Transfer Center Stories: A Mission, a Plan, or Missed Opportunities

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American community colleges have served as a beacon of postsecondary access for those less likely to attend college for over a century. The mission statements of virtually every community college includes its role in the transfer function – allowing students to begin college at the two-year institution to be followed by transfer to a four-year college or university. Thus, a major role of community colleges is that of an "access bridge" to other levels of postsecondary education. Despite an apparent emphasis on transfer within the community colleges, the transfer rates of students remain problematically low. Estimates in the large urban community college district of Los Angeles, indicate that only 5 to 8 percent of the total student population transfer to a four-year institution (Los Angeles Community College District, 2001)[1]. Indicative of the difficulties in measuring transfer, a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that a uniform definition of transfer does not exist resulting in a large variation in transfer numbers (Bradburn & Hurst, 2001). The conclusions are that transfer is difficult to measure for many reasons including the complex nature of tracking student progress though multiple institutions (Hagedorn, 2004; Harbin, 1997; Helm, & Cohen, 2001; Surette, 2001).

Juxtaposed with low transfer rates are high student aspirations. Hagedorn (2004) and others have noted that despite modest GPA's, low college placement, and obstacles along the postsecondary path, community college students often have aspirations that include graduate study at the Master's Degree and beyond (Nora & Rendon, 1990;

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[1] It is important to note that this percentage represents the proportion of the FULL population that transfers. There is a great deal of controversy regarding how transfer rates should be measures of if it is even appropriate to use a percentage rather than just keeping a tally of raw numbers.

Rendon & Nora, 1987). The Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College

Students Project (TRUCCS) studying 5,000 community college students, found that the

most frequent response to the question "what is the highest degree you hope to earn" was

a Master's degree (Hagedorn, 2004). There is an obvious yet unexplained discord

between aspirations and behaviors. Researchers and practitioners are left to conclude that

students may not have the appropriate assistance to navigate through the educational

pathway to transfer status. Alternatively, it may be that students have unrealistic

expectations based on their availability of knowledge, background preparation, and/or

current level of mobility.

To help students through the difficult process of transfer, many institutions across

the country have developed Transfer Centers; physical locations where students can come

to learn more about the transfer process (Zamani, 2001). The mission of Transfer Centers

is to promote and support community college students who are seeking to transfer to

four-year institutions. An informal survey of students who utilized the Transfer Center

resources at Los Angeles Mission Community College (LAMCC) serves to clarify the

functioning of a Transfer Center. Contrary to current literature, this survey revealed that

85 percent of the students who came to the Transfer Center were seeking information and

help on the transfer process, an additional 58 percent sought help with their applications

for transfer and 44 percent sought the evaluation of their transcripts (LAMCC, 2002).

Although the research is limited, it clearly points to a keen student interest in transferring.

This positive interest, however, must be tempered with the obvious need for student

guidance. The same study found that 41 percent of the students who were interested in

transferring were also unsure of the semester in which they would like to do so.

To date, there has been no research that examined the effectiveness of Transfer Centers in promoting community college transfer. This current study examines the role of the Transfer Center in nine community colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) to understand the effectiveness of the centers in promoting student transfer and their role in supporting students who are on the pathway to transfer.

Review of the Literature

In reviewing the literature on transfer in community colleges it became clear that there are numerous barriers which make transfer difficult. These barriers may be traced to two different sources. The first source is intra-individual, or coming from the student, while the second source is institutional, or coming from either the community college or the desired transfer college or university. The student-centered approach argues that students do not have the motivation and study habits necessary to successfully transfer to a four-year institution (Rendon & Mathews, 1989; Swigart, 2000). In this view, it is accepted that students lack the academic preparation, familiarity with higher educational systems, and have significant financial pressures creating monster obstacles to the process (McDonough, 1997; Rendon & Mathews, 1989). In contrast, the institutional approach focuses on the community college and its flaws in facilitating transfer which include inadequate course schedules, lack of faculty involvement, insufficient information regarding transfer requirements, and poor academic advising (Harbin, 1997; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Rendon & Mathews, 1989). This view indicates that institutions fail to provide the necessary services, support, and courses required for students to transfer (Rendon & Mathews, 1989). Within these two sources of barriers the major

hurdles that consistently appeared in the literature revolved around financial difficulties, limited information or knowledge of transfer and academic obstacles.

Institutional Barriers

The mission to assist student transfer in community colleges is a tenuous one due to the disproportionate number of students who enroll and those who actually transfer (Zamani, 2001). There are many potential reasons behind the institutional limitations surrounding transfer. From a fiscal perspective, although the California Community College District received 4 million dollars in 1990 to be allocated to the development of quality Transfer Center facilities, those funds were shifted into general funds only a year later. Since then, the management of these funds has been in the hands of executive administrators at each campus (CCCCO & CCCTCDA, 1997; Zamani, 2001). As a result, money intended specifically to bolster Transfer Centers was directed towards other support services which were deemed to be either more important or more in need of the money.

Another institutional barrier to transfer is the tenuous relationship between community colleges and four year colleges and universities. Current deep budget cuts have weakened and detached the ties between two and four-year institutions. In fact, many of the universities who would normally accept large numbers of transfer students are now unable to do so. Economic prioritization has thus limited some four year colleges and universities in their ability to serve large numbers of community college transfer students seeking admission. The University of California has recently increased admission criteria, making it more difficult for the average community college applicant to compete (Burdman, 2003).

Articulation agreements between two and four-year colleges generally include a list of the community college courses that will be accepted into baccalaureate programs without loss of credits. These formal agreements also follow state transfer policies and voluntary arrangements between two and four year colleges and universities (Cohen, 1988). Thus, articulation agreements serve as major facilitators in the improvement and clarification of the transfer function within community colleges (Ignash & Townsend, 2000). In California, all community colleges have agreements with both the University of California and the California State University systems.

In 2002 researchers from the legislature of the California Community Colleges reviewed the transfer function of the 108 community colleges[2]. The results were that 95 percent of these colleges rated their level of transfer functioning to be at a "satisfactory" level but at the same time attested to the need for additional resources to increase transfer (CCCCO, 2002). Central to these findings was the importance of the ASSIST website as a tool to facilitate the transfer function. ASSIST, or the Articulation System Stimulating Inter-institutional Student Transfer, is a computerized information system created to provide detailed and up-to-date transfer and articulation information for transfer between the California Community Colleges and the public university systems. ASSIST has been termed California's official statewide source for articulation information and is freely available at http://www.assist.org (CCCCO, 2002). Unfortunately, the Chancellor's Office expressed grave concern over the fiscal crisis facing the ASSIST project and has indicated that its future is unclear (CCCCO, 2002).

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[2] California currently has 109 community colleges.

Intra-individual Barriers

Institutional barriers are not the only impediment to success for students who set goals to move onto four year colleges or universities. Community college students often face numerous intra-individual barriers that can prevent them from achieving their goal. Financial burdens such as shouldering increasingly large loan debt (Zamani, 2001), issues with poor quality advisement and inadequate levels of preparedness are but a few examples of the barriers that many community college students encounter (Helm & Cohen, 2001).

Believing in the importance of persistence and transfer, one research study used path analysis to look at the national dataset, High School and Beyond, to explore the student characteristics that facilitate transfer (Lee & Frank, 1990). The five constructs used in the model were student background, high school academic behavior and outcomes, community college academic behavior and probability of transfer. Results indicated that "higher social class, lower probabilities of being minority or female, a higher probability of being from the academic track, higher test scores and grades in high school, and higher educational aspirations characterize the background of those who transferred compared to those who did not (Lee & Frank, 1990).

Expanding upon the financial burden that oftentimes impedes transfer, Wynn points to the combination of rising tuition costs and student loan debts along with decreasing grant awards as major problems for community college students hoping to transfer (Wynn, 2004). When faced with such financial limitations, those with limited socioeconomic resources, or those who have already entered the work force while

attending community college, must decide whether or not the financial burden of a four-year degree is even worthwhile.

Research from the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges attests to student confusion and lack of preparation as an additional barrier to transfer. Researchers reported that Transfer Center personnel reported a lack of academic preparation in students desiring to transfer as their biggest hurdle for success (CCCCO, 2002). Even for those students who have fulfilled academic requirements, confusion surrounding the articulation of this coursework to their intended transfer institution can become a barrier. As researchers suggest, "successful articulation of coursework between the community colleges and the four-year institutions is at the heart of a seamless transfer experience for students" (CCCO, 2002).

However these two perspectives, focused on individual and institutional barriers to transfer, are not mutually exclusive. Rendon and Nora (1987) argue that most community college students do not feel supported by the faculty and cite several studies which concluded that faculty are not promoting transfer. However, Rendon and Nora (1987) also argue that students are not taking advantage of college services designed to assist students with the transfer process and students with low levels of commitment all exhibit low levels of transfer. Thus, the factors inhibiting transfer are not exclusively student-centered or institutional but a combination of the two.

Clearly, the transfer mission of the community college is at risk both from the institutional and the individual perspective. It is clear that educational researchers, policymakers and administrators must make the development of adequate Transfer

Centers and advising practices a priority. In order to facilitate strong enrollment-to-transfer ratios, evidence based practices need implementation.

Research Design and Methodology

The TRUCCS Project

This study is part of the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students Project (TRUCCS). TRUCCS is a five-year longitudinal study of the goals, success, and academic patterns of 5,000 Community College students in the LACCD. TRUCCS was initially funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is currently supported through the benevolence of the Lumina Foundation. The TRUCCS initiative seeks to identify the goals, activities and actions of community college students that promote success, as a means of underscoring the community college function in an urban setting –namely Los Angeles. Whereas many studies of community college students employ traditional definitions of achievement (i.e., transfer to a four-year university), the TRUCCS initiative seeks to foster new definitions more consistent with, and applicable to, urban community college students.

Partly responsible for the success of many community college students is their ability to access and utilize student services aimed at increasing transfer rates. The LACCD has traditionally offered academic advising and other recourse to facilitate student transfer to four-year institutions in the form of a Transfer Center located on each campus. Little information, however, is known regarding the effectiveness of the Transfer Centers. Preliminary site visits conducted by the TRUCCS research team indicated that the resources provided by the Transfer Centers in the LACCD greatly varied in terms of physical location, services available, and usage by students.

To assess the effectiveness of the Transfer Centers within the community colleges, this particular study, under the umbrella of the TRUCCS project, required the use of qualitative data from the center directors as well as the students who utilize the Transfer Center services. To gather the data from the Directors and students, two stages of examination were simultaneously employed. One level of data collection involved interviewing the Directors of each Transfer Center while the other included focus groups with students. Following is a description of the sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures.

Sample

The sample for this study is the nine Transfer Centers located on the campuses of the Los Angeles Community Colleges. The campuses were included based on their 1) participation in the TRUCCS project; 2) presence of an operating Transfer Center; and 3) willingness to participate in the interviews, focus groups, and observations. First, the TRUCCS project choose the LACCD schools from the onset because of their representation of large urban community colleges. LACCD students are ethnically, academically, socially and economically diverse. They also range in age, enrollment status, part-time and full-time enrollment.   Finally, each site had to agree to participate in the project by allowing interviews not only with their Directors but also with their students. Each of the nine Transfer Center Directors were contacted and all agreed to participate.

In reference to the second part of the study which included focus groups with students, students were chosen randomly upon the researchers' visits to the Transfer Centers. Students were selected to participate in the focus groups if (1) they had used the

Transfer Center services on at least one occasion and (2) were either in the process of, or considering, transferring to a four-year institution. This random design allowed the researchers to collect data in a focus group format on a wide range of students who were from different educational backgrounds, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. The focus groups typically included three to five students at each campus, resulting in a sample size of 58 students.

Data Collection

In order to understand the issues of the Transfer Centers within the institutional context, we used a case study approach. A case study methodology allows for in-depth study of a particular site and comparison between each individual site (Stake, 2000). The main form of data collection was the interview and focus group transcripts. Written observations provided by the researchers were also included in the data analysis providing a "think description" of the facilities, the staff, and resources available to the students. For example, one of the institutions had several large bookshelves filled with course catalogs from four-year universities across the country. The interviews, focus groups, and observations triangulated the data.

The transcripts coupled with observations served as the key data resources for this study. All the nine Directors participated in a one one-hour interview with a minimum of one focus group of student's at each of the nine campuses. Out of the nine campuses, five had one focus group of students while four[3] had two focus groups. Some of the institutions required more than one focus group due to the low number of student participation in the initial campus visit. Recording devices were used in the interviews

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[3] At one of these campuses focus groups were difficult to schedule with groups of students. As a result 3 different interviews were held with individual students in the place of a group interview.

and focus groups to allow for transcription at a later date. Observations were done at least once at each campus. For those institutions that had two focus groups, observations were also done twice. However, as a participant in the TRUCCS study, these campuses have been visited numerous times by the researchers, albeit for different purposes.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in a three phase process analysis process following the case study techniques outlined by Stake (2000). All transcripts were read once by two researchers for emergent themes including issues of access, available Transfer Center services and perceived barriers to transfer. After the initial read, a series of codes emerged and were applied to each of the transcripts noting their applicability. Finally, the codes were refined and applied a second time to each of the interview transcripts. The focus group transcripts followed the same analysis procedure with a separate set of codes, although overlapping codes were used when possible.

The transcripts for the director interviews and focus groups were coded by two of the authors to ensure trustworthiness. Each researcher independently coded each transcript after agreeing on a final list of codes. The codes were then compared across each institution allowing for a within and between institution analysis. The observations supplemented the codes providing a description of the context to help understand how the institutional context impacted the Transfer Centers. This analysis technique facilitated a two-prong approach to the data presentation. We provide the themes across each institution and brief narratives of a few institutions providing a more detailed description of the within institution themes. This allows for an in-depth picture of how the themes are

similar across each institution and how the particular institutional context impacts the Transfer Centers.

Limitations

As researchers on the TRUCCS project, we are not unbiased in our exploration of Transfer Centers. We came into the interviews with a pre-conceived understanding of issues that might influence both Transfer Center directors and community college students aspiring to transfer. As a result, the questions related to topics that help and hinder the success of student transfer as well as the barriers to providing students services for transferring. The interviewee's were asked a series of open ended questions allowing for additional data to emerge. This study was also completed in a specific time frame which served to restrict the number and length of interviews. Most interviews occurred over a single-meeting with each interview lasting for approximately one hour. Having several meetings that lasted for a longer period of time might have expanded both the breadth and depth of the information that was obtained. Despite these limitations, the data was rich in nature and is helpful in clarifying the contemporary role of the Transfer Center as utilized in American community colleges.

Results

These findings will focus on the major themes that were delineated from interviews with community college students and will be supported by comments made by the Transfer Center directors to highlight the complexities of student needs and services. The experiences of the students provide a description of the scenarios that help and hinder their successful transfer while the perspective of Transfer Center directors describes the impact of institutional and policy mandates on the implementation of

services to promote successful transfer. As a result, the themes included here are not mutually exclusive to student and Transfer Center directors, but rather are overarching themes of the plight of Transfer Centers and students in general.

The themes that were discovered in the student interviews are as follows: knowledge, academics, and finances. Each of the themes work in concert to either help or hinder the progress of student transfer. The themes can either be a source of help for students or a potential barrier to their transfer. A student who has the knowledge, academic preparation, and finances has a high change of transferring while other students lacking two or three of the themes are dramatically hindered in the transfer process. Figure A (see Appendix A) provides a pictorial of the interconnectedness of knowledge, academics, and finances. The student themes are presented below followed by the results from the Transfer Center directors.

Transfer Students

Knowledge

Students walk on to the campus at a community college with differing levels of knowledge regarding college courses and requirements, financial aid, and resources. The level of knowledge that a student has prior to entering community college impacts their initial by experience altering their perceptions of available opportunities and services. One student explained that his high school counselors did not clarify different higher educational opportunities.

> I think it starts off way before, I mean, if you don't have the motivation
> from the start. I think it starts with the high school counselors. I mean it's
> sad to say, but from my personal experience it's like you have two
> choices: Cal State or UC or you're done. I mean that was my experience
> in high school. My counselor only pushed Cal States or UCs and never
> mentioned that I could go to a community college the first two years and

then transfer. They never mentioned any other options like private colleges. They never mentioned financial aid. I mean, that's why I didn't apply. I think I applied to Cal State LA and that was it.

This particular student felt as if he was not provided information on community colleges or transfer in high school, therefore, limiting his options when sending out college applications. When he entered community college after being denied at the four-year institutions, his knowledge of transfer was low.

Other students entered the community college without knowledge of services and opportunities but created social networks consisting of one or more people who helped inform them of their options. "I heard about it from a friend who had already been here for a longer period of time than I had and he recommended me to come here and get my counseling done here by the Transfer Center. And so I followed his advice and so far it's been working great for me." Another student has a larger network that provides information on transfer and counseling circumventing "bad" advice.

I mean four of us work here. Well the five of us work here, but four of us work in this building so we get to know who are the good counselors. You know, we have a little network of employees here. I will give them information that they'll probably need and they'll give me information. It's good to have the network because otherwise there are, like she said, there are a lot of counselors here, unfortunately, that give misinformation or just don't care.

These students were all actively seeking advice from the counselors in the Transfer Center and moving forward in the transfer process successfully completing the course requirements. These students found a network to bolster their knowledge regarding requirement and transfer resources.

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Of course, not all community college students could report positive implication of a fixed social network. Rather, we heard other comments that led to students discovering the Transfer Center. Several of the students noted that the Transfer Centers were located in areas that were easily identifiable and accessible. They just walked in the office and asked questions or were directed to go to the centers by counselors or faculty members. "You can just go up to any admissions and ask them and they usually will tell you to go to the Transfer Center or talk to a counselor to find out about the credits you need to transfer and they give you the information." Other students in different institutions had more difficult experiences in finding transfer services. One student noted only one faculty member mentioned the Transfer Center resources.

> Personally none of my professors, except for my personal development class which of course was a counselor, none of my professors have let me know. The Transfer Center I mean I know because I work here. I know we've tried, the actual Transfer Center has tried, to have the teachers tell them. I mean we did transfer-ready and evaluation stuff last semester for the math 25, English 101 classes and it still didn't work which is sad.

A student noted that his peers do not transfer because they are not knowledgeable regarding the transfer services. "That few won't transfer? Probably because they don't know about the Transfer Center. That's my main thing because I don't think most students know that there's a Transfer Center." In this student's opinion, the Transfer Center is a key resource in promoting transfer but many students do not utilize the center's services preventing more students from transferring. Limited knowledge regarding transfer was thus a barrier to some students who had limited resources and networks for acquiring transfer knowledge. Those students who were unable to gain knowledge appeared to suffer limiting their options to transfer.

Academics

Even if a student has the knowledge necessary to transfer, if they do not have the grades or the necessary academic requirements then it is not a possibility. Just as students walk on to the community college campus with differing levels of knowledge, they also have differing levels of academic preparation. The majority of the students interviewed mentioned the difficulty in fulfilling course requirements to transfer. "The classes, taking the classes and being on time to school, and trying to get everything done and to meet more classes that I have to take every time I change my major. So, that's one of the obstacles, more classes." Not only are the individual classes difficult for students to complete but changes in academic majors, or a lack of knowledge regarding the required courses, can influence a student's transfer requirements. Students get discouraged and frustrated with having to take additional courses.

Other students noted similar frustrations with the time it takes to complete their required courses. Many students enter the community college with the impression that they can complete an Associate's Degree or transfer within two years. In reality, the TRUCCS Project has found that two years is typically not sufficient and most successful transfer students require more than four years to complete the necessary course sequence (Hagedorn, et al, 2003). "I think some students just get discouraged and they feel like maybe the process takes a little longer than they would have liked it to. Some people kind of get stuck here and they feel like they're not going to keep moving forward." Another student echoed the frustration. "They don't know the classes they're supposed to take and then it's like 'Oh, it takes so long to take these classes.' It's a lot. You have to

be GE[4] certified and then you take the classes for your major. It's a lot of classes. It takes time." Many students, with low levels of academic preparation, are placed in lower level remedial courses that do not apply to degree or transfer curriculum. They must, therefore, spend at least one semester academically "catching up", adding more time to their community college career[5]. Furthermore, if their progression is slowed, by failed courses or leaves of absence, students may get discouraged and opt out of the transfer track.

Another difficulty with academics for these community college students are barrier courses. As the TRUCCS project has consistently found, mathematics is a barrier to student progress (Hagedorn, 2003). Students drop out or fail math courses at a higher rate than any other course. Transfer Center directors consistently cited math has a barrier for many colleges seeking transfer. "They just have a harder time with the mathematics requirement. Many are just afraid of it." As one student aptly noted, "Sometimes you get slowed down because you might not pass a difficult mathematics course or an English course or something." Other students noted the difficultly with managing time and with the perception of difficult courses.

> Classes are not easy. You have to dedicate the time to your work. I mean you're, what in class for an hour and 35 minutes but after that you have to put in three more hours to type a paper. And I hear those math courses are really hard. I'm postponing those until this summer.

Postponement certainly adds time to transfer course degree completion. With difficult and intimidating courses, students are finding that the completion of transfer requirements is more difficult than perhaps expected. Students get frustrated at the lack of

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[4] General Education – GE certified indicates a student who has followed the California curriculum for transfer readiness also called the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC).
[5] Many students spend years in the remedial pipeline prior to taking transfer level courses (Hagedorn, 2003).

progress. However, academics are not the only frustration for students. Financial considerations may also halt their progress.

Finances

One of the most prevalent comments in the student focus groups was that financial limitations were a definite barrier to transfer. Many students described the difficulties inherent in attending school full-time while paying for housing, food, and books and potentially managing family responsibilities and full-time work on the side. "It always comes to either not having money to buy my books or it gets so bad I have to stop and work full-time because I have kids." In the hierarchy of needs, families supersede school and thus may prevent some students from continuing in community college. Another student echoed the conflict between work and school.

> It's just so hard. I mean, I think community college students, especially here, I think we have so many things. We work. A lot of us are parents. Some of us are single parents. And it's just so frustrating you know, to…I can't begin to tell you how hard it's been. So you're always making choices. Do I buy books or do I buy food? You know basic things. There was a semester where I had to ride my bike to school because I couldn't afford bus fare. So and it was like twelve miles. It was far.

Despite the difficulty in managing these financial barriers, clearly motivation exists within these students to get a degree. They desperately want to get a degree and find better employment but the strain of providing for a family requires that they work full-time. As the student earlier cited so poignantly stated, "Do I buy books or do I buy food?"

There are many financial aid programs funded by state and federal government that can help these students with finances. However, when we asked the students about such programs, it became clear that they lacked the knowledge to acquire aid. "And the

reason I didn't go was because I didn't know about the FAFSA. I didn't know. And that's another thing that I think of as a contributing factor. People just don't know. They don't know what's out there for them. They don't know what schools are out there." Similar to the knowledge of services and course requirements, community college students are not receiving advice and instruction on how to obtain financial aid which might allow them to pay for books and other necessities while completing a college degree.

Transfer Center Directors

The themes that were discovered in the Transfer Center director interviews supplement the student interviews, providing a larger contextual understanding of the barriers affecting students in the Transfer Center process. As we highlight each theme, the directors are able to clarify both the internal barriers and the external barriers that influence the institutions and the students. These director interviews thus resulted in two major themes: institutional support and external influences.

Institutional Support

Administrative and faculty support at the community college is vital for the success of a Transfer Center. However, Transfer Center directors of the LACCD have variable experiences with institutional support. Directors either felt completely supported or felt like they were in conflict with the faculty and administration on their campus. The directors that felt support expressed praise for the institution. "The Transfer Center and the career center get total support from the administration. It is one of their priorities" as one director noted. Another stated the following:

> Here it's tremendous. I mean it couldn't be better. I'm supported on
> everything. They would love to give more money. You know what I

mean? They would love it. They're great. Nothing but good things
from both faculty and administration.

In contrast, there were other directors who were dissatisfied with their

institutional support. Some were quite hesitant to talk about their discontent in the

interviews due to fear of negative reactions from administrators. There seemed to be

differing views at some of the schools as indicated by the following comment- "we could

have better support from the administration…they have their own agenda going on".

Another simply stated "I don't think we get a lot of support, we really, really don't".

Finally, another director mentioned conflict:

> In order to run a Transfer Center, you need to have support from the
> administration and always commitment to the process and commitment
> with resources…we haven't got it…one of the reasons why the
> previous director's not here is because of administrative conflict…<the
> former director> was fighting for more support for the Transfer Center
> and didn't get it. And the administration was like, 'Well, you're not
> cooperative so we're going to get rid of you' and subsequently, they did.

Clearly, each director at the nine institutions had differing feelings regarding

administrative and faculty support. However, the common theme was the necessity of

support for the Transfer Center administrators to enable students in the transfer process.

Without support, counseling capabilities, programming and outreach will be limited and

students consequently will receive inadequate services.

One indication of institutional support for Transfer Centers can be defined as the

location in which they are located on their respective campuses. It was clear upon

visiting the nine community colleges in the LACCD that Transfer Centers ranged from

being located in small, cramped spaces to highly visible and accommodating spaces. One

director noted that they could barely accommodate a group of students- "We're kind of

limited for space now so by the time we get a class in, they can't fit in here…we're not

too pleased with our location right now" while another director expressed excitement at her campuses' construction of a new central administration building in which the Transfer Center will be highlighted.

Regardless of their spatial differences, most Transfer Centers had three to four computers with Internet access for student use. These computers are vitally important, especially as the admissions processes move towards electronic applications. As for staff resources, nearly all of the Transfer Centers were unhappy with their staff support. Most had an administrative and counseling staff that was both transient and part-time in nature. Several Transfer Centers had counselors that split their time between the Transfer Center and the career center. As one director noted, "In this office we have one full-time and two part-timers that come in two days or two nights a week". This creates difficulty especially because the transfer counselor to student ratios at all of the schools ranged from 1:1,000 to 1:2,000 counselors to students.

Although the Transfer Centers differed in their available resources, nearly all directors could identify a "wish list" of resources that they would like to improve their center. There were two main areas in which directors focused their desires for improvement- staff and money. Most centers were struggling to provide adequate services and support because of a limited number of staff. As a result they expressed their desire for more support in this area. "They really need a full-time director because how it is now, I split my time and that, it doesn't work…I'd like to see some permanent staff here". Another director said "we need more consistent staff, we need permanent employees".

In addition to the desire for better staff support, every center director mentioned a need for more financial support- "we need lots of money". Oftentimes this money was for improving center resources and capabilities including the purchasing of new equipment and having money to attract students for field trips and seminars. The desire for these improvements can be seen in one director's comments that she "wished" aloud- "I'd like to get a fax machine for the Transfer Center…I would hire more student workers…I'd set aside some money for food…I like the idea of bus trips".

However, despite the "wish" for more money, and the clear necessity for it in some cases, there were several Transfer Center directors who felt fairly well supported financially. "We get by" as one director said after expressing her wishes. Finally, another director stated that she had a lot of resources at her disposal and then continued on stating, "I personally can't think of resources that we just do not have".

External Influences

Directors were able to identify numerous barriers to transfer for their students resulting from the needs of the student population and the lack of services provided by external sources, primarily four-year institutions. The student population is considered an external barrier because they are largely independent from institutional control. The directors quickly acknowledged that most of their students were not the "traditional" college-going student and thus were faced with different concerns when transferring. "You know I think community college students aren't the traditional student so they're working. Almost all of them are working. A lot of them have other commitments like dependants so they have a lot of other life responsibilities and life stressors to get in the way of school". This comment directly echoes the testaments of the community college

students themselves who attested to the difficulty of managing courses with all the other demands placed on their time.

Another identified barrier, also identified by students earlier, was student confusion regarding transfer. One director even stated that "a lot of them have never been introduced to the notion of transfer". This clearly points to the need for effective Transfer Centers and transfer counselors which can help clarify the process for students who might not understand- "the students are really confused and they're confused because there are so many options". Another director stated the following, "I think there's a lot of students, in fact I know this to be true because I do orientations, who say they want to transfer but they don't know what that means". However, in a positive light, many transfer directors spoke positively about their commitment to help guide students through the transfer process. As one director stated, "I believe there are a lot of students that want to transfer and I am here to help them do that….For me it's still every student we're going to get, we're going to help you make that transition". Another director stated that "I think those who want to transfer, in my experience, tend to transfer", expressing his confidence in his students' ability to navigate through the system.

A third barrier that was identified pertained to student's background which incorporates cultural affiliation, citizenship status and beliefs regarding the importance of education. "First-generation status is an issue" as one director noted. Furthermore, "We also have a lot of students that aren't, you know, citizens. They aren't eligible for Pell Grants and things like that". Finally differing cultural beliefs about education were also acknowledged by the directors. One director in particular noted the following:

> There's a lot of misconceptions about the value of education. They
> might say 'I want to transfer' but if mom and dad say, 'You need to get

some money here for rent. You need to help us out with whatever to eat' that will give you a different direction.

This brings us to another barrier, finances. Attending a community college is much more financially feasible than attending a four year college or university for most students. As a result, the money involved in transfer oftentimes restrains students- "finances is a big thing". One director noted cultural differences that he observed facing today's student as opposed to when he was in school:

When I was a student it wasn't that costly to go to college: gas was cheap, the car I chose was cheap, the clothes I wore were cheap. Even though I was poor, I think there are more pressures now for students to get bogged down by more expensive cars, more expensive gas, more expensive insurance, maybe more expensive clothes.

As illustrated in the student focus groups, finances play an important role in the decision making of students. Without the proper resources, many student drop-out of school or consider educational opportunities that require less time, such as certificates.

In addition to the barriers to transfer described by the directors, another external barrier includes a lack of support for outreach and programming from the four-year colleges and universities. One director noted that the campus had few resources to plan a "transfer day" for representatives to come from four-year institutions and discuss transfer. However all directors acknowledged the importance of outreach events for their students- One director whose campus hosts a successful Transfer Day commented that "what you can really count on is the transfer day". At this institution, a big fall fair attracts close to 30 different colleges and universities:

It's very well attended. The schools bring their banners and things to give away. It's usually really good. We love it. We see lots and lots of students coming by.

An addition external barrier is the lack of funding from the state for transfer functions. For all campuses field trips to four- year colleges and universities have become increasingly difficult due to budget cuts. As a result, a method of "piggybacking" on other organizations has developed for field trips. Although this is a creative solution to their financial limitations, Transfer Center directors are thus oftentimes limited in their control over field trips and also limited in the amount of students that they are permitted to send- "If our students want to go they have to go with TRIO but then we're limited to five students". And, as another director said, "The honors program is the impetus for getting a bus trip going…I think that it would be great to do more bus trips, maybe two or three more, but I just don't have the funds now".

ASSIST

Not all of the external influences emerged as barriers to the transfer process. One service was consistently noted as being influential in obtaining knowledge regarding transfer. ASSIST, described earlier asa website designed to help students navigate through the complicated degree and transfer process in California, exists as a separate entity from the public California system as functions on private grant money. A student noted, "Yes, and it's really easy to get it. Because it's step by step. You can't go wrong. I tell people about it too. Every time they ask me like "what should I take" I'm like "Just go to ASSIST." Another student praised ASSIST for its usefulness.

> I think they pretty much know how to hook you up here to ASSIST or
> show you how to hook up to ASSIST here so that you can use it. It's
> probably one of the most beneficial student tools, educational tools to
> transfer in terms of like checking your credit and making sure the classes
> you're taking are going to articulate to the college you want. In fact

ASSIST, from what I've heard, is probably better informed than a lot of counselors are. It's up to date. You should check it out.

Programs that help students transfer are not limited to ASSIST. For example, the highly successful Puente Project and TRIO programs help cohorts of student through curricular guided instruction to transfer. ASSIST, however, is a public and easily accessible site that consistently received praise from the students and directors.

Cross Case (Campus) Comparison

The themes that emerged from the interviews with Transfer Center directors and students reflect the barriers to transfer, including lack of knowledge, academic preparation, and finances. These themes relate to each institution yet do not properly distinguish between Transfer Centers. To further illustrate these results, we present findings from two of the nine institutions that had extremely different physical space, levels of support, and potential for future success.

Central Community College

Central City College is located in the middle of a large urban city near the downtown area. The surrounding community is primarily Latino and tend to be poor. Central has both an academic and vocational curriculum. Similar to all the community colleges in the city, Central has experienced large budget cuts, forcing many student services to shut down or operate on small budgets with few staff and even fewer resources. The Transfer Center at Central is not immune to the budget cuts and has been left with one clerical worker, one full-time counselor and a part-time director. The director splits her time between the Transfer Center and the career development office.

Before 2002, the Transfer Center was located in the main Administration building next to the general counseling office. This allowed counselors to direct students to the

Transfer Center and created cohesion between the two offices. Students could receive general counseling and then immediately interact with those who could provide information on transfer. Unfortunately, in 2002, the center was moved to the basement of the library. The space that the Transfer Center occupied in the Administration building was co-opted by a non-student service office. At the time of this move, the director of the Transfer Center resigned amidst rumors that her aggressiveness in advocating for more resources for the centers instigated her resignation. Aside from this particular resignation, turnover in the director position at this institution was stated to be a pattern at the center.

The move of the Transfer Center dramatically impacted its ability to serve students. Community college students relied heavily on Transfer Centers for current and correct transfer information; however, if the Transfer Center is not located in a visible and accessible location, many students will go without ever utilizing the Transfer Center resources. To this end, many students at Central simply do not know where the Transfer Center is or how it can be found. As one transfer counselor stated, "One of the things that we see is there's no student traffic. In this case, unfortunately, we are in the dungeon and we will not get the traffic that they used to generate at the other office." True to this statement, few students were encountered near or in the center and the director noted that their capacity has dropped by 50% since the move to the basement.

In addition to the inadequate location of the Transfer Center, it was also inadequately sized. With only a small common area and four offices, the Transfer Center used the common area as both a waiting room and a computer workspace for students to access Internet transfer resources. Therefore, Central's Transfer Center was clearly limited by both its size and location in its ability to support student transfer.

However, despite the lack of resources and institutional support, the director and staff are trying to develop a "Transfer Culture." They strongly believe that the consistent promotion of transfer will help cultivate the desire for transfer in the minds of students, staff, and faculty to increase the transfer rate at Central.

Access Community College

Access Community College, in contrast to Central, illustrates how well a Transfer Center can operate when there is sufficient institutional support. Located within the main administration building, this Transfer Center is well operated and highly visible. The main entrance to the administration building serves as a social environment for students and there are signs which indicate the Transfer Center's presence posted. Within the lobby of the administration building there are three laptop computers with Internet access, allowing students to surf the web as they relax in-between classes. The main counseling office and the Transfer Center are located off of this lobby, across the hall from one another. With this set-up, a student that enters the Administration building for information, computer access, or counseling, is immediately exposed to the presence of the Transfer Center.

Once in the Access Community College Transfer Center, it is clear that it is well supported both institutionally and financially.   In a spacious and well-organized room there are large bookshelves of college and university course catalogs and walls decorated with banners from virtually every institution of higher education in California. The common room of the center has two large tables for students to sit and research the hundreds of college and university catalogs. There are five computers within this Transfer Center for student use. The director's office in this Transfer Center is located

near the entrance and thus is highly accessible to incoming students. Even though this

Transfer Center is currently functioning well, plans are in process to build a new

Administration building with the Transfer Center as the centerpiece. All student services

will surround the center creating an institutional culture of transfer.

Clearly, the transfer function at Access Community College is well-supported

institutionally.   It may be suggested that this support is reflected in the fact that Access

Community College reports one of the highest transfer rates within the district.

Conclusion

This study has taken a qualitative approach to address the barriers to transfer that

affect students and institutions alike. This perspective has revealed clear similarities and

differences between the perspectives of community college students and Transfer Center

directors. These findings have been highlighted in the quotes provided and the in-depth

comparison of two highly different Transfer Centers currently in operation.

The message that can be taken from this research is that there are definite barriers

in place which serve to limit the potential of transfer for community college students and

the transfer function for community colleges themselves. These barriers are largely

related to limitations within the domains of knowledge, academics and finances for

students hoping to transfer. For actual Transfer Centers, knowledge, academics and

finances also played a role but were mediated by whether they occurred internally, within

the actual community college, or externally, within the intended transfer college or

university.

Overall, our results indicate that Transfer Centers are in need of greater support.

As one Transfer Center director put it during our interviews- "Our [transfer] numbers are

low. They're supposed to be low. You get what you pay for". Because of varying levels of support and resources, Transfer Centers have been shown to be qualitatively different in their abilities to inform and assist students who desire to transfer. As Zamani (2001) suggests, challenges to transfer can be addressed by "establishing cooperative admissions agreements, extending outreach activities, clarifying articulation agreements, hosting transfer informational sessions, conducting four-year campus tours, and creating innovative approaches to academic skills acquisition" (Zamani, 2001). With increased support for Transfer Centers comes increased support for students and, ideally, improved rates of transfer from community colleges to four year colleges and universities.

Are Transfer Centers working? The answer is "yes and no." Yes, these centers are helping students to understand and navigate the path to transfer. But no, they are not functioning at a level sufficient to help large numbers of students. The idea of a centrally located center staffed with knowledgeable counselors is an excellent one. It is imperative that the state of California find the funding to bolster the centers and make them accessible. Finally, the District must utilize these centers in ways that more students will be aware of their existence and will find opportunities to utilize their services. Too many community college students will not "walk in" if they are not lead. Transfer Center Directors must work more closely with faculty such that announcements of services or direct services themselves are provided not only within the confines of the Transfer Center but also within the classroom. Transfer Centers are an opportunity to lead students to success. Students who do not find them have lost an opportunity to make the difficult path from community college to four-year institution at least a little less rocky.

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Finances

Cost of attending a
four-year institution

Knowledge

Lack of information
regarding the
transfer process

Success

Academic rigor of
university level courses

Academics