This chapter discusses the trends surrounding transfer students and highlights issues affecting these students. Also presented is a synthesis of research on transfer students, post-transfer adjustment process, and perspectives on college adjustment.

Transfer Student Adjustment

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Over eleven hundred campuses strong, American community colleges enroll almost half of the nation’s undergraduates each fall and half of all first-time freshmen, offering them a diverse and flexible curriculum that meets their academic and vocational goals (Cohen and Brawer, 1996). Public and independent community colleges are found in every state. According to Vaughan (2000), the public community colleges serve about ten million students per year—five million in credit courses and another five million in noncredit courses, activities, and programs.

The transfer function is of paramount importance to maintaining access to higher education by providing the lower-division coursework for a baccalaureate degree for those students who, immediately after high school, may be ineligible for admission to a four-year college or university. The open-access admissions philosophy and diversified curricula of public community colleges in the United States provide primary access to postsecondary education beyond the two-year college for diverse students.

The community college student who transfers to the four-year institution faces new psychological, academic, and environmental challenges. The academic challenges facing transfer students have been well documented. Keeley and House (1993) and Townsend (1993, 1995) have written that many students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions have trouble adjusting to the rigorous academic standards and are often faced with numerous other challenges upon enrolling in four-year institutions. This has been attributed, in part, to institutional differences in size, location, academic rigor, and competition among students (Holahan, Green, and Kelley, 1983; Laanan, 1996, 1998). The term transfer shock has been used to characterize the temporary dip in transfer students’ academic performance (or grade point average—GPA) in the first or second

Further research about the experiences of students at the community college who do transfer to senior institutions is necessary to determine the complexity of their adjustment process. Much of the research on community college students’ transition to the four-year academic setting has focused on scholastic performance as measured by GPA. Other studies tend to compare transfer students with native students—that is, students who entered the four-year institution as freshmen—regarding various outcomes, such as time to degree, persistence, and graduation rates.

The research that examines the factors that contribute to post-transfer adjustment is very limited, especially in regard to students’ emotional and psychological development at the four-year institution. A student's prior experience at the two-year college may influence both cognitive and affective outcomes at the senior institution. With a growing number of community college students transferring to senior institutions, more research is needed to better understand their academic preparation at the two-year institution and the extent to which their prior experiences facilitate or impede their educational progress at the four-year school.

**Transfer Behavior**

In 1997, the National Center for Education Statistics published a report entitled *Transfer Behavior Among Beginning Postsecondary Students: 1989–94*. Authored by McCormick and Carroll (1997), the report describes patterns of multiple institution attendance and transfer by students who first entered postsecondary education during the academic year 1989–90. Specifically, the data were drawn from the second follow-up of the 1990 Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS), which was conducted in the spring of 1994 and was drawn from students who participated in the 1990 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), which is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of graduate and undergraduate students. The highlights of their analysis include the following:

- One out of four community college students indicated in 1989–90 that they were working toward a bachelor's degree (prospective transfers). Of this group, 39 percent transferred directly to a four-year institution by 1994.
- Among community college students identified as prospective transfers, those who enrolled full-time in their first year were about twice as likely as those who enrolled part-time to transfer to a four-year institution within five years—that is, 50 percent of full-timers transferred, compared with 26 percent of part-timers.
- Among community college beginners who transferred to a four-year institution, 65 percent transferred without a degree. About one out of three completed an associate's degree before transferring.
• On average, community college beginners who transferred to a four-year institution spent about twenty months at the first institution.
• While one out of four community college transfers had received a bachelor's degree by 1994, another 44 percent were still enrolled at a four-year institution, an overall persistence rate of 70 percent. This is comparable to the persistence rate among students who began at four-year institutions.
• The bachelor's degree attainment rate was much higher among the minority of community college transfers who completed an associate's degree before transferring: 43 percent of associate's degree completers had received a bachelor's degree by 1994, compared with 17 percent among those who transferred without any credential.

Post-Transfer Academic Performance

Four-year colleges and universities continue to be concerned about the academic success of students transferring from community colleges (Cross, 1968; Thornton, 1972). As a result, special attention has been paid to understanding how transfer students perform at senior institutions. For decades, studies have found that transfer students' grades were lower than those earned by upper-division students who had entered the university as freshmen (native students) (Cohen and Brawer, 1989).

In his review of research findings conducted from 1928 through 1964 relative to the success of junior college transfer students, Hills (1965) came up with three main conclusions: (1) transfer students should expect to suffer an appreciable drop in grades in the first semester after transfer, (2) transfer students' grades tend to improve in direct relation to their length of schooling, and (3) native students as a group are shown to perform better than the transfer students. Hills concluded that the transfer student who plans to earn a baccalaureate degree should be warned of the probability of suffering a potentially severe transfer shock. Furthermore, students will most likely encounter greater difficulty than native students and can expect to take longer to graduate.

Studies regarding the academic performance of transfer students have been concerned primarily with GPA because it is the most widely used index for admission of transfer students. Even with the abundance of research, conflicting results have been reported, ranging from the drop in GPA, called transfer shock, to an increase in GPA after transfer, sometimes called transfer ecstasy.

Most recently, an in-depth meta-analysis of transfer shock conducted by Diaz (1992) revealed sixty-two studies that reported the magnitude of GPA change. The studies showed that although community college transfer students in 79 percent of the studies experienced transfer shock, the magnitude of GPA change in most cases was one half of a grade point or less. Of the studies that showed that community college transfer students experienced transfer shock, 67 percent reported that students recover from transfer shock,
usually within the first year after transfer. Significantly, 34 percent of these studies showed that community college transfer students recovered completely from transfer shock, 34 percent showed nearly complete recovery, and 32 percent showed partial recovery.

**Transfer Adjustment Process**

In addition to exploring the phenomenon of transfer shock, much of the recent research on community college transfer students has examined the transfer phenomenon from two other perspectives: (1) the student or institutional characteristics associated with transfer students’ persistence at senior institutions and (2) the relationship between transfer students’ academic performance at senior institutions and personal, demographic, or environmental characteristics (Graham and Hughes, 1994).

**Comparisons with Native Students.** Comparisons between the academic performance of transfer and native students have focused on attrition and persistence, graduation rates, and academic probation. Cohen and Brawer (1982) found that community college transfer students had lower GPAs and higher attrition rates than native students did. Richardson and Doucette (1980) used both GPAs and persistence rates to compare community college transfer students with native students and found differences among different types of receiving institutions. Graham and Dallam (1986) contrasted all transfer students (those from both four-year institutions and community colleges) with native students, using academic probation as an indicator of scholastic performance, and found that both groups of transfer students were more likely to end up on academic probation than native students were.

**Personal, Demographic, or Environmental Characteristics.** Research on transfer students has also sought to identify predictive variables associated with the persistence of transfer students at senior institutions. These studies applied models of student persistence in four-year colleges to transfer students. Using Tinto’s constructs of social and academic integration (1975) as predictors of persistence in four-year colleges, Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986) investigated the relevance of this model for transfer students’ persistence. They found that the variables associated with social and academic integration played a role in the persistence of transfer students at four-year colleges and universities. Furthermore, Johnson (1987) examined the relationship between transfer students’ persistence and four outcome measures: (1) the perceived practical value of education, (2) educational aspirations, (3) academic factors—that is, satisfaction, performance, self-concept, and integration, and (4) external factors, such as family, job, and finances. She found a relationship between persistence and academic satisfaction, performance, integration, and the perceived practical value of education. As a result of the preliminary investigations into the personal, demographic, and environmental characteristics of community college transfer students, the findings suggest that these factors may affect performance at senior institutions (Graham and Hughes, 1994).
Phlegar, Andrew, and McLaughlin (1981) conducted a study in an effort to clarify the conflicting results of the research on transfer students. Specifically, they sought to identify prior academic performance and personal and environmental variables that would predict the academic performance of transfer students at senior institutions. They found that students who met the key requirements of senior institutions—in math, science, and English—performed better than other transfers by two- to four-tenths of a grade point. Conversely, Hughes and Graham (1992) identified only one variable—class attendance at the community college—that distinguished between satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance during the first semester after transfer. For research projects focusing on personal, demographic, or environmental characteristics, Graham and Hughes (1994) argue that the relationship between these variables and academic performance over time needs to be assessed to determine whether transfer shock occurs mainly in the first semester of transfer, thus overshadowing the effects of variables that may predict long-term academic success.

**Perspectives on College Adjustment**

There is an abundance of research on student attrition. Many of these studies focus on factors that either positively or negatively affect students’ decisions to stay in or drop out of college. However, only a handful of these studies have addressed aspects of college student adjustment. A few studies have included some measures that represent college adjustment directly in their models (Bennett and Okinaka, 1990; Chartrand, 1992), whereas others have simply made implications about adjustment. According to Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), college adjustment has not typically been the object of systematic study. Researchers do not rely on a single definition of college adjustment that might distinguish it from other constructs. In other words, because of the complexities of understanding student adjustment in college, scholars have advanced many constructs and frameworks yielding multiple theoretical perspectives.

Three main themes are prevalent in the research on college adjustment: psychological, environmental, and climate approaches. Of these, the majority of studies have addressed the psychological aspects of adjustment. In addition, the climate approach has received wide attention due to the changing demographics of students on college campuses.

**Psychological Approaches.** In his analysis of the Bean and Metzner Attrition Model (1985), Chartrand (1992) defined adjustment as institutional commitment, feelings of academic adjustment, and the absence of psychological distress. In another study, college adjustment is contrasted with *transitional trauma*, defined as the level of alienation a student experiences when unfamiliar with the norms, values, and expectations at the four-year institution (Bennett and Okinaka, 1990).
A popular perspective for examining college adjustment is to consider it as a type of psychological distress, along with personal, social, and academic dimensions. In a study examining minority freshmen, Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) employed a stress-coping model to describe the adjustment process. These researchers used different instruments to measure chronic role strain, life events that cause stress, and minority status stressors in relation to three adjustment outcomes: psychological distress, feelings of well-being, and academic achievement. According to these authors, college adjustment is conceptualized as a function of student attributes, psychological and sociocultural stresses, and the strategies students use to cope with these stresses. They found that racial and ethnic minorities encounter additional stressors not typical of nonminority students. They conclude that stress derives from both internal sources and demographic composition and social climate on the campus.

**Educational Environment.** Another trend in studying college adjustment is to examine the influences of the educational environment. According to Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), assessing structural and climate characteristics of college campuses and the extent to which these factors may facilitate or impede a student's adjustment is critical to understanding the complex adjustment process. A major structural characteristic of a college or university is the faculty. Previous research suggests that spending quality time with faculty members positively affects a student's level of persistence, satisfaction, and academic performance (Astin, 1984, 1993; Pace, 1984, 1992; Tinto, 1987). Therefore, it is important to determine to what extent students interact with faculty members and spend quality time meeting with them outside of class.

**Campus Climate.** According to Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), a campus climate has many dimensions. It encompasses student interactions across race and ethnicity, perceptions of the climate for intergroup relations (racial and ethnic tension), experiences of overt discrimination, and the ethnic and racial diversity of the student body. Although the psychological perspectives mentioned earlier provide an important framework for studying college adjustment, the research literature also suggests that certain institutional characteristics can have an impact on an individual's adjustment to college. The extent to which a college is selective in the admissions process will have an effect on the academic adjustment of students. If the institution only accepts students of exceptional academic talent, as measured by SAT scores and GPA, students are forced to perform on a par with their counterparts. Hurtado (1992) found that both selective and private institutions tend to have distinct racial climates when compared to nonselective institutions. Another characteristic is college size. The size of the institution—for example, the size of its student body or its faculty—will contribute to students' feelings of anonymity, sense of community, or isolation (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Furthermore, others contend that the impact of college size on college
adjustment may have much to do with how students make sense of the environment, which is an important aspect of the early transition process (Attinasi, 1989).

**Conclusion**

Today, community college transfer programs play a critical role in providing access to individuals who desire to continue their education beyond a two-year institution. Students in the transfer pipeline have the opportunity to complete their general education requirements by participating in formalized articulation agreements and then transferring to the four-year institution of choice. Based on the research, transfer students are likely to experience a complex adjustment process—academically, socially, and psychologically—because of the environmental differences between two- and four-year institutions. Having an awareness of the expectations of the four-year school will facilitate a transfer student’s successful transition and ultimate success in the completion of a bachelor’s degree.

**References**


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