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Improving the Success of Transfer Students: Responding to Risk Factors

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Abstract

How can learning communities be designed to reduce transfer student stress and enhance their learning? This study was designed to investigate the impact of the Criminal Justice Transfer Learning Community experience on its participants' level of identified stressors over time and their means of coping with those stressors. The Criminal Justice Transfer Learning Community extended for two terms, and was designed to facilitate students' integration into the university and the criminal justice community. Students in the learning community were asked on multiple occasions to identify stressors and rate their intensity. According to the students, the largest impact on stress reduction was the feeling of belonging to their learning community cohort and the university community.

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Transfer students, defined as students who move from one postsecondary institution to another (Cuseo, 1998), primarily originate from community colleges. With approximately 1,200 community colleges with more than 11 million students enrolled in any given year, the potential number of transfer students is considerable. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2003) reports that about a quarter of these 11 million students state they plan to transfer to a four-year institution and complete a bachelor's degree.

Transfer students' success in completing a baccalaureate degree is more tentative than native students (e.g., students who maintain enrollment at original institution). Reportedly, the attrition rate for transfer students is 10% to 15% higher than that of native students (Glass & Harrington, 2002), and when they fail, the majority of transfer students do so before the end of their first transfer year (Cejda, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998; Cuseo, 1998). Transfer students often feel nameless and have difficulties connecting with other students and faculty. Further, these students often have difficulty navigating the vast university campus, finding the services they need, and learning new procedures and advising systems (Herman & Lewis, 2004).

Underrepresented students begin with similar aspirations as the majority—graduating with a baccalaureate degree—but their enrollment into four-year schools is significantly lower. If they do manage to transfer, underrepresented students' attrition rate is much higher than that of majority students (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Pennington, 2006). Students with disadvantaged backgrounds do not feel as though they fit in and have trouble identifying with the culture and traditions of the university (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004). Gender and age also appear to interact with other risk factors to influence graduation rates (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). For example, older students, especially female students, are likely to have more family and financial concerns than younger students and male students.

Although academic institutions cannot control the external stressors that impact transfer students, facilitating students' progress by identifying stressors that impede their academic success and providing tools to intervene where possible is critical. Learning communities, or initiatives developed to focus on a small group of students with similar interests, are programs designed to provide such tools (Smith, 2003). Learning communities originally were designed for entering first-year students. Given similar issues faced by transfer students, a logical next step was the implementation of a transfer learning community.

Within the major of criminal justice and criminology, the large numbers of transfer students to four-year academic institutions are particularly prominent. Transfer students compose 42% of the criminal justice and criminology majors at the university of this study.

Review of the Relevant Literature

Transfer Students

Transfer status has been viewed as a risk factor that potentially impedes students' academic success at a four-year school. "Transfer shock" describes the distress from initial encounters that transfer students experience while adjusting to changes from community to four-year academic institutions, especially during the first year after transfer. Students who are able to persist in spite of the transfer shock usually recover and graduate with grade point averages similar to native students (Glass & Harrington, 2002).

When most transfer students move to a four-year institution, they are transitioning to a vast, complex system that is dissimilar to the community college they have left behind. Although there are more available services for them, students need information about these resources, the procedures needed to request the services, any related fees, and the locations of the services (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Unlike most community colleges, the services of universities are more difficult to navigate. Glass and Harrington (2002) emphasize the need to reach out actively to transfer students in an effort to help them adjust more successfully to the

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academic and social life of the university.

Accessible and accurate academic advisors are a critical liaison between transfer students and resources. Students who are struggling with courses should receive additional counseling on available resources. Often the closer the advisors are connected to the students' majors, the more satisfied the students are with their majors and, consequently, with their university experience (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Laanan, 2007). Student perception of connecting with faculty and interacting with them also increases students' satisfaction with their academic experience and their sense of belonging (Christie et al., 2004; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Studies show that frequent contact with faculty is a predictor of student retention (Tinto, 2002).

Learning Communities

According to Smith (2003), more than 500 academic institutions have established learning communities. Learning communities promote diversity, teamwork, and personal and professional development. They are credited with the mental and emotional health of students and an increase in grades and retention (Finley, 2008). Faculty who teach in learning communities engage with students in a way that normally is done in advising sessions. In learning communities within majors, students learn how to interact with their peers and appear more socially conscious in the achievements of their groups. For students in professional disciplines, linking with the outside world is vital (Ancar, Freeman, & Field, 2007).

Factors Inhibiting Student Success

The relationships of gender, race, and age with transfer student success have been examined extensively. Age has mixed results with some researchers finding that traditional-age students perform better than older students (Freeman, Conley, & Brooks, 2006), and others concluding that older students are more motivated and more likely to attain higher grades (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Pennington, 2006). Gender is found to be significantly related to student success; females earn better grades and are more likely to graduate. These findings are particularly strong when females do not have family or financial concerns (Freeman et al., 2006; Thurmond, 2007). Minority students begin with lower transfer rates to four-year schools. Those who do transfer have higher attrition rates (Cejda et al., 1998; Cuseo, 1998; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006); however, when socioeconomic status is controlled, racial differences are not significant.

As noted by interaction of socioeconomic status with race and gender, family and financial concerns appear to play an important role in the academic success of transfer students. It is not clear how these factors may be stressing the students and competing with their needs to study and focus on school in addition to the other issues they face as they cope with transferring to a new academic institution.

The purpose of this research is to conduct an exploratory examination of the impact of the Criminal Justice Transfer Learning Community experience on its participants' level of identified stressors over time and their means of coping with the stressors.

Methods

Sample

The large southeastern public university in which this study was conducted has 17 learning communities that have been established over the past 7 years. As a new venture, the university allowed its Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology to plan and implement the first transfer student learning community in the fall 2008 semester. The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology is an appropriate department as the university enrolls a high percentage of transfer students, and a large percentage of these transfers students become criminal justice and criminology majors (41.9%).

The first Criminal Justice Transfer Learning Community enrolled 15 students. The majority were nontraditional-age females. About one third of the students were African American, and one third were White (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n = 13)

Characteristic	Frequency (percentage)
Race	
African American	5 (38.5%)
White	5 (38.5%)
Other	3 (23.0%)
Gender	
Male	3 (23.0%)
Female	10 (77.0%)
Age	19–31 (x = 28)

Students were required to take a sequence of two learning community courses in order to assist with their integration into the university and into the criminal justice community. Blocks of seats in the required courses, Criminal Justice Theory and Statistics for Social Sciences, were reserved to ensure that the students would be able to take these courses together. Students also were required to participate in structured study groups for the statistics and theory courses.

The two sequenced learning community courses exposed students to support services and criminal justice agencies on and off campus as well as to career opportunities. During the second semester, the students volunteered for 25 hours with their selected criminal justice-related agencies. The students attended class lectures by the coordinator on such areas as job interviewing skills, professional appearance, resume writing, and other job-seeking skills. The students also were required to interview professors who either teach in the criminal justice and criminology department or in the department of their minor to become acquainted with the professors' teaching and research initiatives.

Table 2.
Types of Stressors (n = 13)*

| Stressor	Students identifying stressor (n)	Time 1 rate	Time 2 rate	Difference in rate	Time 3 rate	Difference in rate
Limited number of transfer credits accepted	3*	3.6	1.5	-2.1	1.0	-1.1
Navigating a new campus	2	3.5	2.5	-1.0	1.0	-1.5
Expense of books	2	4.5	3.5	-1.0	2.5	-1.0
Balancing full-time work and school	1	3.0	1.0	-2.0	1.0	0.0
Commuting to class	1	4.0	1.0	-3.0	0.0	-1.0
Major requirements	1	4.0	2.0	-2.0	1.0	-1.0
Health problems	1	3.0	2.0	-1.0	1.0	-1.0
Delay in acceptance to major and orientation	1*	4.0	–	–	–	–
Amount of paperwork	1	3.0	2.0	-1.0	2.0	0.0

*Two students did not complete the program

Stressors

At the beginning of the first semester, students were required to identify a personal stressor that they believed would inhibit their successful transition into the university (see Table 2). They were then asked to rate the intensity of that stressor, using a six-item Likert-type scale that ranged from 0 (no stress) to 5 (extremely stressful). At the beginning of the second term and then at the end of the academic year, the students were requested to revisit their thoughts about the personal stressor and indicate the intensity of the stressor at each time. Therefore, the students rated the intensity level of the stressor at three different time periods during their learning community experience: the beginning, midway, and end.

The limited number of credit hours that transferred from their previous schools was identified by 3 students as a primary stressor. Navigating the university's campus and resources, and the expense of textbooks were each identified by 2 students. Full-time employment, travel to school, requirements for the major, health problems, and amount of paperwork were each identified by 1 student as primary stressors. For each of these students, their rate of intensity decreased by an average of 1.6 levels between Time 1 and Time 2 and 0.8 levels between Time 2 and Time 3. Figure 1 further illustrates the decrease across all the stressor intensities.

Figure 1. Change over time of students' perceived intensity of stressor.
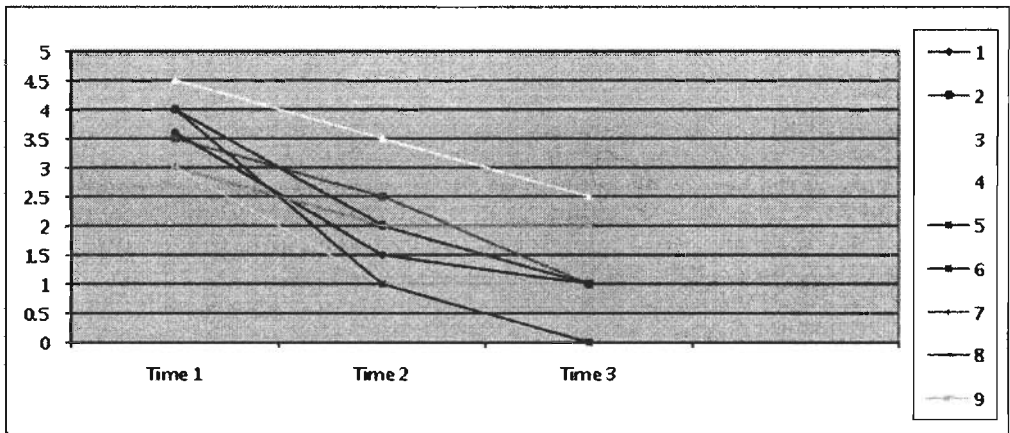
Discussion and Conclusion

The current study with its limited number of students is to be considered exploratory and cannot be generalized to the transfer student population at the university; however, the close interaction of the Criminal Justice Transfer Learning Community coordinator and the 11 students who completed the first-year implementation of the program and the repeated documentation provides excellent insight into the stressors faced by transfer students.

The first learning community course introduced the students to speakers from university services, including financial aid, registration, and the specific program designed for nontraditional students. These speakers provided information and help to the students as they coped with finding and using different resources. Several of the students who identified limited transfer credits accepted as a stressor met the university contact who could directly help them understand the process to have other potential courses reviewed and accepted. The individual contact with financial aid provided support and information as did the representative from the Office of Disabilities.

According to the students, the largest impact on stress reduction was the feeling of belonging to their learning community cohort and the university community. Representatives from the student associations spoke to their class and encouraged them to belong. The learning community student with a long commute to campus began to stay at times with other learning community students who lived on or near campus. The students solved problems,

studied together, shared texts, and called each other for support in many areas of their lives.

Since learning communities cannot be considered the panacea for all transfer students' impediments to succeeding, more evaluation is needed. As exploratory research, this study examines another dimension—student stressors and the impact of the learning community experience on coping with those stressors.

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