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Rationalizing Neglect: An Institutional Response to Transfer Students

Almost 60% of college students attend more than one institution (Adelman, 2006; Peter & Forest Cataldi, 2005) and a growing body of literature documents the distinct academic and social challenges these students encounter (Cejda, 1994; Jacobs, Busby, & Leath, 1992; Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 2001; Townsend, McNerny, & Arnold, 1993; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). For instance, transfer students' grades often decline for a period of time after arriving at a new campus (Laanan, 2001). This phenomenon, identified by Hills (1965), is widely known as "transfer shock." Britt and Hirt (1999) suggest one possible explanation for this decline is the "increased difficulty of the specialized major courses in the four-year" institution for transfer students from community colleges (p. 199). However, the issues do not end there. Britt and Hirt also mention social challenges such as "feeling out of place or older than other students" and encountering "personal and administrative problems at a new school" (p. 199) as some of the challenges unique to transfer students.

Although some students draw from reservoirs of personal resiliency and institutional support to achieve their educational goals in spite of their initial challenges, evidence from nationally representative samples of students indicates that transferring from one institution to another can

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have lasting negative consequences for many other students, suggesting that institutions may not be providing the supports and programs necessary to assist this growing population (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Britt & Hirt, 1999; McCormick & Horn, 1996, Townsend, 2008). Most prior research has focused on the transfer experience by studying the students themselves. In this case study, conducted in 2005–2006, we undertake an in-depth examination of one university to uncover the manner in which institutional agents shape the transfer student experience. In doing so, we identify structures, programs, policies, people, and practices that have contributed to the rationalized—and largely institution-wide—neglect of transfer students.

This study explores how the institution's efforts and abilities to facilitate transfer-student success are affected by:

1. institutional structures and policies,
2. personal perceptions and interventions, and
3. internal and external environmental conditions.

Institutional Support and the Transfer Student Experience

Transfer students are an incredibly varied student population. Like all student cohorts, transfer students can be of traditional age or older, attending part-time or full-time, commuting or living on campus, and working full- or part-time. But they can also enter as first-year students, sophomores, juniors, or seniors via any (or many) paths: co-enrolling (attending more than one institution at the same time), reverse transferring (from four-year to two-year institutions), and swirling (transferring from one institution to another more than one time) (de los Santos & Wright, 1989).

Despite their various enrollment patterns, most research has noted with some consistency the challenges transfer students face when matriculating from a two-year to a four-year institution. Laanan (2001) summarizes these issues: transfer shock (drop in grades), transitional trauma (social adjustment to a new campus), academic trauma (academic adjustment to the more rigorous four-year campus), and, in some cases, transfer ecstasy (an increase in GPA). However, Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) found in their study at one four-year institution that the students transferring from a two-year institution were better able to cope with the transition than were students going from one four-year campus to another. The researchers concluded that students from two-year campuses *expected* challenges when transferring to a

four-year institution and were thus better prepared to handle such challenges. Conversely, students who transferred from four-year campuses were surprised, and thus, unprepared, when the adjustment to a new campus did not come easily, further intensifying the challenges for these students (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007).

These counterintuitive findings reflect the perplexing challenges institutions face when working with transfer students. Therefore, it seems timely to examine the transfer phenomenon from the institutional perspective, which often has been ignored in previous research. This study is valuable in that it helps educational researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers transition from recognizing a problem (lack of support for transfer students) to understanding its causes, moving us one step closer to providing appropriate supports to this growing and disparate population.

Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to extend previous research by taking a closer look at the institution and its agents by employing organizational theory. This framework requires consideration of formal policies, the variable implementation of those policies by individual employees, and the contextual factors that affect the institutional efforts to facilitate transfer student success. The investigation of these viewpoints roughly parallels the three organizational theory perspectives identified by Scott and Davis (2007): rational, natural, and open systems examinations. By employing all three of these perspectives, rather than working through just one perspective, we are able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional response to transfer students.

Rational Perspective

Examination of organizations through a rational perspective gives primary consideration to the formal aspects of an organization. According to Scott and Davis (2007), the rational perspective posits that “organizations are collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively *specific goals* and exhibiting relatively highly *formalized social structures*” (p. 29; emphasis added). Applying this perspective to the present study, one would expect that the university has established policies and structures in direct pursuit of a clearly articulated goal or desired outcome for its transfer students. Therefore, this analysis examines both the official institutional policies related to transfer students and the organizational structures that affect the transfer student experience.

Natural Perspective

Theorists working from a natural perspective expand their understanding of organizations to include various *unofficial* and *informal* elements of an organization. Recognizing that there is often a difference between espoused goals (i.e., official organizational goals) and enacted goals (i.e., those toward which actual operations are directed) natural theorists tend to focus on the role of informal policies, practices, and relationships. When applied to the examination of the university's activities related to transfer students, the natural perspective requires us to remain open to the possibility that what is *really* happening differs from what is *supposed* to happen. Accordingly, this analysis considers the role of informal communication channels, personal outreach by individual staff members, and the institutionalization of unofficial processes. In addition, we explore the extent to which individual practice is affected by personal beliefs and motivations.

Open Perspective

Examination of organizations through an open systems perspective further expands the issues that should be considered when conducting an organizational analysis. Theorists operating from this perspective define organizations as “congeries of *interdependent* flows and activities linking shifting *coalitions* of participants *embedded* in wider material-resource and institutional *environments*” (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 32; emphasis added). In other words, open systems theorists expand the realm of organizational analysis in four significant ways: (a) inclusion of the notion of interdependence between organizational components, (b) consideration of the flow of information and materials, (c) identification of various and shifting coalitions within an organization, and (d) recognition of the interplay between an organization and the environments in which it is situated. Thus, the open perspective suggests that an institution's approach to transfer students may be shaped, in part, by state-level governance structures and policies.

Methodology

The methods employed for this study were chosen specifically to address many of the limitations of earlier research on transfer students. Three components of the methodology warrant special attention. First, rather than studying transfer students per se, we instead considered the various institutional agents, policies, and practices that affect them. These institution-specific factors help shape the experiences of students

(Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And while admissions standards control the characteristics of the transfer students an institution accepts, other policies and practices enacted at the institutional, departmental, or individual level shape the experiences of those students who do eventually arrive on campus.

Second, we chose to employ a qualitative method of inquiry. Such a choice allowed a comprehensive and customized consideration of the diverse issues relevant to a wide variety of institutional stakeholders. Thus, while our questions were fundamentally the same across all of our interviews, the qualitative nature of the study allowed us to probe for additional information as issues arose. Such probing allowed respondents to share unique examples, anecdotes, and feelings that had considerable influence over their thoughts and actions related to transfer students. Further, consistent with our use of an organizational theory framework, the qualitative methods allowed us to consider both formal and informal policies and actions; the methodology also enabled us to consider relevant factors both internal and external to the university.

Third, we chose to conduct a case study of a single institution. As Merriam (1998) states, “the specificity of focus [with a case study] makes it an especially good design for practical problems” (p. 29). Focusing on a single institution allows for an in-depth investigation of this “contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Although there was great diversity in transfer students’ backgrounds and academic pursuits, each of these students shared a single institutional context that shaped their experiences as students.

Institutional and State Contexts

The institution, Research U,¹ serves as the location of this study. During the year of our study (2005–06), data from the state’s higher education commission indicate that approximately 1,100 students transferred into Research U. The campus accepted roughly 4,500 first-year students in 2005; therefore, the newly admitted transfers were approximately 20% of the incoming population that year. Research U was also the state’s largest recipient of transfer students, enrolling 23.5% of the 4,645 full-time undergraduates who transferred to any of the state’s 14 public or 25 private four-year institutions. Most of the students transferring into Research U had originally attended a different school within the state (76.4%). Roughly 44% of Research U’s incoming transfer students were transferring from one of at least 18 different two-year colleges; the remaining 56% transferred from one of at least 30 different four-year institutions.

Research U is part of the state’s public system of higher education.

A state statute formally calls for a “coordinated, comprehensive system ... focused on economic development and benefit to the [state].” The state’s commission overseeing higher education articulates specific missions for each of the state’s institutional types. Although there is no mention of the transfer function among the mission statements related to four-year colleges or research universities, the commission specifies that the state’s two-year colleges are meant, in part, to “enable students to gain access to other postsecondary education,” and “confer associates’ degrees which lead to continued education at a four-year or research institution.” Thus, although not explicit, these mission statements imply that, in service to the state, Research U would admit and educate students who begin college at one of the state’s two-year institutions.

Study Participants

This paper draws from data collected through interviews with 17 faculty and staff members at Research U. Using purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), participants were identified by the research team as individuals or departmental representatives with the potential to affect the transfer student experience, either directly through interaction with students or indirectly through policies affecting them. Among the interviewees were two professors (who were also program advisors within their respective departments) and representatives of the admissions, orientation, academic deans’, residence life, and institutional research offices. See the Appendix for a complete list of participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected via in-depth interviews conducted by six staff members and one graduate assistant at Research U. Using semistructured interviews, researchers were able to ensure consistency across interviews while providing enough flexibility to allow probes and follow-ups uniquely tailored to each interview. Sixteen of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. One interview, with an assistant dean and academic advisor in one of the colleges, was not recorded (at the interviewees’ request). Instead, one researcher and a graduate assistant took detailed notes during the interview.

The constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) served as the vehicle for analysis. It involved three stages, each leading to a greater level of precision. First, after the first few interviews had been conducted, four of the researchers met to discuss emerging themes. Second, upon completion of the interviews, the four researchers met again to compare the initial themes against the new data and refine them accordingly. Third, the two lead researchers (this paper’s authors) took

these themes; reviewed, revised, and synthesized them further; and applied the organizational theory lens to the remaining themes, sorting them into rational, natural, and open systems considerations.

Steps were taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of these findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A diverse team of researchers collected the data and assisted in the early analysis of the interview data. Any points of disagreement were discussed until a compromise was reached. Typically, the discussions focused on semantics. For example, terminology to capture themes may have varied by researcher; however, after a discussion of the data, the group would reach consensus on the verbiage that most accurately captured the phenomenon under discussion. In addition, the diversity of interviewees helped create a richer and more complete understanding of the institutional view of the transfer experience. By interviewing both faculty and staff members, including representatives of both the academic and student affairs divisions, we intentionally sought interviews that would provide multiple interpretations of the institution's response to transfer student needs. Finally, throughout these interviews, faculty and staff members referred to a number of forms and policies. They also mentioned various statistics and beliefs about transfer students on the campus. To confirm and supplement the participant comments, we reviewed these forms, identified the relevant policies, and checked statistical statements with the institutional research office. The findings reported here capture the voices of those institutional representatives.

Limitations

The present study is constrained by two primary limitations. Most prominently, data for this study were collected from a single institution. This focus, though facilitating an in-depth exploration, reflects only the climate, culture, and practices of a single campus. Readers should be cautious when considering how this study's findings may apply at other institutions. Second, by employing an organizational theory framework and focusing on institutional policies and practices, it is only in passing that we address the student-level variables that likely have direct and significant effects on transfer student success. Several earlier studies have demonstrated that, as is the case for native students, pre-college characteristics are largely predictive of retention and graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study did not look at these variables in relation to the transfer student population.

Findings

Responses from the institutional agents were surprisingly similar on all themes. In this section, we explore their perceptions of both the student-level and the institutional factors that influence the institutional efforts through the lens of organizational theory (i.e., rational systems perspectives, natural systems perspectives, and open systems perspectives).

Student-Level Factors Affecting Institutional Efforts Related to Transfer Students

The findings suggest that institutional factors play a major role in determining how the university responds to transfer student needs. Nevertheless, it would be improper to overlook the student-level factors that complicate institutional efforts to improve the transfer student experience. Specifically, faculty and staff members mentioned two characteristics of transfer students that make them a particularly hard population to serve: (a) the students' incredible diversity and (b) their frequent false assumptions about the institution.

Prominent in many of the interviews were statements regarding the diversity of transfer students. This diversity included race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status as well as differences in educational backgrounds, number of entering credits, and major interests. In fact, the racial, gender, socioeconomic status, and age diversity of the transfer students varied to a much greater degree than the direct-entry student cohort. One administrator spoke to the challenge of addressing this diversity from an institutional perspective:

There were so many issues on the table that I don't know how much you can say about her role as a transfer student, a commuter student, and older student, a commuter adult, a [student from a specific two-year institution].

Though diversity was evident in so many ways, the institutional representatives were most likely to comment on the diversity of transfer students' previous educational experiences. At Research U, students are allowed to transfer into the university at nearly any point in their collegiate career. In the fall 2005, transfer students brought anywhere from 10 to almost 130 credit hours to the university. Accordingly, some students would arrive on campus just months after they graduated high school, while others would be entering their third or fourth year of collegiate study. An administrator from enrollment management recognized the inherent challenges of this policy stating that, "[The transfer

students are] a little harder to categorize because you have to dig down and find out when are transfer students coming to the institution. Are they coming after two years or one year or three years?"

In addition to the varying levels of academic credit, the institutional representatives noted that transfer students brought with them a range of assumptions and expectations about college that were developed at their previous institutions. For instance, one represented stated, "Transfer students come in with a lot more preconceived notions than freshmen.... They assume a lot of those things are the same [as at their previous institution] ... and every college does it [procedures] differently." If students held strong to those assumptions, they would often make mistakes navigating the administrative bureaucracy of Research U.

A representative of the registrar's office had seen these types of mistakes regularly among transfer students. She noted that one of the most important issues for transfers was the "difference in how the institution that they came from and [Research U operated].... Different policies and procedures and different ways of registering and paying fees, just the whole thing." She continued with an example:

At some schools, they [transfer students] don't have to apply their financial aid if they have financial aid, it's automatically applied for them, so they don't end up having to pay fees. Here, you have to accept your financial aid and apply it. So they end up being cancelled out of their classes for nonpayment because they didn't realize that even with their financial aid, they've got to pay.

An assistant dean in a college that receives a large proportion of transfer students thought such false expectations were particularly likely among students transferring from a small two- or four-year institution. She noted that, if "they're coming from a real small school to a big school and their expectation is that we'll contact them to do all these various things, ... that's not the case." In situations like this, when student expectations are misaligned with university realities, the result is confusion and frustration for all involved.

Institutional Factors Affecting Institutional Efforts Related to Transfer Students

Perhaps the most common feature of interviews was the nearly universal wish that institutional agents were doing more for their transfer students. Such sentiments, however, were buttressed by the admission that they were unlikely to actually take further action to address transfer student needs. In this section, we outline the formal, informal, and envi-

ronmental factors that affect the institution's efforts to support transfer students at the university.

Formal structure and policy regulations (rational systems perspective). Interviewees made frequent mention of the institutional organizational structure or policy regulations that they felt interfered with their ability to fully support transfer students. Two such policies that were mentioned frequently were (a) admissions/major requirements and (b) time constraints posed by the academic schedule.

Admissions and majors. Admission requirements vary depending on the transfer students' classification and if they need to apply for acceptance into a major. At Research U, although students are encouraged to apply by certain deadlines, applications are accepted year-round. Students wishing to transfer with junior-year status must apply directly to their desired major program. Though some majors have only minimal standards for entry, others limit the number of students who may enter the major by imposing high standards for prerequisite course grades. Transfer students who do not get accepted into their desired major must then scramble to apply to second-choice majors (e.g., economics instead of business administration) or wait until a subsequent semester to reapply. Moreover, the variability of requirements and program availability makes it difficult for university agents to communicate accurate information to students at other institutions who are considering transferring to Research U.

Time constraints. Making the departmental variability even more challenging is the tight timeline of prematriculation steps for transfers. For example, the timing of transfer student orientation, which is meant to assist students with the transition, actually inhibits transfer students' ability to get into their desired or required courses. A staff member in a professional-degree program noted that incoming transfer students "have those late date orientations . . . , so those students are a little hyper about the fact that preregistration has taken place and their biggest concern is course availability." An associate dean agreed: "It may not be the schedule of their dreams . . . when you're a transfer student you're registering after all the current students have registered."

While the timeline may interfere with transfer students' course scheduling, it also challenges university faculty and staff who are charged with helping students make the transition. Because she had only limited time to spend assisting such a large population of transfer students, the associate dean likened her work to that of a "triage" nurse; on transfer orientation day, she does "major surgery" only. The tight timeline required that students leave orientation day with a complete schedule,

even if the university has not yet received complete, official documentation from a student's previous institution. That same associate dean recalled that, in the absence of formal transcripts, she has "done [transcript] evaluations based on a student's self report written on the back of a Hardee's napkin."

This condensed timeline and crisis-management response can have implications beyond just course scheduling. Because transfer students are new to the university, they are likely to need special assistance handling administrative matters during the first few weeks of their first semester. So, too, will most other students. It is during these critical times that university offices have the most difficulty providing transfer students the individualized attention they need. As the head of one undergraduate program noted, these instances can have a lasting impact on transfer students:

Sometimes the problems I see are, to put it very simply, it's just in customer service, when students go to a particular office. Usually, the first time they do it is at the beginning of semesters when things are very hectic and they get put off or run around or something like that then that's the impression that stays with them.

Another staff member explained why transfer students might not receive necessary information and good service from these offices: "We just don't have the resources and staff and time to do it."

Informal practice and personal exceptions (natural systems perspective). Although institutional policies may govern various facets of the transfer student experience, those policies are enacted by individuals. As such, formal policies may be differentially interpreted, ignored, or even undermined by employees. Policy implementation is linked directly to the institutional agents' beliefs about transfer students, and these beliefs are founded on assumptions and perceptions, not necessarily accurate assessment data.

The myth of transfer student success. Staff assumptions about the success of previous transfer students were particularly powerful. For some employees, the visible success of a few transfer students was taken as anecdotal evidence that transfer students, on the whole, are doing well at Research U. A representative from one of the university's professional schools noted that at least half of the awards presented by the school went to transfer or international students. These transfer student success stories led her to believe that, "in the big picture, yes, they [transfer students] are successful students." Other staff members referred to some vague recollection of previous assessment data indi-

cating that transfer students received higher grades than did first-year students.

However, when asked about this assessment data, an administrator involved with the original analysis indicated that the referenced assessment finding was misleading. He explained that transfers are not first-year students. They have had previous experience in higher education, so it is not surprising that they compare favorably to first-time students entering the institution. The administrator explained further that when transfers at Research U were compared with students with a similar number of credits, they were not as successful. He stated that “the graduation rate [for all students] is about low-80 percent, and for transfers it is a low- to mid-60 percent.” This statistic, however, was not discussed by other interviewees and the information had not been disseminated widely through official university outlets. The analyst further speculated that a similar “myth” about transfer student success exists at many institutions, adding “you just can’t kill the myth.”

The myth is so hard to kill, in part, because of inconsistent definitions of who transfer students are. During our analysis, we were struck by the respondents multiple and varied definitions of “transfer” students. As one participant explained,

We probably define them in different ways depending on how we’re talking. If we’re [talking] formally about transfer students, we want to be very clear about the words—transfer student is someone outside the [Research U system]. We consider students inside the [system] “change-of-school.” That’s basically part of the paperwork—the way you deal with those students. But in a quick casual conversation if somebody were to say transfer—that’s anyone who’s not even in the [specific College within Research U] here.

As further evidence of the inconsistent institutional understanding of “transfer student,” one administrator noted that the major student databases on campus did not have a consistent variable indicating whether a student had transferred into Research U. Although the state’s commission on higher education labels students as transfers if they have attended *any* previous institutions of higher education, officially Research U applies the moniker only to those who enroll having already earned *30+ credit hours elsewhere*. As a result, various departmental reports about transfer students base their conclusions on different data—even when describing the same semester.

Narrow understanding of transfer students’ needs. Near-universal

beliefs about the needs of transfer students affected how the institution structured its assistance. Though described using slightly varying terms, faculty and staff believed transfer students' biggest concerns related to transferring course credit and building a first semester schedule. In fact, only two employees, an administrator in the university's welcome center and an advisor whose daughter was a transfer student, made mention of the potential social challenges facing transfer students. This focus on early academic issues suggests that the university views "transfer" as a transitory phenomenon. An associate dean of one college summarized the perceptions of the staff: Once students begin courses, rather than retaining their labels as transfer students, "they become a student in the [particular] college ... they become [particular] college students."

Unofficial assistance. Although certain beliefs about transfer students permeate the university and constrain efforts to assist transfer students, some individuals have taken personal steps to assist this population. Some employees, who either transferred from one college to another themselves or have family members who transferred, made a special effort to facilitate transfer student success. Said one program advisor: "I have a daughter who's in college now, who's transferred quite a bit. She's gone to—let's see—she's made three transfers. I think that her perspective has helped me on this some." This personal understanding of transfer student needs led the advisor to make special outreach efforts with faculty at other institutions so that they may provide important and accurate information for their students considering transferring to Research U. He believed that

informal contacts [with] instructors from different institutions to us that are outside the admission and orientation thing [and]... having contact with students semesters before they even come here—if they know this is what their intention is ... those things are very valuable for us and they really do make the students feel a lot more comfortable.

Another administrator has looked the other way while colleagues enacted an informal policy that earmarks certain seats for transfer students, a direct violation of official university policy. Though she did not officially endorse the practice, she was fully aware that "some departments that shall remain nameless hide some seats for transfer students. They will hide anywhere from five, 10, sometimes 20 seats ... that they can bring out for transfer students." Recognizing the ramifications of official university policies, this administrator implicitly approved this informal practice aimed at helping transfer students.

Environmental Considerations (Open Systems Perspective)

Of course, not all things affecting the university's treatment of transfer students originate within the institution. Because all transfer students have received college credit elsewhere, Research U must take into consideration the policies and curricula at feeder institutions. Thus, articulation plays a critical role in the students' transition between institutions. In addition to articulation issues, Research U juggles multiple missions (e.g., state, institution, college, department) that may, at times, be contradictory. Thus, the environmental context in which Research U operates has effects—both direct and indirect, both obvious and subtle—on the transfer student experience.

The articulation challenge. To facilitate a smooth transition, academic records must be transferred between institutions in a timely manner; formal articulation agreements expedite this process. For each incoming transfer student, Research U staff review the available transcripts to determine which and how course credits will transfer. When the course titles and numbers have been standardized (through the articulation agreement) or when course syllabi are made available to Research U, the review process is relatively straightforward. But if Research U does not have a working relationship with the other institution, the transcript review process can be much more difficult. An associate dean described one such challenging experience:

A couple of years ago, I got a student from some school in California with a course title of "Magical Mystery Tour." ... Older people would think that that's a course about the Beatles. Actually, it was a cultural anthropology class, which had a very creative title. You had no idea what things were until you looked at a syllabus ... if I get something like a "Magical Mystery Tour" course title and there's no other explanatory information you try to go out there on that college's website and try to figure out what that thing is.

Clearly, without a close relationship between the sending and the receiving institution, even basic tasks like evaluating a transcript become challenging and time-consuming.

Just as inefficient, typically, are efforts to identify potential transfer students while they are still enrolled at other institutions. Although a few local community colleges and branch campuses have begun asking students upon entry whether they plan to transfer to Research U, identification of potential transfer students at other schools is nonexistent. If a school sends only a handful of students to Research U every year, it is simply not worth the time for staff at each institution to coordinate proactive transfer-planning initiatives.

Multiple missions, competing interests. Staff members must achieve a tricky balance when deciding what to do about transfer students. Broadly, Research U employees attempt to fulfill what are, at times, competing perceptions of the institution's mission—to serve the needs of the state and to enhance Research U's national reputation for academic excellence. With most of its transfer students coming from in-state institutions, transfer students could play a key role in Research U's efforts to serve the state.

But Research U personnel expressed concerns about the academic abilities of transfer students, which then puts the objective of serving in-state students in direct conflict with the desire to increase the institution's national reputation. One administrator acknowledged that he had heard “implicit kind of negative stereotypes about transfer students.... They're viewed as less prepared.” That same administrator stated that although the institution takes in transfers students to “maximum student body size for your facilities ... you don't want to have students that aren't of a higher quality. You don't want to just fill the gaps.” Further restricting the admission of transfer students, however, would be politically risky, as the institution might be perceived as “sort of turning away its state service mission.”

Although the state political context provides this indirect protection for students wishing to transfer into Research U, the state and national educational context encourages Research U to place particular emphasis on different student populations. Specifically, an administrator within student affairs spoke of both “a departmental and Board of Trustees commitment that we've made to first-year students.” As noted by a different interviewee, the University is “generally concerned with the first-time full-time degree-seeking students because that's what we're rated on.”

This focus on first-year students was unambiguous when Research U dropped a successful new housing option for transfer students. In 2005, one of the campus's new residential halls housed 80–90 transfer students. As one participant from residential life stated, “our aim was to keep them together so that we can keep our focus on their particular needs.” This administrator believed the program to be a success, as students “enjoyed having others who were in similar experiences with them, near them, and around them. They developed a very strong sense of community.” Shortly thereafter, however, the program ended in 2006, because the hall had to be used to house first-year students after the university tore down a large first-year complex to make way for a new facility for honors students. This elimination of a successful program

for transfer students reflects the overall sentiment of the university; as a participant from Admissions stated, “Transfer students ... are an afterthought.”

Recommendations to Improve the Transfer Student Experience

Although the participants felt limited in their ability to assist transfer students, they did offer several institutional changes they believed would help these students make a successful transition to Research U.

Before institutional agents could improve services for transfer students, they needed to improve their ability to *identify* transfer students and *understand* these students’ needs. Therefore, representatives acknowledged that any institutional changes should be based on the needs of the students, noting it is critical to talk to transfer students and develop supports, policies, and programs based on their needs. As one participant admitted, “I don’t think they’re [the transfer students] well understood.”

Because of the shifting definitions, not all students coming to the institution receive the same type of supports. The current system does not recognize system transfer students in the same way as other transfer students, yet many need the same sort of supports, programs, and policies as other students transferring from one campus to another. As one interviewee described, “they’re [change-of-campus students] basically just treated as someone who’s switching majors.” Participants recommended treating between-campus transfer students as other transfer students.

Once transfer students are admitted to Research U, they are absorbed into the larger student population and officially lose the distinction of being transfer students. The end result is that there is no information regarding their challenges or successes. Several participants talked about the value in creating a transfer student tracking system to allow for administrative follow-up. As one advisor said, “I would really like to be able to set up time after the Orientation ... a follow-up time with all transfers, just to say ... don’t forget we’re here; how are you doing; how’s the transition been.”

A few of the participants mentioned the importance of developing better articulation between all institutions sending students to Research U. As one participant stated, “even though we have this articulation agreement ... we don’t play in the same sandbox.” She recommended getting the Research U advisors talking to the advisors at the sending institution, “the more we could improve that communication [between institutions would] make it more of a seamless transition for students.” Another participant discussed identifying students from campuses who

traditionally struggle at Research U. “We know some of the places from history where our students ... [are] going to struggle [when they come] here. So I think that we need to be targeting those transfers in some way, shape, or form.” Thus, the interviewee concluded that Research U might develop articulation structures and programs that target students planning to transfer from these specific institutions to assist them in their transitions.

It was clear that most participants felt that providing effective orientations was critical. Some participants believed that orientation should include a social introduction to the university as well as an academic one. However, many of these administrators believed that any changes would necessitate lengthening the orientation, leading to even fewer students attending. As one advisor acknowledged, “They [the transfer students] sort of have the feeling that they don’t even need that [the current limited orientation], because they’ve already been to school and they know things.” Nevertheless, one thing all of our participants agreed upon was that the orientation as it is currently designed is difficult. As one participant stated, transfer orientation is “hell. It’s utter hell.” One of the central problems with orientation is registering students after most of the continuing students have registered. Therefore, many of the professionals who work at orientation asked that the institution establish an official policy that leaves seats in gateway courses for transfer students and that these seats in these key courses are available for students during orientation.

Finally, a few of the participants mentioned the lack of scholarships for transfer students. One participant stated that “we have lots of scholarship funds for new freshmen, but there is almost ... nothing for transfer students.... I wish the university had some scholarships specifically for transfer students.” Financial concerns do not exist just for first-time full-time students, so our participants suggested offering scholarships targeting transfer students.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the faculty and staff at this institution perceive that they face many obstacles when trying to facilitate the success of their transfer students. Transfer students are incredibly diverse, thereby dooming even the most well-intentioned of one-size-fits-all policies. Coordination of the transfer process requires communication and collaboration between both the sending and receiving institutions, tasks made more difficult by tight deadlines and a lack of institutional priority.

In addition, faculty and staff perceptions of transfer student needs and challenges were limited by their own experiences. Exacerbating these difficulties was the limited awareness of the concerns (e.g., social adjustment, lack of information regarding campus traditions and procedures) expressed by transfer students on campus or in the literature (e.g., Laanan, Townsend). Acknowledgment of these concerns was either marginally present or completely absent from the comments of the institutional representatives.

In fact, the participants' discussions about transfer students often reflected inconsistencies regarding transfer students' success, their needs, and what should be done to assist them. On multiple occasions, some interviewees would state their desire to do "more" for transfer students, while others believed that Research U already had sufficient support services in place. Many of them spoke of a campus-wide stereotype of transfer students being underprepared academically, but recounted personal anecdotes that led them to believe transfer students were doing well at Research U. Undoubtedly, the perception that the transfer students were successful eased the pressure to do "more" anytime soon. Though not "invisible" to campus administrators, transfer students appeared to remain in the shadows of more prominent student populations.

Why are transfer students not a priority? One possible (albeit cynical) explanation is that transfer success does not benefit an institution's reputation. Some institutions make strategic decisions based on the notion of improving their rankings (Van Der Werf, 2009, n.p.). With higher rankings come higher quality students, more research dollars (if it is a research institution), and more alumni giving; in short, improved rankings lead to improved economic health. Thus, in pursuit of improved rankings and economic solvency, institutions allocate their limited resources toward improving the experience of students who "matter" most to rankings. For most institutions, transfer students do not figure on this scale.

Instead, Research U (and, we suspect, many institutions) focus on "first-time full-time" students with special emphasis often directed toward the most high-achieving of these students. Retention rates, average ACT/SAT scores, and other public-consumption indicators of institutional quality are typically based only on those first-time full-time students admitted directly to the institution each fall. Within an environment dominated by rankings and reputations, administrators may be making calculated investments in areas likely to yield the highest public-image returns. Such an investment in institutional prestige may have already begun to yield clear financial returns for both the state and Research U. Since 1986, the state has more than doubled the number of

out-of-state students coming to the state for college each year (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2010). Research U has been the primary beneficiary of the increased tuition dollars that accompany these students. The corollary, of course, is the relative decrease in students from within the state.

In a time of increased public scrutiny, institutions may do well to revisit their tendency to neglect transfer students. At many campuses, including Research U, the transfer student population can play a critical financial role by boosting income through tuition (tuition replacement for native student attrition) and fulfilling institutional and community needs (serving the state by admitting proportionally more in-state and minority students as transfer students). In doing so, Research U would be contributing to the overall health of the state system. A strong state system, one that makes consistent, widespread, and long-term contributions to the state, would be viewed favorably by elected officials—including those who control state contributions to Research U.

Throughout this paper we have argued that transfer students are an important student group that has heretofore been largely neglected—perhaps understandably so—by Research U (and likely at other institutions as well). We have also suggested that an increased emphasis on transfer students could benefit both the specific institution and the state system of which it is a part. We suspect this focus will not come about without a convergence of pressures—both from within the institution and from its environmental context.

Perhaps the most significant pressure comes from the transfer students themselves. Their sheer numbers mean they, as a unique population of students, will soon be too big to remain an afterthought on campuses. Locally, Research U's state commission on higher education has placed increased emphasis on transfer students, publishing a series of statistical worksheets and narrative reports about the patterns of transfer between the state's schools. The commission has also developed a website that helps students and administrators streamline the credit-transfer process.

Nevertheless, we suspect this emphasis will have only marginal effect so long as efforts remain largely piecemeal and free from legal, financial, or accreditation consequences. Ideally, given the considerable size of the transfer student population, evaluation criteria outlined by states, accreditors, and rankings publications should include the success of transfer students. Until then, however, transfer students may be subject to the occasional efforts of a few passionate individuals on each campus.

Summary and Conclusions

Traditionally, research on the transfer student experience has focused on student-level variables (e.g., SAT, race/ethnicity, gender) that are believed to affect transfer student success. Additionally, most research on transfer students deals with students transferring from two-year institutions into four-year colleges and universities. Few studies deal with swirling, reverse, or simultaneous enrollment. Again, the sheer numbers of transfer students and their many and various educational routes warrant more research attention.

Ultimately, our work suggests that the transfer student experience may be shaped by a variety of subtle, often hidden, institutional influences. Therefore, we suggest that future research in this area include a detailed analysis of the institutional contexts into which students are transferring.

Our study also suggests that the use of organizational theory as a guiding framework for analysis related to student outcomes has value. Particularly important is the use of multiple lenses (rational, natural, and open systems perspectives). We found transfer student support to be impeded in ways related to each of these perspectives; therefore, we encourage future research to take a multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of institutional influences on student experiences. To examine just how the official policies and structure of an institution affect transfer students would ignore the potentially dramatic alterations to policy that take place when those policies are implemented by employees. To ignore the external environment might lead researchers to make recommendations that would not be feasible given the pressures and complexities that arise from operating within that environment. Therefore, we suggest future research on institutional factors affecting transfer student success consider variables associated with the rational, natural, and open systems perspectives of organizational theory.

If institutions adjust their focus to more clearly include transfer students, the institutions will likely also adjust their allocation of resources accordingly. By raising the profile of transfer students, an institution subtly encourages its agents (faculty and staff) to increase the amount of time, energy, money, and other resources earmarked for the facilitation of transfer student success. Such reallocation would have a direct effect on transfer student experiences simply by allowing the institution to do what it already does, but better. Perhaps more important for the long-term success of the institution and its transfer students, the reallocation of focus and resources would allow the university to reexamine and revise any institutionalized policies and practices that limit its ability to meet the needs of this important, and sizable student population.

Note

¹ To maintain anonymity, throughout this paper the university will be referred to as Research U.

Appendix

Institutional affiliation of interviewees

Admissions
History
Psychology
Arts and Sciences
Branch campuses
Business
Engineering
Enrollment Management
Institutional Planning and Assessment
Nursing
Off-campus student services
Orientation and Testing
Registrar
Residence Life
Student Disability Services
Visitor Center

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