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Transfer Student Experiences: Comparing Their Academic And Social Lives At The Community College And University

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Through focus group participation students expressed a variety of experiences when comparing student life at the community college with student life at a Western university. Two overarching themes emerged. The first theme focused on classroom experiences, which included the levels of individual attention students received, the amount of interaction with faculty and staff, the quality of learning experiences, and coursework difficulty. The second theme centered on the student life balance, which encompassed financial concerns, social networks and support, and support from campus service. What kind of inter-institutional and intra-institutional processes can be improved to enhance overall experiences for students transferring from a community college to a four-year university?

Literature comparing student experiences at a two-year community college with experiences at a four-year institution is limited. Very little is expressed directly by students in their own voices. The literature involving student retention and first year experiences in community colleges does reflect some direct student reports.

Academic and social integration is key to students making campus connections. Barriers to students staying in college include: poor academic preparation, lack of clear goals, low faculty involvement with students, and indifferent and racist campus cultures. Poor relationships between institutions create fragmented educational systems that are difficult to navigate and create additional barriers to student retention (Rendon, 1995). Jalomo (1995) found that positive aspects of college success were learning interesting, relevant information and making friends and meeting new people. He also found that it is difficult for students with families to get involved and that the college experience puts a strain on family relations.

Student perceptions of faculty and advising at the community college are primarily positive. Hughes and Graham (1992) found faculty to be interested in students and available to them outside of classes. These students also perceived that academic advising was somewhat complete and accurate. Pincus and Archer (1989) reported that student experiences with counselors

were similar at the community college and the university, while students viewed instructors at four year institutions as being less helpful than community college instructors.

Many transfer students experienced an overall "campus culture shock" after transferring from a community college to the university. Within that `shock' of being on the university campus, undesirable student experiences included: parking, crowds, lines, and a lack of individual attention (Davies and Dickmann, 1998). While the majority of the literature deals with the actual transfer process, the authors of this writing were interested in directly hearing student voices about their community college and university experiences.

Method

The authors selected students who transferred to the university in the Fall of 1996 from the fifteen public community colleges in the state. The student data files were identified and students randomly ordered. The authors wanted to hear the student voices in the transfer process and have them tell their individual stories; thus, focus groups were decided upon as the methodological instrument. This technique was selected to provide students an opportunity in a non-threatening group setting to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes where their opinions were compared and contrasted (Flores and Alonso, 1995). A maximum group size of eight was decided upon to provide enough stimulus for interaction and still be sure every student was heard (Higginbotham and Cox, 1979). Eleven separate focus groups were held with an average attendance of six students. The students were telephoned according to the random generated listing to elicit their availability and willingness to attend a focus group meeting. A post card was mailed to participants to remind them of the meeting time and to provide directions.

One of the authors began each focus group session by asking the first of six questions. Each participant had an opportunity to respond to each question during the open discussion that ensued. Once discussion began, however, it became free flowing among the participants. The questions used to elicit student perceptions were:

1. Why did you choose a community college to begin your college career?
2. What did you do to prepare yourself for transfer to a four year college?
3. Describe your community college academic program of study and how it relates to your academic studies at this university.

4. Describe the actual experience of making the transfer from your community college to this university.
5. How has your college life at the university compared to your mental pictures of what you thought it was going to be like?
6. What portions of your university life (academic and social) are most enjoyable for you? Which ones are the least enjoyable?

The participants were given the opportunity to make concluding remarks about their experiences and summarize how they felt about the experience at the end of the focus group experience.

All focus groups were held during a two week period and the sessions were two hours in length. The tapes from each focus group were then transcribed verbatim and coded using HyperRESEARCH-TM software. The qualitative coding used an inductive approach to form general thematic units within the various questions responded to by the participants. The students' stories were told within the thematic units using the students' own voices as expressed in the captured quotations.

Results

Comfort on Campus

Student comparisons between their community college and university experiences were more different than similar. Accompanying the positive experiences were stories laced with frustration and disappointment.

Student stories illustrated their comfort level on their community college campuses. Some students experienced such a great comfort that, "If it was a four year school, they'd still be there." When comparing community college experiences to the university, one student described the former as, "Much more fun, much more relaxed, more comfortable." Students also found comfort in convenient parking and campus accessibility: "I like the fact that you can park so close to your classes. That was good." "At [the community college] there were three buildings ... Everything was right there."

For other students `comfort' at the community college was experienced as complacency: "I hated my community college ... I just walked through ... it was more comfortable, more relaxed.... [but] "All my classes were identical. They were in class with an open book. It was terrible. I can now actually say it was so bad that I walked through the community college."

Students were equally eager to share what they liked about the university; however, these stories were told in greater generalities: "I imagined myself ... skiing every weekend, chair lifts coming right down into my dorm. It's not like that. I haven't been skiing once. So that in that respect it's different ... I really do love [this university]." "The atmosphere here - it was everything I wanted it to be." "It's a very comfortable campus. From the first week I was just so excited to be here.... I was amazed at the level of services, all the computers You can pretty much find anything you want." "I found [this university] to be a really good environment for learning."

Far from feeling satisfied, other students felt overwhelmed. These students shared experiences of feeling lost and are summarized in this voice:

... a university is different from the community college ... you know, it's broken up in different colleges and there is different administrative buildings and it's just like this huge, lumbering beast ... it's really kind of bewildering and you really don't have someone who just gives you what's good for you in your own personal situation.

Classroom Candor

Credit for both the satisfaction and the dissatisfaction which students experienced at community colleges and at the university is shared by the following classroom factors: the individual attention and the level of interaction with faculty and staff that students receive; the quality of the teaching-learning experience; and level of difficulty in the course work.

Individual attention

Students claimed individual interaction was a clear advantage of the community college. They were able to get to know counselors, instructors and other students on a personal level: "I got to know one of the counselors really well, just because it was such a small community college." "I had a better GPA ... because of more one-on-one situations, and more comfort." Some students said that the high level of interaction among students and faculty at community colleges made their experiences better and was key to academic success: "... there was a lot more interaction with the instructor ... it was just more interesting." "Because you get individual attention ... and I do better when I get more attention and more help." "... much more interaction between teacher and student, student and student."

One student talked about preparing to leave [this university] to go back to his community college: "It is just so different at a community college. I'm going to be really sad to leave [this university], but not so far as the academics are concerned.... I'm looking forward to going back to my community college and getting that type of one-on-one interaction. I learned so much more. Here [this university] I've learned how to bide my time."

As institutions become larger, opportunities for individual interaction may seem fewer. However, one student experienced an open-door policy with his department head: "I went to the department chair ... and he was like 'I wish more people would come in and tell me how they are feeling about things that are going on with the department,' He was totally cool about it. All I had to do was make an appointment and show up and he talked to a bunch of us." When considering university faculty availability, some students found electronic mail to be a satisfactory alternative for interacting:

It seems that more and more professors have an e-mail address now, and you can get a hold of them. And, I like the idea that students can get a free e-mail address here by using the computer labs at the school to contact the teachers ... and I do that a lot. Having an e-mail address to contact them seems to be easier for them than calling them on the phone or meeting them at the one of the half-hour office hours ... they can actually sit down and individually address you and you don't have to be there. I've had about half and half. Where teachers are all too happy to help you. Have you come to their office and they'll take you by it step by step if necessary. But, I noticed that a few of my teachers would rather have you e-mail them than ask you a question, then they'll e-mail you back ... but that's the main difference between the community college and up here.

Without individual interaction students felt lost or alienated in the large, less personal university atmosphere. Some students sensed a loss of personal recognition: "You come here and it's like ... okay, what's your social security number and it's like ... wait, I have a name." "There is that sense of where

you are just a number or something, and I still get that sense from the school."

The teaching-learning experience

Faculty members can heighten the level of individual interaction students experience through their teaching style. Teaching style sent clear messages about instructor caring to the students.

Students enthusiastically told of positive teacher-learning environments, and the instructors' authenticity at the community colleges: "I felt in my classes my teachers cared a whole lot more about who I was and what I did in their class and if I understood, not just if I need the grade." "It's not as a whole they're harder or easier or anything ... different ... I just think it's the personal level, the sincerity of the teachers." Another student echoed others who spoke about genuine teacher-learning experiences:

I felt that a lot of my instructors at the community college had chosen to work there because they like the environment ... there's a realness of people, you know ... I got the sense that teachers felt like they were contributing to the community in a much more direct way.

Students felt the quality of community college teaching contributed to their being better prepared to transfer to a university. One student shared that "at [the community college] they don't have all the research, they are strictly there to educate," and two other students said: "I had two really good professors at [the community college], so I felt prepared" and "I had a couple of really good teachers down there at the community college ... I was definitely prepared." Another student appreciated her community college teacher's support allowing her to apply her classroom learning to real life experiences:

I requested to do workshops around the state ... directly correlating to the experience in the classroom.... I was released to be able to continue my involvement by teachers saying 'hey, that's great, why don't you just write me up a little paper about what you did.'

Three students continued their higher education journey as a direct result of their community college experience: "... got interested ... for each success I

kind of pushed ... went a little further," "I started in the community college, it sparked my interest in learning and I did very well," and "I think the community college helped me get a good base of business, just a broad everything."

On the other hand, two students were discouraged with community college instruction. One student said, "I was disappointed with the quality of teaching. There were some unprofessional, immature teachers there." Another student objected to the attendance gate keeper, "This teacher had the gall to take attendance and to score off for attendance if you missed three classes.... If I'm paying for it and I don't want to show up, that's too bad, I'm the customer." Feeling ill-prepared to transfer to the university created negative experiences for one student: "... at the community college it was a real waste of time. You got classes that were really unnecessary." Another student was disappointed in her community college adviser's lack of forethought:

I think they [the community college] somewhat disillusioned you in not showing you what the bigger colleges are going to offer ... They put you into your core classes and they don't compare it to what you are going to look at on the piece of paper for your major.

Students' teaching-learning experiences at the university were less positive than those at the community colleges. For many, their university learning experience was no more than listening to lectures and being tested on them. Students were irritated as they shared these stories: "The problem at [this university] sometimes in the sciences they are so encompassed by their research they get rather lackadaisical ... they teach the material and they expect you to go on and test it from there.... " and:

When I was in community college I never thought when I came to the university I would ever miss a class, because I never did it there. I figure I'd have to go to class because I'll miss something. And I found out that I won't miss that much, because all they do is talk and you write it down.

Some students wondered if instructors were actually reviewing their assignments; others wondered what it took to receive a high grade: "This guy ... I don't even think he's looking at the work we do and he's just putting

up overheads and movies in class and we're not really learning anything." "I expect to be able to get an A in the class by finals and in some classes that doesn't seem to be possible. There seems to be another trick to it ... like having taken the course before." Still other students resented their subservient role when communicating with university professors:

[I was sick and] knew that I wasn't getting any better so I tried to call

... He never returned any of my calls. It's like he knew what I was going

to ask, and he just didn't want to deal with it so he didn't call me back.

He's like "no, I'm sorry there are no exceptions and that was clearly

stated on your syllabus."

You pay thousands of dollars to do this, and yet you might ... you're

treated, like I said as a student. When you have a problem with your exam

... and [try to] talk to them and come to a compromise possibly ... But, in

a situation, it's like "no, I'm the teacher you're the students."

Using Teaching Assistants to enhance classroom experiences met with varied results at the community colleges and the university; although, there were fewer students who experienced a Teaching Assistant in classes at the community college: "I didn't have any TA's at [my community college]." "I don't think there were any TA's at the community college. Maybe two the entire time." One student was very disappointed with a Teaching Assistant when beginning her community college experience: "I had a substitute who called herself a TA. It was just incredible how poorly she knew her subject ... That was the first class I had at the community college."

Teaching Assistants are more common at the university. Some students felt the TAs were extremely valuable; others felt they were less so: "I think the TA's [this university] are better than [the other institutions I attended]."

"The TA would explain it better than how the teacher did." "I'm in a programming class and there's 2 instructors - 3 GTA's and 6 TA's. It's amazing how they all know the subject so well. They are all great resources, great help." "I had TA like that in chemistry who taught the lab. He knew his stuff, he hated it, but he knew it.... I was surprised because I didn't know what I was doing. He explained to me really well." "We do have some TA's who try their very best to help you whenever they are available, so it depends on the TA and their training."

Those having negative experiences with Teaching Assistants claimed they were not prepared to teach or did not want to teach: "there are some that would rather not be teaching professionally ... and if the students pick up on that obvious frustration with the TA trying to explain elementary steps to do - some can't get it." "I had a TA in composition. That was the most messed up class I have ever seen in my life." "I found out about the TA's, too. They have a lot of scattered thoughts ... their lesson plans aren't planned out.... They haven't gained the skills and abilities."

Coursework demand

Students' course expectations coupled with personal views on the helpfulness of reading and writing assignments in the learning process form their individual assessment on the level of course difficulty.

Students saw community college classes as less demanding and lacking challenge: "It felt like high school to me again." "Class sizes are definitely smaller at the community college. I'm inclined to say the level of difficulty is a little less, too ." "I worked full time, I went to school full time, I was in the Guard on the weekends, did drills for 2 weeks at a time, leave school for 2 weeks, come back, and still get A's." "I found that [the community college] wasn't challenging enough."

Difficult or not, many students appreciated the additional opportunities to apply their new-found knowledge in homework and writing assignments at the community college: "There are some writing assignments, more at the community college, because there are less students and teachers have more time to score." "One thing I liked about the smaller classes at the community college - they paid more attention to written work. They have the time to grade 30 papers instead of 300 papers." "... in the smaller schools you get more homework, which helps. More essays. Like, I wrote more essays and summaries over the class periods, and it helped a lot more." "I got more homework at [his community college], but the material was the same."

Students experienced differing degrees of course demand at the university; some felt they had less homework while others reported having more reading and more work in general: "I get less of it here. Less reading, less homework." "... here you get assigned some pages ... you look in your syllabus, and you're going to read these chapters ... There just chapters reading. I have maybe one class this semester where I get homework three times for the semester." "I thought that this place was more difficult just because of the style of learning that I've had in the past." "[at this university] There's a lot of work in each class. So it's like ... they think there class is the only class that you've got"

Student Life

Community colleges have a diverse student age group. The majority of these students have more than a student identity since they also work, raise families, take care of parents and generally have other than student life roles. Most students felt support by faculty and staff at their colleges: "When I went to [my community college] they asked you ... how many hours do you plan to work per week?... that was part of your schedule." "Teachers over at the community college kind of have an idea that you have other things that are important to you. That you have another life."

Students had mixed expectations concerning their student-life and other-life balance when they came to this university. Several individuals anticipated that their primary identity would be as a student: "I kept telling my mom, once I get up there I'm going to be perfectly fine because my school will be my job ... and that's pretty much why you are here." "I do feel more like a student since I've been up here ... that it really is the main definition of who I am ... is that I'm a student. And, I get it from the community and the school." "People are like ... 'what's your job' and I'm like ... well, I'm a student. And, you're like that's a full-time job ... that's hard work, you know".

Other students expected to continue balancing student life with other life responsibilities. However, they were not successful in meeting that expectation, and they expressed both surprise and frustration wondering how they would survive as a student and as a resident: "I expected that I could come up here and work. But I'm not going to try it because ... my workload is much heavier than what I expected." "Here ... you're a student. That's all you do ... ever. Like in my situation I was supposed to work, go to school, do homework and had practice on my instrument ... it was too many things to do in one day." "I worked almost 40 hours a week [at my community college] and I thought I would still be able to do that here.... I couldn't handle the workload and work at the same time. My grades dropped a lot." "They expect you to be a student 30 hours of the week ... But, it doesn't work ... I have no time for anything. No time for myself ... like to go out and have fun." These transfer students recognized the importance of balancing multiple aspects of life for themselves. Frustrations over unmet expectations led to stories about how to manage, or even how to establish, adequate financial and social support.

Financial frets

It appears community colleges understand that students take classes and must also work to meet their financial needs. This was in addition to the financial aid the colleges made available: "At [my community college] I got

this scholarship that was from the state ... it paid for all my tuition." "I received a letter in the mail and it was like ... congratulations you've been accepted for the presidential scholarship or something like that.... They are going to pay for a year of school." "When I was [at my community college] I had a support network of friends, relatives ... I had a job that I could support myself with living off campus."

Students seemed felt they were in a dilemma at the university that left them in financial difficulty. Many were having a difficult time getting adequate financial aid, or in some cases any financial aid: "My biggest problem was just ... finding financial aid" "financial aid up here is tough. Very tough". Student frustrations were readily apparent as shown in the next two voices' frustrations and worries related to financial need:

... instinctively I had this idea that if I came up here, and as long as I still had good grades and stuff I thought that they would be throwing thousands of dollars at me. And when I came up here it was like squeezing blood out of the toilet! I get up here and all of a sudden it is not assumed that you worked, you know ... if you are making \$5.00 - \$6.00 an hour it doesn't go very far. The work load was a lot greater and.... And it's not built into the system really, and the financial aid isn't there either.

Their dilemma was the need to support themselves financially, and the equally demanding need to spend more time being students. Successfully meeting the demands to be a responsible student can be stressful. Add financial concerns to the equation and the stress level increases. Then there is the need for social life and social support.

Social subsistence

Students had very different views of their social experiences at their community colleges. One student found ease in connecting with others, "it's easier to make friendships with peers.... You get to talk to people more ... in the community college." Another student had an opposing experience, "I didn't get along with my roommate and ended up moving out, so ... the second semester wasn't a very good experience ... socially."

Many students found university social life to be alive and well. Some students found a support system through their social network, and others' social lives were in atrophy. While some students were pleased that social experience expectations were met or even exceeded, there were others who thought that social life might be a detriment to their success as a student: "I had a pretty good picture to what the campus was going to be like ... but it's been a lot more social than I thought it was going to be." "there has been more school spirit that I thought, and at least ... definitely more social activities and things to do, social life and everything was more than I expected." "It's a lot more social than I thought it would be. It seems like you can make anything into a social ... studying for finals and you can have a party for it." "That was about the only surprise I guess. The people are a lot more friendly than I expected." Student life can become unbalanced when social life becomes the primary focus. One student talked about social over-indulgence: "I was pretty unprepared for that actually. It's been a little detrimental. Like you said you've got to study for a final and it's a little hard to get away. I don't go to the library either."

Social support systems helped provide personal balance for several students. Having a connection with other people was important and enriching for those who found social support. Students talked about finding partnerships within their college department, in the classroom and in a cohort of people transferring at the same time: "I don't know how your departments are, but I pretty much know everybody there ... friends with most everybody there. It's not really a problem ... the social part of it." "A lot of my classes are major classes, so they are small, too. You have friends in class, but ... it's different.... It's like a business relationship." "A lot of my friends are from the community college still. They transferred over, too. So, we're like old buddies and stuff." Still other students recognized and experienced the value of a social support system within their living environment: "I wished I had lived in the dorms because of the contacts with other people." "Well, with family housing I expected to kind of be by myself, but the whole community takes you in as a family. They'll watch my kids, they'll take my kids swimming, they'll do this for my kids. We go over to supper at their house. My neighbor is a single mom, too. We just trade baby-sitting, do all kinds of things together.... So it was a lot more community than I ever expected."

There were a number of students who reported having meager social lives. Whether choosing social abstinence in order to be more academically successful, or finding it difficult to find social connections, some students' social lives were in atrophy: "I had to cut away a whole chunk of life. And that's been really weird for me." "The social aspect is totally different. There is like no social life ... unless it's friends of my friends." "I'm coming up here, and it's not as much ... social life that I expected it to be. I'm really disillusioned actually.... you know ... in terms of the support system ... and it's just not

happening." "Socially, I don't know, there's too many people in the classes and strained. I can't go talk to everybody. It's hard to meet people."

Searching for Other Support

Students who sought out available programs to help them settle into the university were disappointed when the programs did not meet their needs or expectations. Interested in participating in orientation, one transfer student who was working full-time found an all-day orientation wasn't something she could make a commitment to:

They have an orientation for freshman, and they also have one for transfer students ... but instead of two hours one day, it seemed like it was some eight hour deal ... I thought I can't do that because I have a summer job.

Another student was interested in the mentoring program for transfer students and non-traditional students. She found that her needs for academic support were not met when she made an effort to become involved:

I had a mentor and he was a male.... It wasn't successful at all. He contacted me once and they sent me a brochure on it. Every other Friday they have a meeting and a list of where their meetings are. Each one of them were in a bar. What if I'm interested in academic, not social.... That's not what I wanted from a mentor.

Students experienced a lack of support in finding accurate information to tell them how to get registered and advised: "I was confused. The people I was being helped by, they were graduate students themselves, working at these jobs, so they would be gone by the time I got in there." "I'd call admissions and I'd get different people and different people would tell me different things." Other experiences revolved around the level of courtesy and service extended to students by people working at CSU, with students feeling that they were treated like second-class citizens,: "when this lady just wanted to push me through in ten minutes because she had an appointment ..." "I still see this attitude, not as much faculty, but just a lot of the employees on campus. They think we're just a bunch of pompous kids or something like that, that need to be put in our place. I thought that was uncalled for."

Students need strong support systems, and financial, social and institutional sources all contribute to, or detract from, a good college experience.

Implications for Practice

Transferring from a community college, settling into, and eventually graduating from a university requires systemic support. Following are several recommendations to help provide students the level of support necessary to successfully graduate:

Campus and staff should be more welcoming and helpful. Clearly marked buildings and information about what services and departments can be found in each building. All campus staff should be able to provide a positive greeting and willingness to assist students.

Better training for campus faculty and staff. Faculty, advisors and service staff from both institutions should have coordinated processes within which to perform tasks which integrate transfer students to the university.

Inter-institutional faculty exchanges. Promote meetings, or visiting teacher opportunities, with constituents at each college level to gain insight and information regarding course contents and requirements and other institutional cultures.

A one stop service center. Create a hub similar to that at community colleges where students can access the systems necessary to settle in to the university with minimal confusion and disruption to their lives.

Stronger links with housing listings. Possibly a `hot link' to housing helpers or chamber branch. These listings would be comprehensive to include housing to share, multiple family dwellings, and houses to rent.

Improved financial resources. An avenue to work and still be a successful student. Increased opportunities to receive adequate financial aid would reduce the burden of working additional hours to make ends meet.

Direct communication link. Use current technology to provide easily accessible, accurate information about credits, registration, advising, financial aid, establishing residency. A computerized query and referral should be added to the campus Internet home page. This will allow students self-directed access to campus life.

Standard transfer and credit acceptance practices. University-wide, and individual colleges and schools within the university need to establish core

standards for transfer. This will let students know up front what to expect and provide a framework to work from.

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