The Integration and Success of First-time Freshmen and Transfer Students: A Study of Three CUNY Colleges

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Framing the Study

• Early academic and social integration impact a host of outcomes, including satisfaction, relationship-building, academic success and degree completion (Tinto 1975, 1993; Braxton et al. 1998).

• Academic integration appears more important than social integration within commuter institutions as compared to residential four-year colleges (Pascarella et al. 1993; Bean & Metzner 1985; Braxton et al. 2004).

• Newer research suggests that the integration process is fundamentally different in commuter institutions, perhaps focused on “socio-academic integrative moments” (Deil-Amen 2011).

• But we don’t know very much about whether freshmen and transfer students diverge in the process of integration, or whether this affects important outcomes like persistence.
Key Questions

1. What distinguishes the integration experiences of freshmen from transfer students? How do these differences impact persistence outcomes for both groups?

2. What are the key institutional factors affecting student outcomes?
   - Do students have different experiences of similar institutional structures?
   - Do institutional structures – and their effectiveness – differ across colleges?

3. How does student satisfaction influence persistence?
Contributions

- Describes major differences between the integration experiences of freshmen and transfer students, including:
  - Key priorities;
  - Ease of academic achievement;
  - Sense of commitment to social & community involvement; and
  - Institutional supports & barriers.

- Details students’ experiences of institutional practices and priorities, and how these contribute to student persistence.

- Argues that “satisfaction” is a complex concept deeply tied to academic achievement.
The Study: Focal Colleges

- Three, four-year colleges.
- All three have liberal arts curricula and similar rates of admission.
- They differ in their “value-added” measures: one falls below expected performance given student inputs, one meets expectations, and one rises above expectations.
The Study: First-time Students

- Yearlong interview study of 30 first-time freshmen and 30 two-to-four-year transfer students.

- 20 students each were selected from three colleges– 10 freshmen and 10 transfers students.

- The first interview took place in September/early October; the second in January/early February; and the third in May/early June.

- Data also collected via online “check-ins” each month.

- Possible to link these students with administrative data to determine their outcomes over time.
The study also includes interviews with 5 “native” upper classmen from each campus (n=15 total), or those who started at each college as freshmen and who have remained through their junior years.

In addition, interviews were conducted with a combination of “on the ground” and senior, upper-level administrators, as well as some faculty members, at each college.

This work is ongoing, but thus far, 20 faculty members and administrators are included in the data.
The Longitudinal Sample

Interview Sample by College and Student Background

- College 1
  - Freshmen: White: 4, Black: 3, Hispanic: 2, Asian: 1
  - Transfer: Other: 1
- College 2
  - Freshmen: White: 5, Black: 4, Hispanic: 3, Asian: 2
  - Transfer: Other: 2
- College 3
  - Freshmen: White: 3, Black: 2, Hispanic: 1, Asian: 1
  - Transfer: Other: 1
First-year Student Sample: Where Are They Now?

Round 1
- College 1: 20 Students
  - 1 transfer student stops out; incomplete R2 interview
- College 2: 20 Students
  - 1 transfer stops out; incomplete R2 interview
  - 1 freshman transfers within CUNY
  - 2 freshmen drop study
- College 3: 20 Students
  - 1 freshman transfers within CUNY
  - 2 freshmen transfer outside CUNY

Round 2
- College 1: 19 Students
- College 2: 17 Students
- College 3: 20 Students

Round 3
- College 1: 19 Students
  - 1 freshman transferring inside CUNY
  - 1 freshman transferring outside CUNY
- College 2: 19 Students
  - Gain 2 freshmen
  - Gain 1 transfer
  - 1 freshman drops study
- College 3: 19 Students
  - 1 freshman drops study
  - 1 transfer student stops out
What Characteristics Do Most Freshmen Share?

- The majority have not taken time off between high school and college.
- Many have attended top New York City public high schools; yet many are also first-generation college-goers.
- Most students’ parents or broader families prioritize education.
- Not all students saw CUNY as their “first choice.”
What Do Freshmen Tell Us About Their Academic Experience?

- Initial integration is challenging; classes become more difficult in the second semester but familiarity and comfort also increase.

- The quality of general education courses is uneven and often “luck of the draw.”

- Math and other quantitative subjects can prove a huge hurdle, with many students “downgrading” their major expectations following their initial experiences.

- Not all students learn the “tricks” of early registration, intensive research on courses, etc., soon enough.
What Do Freshmen Tell Us About Academic and Administrative Supports?

• Many students appreciated freshmen support programs; others found these programs, “a waste of time” or “too much work.”

• Perceptions of the quality of advisory services differed dramatically across colleges and students.

• Nearly every student discussed administrative and bureaucratic hurdles and “red tape,” as well as disconnects between “advertised” services and the “reality.”
What Do Freshmen Tell Us About The Social Experience?

• Most students expressed some early interest in “getting to know” their colleges and in participating in some aspect of the school’s community.

• Not all students retained that interest.

• Students who got involved tended to have a warmer take on their campus community.

• The most common reasons for lack of social engagement include work, desire for a strictly academic focus for the first year, and a feeling of “not fitting in” (diversity vs. integration).
What Matters for First-time Students’ Integration Throughout The Year?

- Increased comfort $\rightarrow$ increased confidence $\rightarrow$ greater academic success (+ greater satisfaction?)

- This process often was facilitated by a “key player,” who varied based on the student.

- Most common “key players” were academic in nature, though new friends, and occasionally, extra-curricular activities, also could play this role.

- Students’ knowledge that support resources were present seemed equally important as their actual use of such resources.
What Matters for First-time Students’ Integration Throughout The Year?

The “fundamentals” also really matter:
- Can the student get to school given the length of the commute?
- Is the classroom enjoyable (or even just bearable)?
- Is the student able to achieve passing grades?
- Do they see some (any) commonality with classmates?
What Characteristics Do Most Transfer Students Share?

- More than half of the transfer students in our sample have taken a circuitous path to arrive at their four-year college (18 of 31).
- Many students are juggling numerous life priorities, with work often at the top of the list.
- Transfer students tend to be more “college savvy” than freshmen.
- These students are laser-focused on earning their degree.
What Do Transfer Students Tell Us About Academics?

• Many students do not feel prepared to succeed academically; they also receive little additional support to do so.

• The type of courses transfer students take matter: major credits vs. general education requirements, prerequisites, or “credit fillers.”

• Some academic departments are much more supportive of transfer students than others, depending on the college.

• Academics are transfer students’ primary – and sometimes sole – focus.
What Do Transfer Students Tell Us About Academic and Administrative Supports?

• Getting on track academically is a major challenge for many transfer students, in large part due to problems with:
  • Transferring credits;
  • Declaring a major at the right time; and
  • Registering for the right classes.

• Informational gaps, “the runaround,” and lack of flexible scheduling are large contributors to these challenges.

• Information gaps remain in part because of communication breakdowns – not enough comprehensive counseling or guidance.

• They also can have “spiral effects” throughout transfer students’ time enrolled in four-year colleges.
What Do Transfer Students Tell Us About The Social Experience?

• Many students discussed a “get in, get out” mentality.

• Some students talked about the importance of “networking,” but they distinguished this from “getting involved” in their campus communities.

• Transfer students’ social involvement mainly unfolds in the classroom – or perhaps within their major field of study department – which becomes the hub of their college experience.

• The “social experience” described by transfer students is dramatically different from that described by freshmen.
What Matters For Transfer Students’ Integration & Success Throughout The Year?

• “Integration” for transfer students largely should be viewed in academic rather than social terms; it also potentially is less important than academic *success*.

• Transfer students’ ability to pursue their preferred major is a critical contributor to their sense of academic integration and their likelihood of classroom success.

• The sense of community stemming from their selected major also matters.
What Matters For Transfer Students’ Integration & Success Throughout The Year?

- Transfer students’ likelihood of connecting with support resources is more tenuous than for first-time freshmen, but possibly more important.

- Like first-time freshmen, an “assessment and adjustment” process unfolded, but it tended to focus transfers even more singularly on academic success.

- Transfer students’ “sense of commitment” aligned closely with their persistence patterns.
Key Takeaways for First-time Freshmen So Far…

- Start the college acclimation process early through campus visits and information-sharing concerning expectations;

- Encourage students to partake in freshmen orientation courses and programs where available;

- Press students to inquire during registration about enjoyable and/or feasible course options (that also might fulfill requirements);

- Awaken students’ understanding of the importance of self-advocacy inside and outside the classroom;

- Provide students with clear examples of “success pathways,” for their first year and beyond.
## Key Takeaways For Transfer Students Thus Far…

- Push for an early transfer credit assessment and immediate information sharing about major declaration procedures;
- Increase transfer students’ awareness of available support resources and ease of accessing such resources, especially through initial orientation programs;
- Prioritize academic, classroom-based integration – with both the professor and peers – over social integration;
- Flag academic challenges early and often, an imperative step for facilitating continued receipt of financial aid and ongoing enrollment; and
- Celebrate the “transfer student majority” to avoid a sense of marginalization or disconnection.
Key Takeaways for All Students Thus Far…

• Improve the clarity and reach of communications;

• Develop support resources to skirt technological confusion;

• Address informational discrepancies between advising offices and academic departments;

• Move beyond the “lowest common denominator” in the classroom.
Institutional Questions, Revisited

• Do students have different experiences of similar institutional structures?

• Do institutional structures – and their effectiveness – differ across colleges?
The Short Answer...

- Do students have different experiences of similar institutional structures?
  - YES

- Do institutional structures – and their effectiveness – differ across colleges?
  - YES
Some important **within-college** factors include:

- Extent of students’ academic preparedness;
- Extent of students’ self-advocacy;
- Students’ major field of study;
- Whether students view themselves as “insiders” or “outsiders”;
- Whether students have substantial non-college responsibilities; and
- Whether students expect a “traditional college experience.”
The Longer Answer...

Some important *between-college* factors include:

- Presence and public knowledge of available resources;
- Clarity of informational pathways;
- Availability and helpfulness of academic advising, one-stop centers, financial aid, and the registrar;
- Classroom quality – especially regarding professors;
- Sense of academic and/or social community.
A Brief Word on Satisfaction and Persistence

• Satisfaction is complicated.

• Academic success (or lack thereof) often shapes it and also can override it.

• Satisfaction may be most important for students “in the middle” vis-à-vis persistence.

• For all students, expectations and goals shape both satisfaction and persistence, sometimes independently.
Why It Matters

• Both freshmen and transfer students comprise CUNY’s four-year college communities; we need to know what works and what doesn’t for both.

• We know a lot about what is going right and what is not; this knowledge should allow us to identify and tackle “low hanging fruit” efficiently.
Thank you!

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Please feel free to email questions to:

cmc2304@columbia.edu
Extra Slides
## Persistence Prospects

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