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Supporting Vertical Transfer: The Role of a Student Union Learning Community

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Over the last few decades the number of students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions has dramatically increased, prompting college campuses to redouble their efforts to expand their capacity to serve students in ways that are comparable to native freshman (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). Transferring students face numerous barriers, such as misalignment of curricula, credit loss, or too little guidance through the complex transfer process. One in five entering community college students transfer to a university, despite 80% seeking to do so, and only 60% of those transfer students earn a bachelor’s degree within six years (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). Receiving institutions have struggled to adequately support transfer students when they enter the new university environment. Researchers have investigated the challenges transfer students encounter during their transition, building on theories of “transfer shock” (Flaga, 2006; Hills, 1965) and students’ social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993; Townsend, 2008).

Given the turmoil transfer students can encounter navigating both academic and social challenges, student affairs practitioners are well positioned to develop interventions, programs, and services that support students’ holistic transition to the new university. Noticing the need for this type of intervention, practitioners at a research university created an innovative program using a learning community model and leveraging the resources and programs of a student union/center of campus life to support transfer students’ transition. Created by the center for campus life with support from the university counseling center, the program was well positioned to support students’...
engagement in the campus community, sense of belonging, and mental well-being. The purpose of this study was to examine how participation in a transfer learning community contributed to student flourishing, defined as students’ emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Keyes, 2002), through the transition from community college to university.

Transfer Students

Adapting Tinto’s (1993) work on academic and social integration in student departure, numerous researchers examined experiences and outcomes of transfer students, particularly those of “vertical” transfers moving from community colleges to four-year universities. Researchers have found transfer students to report academic challenges related to adjusting to larger campuses and class sizes, less frequent and positive interactions with faculty, and less academic support overall (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend, 2008). While researchers have found transfer students to take longer to graduate (NCES, 2003), have lower GPAs, and higher rates of departure (Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008; Glass & Harrington, 2002), others have shown community college transfer students to be as successful academically as starting first-year students (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011).

Socially, transfer students often struggle to develop a robust social support system, and Townsend and Wilson’s (2006) findings from focus groups described transfer students as struggling to find community or to feel connected to campus. Transfer students, compared to native students, were less likely to be involved in student organizations, reported less informal interactions with peers and faculty (Terris, 2009), and engaged less frequently in co-curricular learning experiences such as internships, community service, and study abroad (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

Our work to support community college transfer students applied concepts from the field of positive psychology to create a learning community program wherein transfer students could flourish. Keyes (2002) advanced the notion of mental wellness as more than a lack of mental illness, describing the construct of flourishing as three domains of well-being: emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The emotional well-being domain describes individuals’ positive affect (i.e., cheerful, happy, peaceful) and generalized satisfaction with life. An individual described as exhibiting psychological well-being finds purpose in life, accepts self, seeks personal development, acts and thinks autonomously, and can establish positive relationships with others. Keyes described social well-being as a general acceptance of others, a positive outlook on the potential for people, groups, and society to progress, feelings of utility and belonging in society, and feeling connected to the larger society.

Previous application and study of Keyes’s idea of mental wellness among college students informed our programmatic intervention to support community college transfer students. Swaner (2005) offered conceptual connections between college student mental wellness and engaging educational practices such as learning communities and service-learning programs, suggesting that these programs provide an optimized balance between challenge and support and thereby foster student success alongside mental wellness. Researchers examined how student attributes and college environments associate with Keyes’s (2002) construct of flourishing through student surveys at a small private college (Low, 2011) and later in a predictive model of student flourishing from a multi-institutional survey (Fink, 2014). Low (2011) found students’ ratings of the importance of community service, political involvement, and global awareness to be positively associated with flourishing.
Fink (2014) found students’ ease with transition to college, socially supportive college environment, sense of civic engagement, and sense of belonging to be positive predictors of flourishing. By creating positive social experiences, providing key resources and information to ease the transition, and optimizing stress levels by building a community of support, our creation of a transfer learning community was conceptually designed to foster students’ well-being and overall success as they navigated the new four-year university environment.

Transfer2Terp Learning Community

The Transfer2Terp Learning Community (T2T) was designed to support community college transfer student well-being and overall success by positioning the student union/center for campus life as students’ campus home. Educators use the term learning community to describe a wide range of educational initiatives across many different contexts, but learning communities can broadly be defined as strategies to reform teaching and learning in higher education settings which foster seamless connections between students’ social and academic realms and integrate information across educational experiences (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Learning communities, by connecting students’ classroom settings with their peer groups, facilitate the accompaniment of learning alongside students’ engagement in the college environment. The T2T learning community employs both curricular and co-curricular offerings and aims to foster students’ social and academic integration into their new campus environment by working toward three main program goals: (a) to assist students with the transition to the life and culture of a research institution, (b) to engage students in leadership, identity, and civic development involvement opportunities, and (c) to encourage a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with the campus community.

T2T was designed as a support system to promote flourishing as students transitioned from “transfers” to “Terps” (an abbreviated mascot name of the university) and to confer upon participants the institutional value of civic engagement with a dual purpose of developing students’ general sense of civic engagement and their sense of connectedness to the campus community. With numerous service-learning, leadership and identity development, and student engagement programs, the student union/center for campus life is uniquely situated to direct the transfer learning community. The first semester T2T course was designed to help students sharpen their academic success skills, discover campus resources, explore their academic, co-curricular, and career-related interests, identify and understand differences between community college and research university, and discuss and apply strategies for being successful at research universities (e.g., connect with faculty about research opportunities). A second semester course was offered to encourage students to reflect on their civic identity and become involved in the process of positive social change. At the foundation of this course was a 6-week practicum wherein students engaged in experiential learning as they investigate the process of social change by focusing on the interplay between social issues and social change strategies within the context of a specific community.

Complimenting their coursework, students engaged in a variety of activities outside of class that also supported the program goals. Students were paired with a “T2T Coach,” a university staff member charged with getting to know students throughout their transition, answering questions and providing encouragement, and connecting them with co-curricular learning opportunities of interest to the student. Leveraging student union resources, students were provided with increased access to campus resources in order to ease their transition to the university, including lockers and laptop checkouts in the student union, free luncheons with faculty members, liaisons to advising,
counseling, and career centers, tickets to campus events, and funding for leadership, identity, and civic development opportunities such as social justice retreats and service learning trips.

Methodology

In order to investigate the experiences of T2T participants, the following research questions guided our investigation:

1. How did T2T participants experience the transition to university?
2. What is the relationship between T2T participation and transfer students’ perceptions of their civic engagement and mental health?

Researchers collected both quantitative and qualitative information to describe the community college transfer experience at the university and the role the learning community plays in supporting students as they navigate their transfer experience. Findings in the current study were triangulated from three data sources: T2T students’ reflective journals throughout their first two semesters, T2T student focus groups conducted at the end of the first semester, and a survey administered to T2T and control groups both at the beginning of their first semester and end of their second semester. The Institutional Review Board approved all research activities.

Data Sources

Researchers surveyed students in the T2T program and a control group of transfer students in order to examine group differences on the outcome variables of interest. Students were contacted via email to respond to the same web-based survey at two different time points: at the beginning of students’ first semester (pre) and during the last week of students’ second semester (post).

Survey Sample. Given the limited capacity of the T2T program in its pilot year, researchers were able to construct “T2T” and “control” groups by random assignment in order to address a potential self-selection bias in the study design. Throughout the summer before students’ first semester at the university, researchers contacted all incoming transfer students from in-state community colleges (1,331 students). Of those students, 205 requested to enroll in T2T and 50 of those 205 students were randomly selected to be invited into T2T. In total, 40 students enrolled in the T2T program, leaving 165 in the control group. During the “pre” test of the survey, there were 37 respondents from the T2T group (93% response) and 45 respondents from the control group (22% response). For the “post” test, researchers only surveyed students who participated in the “pre” test, resulting in 25 respondents from the T2T group (68% response) and 24 respondents from the control group (53% response). This large difference in response rate was likely due to the in-person encouragement for T2T students to complete the survey. Gender and racial demographics were similar across groups, with 62% and 52% of the T2T and control groups identifying as female, respectively, and 39% of the T2T students and 35% of the control group students identifying as White.

Survey Instrument. The survey instrument used in the current study included measures from the National Study of Living Learning Programs (NSLLP; Inkelas, 2007) and Mental Health Continuum Short-Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2002). We selected these measures given their past use across multiple campus samples of college students in the 2008 and 2009 administrations of the NSLLP, results from which were used by Fink (2014) to build a predictive model of flourishing among college students.
**Sense of Civic Engagement.** Students responded to a four-item scale to indicate the extent to which they felt a sense of civic engagement. The four-item scale, originally administered in the NSLLP (Inkelas & Associates, 2007), was initially developed to be consistent with Tyree’s (1998) construct of citizenship for social change. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency in its original use in the NSLLP (Cronbach alpha = 0.89). The scale assesses students’ sense of civic engagement by asking students to rate on a scale of strongly disagree to agree on the following items: (a) It is important that I play active role in community, (b) I volunteer my time to the community, (c) I believe my work has a greater purpose for the larger community, and (d) I work with others to make community better place.

**Mental Health.** In order to assess students’ mental health, researchers selected the MHC-SF (Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Klooster, & Keyes, 2010), a broad measure of mental health. The MHC-SF has a theoretical foundation in Keyes (2002) conceptualization of mental health as a continuum between “languishing” and “flourishing.” The MHC-SF contains 14 items that address social, psychological, and emotional well-being and categorize respondents into three groups (languishing, moderately mentally healthy, flourishing), and the MHC-SF is an internationally normed measure of mental health that has been used in numerous studies among entire adult populations and college students specifically (e.g., Fink, 2014). Readers are directed to Keyes et al. (2008) for information regarding the psychometric properties of the MHC-SF.

**Reflective Journals.** As a part of the learning community seminar course, all T2T students completed journal assignments wherein they wrote 1–2 pages reflecting on their transition to the new university. Of the 40 T2T students, 22 students consented to sharing their journals from the first semester, and 14 students consented to sharing their journals from their second semester.

**Focus Groups.** We conducted four focus groups (60–90 minutes with 5–6 students each) for 21 T2T students at the end of students’ first semester. These focus groups prompted students to describe their transition to the university, with a particular focus on structures of support, outstanding challenges, and campus engagement.

**Analyses**

**Survey Analysis.** Analyses of survey data concerned the second research question. To examine the effect of the T2T program on students’ sense of civic engagement, researchers used ANCOVA analysis to test mean differences on the civic engagement scale between three groups: control group, T2T students not in the social change course, and T2T students in the social change course. Finally, to examine mental wellness, researchers used previously established procedures to categorize students into flourishing, moderately mentally healthy, and languishing groups based on their responses to the MHC-SF. Researchers then used Chi-squared analysis to examine differences in group distributions between T2T and control groups.

**Focus Group and Journal Analysis.** Recordings of these focus groups were transcribed, and a research team coded the data using pseudonyms for each participant. Inductive coding schemes, in two levels of analysis, were created for the focus group transcripts and the weekly reflective journals. First, broad themes were used to facilitate the extraction of data and to reduce the data to manageable proportions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Two broad themes emerged from the focus groups and journals entries: (a) the challenges students faced when transitioning to the university, and (b) the supports for students when transitioning to the university. The coding framework we used to interpret the qualitative data derived from the spring 2013 reflective journals was adapted from Keyes’s (2005) three domains of mental well-being: emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Therefore, mental wellness was the third qualitative theme.
Limitations

Readers must consider various limitations with respect to this study’s design. Among the most relevant to the overall findings is the limitation of the actual T2T program, studied during its pilot year. In the years following data collection, T2T program staff refined and honed aspects of the curriculum and benefitted from student leadership of program components to enhance the experience of T2T participants. Readers should note that, although an outside expert was recruited to facilitate the focus groups, the program staff were the main organizers, collectors, and analyzers of data. One of the methods to check interpretations of student data with T2T participants was the inclusion of T2T students as panelists in the presentation of preliminary findings to campus audiences and subsequent debriefing. Finally, due to resource limitations, the researchers were unable to gather qualitative data from the control group, which could have yielded even further insight regarding the research questions. Future study of the T2T program with additional focus groups among nonparticipants would create additional insight as to how students experience the transfer process while participating in a learning community program developed beyond its pilot year.

Findings

Survey Findings

Civic Engagement. Net of students’ prior ratings of their sense of civic engagement, T2T students who took the spring social change course (M = 3.56, SD = 0.37) reported higher sense of civic engagement compared to participants in the control group (M = 2.96, SD = 0.49), F = 15.90, p < 0.001, and compared to T2T students who did not take the spring course (M = 3.02, SD = 0.37), F = 5.04, p = 0.036, yielding large Cohen’s d effect sizes of 1.36 and 1.53, respectively (Table 1). The civic engagement scale demonstrated strong reliability within the sample (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87).

Mental Wellness. Table 2 describes the numbers of students in each of the MHC-SF groups, categorized from student responses to the MHC-SF during their pre-test and post-test surveys. Percentages across the three MHC-SF categories did not seem to vary between the T2T and control groups at the pre-test. While the proportion of flourishing students within both T2T and control groups appears to remain static across the pre- and post-tests, more of the students in the control group are languishing at the post-test compared to students in the T2T group. A higher percentage of students in the T2T group were in the moderately mentally healthy group at the post-test compared to the percentage of students in the control. Chi-squared analysis evidenced significant differences between T2T and control groups in proportions of students in

| Sense of Civic Engagement post-test ANCOVA comparisons between control and T2T groups using students’ sense of civic engagement pre-test rating as covariate |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Group A:        | Group B:        | Group C:        |
| Control (n = 24)| T2Ters not in social change course (n = 11) | T2Ters that completed social change course (n = 12) |
| Sense of Civic Engagement Post-Test | M = 2.96 | M = 3.02 | M = 3.56 |
| SD = 0.49       | SD = 0.37       | SD = 0.37       |

Group Differences

Group A < Group C***, Cohen’s d = [1.36]
Group B < Group C*, Cohen’s d = [1.53]
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
each MHC-SF category. Readers must use caution while interpreting the Chi-squared finding given the small number of respondents in each category.

**Focus Group and Journal Findings**

**Challenges Transitioning to the University.** T2T students found several challenges in student service settings, from the inadequate campus-wide orientation for transfer students to the academic advising they received. These students expressed a high sense of frustration with professors and academic advisors, describing the limited or ineffective time they were given with them.

“If you want to do psych, there’s no reason for you to talk to me, we don’t have any connection. You can go talk to the psych department.” And I was like, I was really pissed. It was just very irritating. And like, what do you do about that situation, though. Who am I supposed to go to? (Rachel, Focus Group)

Given the large class sizes at the university, students had a difficult time forming relationships with professors and rather sought out teaching assistants for classroom support.

I felt that professors here don’t care for their students, at all, especially in big classrooms. I know that they have to do research in order to get paid, but that doesn’t mean that they have to stop teaching and caring for their students. (Luis, Focus Group).

**Finding Community.** Another challenge to transfer students was the ability to find a community within the institution. Most of the T2T students were also commuter students. The experience commuting did not allow them to make connections on campus or get involved on campus, as one student mentioned:

The other thing that I feel is that everything seems to be limited to freshman and people that live on campus. I am a commuter student. I would like to be as involved as I was in my college before transferring

---

Table 2

*MHC-SF diagnostic category for pre- and post-tests between control and T2T groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MHC-SF Diagnostic</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flourishing</td>
<td>Moderately Mentally Health</td>
<td>Languishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 45 (Pre)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 24 (Post)</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2T</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 37 (Pre)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 25 (Post)</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-squared Value—Pre</td>
<td>0.820</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-squared Value—Post</td>
<td>5.157*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.
here. I was really involved with different clubs and I did a lot of volunteer work. But here, it's really far away from my house and all of the events take place in the afternoon. I get here really early and after my classes I just want to go home and not wait around until 6 or 7 at night. (Toby, Focus Group).

Events on campus were unknown to these students, and the time of events made it difficult for them to attend the events for other students. Finding a community of peers was also challenging to students who, due to their delayed arrival among their peers at the university, missed out on the key community building of the first years of college. As one student commented, “. . . the freshman class is going to be with the freshman class and the people in the dorms are going to be with the people in the dorms” (Liz, Focus Group). T2T students observed that there were already cliques or grouping of students, which made it difficult to make friends in those groups or join the group. Even within student organizations, there were already groups who were formed that did not enable transfer students to feel like they could be part of these groups.

**Support during the Transition.** The supports for transfer students were similar to those faced by others as challenges. One support area for students were cocurricular activities they later got involved with, such as the riding club, gymnastics, and community service groups. The T2T community was also mentioned as a group and space to see familiar people, who can relate to each other. One student said this about the T2T course specifically:

> I really am thankful for T2T as a course. It helped me to transition to UMD without feeling so much as an outsider as I kept thinking I would be in the weeks leading up to the first day of classes; the community in which T2T brings is definitely the best part of the course. (Corinne, Journal Entry).

Corinne mentioned in her journal entry that this learning community placed her in a smaller and comfortable environment among the larger university campus.

Some students even spoke of how they could socialize with the learning community classmates outside of class, “people that became more than classmates but friends” (Chris, Journal Entry). Chris also described how the learning community was supportive, “We listened to each other, encouraged each other, and made each other aware of the awesomeness that we all had inside” (Journal Entry). Students were asked to evaluate the course after completing it and mentioned that, through enhanced connection to student affairs staff in the student center, the course and the T2T community was a source of both support and information about the campus’s student services.

Well I know one thing, that we wouldn’t know any of this stuff if it wasn’t for T2T. . . . It was one of the best highlights for this semester because if I didn’t have this class, I would be so, even more lost, even more, have so much less friends than I do now. And it just, I think without T2T we wouldn’t be able to find others on campus support, really. We wouldn’t know (the union director), we wouldn’t know (the program coordinator), we wouldn’t know (the student union), really as much. (Karen, Focus Group)

**Mental Wellness.** Among the three domains of well-being, the psychological and social functioning were most evident in the transfer student experiences. The students showed dimensions of flourishing, particularly psychological well-being, through the use of their environmental mastery and personal growth in college. Challenges, such as difficult course content, time management, and multiple responsibilities, were resolved with tools and mechanisms as students progressed from the fall to spring semester. Students spoke of finding their “footing” and making the “transition a smooth one” (Kendall, Journal Entry).
Tutoring, getting career advising, and using the human resources available were some of the tools used by students.

Now comparing last semester to this semester again, I would have probably cried last semester after the first day of math thinking to myself I cannot do this I cannot do this! But I feel as though I have an armory of tools to help me get through this class mainly involving tutoring and my math graduate student Chris who happens to be my roommate! (Liz, Journal Entry).

Liz also sought out a close relationship, the roommate, in order to help her with the class. Among other students, the help of other relationships, such as from professors, were also sought to attain good grades. “I learn. . . . Academically, getting to know my professor and asking for help frequently is necessary to have good grades” (Rita, Journal Entry).

Positive psychological well-being was clear in another student, who was systematic in tackling each course. The student further stated, “I have started this semester well by setting goals for each course, evaluating my study environment, personally meeting with my instructors, studying aloud and trying my best to sit as close as I can to the front of the classroom” (Caleb, Journal Entry). In this case, Caleb evaluated each environment and was intentional in his behavior, such as sitting in front of class and practicing a study habit to improve a class outcome. The students who exhibited negative psychological well-being had a more difficult time navigating campus. One student said that, “when my classes started to pick up in the fall semester, I experienced a lot of anxiety and stress. I did not understand a lot of the campus specific academic routines and rules” (Jamie, Journal Entry).

Personal growth was another domain of psychological well-being that students illustrated in the spring semester. When students sought to challenge themselves, they attained skills in balancing multiple tasks. One student said, “All of my courses this spring require study time outside of the classroom. In order to beat this challenge, I must be disciplined in my studies and find the perfect balance between work, study, and my leisure time” (Kendall, Journal Entry). Another student mentioned that exploring new majors was a challenge logistically because that would mean they would have to stay an extra semester, but “[they] believe that it really will not matter if [they] minor in another field to expand [their] knowledge and better prepared for the professional world” (Caleb, Journal Entry). For this, and other students, personal growth was also knowledge gained in majors, minors, and elective courses that expanded their minds. For other students who were not growing in college, they were able to acknowledge that other psychological issues may be a barrier.

I need the motivation to get more involved. There is something within me that I am not learning to overcome or accomplish and I know it’s anxiety and not enough confidence. To overcome this problem, I am going to a meet with counselor at (the university counseling center) next week. (Jessica, Journal Entry).

The positive aspect about Jessica’s issue is the ability to determine next steps to confronting the issue of not getting more involved on campus. There were other students who also noticed that their difficulty with time management or lack of study skill habits, for instance, was not allowing them to succeed; therefore they needed to seek assistance and support from campus resources.

Students experienced social well-being when they mentioned feeling socially accepted in groups and integrated into the campus community.
One of the most positive experiences I am enjoying is the fact that I am getting used to being on campus and my classes. I am doing better than last semester in every way. I have more friends now and become more and more familiar with the campus resources. (Rita, Journal Entry).

Students gained a social network on campus as they participated in campus events, service projects, protests, and social media campaigns. They strengthened these networks and accessed key resources through participation the T2T learning community.

Discussion

The students in this study described the various challenges to transferring to a four-year public university. While the finding that they confronted difficulties as they transitioned to a larger campus was not surprising, given the similar conclusions of previous researchers (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Townsend, 2008), the finding that they perceived campus services inadequate is concerning. The constant criticism within the fall semester journals and focus group discussions was the lack of care and attention given to students in advising offices or by professors when approached for help. Particular programs that were created to assist students were not useful or were not reflective of their experience, such as orientation programs. Like Townsend (2008) and Townsend and Wilson (2006) found, these students faced the challenge of transition due to the larger campus and class sizes, few or negative interactions with faculty, and less guidance from academic advisors.

The commuter experience for those students who did not live on campus was a salient reminder that they were not part of the campus community. The outsider feeling and lack of connection to people or groups within classes or student organizations was commonly discussed among this transfer population, similarly to the findings from Townsend and Wilson (2006) study. Non-traditional age and commuter transfers in this study reported challenges connecting to campus socially. Once students began to connect with the T2T learning community, they felt capable of going out of their comfort zone to meet others, socializing in other settings outside of the learning community, and working together in study groups. T2T was the initial social network for these students and the way in which students built a support system as they transitioned to the larger campus community.

For the spring 2013 semester, we assumed that the class would provide a foundation for civic engagement, since assignments were created to allow students to explore social issues of interest and act upon those issues. The spring 2013 reflective journals were coded to find the various elements of Keyes’s (2002) mental health continuum and Tyree’s (1998) components of civic engagement. In the journals, we were unable to find a substantial amount of clear mention from students regarding their sense of civic engagement. We focused on Keyes’s (2002) mental health’s three domains of well-being described: emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The psychological and social well-being domains were most prominent in students’ qualitative data, overlapping with the survey results and supporting Keyes’s conception of the parallel relationships between social and psychological well-being.

When students employed tools that helped them experience success, they had positive dimensions of mental health. The “positive dimensions” students exercised were holding positive attitudes, seeking challenges, managing their environment and building trusting relationships that sustained them during transition challenges. In the spring semester, they developed these tools to help them resolve issues. A positive frame of mind was essential to attaining other dimensions of mental health in their college experience. When students did not exhibit at least a positive frame of mind, they struggled to seek out resources and resolve problems or challenges with transitioning to the institution.
Findings related to mental wellness in the reflective journals were consistent with survey data comparing T2T participants to other community college transfers. Compared to students in the control group, students who participated in the T2T program were less likely to be in the unfavorable mental health category of “languishing” at the end of their first year at the university. In written reflections and focus groups, students described their experiences leveraging growth in psychological and social well-being to overcome challenges throughout their transition year. The qualitative data did capture students’ attributions of social well-being to participation in the T2T program, which could explain, at least in part, the favorable effect of T2T participation on student mental wellness as evidenced in the survey findings. Participants in the learning community may have experienced more social well-being through participation in T2T, which resulted in more favorable mental health responses on the follow-up survey compared to non-participants.

Compared to students in the control group, T2T participants scored higher on a scale of “Sense of Civic Engagement” at the end of their first year taking into account students’ pre-test rating of civic engagement. As expected, this difference was most pronounced among the T2T students who enrolled in the spring “Civic Engagement Seminar.” The spring course was intentionally created to engage transfer students in co-curricular learning experiences, such as internships, community service, and alternative break programs, in order to counteract findings evidenced in Ishitani and McKitrick’s (2010) study showing transfers to be less likely to be involved in these types of co-curricular programs.

Results are consistent with previous research about overlap between students’ engagement, sense of civic engagement and their mental health from languishing to flourishing (Fink, 2014; Low, 2011; Swaner, 2005). As shown through this study, the student union directed learning community provided critical support to students as they transitioned from community college to a university with particular regard to their sense of civic engagement and mental health. Given previous evidence citing students’ ease with social transition to college and sense of civic engagement as major predictors of mental health (Fink, 2014), the T2T student social community, enhanced by the learning community model, was a major source of support throughout the challenging transition.

**Implications for Practice**

This study highlights areas for improvement of transfer student services and supports the role of a student union directed learning community in easing the transition of community college transfer students to university life. The student union, which serves as the center for campus life and offers civic engagement programs, was well positioned to establish T2T and provide its students opportunities for civic development and social support. Major barriers to transfer students’ success existed, such as inefficient credit transfer between community colleges and the four-year university, insufficient communication of existing transfer policies to prospective students, or frustrating initial experiences with academic advising and orientation. For many students experiencing troubled pathways from community colleges to the four-year university, the T2T learning community offered important resources, support, and encouragement to persevere and flourish through the transition.

As university leaders work to build more efficient transfer pathways from community colleges, student affairs practitioners can provide leadership by working to enhance the transfer student experience through initiatives that, similarly to T2T, outreach to the transfer community to provide resources and support. Researchers and practitioners must consider how to scale targeted interventions like T2T, which only directly affected a small number of the institution’s transfer students. Further research into the effects of these interventions at scale is paramount. We found that, as a means to deliver important information about campus resources and build a strong
community, the learning community model worked quite well. While T2T delivered a stream of information about campus resources and study skills, staff also emphasized the importance of students’ personal and community resources by facilitating relationship building for students among their peers and with student center staff mentors. A common sentiment heard from T2T participants was gratitude for having the additional support and access to resources in their transition to the university. Students recognized that the vast majority of transfers were not participating in the program, which, in part, motivated a group of T2T student leaders to create a broader transfer student organization, open to all transfer students at the university.

As the scholarship solidifies around the positive effects of learning communities on students’ academic and social experiences in college and their civic engagement and mental wellness, practitioners are turning to learning communities as interventions to better serve students. In a recent article describing how learning communities have emerged as mechanisms of educational reform to support underserved students, Fink and Hummel (2015) highlighted examples of transfer student learning communities. Structured to support students holistically, learning communities are a powerful practice to both support students throughout the transfer transition and enhance the overall transfer student experience.

Conclusion

As a reaction to the need to enhance the transfer student experience, student affairs practitioners created an innovative learning community, directed by the student union, to ease the transition between community college and large research university. Findings from focus groups, journal reflections, and survey responses of learning community participants illuminated the transfer student transition experience and suggested favorable outcomes from learning community participation on civic engagement and mental health outcomes. Overall, the T2T program was effective in its pilot year in connecting students to resources, campus, and fostering a supportive community.

References


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