

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 782

RC 020 581

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 TITLE Meeting the Needs of Rural Students through Distance Advising: The Role of Transfer Guides in Three Measures of Student Success.
 PUB DATE Mar 96
 NOTE 9p.; In: Rural Goals 2000: Building Programs That Work; see RC 020 545.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Academic Advising; *Academic Persistence; *Articulation (Education); *College Transfer Students; Education Majors; Grade Point Average; Higher Education; Rural Schools; *Student Adjustment
 IDENTIFIERS *Montana State University; *Student Handbooks; Student Support Services; Transfer Shock

ABSTRACT

College students who transfer from a two-year or community college to a four-year institution must make many adjustments to the new institution and frequently suffer "transfer shock," evidenced by a (usually temporary) drop in grade point average. A student who is unprepared for transfer shock may become discouraged and drop out before obtaining a degree. At Montana State University (MSU)-Billings, many students transfer in from remote rural two-year colleges and must face strenuous commutes and adjustment to a larger, more structured institution; cultural differences; and juggling of family and work responsibilities. To address these issues, the College of Education and Human Services at MSU-Billings created transfer guides for students at several regional colleges. The guides contain information about how courses will transfer; answer questions about academics, child care, and housing; and inform students about transfer shock and the cultural and academic supports available to them. To assess the effectiveness of the guides, transcripts were examined for 103 students majoring in elementary education who had transferred to MSU-Billings from two-year colleges during 1990-95. Students had transferred from Northwest Community College (Wyoming), where transfer guides were in use, or from other regional, non-tribal, two-year colleges not using transfer guides. The two groups did not differ significantly in severity of transfer shock or recovery of grade point average, but Northwest Community College transfer students were more likely than other transfer students to persist to graduation. Contains 14 references. (SV)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF RURAL STUDENTS THROUGH DISTANCE ADVISING: THE ROLE OF TRANSFER GUIDES IN THREE MEASURES OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Increasingly, students seeking a secondary education eschew the "traditional" route to a college degree and, for a myriad of reasons including convenience and cost, elect to begin their education careers at a two-year or community college (Breneman, 1983; Kintzer, 1973; Knoell and Medsker, 1964). Many plan a transfer to a four-year institution for degree completion. The academic performance of these students remains an area of concern for all involved in the transfer process.

The many adjustments that students have to make to a new institution after transfer have been offered by some researchers as a partial explanation for the phenomenon of transfer shock. Well-documented and thoroughly studied, transfer shock is generally referred to as a drop in grade point average during the semester following a change of colleges (Hills, 1965). In her meta-analysis on the subject, Diaz (1992) found that 79% of the 62 studies included reported transfer shock among community college transfer students. It appears to be universal, affecting many students to varying degrees regardless of major, educational level, academic ability, age, or geographic location (Keeley and House, 1993).

While a common occurrence, transfer shock does not appear to be severe in most cases. The majority of GPA changes in Diaz's (1992) review involved one half of a grade point or less, which most students recovered before graduation (64% recovered completely or nearly completely, and an additional 34% recovered partially). Only students whose GPA was low to begin with were seriously effected (Britton, 1969; Dennison and Jones, 1970; Gold, 1972; Keeley and House, 1993). Why should a slight, usually temporary drop in grade point average be of concern to the majority of students?

One reason is that a student who is unprepared for transfer shock may be more likely to become discouraged and to abandon his or her efforts at achieving a four-year degree. This has obvious negative consequences for the student, and is of concern to administrators in a time when enrollment and retention rates are emphasized as a measure of an institution's performance. Most researchers examining GPA declines and recoveries include in their subject pools only those

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students who persist until graduation. There is a dearth of information regarding the students who are unable to weather the effects of transfer shock and who drop out of a program of study before obtaining a four-year degree.

These issues are relevant at Montana State University-Billings. Located in Montana's largest community, MSU-Billings serves a sparsely populated geographic area in Eastern Montana and Northern Wyoming. There are several two-year colleges in remote locations from which students transfer to the university. In addition to having to adjust to an education system which is larger and more structured than their home institutions, many of these transfer students have to overcome cultural differences, make strenuous commutes, and juggle family and work responsibilities. As much of a concern as grade point averages is whether students are able to persist until graduation.

To address these issues, the College of Education and Human Services at Montana State University-Billings created transfer guides for students at several regional colleges. Designed with input from faculty at each institution, the guides contain information about how courses will transfer; welcoming and explanatory letters from the dean; answers to questions on topics including academics, child care, and housing; and important telephone and fax numbers. In the guides, staff and faculty address the issue of transfer shock and inform students of the cultural and academic supports available to them. After the final copy for each college was approved by advisors and faculty, a formal articulation agreement was signed by MSU-Billings and community college deans of instruction, and press announcements were released to local newspapers.

As part of a maintenance plan, the academic advisor from the College of Education and Human Services at MSU-Billings makes frequent visits (at least one per semester) to community colleges where transfer guides are in use. During visits, the advisor discusses curriculum changes and other issues with faculty, and maintains contact with students who are considering a transfer. In this way, students receive early and accurate information about the receiving institution, and the guides become a tool for advising rather than a substitute. This ongoing interaction is a vital part of the atmosphere of support established by articulation agreements.

After transfer guides had been in use at one community college for over five years, we tested the effectiveness of our efforts. It was hoped that use of the articulation agreements and corresponding advising services had helped transfer students to be more successful in completing a four-year degree. We hypothesized that these individuals would experience less of a post-transfer drop in grade point average than students who had not had access to such services; would recover grade

point averages more thoroughly; and would be more likely to persist at MSU-Billings until graduation.

Method

A list of students majoring in elementary education who transferred to MSU-Billings from 1990 to 1995 was obtained from the Office of Institutional Planning. Two groups were formed: One was composed of students from Northwest College in Powell, Wyoming, a community college where transfer guides had been in use since 1990, and the other included students who had transferred from other regional non-tribal, two-year colleges where transfer guides had not been developed. For this pilot study, tribal colleges were excluded to control for cultural differences which might have effected academic success.

To be included in the sample, a student must have (a) transferred from Northwest College or another regional community college within the past five years, (b) had no more than one semester away from college prior to transfer, and (c) completed at least one full regular-year term at MSU-Billings. Criterion (b) was applied to control for the influence of maturation on pre-and post-transfer grade point average comparisons. With criterion (c), we excluded from the study students who took only a few summer classes at MSU-Billings to supplement their work at other institutions.

Forty-four students meeting these criteria transferred from Northwest College from 1990 to 1995. Fifty-nine transferred from other regional community colleges in the same period. Transcripts of all of these students were examined. The difference between the cumulative pre-transfer grade point average and the grade point average of the first semester after transfer was recorded as the magnitude of effect. Final cumulative grade point average at the time of departure from college was recorded to check for recovery (Table 1). Persistence (or lack thereof) was determined by examining current term classes. If the student had completed a degree or was in progress, he or she was considered to have persisted. If the student discontinued studies before obtaining a degree, he or she did not persist (Table 2).

An independent t test was performed to test the difference in mean magnitude of effect between the two groups. A chi square was calculated to compare persistence.

Results and Discussion

An alpha level of .05 was used for both t tests. These tests indicated that there was not a significant difference between the two groups in terms of negative

magnitude of effect or recovery of grade point average after transfer. A chi square did indicate a difference in persistence rates between the groups at the .007 level of significance. The hypothesis that the use of transfer guides positively affects the ability of students to persist to graduation is strongly supported by the analysis.

These results are consistent with the large body of research that indicates that most students who transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution will experience transfer shock. As it has also been shown that most students will recover given time, it is vital that we are able to encourage students to persist to experience the rewards of their efforts. This study shows that the implementation of transfer guides is one way to do this.

Research on student needs and articulation agreements confirms the advantageous use of the general format of the MSU-Billings and Northwest College guide. Information given to students should be in the form of written course equivalency guides and articulation agreements ("Good Practices In Transfer Education," 1990). The MSU-Billings agreements with community colleges specify assignment of credit, as recommended by Knoell and Medsker (1965), rather than a vague acceptance of classes. Because ready and early access to articulation information improves students' transfer experience (Bowles, 1985), they are encouraged to begin to use the conveniently formatted guides as early as their first semester of study at the community college. As Kintzer (1981) emphasized, dissemination of information is essential; the guides are not valuable if they are not accessible.

Bowles (1985) and Cejda (1994) suggested that articulation agreements are more effective when developed and implemented by individuals at both institutions at the departmental and central administrative levels, including those who will be using the guides most frequently. We have met this objective by creating transfer guides through collaborative effort between and within our colleges. Students are reassured by the perceived cooperation and permanency of relations between the institutions.

Complaints of transfer students often include difficulty scheduling courses for the first semester after transfer (Kintzer, 1973) and advisors' lack of availability. Montana State University-Billings has attempted to address these concerns by including in the transfer guide support plan early and frequent opportunities for student advising. By the time students transfer they have met with the College of Education and Human Services advisor three to four times during the advisor's visits to their community college. It seems as though building a rapport in this manner has helped them to feel more comfortable in asking for assistance during and after the transfer semester and has contributed to a "seamless" transfer. We have also experimented with registering students for classes at MSU-Billings early

in their last semester at their community colleges. Using the internet to access records, we are able to register students during advising sessions at the sending institutions. Students save themselves a trip to Billings, and leave the sessions with tangible confirmation of their courses for the following semester in the form of a printed course schedule. Many have commented positively about the convenience of this procedure.

Student retention and success are concerns of all involved in the process of transfer from a 2- to a 4-year institution. By creating transfer guides with useful information presented in an accessible format, by making the guides readily available, and by offering competent advising throughout the transfer process, college faculty and staff can positively affect a student's ability to persist to graduation.

Abstract

Articulation guides for students transferring between Northwest Community College in Powell, Wyoming and Montana State University-Billings are described. The articulation agreement in place between the two institutions includes course information and supporting advising for transfer students. The effects of the guide on reduction of transfer shock for these students were studied. It was hypothesized that use of the guides would help students to weather transfer shock better than those transfer students from community colleges where no guides had been available. The two groups' declines in grade point average after transfer, recovery of GPA, and persistence were compared. It was found that the severity of transfer shock and the extent of recovery of grade point average were not significantly affected by use of the transfer guides, but that the ability of the Northwest College transfer students to persist to graduation was positively affected. The format of the transfer guides and corresponding advising activity are detailed and implications for students and administrators are discussed.

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Table 1

Means of Pre- and Post- Transfer Grade Point Averages

Group	Pre-Transfer Cumulative GPA	First Semester Post- Transfer GPA	Departure GPA
Northwest College N=44	3.06	2.97	3.56
Other Colleges N=64	2.88	2.66	2.77

Table 2

Summary of Persistence

Group	Persisted	Did Not Persist
Northwest College N=44	35	9
Other Colleges N=64	35	29