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Promoting Transfer Student Success through Comprehensive Orientation Programming at GVSU

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Promoting Transfer Student Success through Comprehensive Orientation
Programming at GVSU
by
Berkley Bretschneider
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Master's Project
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and Community Innovation
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Berkley

Abstract

Research has shown that transfer students have lower retention and graduation rates than students who stay at the same institution for the duration of their college enrollment. Transfer students are a diverse group of students that face unique challenges when transitioning to a new institution, particularly when coming from a two-year school to a four-year college or university. This project examines common issues experienced in transition and explores best practices to set transfer students up for success at receiving institutions. Focusing on early academic advising, peer mentoring, and exposure to campus resources, this project restructures the current Transfer Advising and Registration system at Grand Valley State University to provide a more well-rounded introduction to campus that works to smooth the transition process for transfer students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Although transfer students are a growing and diverse population in higher education, this student group faces a unique set of challenges when transitioning from a two-year to a four-year institution (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021). Transfer students often have lower levels of retention and degree completion when compared to students who stay at the same institution for the entire duration of their degree (Blekic et al., 2020). This significant gap in retention and graduation is caused by many factors including transfer shock, lack of engagement on campus, loss of credits, low academic self-confidence, and barriers in institutional policy (Ishitani, 2008; Blekic et al., 2020).

With four-year institutions having high tuition costs, many students start their baccalaureate journey at community colleges to avoid insurmountable student debt (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). In addition to lower tuition costs, open-access admissions policies at community colleges greatly increase access to higher education for people who cannot afford four (or more) years at a university or do not meet more selective admissions requirements. Therefore, the opportunity to transfer from two- to four-year institutions provides students from all backgrounds with a better chance of obtaining a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Colleges and universities must do more to better support transfer students, provide a seamless transition into the new institution, and increase retention and bachelor's degree completion overall.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

Increasing the retention and graduation rates of transfer students is essential in expanding access to bachelor's degree attainment overall. Higher education is fundamentally important in improving social and economic outcomes for all, with college degrees providing greater opportunities for employment, wages, and better benefits (Flowers, 2019). Financial barriers to higher education can lead to many students stopping out or not enrolling at all (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Therefore, the transfer function allows for many students to take a more affordable and accessible path to earn a bachelor's degree. By starting at a community college with intentions to transfer to a four-year institution, students can significantly cut down the cost of their education and still earn a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Institutions must be doing everything they can to provide new transfer students with the support and resources necessary for success.

Transfer students at GVSU made up 18.3% of the total undergraduate population in 2021 (GVSU, 2021) and make up about 40% of undergraduate students overall (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Although more than 80% of students entering community colleges have plans to complete a bachelor's degree, only about 17% reach this goal, making transfer student retention and graduation a local and national issue (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Administrators must start paying more attention to transfer students and providing them with sufficient transition programming and resources to improve outcomes for all students. By exploring the reasons behind why transfer students have lower retention and graduation rates, institutions can find ways

to increase these numbers and support all students equitably, increasing success for the institution and students overall (Bahr et al., 2013).

Background of the Project

Transfer students have been historically neglected by four-year institutions for a multitude of reasons. To start, many institutions have little incentive to support transfer success because transfer students are not included in the national measures of retention that are used for accreditation and funding purposes (Grites, 2020). The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) is used to measure first-year persistence and is often used for the evaluation of higher education institutions. Though IPEDS also tracks transfer student data in some ways, the organization only counts students who enroll at the institution as FTIACs in their measures of graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This means that transfer students are excluded from federal measures of graduation, causing their success to be put on the back burner by many institutions (Grites, 2020). Institutions and administrators must work to give equitable attention to all students and need to prioritize the needs of every student in attendance.

Additionally, transfer students often receive less attention and support than first-year students because administrators assume that because transfers are not new college students, they do not need the comprehensive orientation programming that is commonly implemented for FTIACS (Marling, 2013). Though this is true in some regards, transfers are still new students at the receiving institution and often struggle with learning new policies, procedures, and campus norms. Therefore, transfer

students must be provided with sufficient opportunities and a well-structured orientation to help them learn about the institution and the resources offered that support student success (Grites, 2013). Orientation can play a key role in helping new students feel welcomed and supported on campus, making it an essential part of providing a smooth transition to transfer students (Blekic et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2021). To best support transfer students and improve retention and graduation rates, higher education professionals must be aware of how to set new transfers up for success. By examining this issue in-depth, advocating for transfer students, and exploring best practices to increase student success, institutions can work to better support all students and provide a seamless transition for transfer students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to identify common barriers transfer students face when making the shift from a two-year institution to a four-year college or university. By examining issues experienced in transition and identifying potential solutions and best practices to improve the transfer experience, the goal will be to better improve the transition period with a focus on increasing rates of retention and graduation for new transfer students. Specifically, the main purpose of this project will be to transform GVSU's current Transfer Advising and Registration (TSAR) sessions to better prepare new students for a positive first semester at Grand Valley. This project will focus solely on the post-admission period for new transfer students, concentrating on orientation and transition programming. GVSU's current TSAR system will be completely transformed to be a day-long, comprehensive orientation

program that touches on course registration, learning about campus resources, understanding institutional policies, and helping students get socially and academically integrated on campus. With a team of peer mentors and professional academic advisors supporting small groups of new transfer students, the incoming students will have the chance to ask questions and learn about GVSU from various perspectives. With this project focusing mainly on the transition period for new transfer students and preparing them for a successful first semester or year, this project will not touch on transfer students after their first year at the receiving institution. Though this type of transfer orientation program would be unique to GVSU, the individual components comprising the project are drawn from recent literature on transfer student experiences at other institutions.

Objectives of the Project

The objective of this proposed project is to offer suggestions on how to provide a better transition experience for students transferring to GVSU. This will be achieved by offering a comprehensive overview of the challenges transfer students experience when coming to a new institution and exploring best practices to improve the transition period. To improve outcomes for transfer students, it is essential that institutions are made aware of the struggles transfers experience so that programming can be designed to support them through the transition. Raising awareness of the challenges transfer students experience when entering a new institution will hopefully lead to better outcomes for these students and create a stronger sense of a positive transfer culture on campus (Jain et al., 2011).

Definition of Terms

- *Native Student:* Student who starts at one four-year institution and continues enrollment throughout their entire time in college (Ishitani, 2008).
- *Receiving Institution:* Institution a student transfers into after starting their post-secondary education at a different institution.
- *Transition:* The period between a student's departure from one institution through the first semester or year at a receiving institution.
- *FTIAC (First Time in Any College) student:* A new college student that is starting at an institution with no prior college credits or experiences.

Scope of the Project

This project will address barriers faced by transfer students transitioning from a two-year institution to a four-year one. It will address the issues students face during the initial transfer period including the time post-admission and through a student's first semester or year at the new institution. Though it will not address issues faced past the transition period, the hope is that the implementations of this project will prepare students for success that results in degree completion. This project also will not touch on issues faced pre-transfer/while the student is still enrolled at a community college. There is work to be done on both sides of the transfer process, but this project focuses on ways to support transfer students regardless of their past educational experiences. While there might be other factors affecting a transfer student's retention and graduation, this project will focus on

factors that can be supported through an institution's orientation programming, such as access to resources and information early on.

Some constraints facing this project will be institutional policies that cannot be easily changed and challenges regarding staffing and funding. Realistically, this form of orientation would cost too much money and require extensive staffing that GVSU is not currently able to provide. However, in an ideal scenario, this orientation program designed to increase transfer student success would be implemented and providing equitable experiences to all students would be viewed as well worth the resources.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of relevant literature regarding issues faced by college students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions and an overview of student development theories that guide the structure of the new transfer orientation system. It is important to provide background information on why retention and graduation rates are significantly lower for transfer students when compared to native students to identify potential strategies for improving these trends. Additionally, by examining high-impact practices designed to improve outcomes for transfer students, this chapter will act as a foundation for the final intervention.

Theory/Rationale

This project will rely on components of two student development theories: Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement and Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory. These theories will help to explain how involvement on campus is linked to student success and explain how students experience and comprehend transition.

Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement

This project will be partially guided by Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement. The term involvement refers to the amount of time and energy that students dedicate to their academic experience (Astin, 1984). This can include a variety of experiences, such as time spent studying, involvement in extracurricular activities, working closely with faculty, staff, and other students, and much more. Astin argues that students who are highly involved on campus will have better

academic and social outcomes from their college experience (both learning-wise and developmentally) than those who are less involved (Astin, 1984). In sum, students who are more involved have higher rates of academic success and student retention. Astin suggested that it is essential for administrators to value students' time and design programming and initiatives that emphasize quality over quantity and that are focused on the development of the whole student (Astin, 1984). This theory can be used to design activities that value and promote getting involved on campus (Astin, 1984).

When working to improve the transition experience for new transfer students, Astin's Theory of Involvement can be used to demonstrate the importance of encouraging involvement on campus early on. Transfer students are more likely than FTIACs to experience feelings of social isolation during their first semester, making it even more important to allow opportunities for students to interact with peers and learn about how to get involved on campus during orientation (Marling, 2013). By encouraging students to get involved in the campus community outside of the classroom, there is hope that transfer students can experience the positive social and academic outcomes that Astin's theory outlines.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

This project will also be influenced by Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory. In this framework, Schlossberg explains that though each person experiences a transition in unique ways, the transition model provides stable conditions under which transition can be understood (Anderson et al., 2012). Specifically, the "4 S

System” offers guidance on determining what types of support are most beneficial in helping people cope with transition and refers to a “...person’s *Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies*” (Anderson et al., 2012). Looking further into the 4 S’s, *situation* refers to what a person is experiencing during the time of transition (having multiple areas of stress, dealing with change in more than one way, etc.), *self* refers to the individual person (each person is unique and has diverse experiences that impact how they deal with change), *support* refers to the amount and types of support available, and *strategies* examines how a person handles periods of transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The authors explain that these principles can be applied at any point in the transition and that these resources can determine how positively or negatively a person deals with the transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

In the context of student development and the transition of transfer students into a new institution, Schlossberg’s Transition theory can be used to intentionally design orientation to best fit the diverse needs of transfer students. By thinking of the 4 ‘S’s of transition in every step of the planning process, orientation can serve as a supportive resource to help new transfers adjust regardless of how they are independently experiencing the transition into the new institution (Anderson et al., 2012). Every student has unique experiences and characteristics that can impact their ability to cope with change and adjust to new environments, making it extremely important for institutions to have an accessible and adaptable orientation that meets the various needs of all new transfers (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). This theory will be used throughout this project to provide guidance on the structure of the new

orientation programming and offer context on how to support students experiencing change.

Research/Evaluation

Barriers/Challenges Faced by Transfer Students

Transfer students face a unique set of challenges when entering four-year institutions that differ from issues commonly experienced by traditional FTIACs. Transferring from a two- to a four-year institution has become a norm for students pursuing bachelor's degrees (Grites, 2013; Marling, 2013). Though some data suggests transfer students have comparable graduation and retention rates with native students, other studies suggest these measures are significantly lower for students that attend more than one institution (Blekic et al., 2020). The negative effects of students struggling through this transition are reflected in students' grades almost immediately (Blekic et al., 2020).

Looking further into the root causes of struggle in transition, in 1965, John Hill introduced the concept of "transfer shock" to explain the dip in grade point averages that transfer students often face in the first year or semester at their new institution. Though the theory of transfer shock was first introduced over fifty years ago, it is still a relevant issue faced by students experiencing transition, with many schools and advisors still seeing transfer students struggling academically during their first semester (Thurmond, 2007). Students coming from a community college are the most likely to experience significant transfer shock, leading to students feeling incapable of academic success at the new institution (McGuire & Belcheir, 2013).

Though some students can recover from the initial drop in academic performance, other students continue to struggle moving forward or withdraw from the institution completely (Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008). By examining the factors that contribute to transfer shock, practitioners can gain a better understanding of the challenges transfer students face and identify ways to better support students in transition.

Multiple factors can contribute to a dip in academic performance or overall withdrawal from the institution shortly after transfer, including assumptions made by incoming students about their new school, and by institutional leaders assuming the amount and types of support transfer students need to be successful (Grites, 2013). Other than academic struggles, new transfer students also face issues in forming social relationships, getting involved on campus, connecting with faculty, navigating the new campus environment and systems, and understanding institutional policies – all things inextricably linked to student retention and persistence (Blekic et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2021). In addition, loss of credits, longer timelines to graduation, and rigid institutional policies that favor native students can harm a student’s ability to persist post-transfer (Thomas et al., 2021).

Transfer students also face barriers in feeling accepted and supported at receiving institutions. Because transfer students are not included in the data that is used to evaluate retention rates at four-year institutions, transfer populations are often pushed aside by administrators and receive less attention and support from the institution in the transition process when compared to FTIACs. With the lack of an incentive for institutions to help them succeed, transfer students often feel isolated

and stratified from peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Ishitani, 2008; Marling, 2013).

In addition to experiencing transfer shock, many students also experience “transitional trauma,” which refers to, “the level of alienation a student experiences when unfamiliar with some of the norms, values and expectations that predominate in a school community” (Bennet & Okinaka, 1990). Many of these issues can be improved by implementing better support systems focused on academic, social, and overall integration to the new campus that would provide a smoother transition and make transfer students feel more valued at the receiving institution, creating a more transfer-affirming culture (Grites, 2013; Marling, 2013). The following sections will further outline frustrations experienced by transfer students and suggest ways campus resources can be revamped to better support them, reduce transfer shock, and improve retention and graduation rates for all students in transition.

Campus Integration/Sense of Belonging

Social Integration. Although many students enter college to earn a degree, social aspects of being on campus can be just as important as choosing classes and majors. Additionally, having a strong understanding of how to utilize campus resources, learning management systems, and institutional policies can affect a new student’s experience in transition (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). Looking first at social integration, involvement both inside and outside of the classroom plays a key role in increasing student success and creating a sense of belonging on campus (Thomas et al., 2021). Transfer students might have issues adjusting to their new

campus's social climate for a variety of reasons, including feeling like they are behind native students who have already found social groups, and outside factors such as work or family responsibilities (Marling, 2013). Transfer students come from a wide array of demographic and educational backgrounds (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). More so than native students, transfer students are more likely to be older, work full- or part-time, and have additional responsibilities outside of school (such as having a family), which makes them less likely to get involved outside of the classroom (Lester et al., 2013). Despite other obligations, building a sense of belonging and establishing a support system on campus are essential parts of the college experience, and institutions could do more to help students acclimate socially to campus.

Looking further, Marling (2013) suggested that transfer students can be hesitant to reach out to others because they assume everyone else already has friends, making them feel isolated from others. She suggests taking more time to work with transfers and to help connect them with people "with common interests, goals, and abilities," (P. 83) and expanding these recommendations to groups outside of just transfer students. Early connections with peers and student groups on campus can help decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness within the transition period, leading to higher rates of persistence for students. On the other hand, Lester et al. (2013) explained that for many transfer students, social engagement is perceived as something that happens either in the classroom or separate from school altogether. While the literature on transfer student social engagement is sparse, other studies focused on college students overwhelmingly argue that social engagement and a

sense of belonging on campus are directly tied to student success (Thomas et al., 2021). For students who want to be socially involved on campus, it is important to provide resources and referrals when they first arrive on campus.

Academic Integration. In addition to becoming socially integrated on a new campus, transfer students must learn how to navigate new institutional policies, procedures, and how to adjust to the pace of the new institution. Part of building a sense of belonging on campus comes from knowing that faculty, staff, and other students are there to support them, which includes helping new students navigate various policies and procedures to be successful in classes (Lester et al., 2013). Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013) stated that many new transfer students experience challenges navigating registration and learning management systems, often having to learn a different system than what was offered at their previous institution. Providing students with necessary information pre- and post-transfer can help resolve this concern for students, both through comprehensive orientation and other resources, such as informational packets that come with acceptance letters or transfer-specific resources on the school website (Marling, 2013; Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). Another area of concern for transfer students surrounds the academic rigor of the receiving institution. Some students expressed that there was a “huge stigma” about the academic difficulty between two-year and four-year institutions, with students worrying that professors at four-year schools will be more demanding than faculty at community colleges and that they will not be able to keep up academically (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). Lukszo and Hayes (2020) found that expectations of

academic rigor were engrained in students by community college professors, advisors, and peers, leading to student assumptions that two-year schools were more relaxed, while four-year institutions had higher standards. The stigma of harder classes and hearing experiences from other students' transfer experiences can shape expectations of pre-transfer students that may cause them to make assumptions about their receiving institution. This can be troublesome for students, especially those that “already feel marginalized on campus as a transfer student” (Lukszo & Hayes, 2020, P. 46). Overall, students must be given the information and resources necessary to be successful during orientation so that they can form accurate expectations of what the transition will be like.

Peer Mentoring. Peer mentoring programs are an effective and cost-efficient way for institutions to provide support to new students experiencing transition (Lane, 2020). Research shows that peer mentorship is a high-impact practice that increases overall student success, leading to better performance in the classroom, more involvement on campus, and higher retention and graduation rates (Collier, 2017; Lane, 2020). For new transfer students who may feel isolated, socially behind, and face the various challenges that come with adjusting to a new campus, peer mentoring could be an effective solution to assist students with campus integration and to help them build a support network on campus. Ogilvie and Knight (2019) found that many previous transfer students expressed a desire to connect with current students to help ease their transition and assist with the navigation of campus resources and systems. Peer mentors can play an essential role in helping new students get acclimated to the

institution academically and socially and can positively influence the persistence rates of transfer students (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021). While it is helpful to connect transfer students to previous transfers who have gone through the same process, having native students also serve as peer mentors can be beneficial as well (Marling, 2013). Overall, peer mentorship programs can be a valuable resource to help students feel connected on campus, make genuine connections with others, and can increase a student's sense of belonging to the institution, making students more likely to persist through to graduation (Ogilvie & Knight, 2019; Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021). If implemented within orientation practices, institutions could better prepare students to succeed in their first semester at the receiving school and potentially reduce the impacts of transfer shock.

Early Academic Advising

Access to quality academic advising is essential for a smooth transition from a community college to a four-year institution. Many of the concerns transfer students face when arriving at the receiving institution (uncertainty about credit transfers, how to register for the correct classes, learning how to navigate campus resources, understanding institutional policies, etc.) can be reduced or resolved by meeting with an academic advisor at the beginning of the transition process (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Marling, 2013; Fann, 2013). Early access to academic advising services at the receiving institution allows students an opportunity to learn more about the institution, timelines to graduation, and institutional resources and systems (Fann, 2013). Additionally, advising plays an integral role in developing transfer student

capital, or the institutional knowledge that prepares transfer students to be successful at the receiving institution (Hayes et al., 2020). Fann (2013) stated that advisors who provide accurate and transparent information about the transfer process early on are essential to ensuring students know all their options and how the process works. Instead of receiving information on an “as-needed” basis, advisors, faculty, and recruiters need to be open and honest about the transfer process with new students from the very beginning to set realistic expectations of what their remaining time in college will look like (Fann, 2013). When four-year institutions allow for prospective transfers to utilize their advising services pre-and post-admission (during orientation and registration sessions), transfer students can enter the institution feeling better prepared to navigate campus, removing some barriers transfer students face at a new institution (Fann, 2013).

Credit Transfer

An additional barrier that could be reduced by early academic advising is a lack of knowledge on how credits will transfer into the new institution. Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013) found that the most anxiety-inducing aspect of the transfer process for students coming from two-year institutions was understanding how credits from previous courses at the community college would count toward degree requirements at the receiving institution. This lack of understanding can lead to students feeling unsure of their academic standing and expected graduation timeline (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2020; Ogilvie & Knight, 2019). Even though some states and institutions have processes in place to reduce credit loss – such as common

course numbering, transfer pathways/agreements, and credit by assessment – the transfer process is often not as seamless as policymakers and administrators portray (Giani, 2019).

Though some of the issues regarding credit loss need to be examined from the perspective of academic advisors at community colleges, receiving institutions could be doing more to help students gain a better understanding of what credits did/did not transfer and how that will affect their degree plan (Marling, 2013). Being fully transparent and helping students get in touch with academic advisors as soon as possible after admission to the receiving institution helps students gain an understanding of what requirements have been fulfilled by previous courses. Additionally, this transparency and meeting with an advisor allow an opportunity for students to learn what classes are still needed for their major and graduation. Giving this information during orientation is an easy way to reduce anxiety regarding graduation timelines for new transfer students and would allow them to focus on adapting to campus and succeeding in their classes (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Gyani, 2019).

Orientation

In conjunction with peer-mentoring and academic advising, orientation is an effective practice that can prepare students to succeed and persist at a new institution. Orientation programming is a long-standing practice at many institutions, aimed at helping students transition to life on campus (Mayhew et al., 2010). Despite intentions for orientation to promote student success by acclimating students to

campus, assisting with course registration, and providing the information needed to navigate the institution, some programs are more effective than others (Mayhew et al., 2010; Ogilvie & Knight, 2019). Many traditional orientation programs are focused on helping first-year students succeed but do not address challenges unique to transfer students (Townsend, 2008). When designing orientation programming for transfer students, practitioners need to keep in mind that though transfers are not traditional first-year students, they are still in their first year at the receiving institution. Transfer orientation can be like FTIAC orientation programming in some ways; however, it is important to have individualized and transfer-specific programming that is tailored to the direct needs of these students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). It is essential that separate orientation programs are created to address the needs of incoming transfers so that they feel supported, well-informed, and prepared to succeed and persist through to graduation (Townsend, 2008; Fink & Jenkins, 2017).

It is important to make orientation mandatory but accessible for students that have obligations outside of school (Urias et al., 2016). Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013) stated that many transfer students did not attend orientation because it was not required and did not want to attend because they already had experience as college students. For this reason, it is important to make orientation both required and tailored to the specific needs of incoming transfers. While first-year orientation focuses on how to be successful college students, transfers need to learn more about the institution and its systems, as they have already taken college-level courses

(Townsend, 2008). Multiple sources assert that transfer students want orientation focused on course registration with assistance from advisors (Townsend, 2008), information about credit transfer, meeting current students and faculty, navigating institutional policies and resources (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001), and learning their way around campus (Ogilvie & Knight, 2019; Thomas et al., 2021). If practitioners and institutional leaders modeled orientation programming based on the wants and needs of incoming transfer students, transfer students could have a more seamless transition to campus, positively affecting retention and graduation rates.

Summary/Conclusion

Transfer students are likely to have lower rates of retention and graduation when compared to native students (Blekic et al., 2020). By identifying why transfer students struggle to persist at the receiving institution, implementing high-impact practices to make the transition process easier, and designing programs specifically tailored to the needs of transfer students, institutional leaders can make four-year institutions a more welcoming environment for new transfer students. Focusing specifically on orientation programming that provides early access to quality academic advising, connections to peer mentors, and detailed information about the campus environment, the transition process can be greatly improved.

This chapter provided an overview of the literature surrounding challenges faced by transfer students and best practices to improve the transition period at the receiving institution. The information laid out in this chapter will serve as the foundation for the final solution in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

As explained in prior sections of this project, transfer students coming from a two-year institution into a four-year institution are likely to face a unique set of challenges during the transition (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021). Transfer students tend to have lower retention and graduation rates when compared to native students that stay at the same institution for the duration of their degree (Blekic et al., 2020). Because transfer students often do not receive the same level of support, guidance, and programming that traditional first-year students experience, the first semester or year at an institution can be challenging both academically and socially (Marling, 2013). Providing a well-structured, day-long orientation program designed to meet the diverse needs of transfer students is key to giving students the proper guidance and information needed to acclimate to the new institution and have a successful first semester. Though a one-day orientation will not be enough to completely transform the transition experience for transfer students, it can be a strong first step in ensuring students are prepared and informed before the start of their first semester.

Drawing on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, this project will introduce a comprehensive orientation program aimed at preparing transfer students for a smooth transition into the receiving institution. By directly addressing some of the barriers these students face, this orientation program will be focused on mitigating transfer shock by educating students about resources and vital information about the institution, connecting students with academic advisors, and building the foundation

for a strong sense of belonging on campus. The overall goal of this project is to improve the transition process and increase retention and graduation rates for all transfer students. In this chapter, I will outline my plans and intentions for a day-long orientation program focused on thoroughly addressing the needs of transfer students at Grand Valley State University (GVSU).

Project Components

Background Information

To best understand how to strengthen orientation programming for transfer students at GVSU, it is valuable to have appropriate context for the current orientation practices at the university. At GVSU, each new transfer student is required to attend orientation, opportunities referred to as Transfer Student Advising and Registration (TSAR) sessions. While the Admissions Office student registration for TSAR, the set-up, organization, and implementation of these sessions are handled by individual academic advising offices. While each office conducts TSARs slightly differently, the overall goal of these orientation sessions is course registration. Advisors meet with students one-on-one or in small groups to help them declare majors and register for the appropriate classes for the upcoming semester or academic year. With sessions being capped at an hour and a half, there is limited time to discuss other important information that can ease the transition to GVSU. Additionally, because sessions are often one-on-one with a professional academic advisor, there is

little to no opportunity for new transfer students to meet other students and start to build a sense of belonging on campus.

While the current TSAR setup is sufficient to register students in GVSU courses, it lacks content and the time for relationship building in comparison to First-Year Advising and Registration (FYAR) sessions. For new students attending FYAR, they experience a day-long orientation program that consists of a resource fair, presentations about GVSU and degree requirements, and course registration. Unlike TSAR, FYAR allows opportunities for students to get to know one another and is staffed by professional academic advisors, faculty advisors, and student leaders. When these two programs are compared, it is clear that transfer students do not receive equitable attention and support when transferring to GVSU. GVSU welcomed 1224 new transfer students in the Fall 2021 semester and transfer students currently make up 18.3% of the undergraduate population (GVSU, 2021). Therefore, GVSU must dedicate more time and resources to support these students and provide them with programming that sets them up for a smooth transition and success at the university.

Project Overview

This project will transform GVSU's current TSAR program to reflect the style of FYAR more closely with transfer-specific support resources and components to address the unique challenges faced by transfer students at the institution. As explained by Eggleston and Laanan (2001), transfer students need similar orientation information to that of first-year students, the content needs to be slightly different to

meet the unique needs of transfer students. The proposed transfer student orientation will be a full-day event focused on helping students learn about GVSU. These sessions will take place on campus, but online arrangements can be made to accommodate students who are unable to make it in person.

Throughout the day, students will work with a combination of professional academic advisors and student leaders (preferably some who were transfer students) to ensure each new student can see multiple perspectives and interact with various staff at GVSU. The day will consist of a campus tour, presentations, resource fairs, time for socialization to get to know other students, and will conclude with course registration. Additionally, students will each have a chance to talk with an academic advisor to gain an understanding of how credits from their previous have transferred to GVSU. Though the activities will mostly take place in small groups, the combination of professional and student staff will allow for each student to receive individualized attention when necessary.

The goal of this longer and more detailed orientation is to prepare transfer students to make a seamless transition to GVSU. By addressing issues like credit transfer, academic and social resources, navigating university systems, and providing information on general policies and procedures, the intended overall outcome would be that students were prepared for and excited to be GVSU students. Providing information and teaching new students how to navigate campus and its resources is

essential to helping students feel well-supported and informed during their first semester (Townsend, 2008; Fink & Jenkins, 2017).

Orientation Enrollment

Upon admission to GVSU, new transfer students will receive an informational packet instructing them to sign up for a TSAR date. Students will be able to see a schedule of the program to have an idea of what to expect during the orientation. Like FYAR, there will be a \$95 registration fee to cover staffing and breakfast/lunch for the day. While this fee is necessary to fund the new TSAR system, fee waivers will be available for students with extenuating circumstances. Students will select a date to participate and will submit general information about what academic major and/or minor they intend to pursue – this will be used during orientation to assign students with similar interests to advisors that work with those programs. After signing up, students will receive a follow-up email with instructions to campus, the schedule of the program, and additional information about what to expect.

Orientation will be required for all new transfer students. Attending orientation on-campus will be strongly encouraged, but not mandatory. As explained in the literature, transfer students are a diverse group that often have responsibilities outside of being a college student, such as work and family obligations (Marling, 2013, Lester et al, 2013). To provide flexibility and accommodations to those who cannot make it in person, some students will be offered an online meeting with an academic advisor to go over transfer credits and class registration and will be sent information on additional resources. While it is preferred all students attend the full

in-person session, Urias et al. (2016) explained the importance of making orientation accessible and adaptable to students who may be physically unable to make it.

Because transfer students have a diverse set of experiences and circumstances, it is important to understand that not every student can devote a whole day on campus before enrollment (Lester et al., 2013). Because this program is focused on increasing transfer student success and retention, it is essential to GVSU does not create any additional barriers for students in transition. For that reason, orientation will be mandatory, but the delivery will be somewhat flexible.

Peer Mentoring

The new TSAR orientation setup would include informal peer-mentoring. Hiring student leaders to serve as orientation assistants and peer mentors is a cost-efficient and effective way to help new students transition into the school socially and academically (Collier, 2017; Lane, 2020). Along with academic advisors, student employees would be hired to help assist with various tasks throughout the day. Like FYAR, the new transfer students will be assigned to a group of 8-10 other students participating in orientation. Each group will be led by two professional academic advisors to assist with credit evaluation, course registration, and override approvals. Working alongside these professionals would be two student leaders that are currently enrolled at GVSU. The student leaders would assist with general registration questions, share their experiences at GVSU, and help incoming transfer students feel excited and prepared to be on campus. While the hiring committee would prioritize hiring student leaders who had previously transferred to GVSU, the ideal team would

consist of both transfer and students who enrolled at GVSU as a FTIAC. Including both transfer and non-transfer students on the team will help to ensure the incoming students meet with diverse student types, which can be particularly relevant for transfer students (Marling, 2013). Utilizing students as peer mentors and encouraging them to share their experiences with incoming transfer students could play a role in welcoming the new students to campus and make their academic and social transition easier.

Academic Advising

While student workers would be present to assist with registration, the academic advisors in each group would be responsible for ensuring each student receives accurate and appropriate information. Student groups would be comprised of people pursuing similar majors (or at least in the same college) so that they could be assigned advisors familiar with the student's intended program(s). It is essential to have academic advisors facilitating transfer orientation sessions because access to quality advising early on can be transformative to a new student's experience (Fann, 2013). Transfer students often enter orientation feeling lost about how credits transfer, how long it will take to graduate, and in which classes to enroll, which can cause significant stress during the transition period. However, meeting with academic advisors to discuss these topics early on can help students have a better understanding of where they stand academically (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Marling, 2013; Fann, 2013). Though students would be in a group setting for the majority of TSAR, the schedule allows for ample time for advisors to meet with students one-on-one.

Allowing students to spend a day with advisors leading the group also allows time for students to learn a range of information about GVSU, rather than trying to fit everything into an hour and a half virtual session. Providing information upfront (at orientation) rather than on an “as-needed” basis allows for transfer students to have clear expectations of what their time will look like at GVSU moving forward (Fann, 2013).

Campus Integration

To fully acclimate new transfer students to campus, a significant portion of the day would be spent on topics outside of registration, such as.... Specifically, the day would begin with a resource fair, where students would have the opportunity to talk with representatives from various offices and resources on campus. This list would include both social and academic resources, such as the Student Academic Success Center, Disability Support Resources, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Office of Student Life, and the Career Center. Each office would have a table set up with information, giveaways, and professional and student staff to talk to incoming students about what they offer, how it can help them during their time at GVSU, and answer any questions students may have. The resource fair would allow students an opportunity to learn what resources GVSU offers to support them, which can have a positive impact on a student’s transition experience (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013).

To help students gain an understanding of GVSU’s policies, procedures, and online systems, students would be required to attend sessions on various topics related to navigating the bureaucracy of higher education. Sessions would include an

overview of online systems (such as Banner, myPath, Blackboard, and Navigate) and various institutional policies (general degree requirements, how to stay in good academic standing, add/drop deadlines, etc.). Students would be able to attend all the sessions offered or could choose to attend only the sessions they feel would be most helpful. It is essential to give transfer students choices about engagement in these types of educational opportunities to honor their prior experiences and expertise. Though transfer students are not new college students they are brand new students to GVSU. Because of this, it is important to offer sessions on institutional policies and resources so that students have a strong understanding of Grand Valley-specific policies early on (Grites, 2013). Overall, the schedule for TSAR would offer structure and flexibility to enable students to maximize their orientation experience.

Project Evaluation

To fully evaluate the effectiveness of this program, students would be asked to fill out a post-orientation survey to share thoughts and suggestions on what went well and what could be improved. The survey would ask questions about the structure, content, organization, and staff to fully examine various aspects of the day. Student-workers and academic advisors would also be asked for their feedback to gain an understanding of how they think the program is running. The survey data from the first year of the new TSAR system would be compared to the data from the old, shorter TSAR structure. Additionally, student workers would be regularly evaluated by supervisors to ensure that things are going smoothly and that the students feel supported in their work.

Post-orientation survey data would be used to evaluate the structure and effectiveness of the new TSAR system. For larger measures of effects on retention and graduation rates for transfer students, administrators would compare completion rates of students before and after implementation of the new program. Because this would be a long-term study, surveys would also be sent out to the new transfer students at the end of their first semester to gauge how well TSAR prepared them to adjust and succeed at GVSU. This would be evaluated by asking intentional questions to test students' knowledge of various topics covered during orientation.

Project Conclusions

Transfer students face a unique set of challenges in the transition to a new institution that is different than barriers experienced by first-year students. Having to overcome additional hurdles can lead to transfer students having lower retention and graduation rates overall. Institutions must be doing more to better support transfer students through the transition period to help these students meet their educational and career goals.

The transfer experience can be greatly improved when institutions understand the common challenges faced by new transfer students. When sufficient programming, support, and guidance is provided, transfer students can graduate and be retained at similar rates as FTIAC students. The comprehensive orientation program explained in this project offers solutions to many of the problems experienced by transfer students. Through access to early academic advising, peer-

mentoring, and efforts to encourage academic and social integration, transfer students can enter a new institution feeling well-equipped and prepared to succeed.

Plans for Implementation

The information outlined in this project could be used for other institutions that lack well-developed transfer orientation programs to improve current practices. Additionally, sharing this information with academic advising centers and admissions representatives at GVSU could help spread awareness of the unique challenges and experiences of transfer students. Transfer students make up a significant portion of undergraduate students and these students must be receiving equitable treatment and support.

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The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Berkley Bretschneider in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.Ed. in Higher Education, College Student Affairs Leadership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karyn Rabourn'.

Karyn Rabourn, Project Advisor

April 27, 2022

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
M.Ed. in Higher Education Program

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karyn E. Rabourn'.

Karyn E. Rabourn, Graduate Program Director
April 27, 2022

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
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