

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**Learning the Ropes: A Case Study of the Academic and Social Experiences of College Transfer Students within a Developing University-College Articulation Framework***by Timothy Gawley and Rosemary A. McGowan***Abstract**

The number of articulation agreements between Canadian colleges and universities has been increasing steadily since the early 2000s. Though various implications of these agreements have been discussed, missing are the students' grounded transfer experiences. This paper discusses the academic and social experiences of college transfer students at a Southern Ontario university. Using multiple methods, this paper identifies the following issues regarding the college transfer experience: transfer shock; expectations about university life; the social aspects of the college transfer experience; and student concerns about college transfer credits. Student-based recommendations for the development and assessment of college transfer processes are also presented.

Across Canada, community colleges and university relationships are structured according to two arrangements. British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec pioneered the development postsecondary systems in which direct university and college collaboration have been encouraged. Subsequently, the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba have also developed stronger links between colleges and universities (Stanyon, 2003). In Ontario, the community colleges and universities have traditionally maintained relatively separate roles with community colleges being established to fulfill the demand for technical training while universities have provided career-oriented preparation for professions and knowledge-based occupations (Beach, Boadway & McInnis, 2005, p.10). However, Ontario has recently moved in the direction of the latter provinces in initiating formal articulation links between university and college programs (Stanyon, 2003). In Ontario, a growing number of college students are now pursuing post-graduate studies at universities. In 2004, over 4100 Ontario college graduates enrolled in university studies within six months of completing their college studies (ACAATO, 2005). In addition, a recent study indicates that over 20% of Ontario college students intend to pursue university and/or further college studies (ACAATO, 2005). According to the Ontario College University Transfer Guide, these students currently have 217 transfer agreements from which to choose (OCUTG, 2006). 173 of these agreements are bilateral (versus multilateral or direct entry articulation categories). The most common type of articulation agreement in Ontario is the degree completion arrangement (N = 156) in which "[a] college(s) and at least one university negotiate an articulation agreement whereby graduates of a diploma program receive specified transfer credit for a completed diploma program toward a degree and then complete a specified number of additional credits at the

university in order to qualify for the baccalaureate degree" (OCUTG, 2006). The success of these college-university articulation arrangements depends, in part, on an understanding of the experiences, challenges and motivations of students who transfer from one type of institution to another, as well as the experiences of staff who oversee the implementation of the articulation agreements. This paper is one in a series of two papers which focuses on the college transfer experience from the student's perspective; the companion paper describes the experiences of university staff.

Relatively well-established research in the United States has identified a range of student and institutional issues related to the transfer experience. Some of the issues include the effects of transfer upon student grades commonly known as "transfer shock" and "transfer ecstasy" (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Cjeda, 1997; Fredrickson, 1998; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Laanan, 2001; Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000), student withdrawal rates (Minear, 1998 in D.S. Peterman, 2002; Van Middlesworth, Carpenter-Davis & McCool, 2002), student perceptions of the cultural differences between college and university (Davies & Dickmann, 1998) and institutional remedies to enhance the success of transfer students (Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000). The importance of understanding the factors and processes that contribute to the experiences of college transfer students has important implications for the retention, graduation and overall success of students.

While there are statistical analyses and reports detailing the mobility of students from college to university (ACAATO, 2005), their grade patterns, graduation rates and withdrawals (Chan, 1995), we know very little about the qualitative experiences of college transfer students, particularly in a Canadian context. This paper presents the results of a case study that analyzes the academic adjustment and social activities of college transfer students at a medium-sized university campus in Southern Ontario where college transfers constitute approximately 20 percent of the student population.

The goals of this paper are threefold. First, it attempts to identify whether the "transfer shock" phenomenon is evident among students at this university institution. If transfer shock is evident, then a finer-grained analysis is performed to examine if the phenomenon is specific to certain academic programs. Second, the paper explores the perceptions and experiences of college transfer students to better understand the ways in which university and college experiences are similar and the ways in which they are different, and the implications of these similarities and differences for a successful transfer experience. Finally, the paper identifies the difficulties, if any, faced by college transfer students and subsequently proposes recommendations for established and prospective transfer arrangements in other postsecondary contexts.

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## Methods

This study employed four data collection methods: the analysis

of existing documentation, a self-administered questionnaire, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. To analyze the association between college transfers and their academic performance, the university Grade Point Averages (GPAs) of college transfer students were analyzed and compared after their first term at university, at the end of their first year and second year. University GPA data was accompanied by the student's college GPA (converted into the University's GPA system by the University), the name of the student's college, college program, the university program enrolled in, program withdrawals and other changes in status (from full-time to part-time studies). The data was obtained from the Admissions Office of the university and given under very strict adherence to the confidentiality measures established by the university's Ethics Board.

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to college transfer students. These were initially administered through an exhaustive e-mail list of college transfer students at the university. The investigators e-mailed all qualified transfer students provided by this sampling frame. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, the investigators e-mailed preletters that informed students about the coming questionnaire. This was complemented with the posting of flyers around campus requesting the participation of transfer students. The questionnaire administration began in March 2005. The subsequent nonresponse was initially disappointing but the investigators knew prior to the administration that the seasonality inherent in the late March and April period was certainly not the ideal moment for requesting students' participation. A second administration was done in May 2005 followed by third and fourth attempts in January and May 2006. A total of 41 students replied to the questionnaire (response rate = 14 percent). The questionnaire asked students to provide information about their academic backgrounds such as which college they transferred from, which college program they attended, what year they transferred to university and whether the transfer to university was made prior to or following the completion of a college program. Students were then asked to compare college and university on the following dimensions: workload, instructors, registration, financial assistance and extracurricular involvement. The questionnaire concluded with the provision of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, student status (full-time or part-time), commuting distance to university, employment status, marital status and number of children.

Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson (2001) describe focus groups as an effective means of adding insight and detail to survey-based research. Hence, college transfer students were sought to share their experiences in one of three focus group sessions. The focus group discussions certainly fulfilled this expectation as the discussions between the transfer students were often thorough and lively. Students were recruited through the same procedures as described above (through e-mail and flyers). Each group ranged in number between 4 and 7 participants. Even though several other students showed enthusiastic interest in focus group participation, the achievement of data saturation compelled the investigators to limit the number of groups (Morgan, 1997, p.43). The focus groups occurred in classrooms on the university campus and lasted for approximately 75

minutes. The following open-ended focus group questions were derived from a similar study of college transfer students conducted by Davies & Dickmann (1998, p.545):

1. Prior to starting at [University X], what were your expectations, if any, about university life?
2. How would you describe your experiences in transferring from college to [University X]?
3. What parts of university life do you find enjoyable? What parts do you not enjoy?
4. Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer to other college transfer students?
5. Is there anything that you have thought about that you would like to add to our discussion?

Using these methods, this study offers several observations regarding the college-to-university transfer experience. Following a general description of the questionnaire respondents' demographic characteristics, the following results are presented. These are 1) transfer shock, 2) expectations about university life which includes a) workload distinctions between college and university and b) expectations of university professors, 3) the social aspects of college transfers, and 4) the issue of college transfer credits.

## Results

### College transfer student characteristics

The sample of questionnaire respondents is small but diverse. Although the sample is insightful, the results are interpreted with caution since the sample is not confidently regarded as being representative of the transfer student population. Twenty-four respondents had been at the university since September 2004, with the other 17 attending the university since September 2002. The students arrived from a variety of colleges and programs. At least seven community colleges are represented in the sample while at least four clusters of college programs are represented including Business, Administration, Enterprise or Marketing; Law and Security, Police Foundations or Private Security; Social Services, Child and Youth Services, Developmental Services; and Counseling and Other.

The majority of the 41 respondents ( $f = 25$ ) came from two college institutions with which the university has a total of 9 bilateral articulation agreements, all of which are degree-completion programs involving credit transfers (OCUTG, 2006). The remaining 16 students did not come from colleges having formal articulation agreements with the university. However, the possibility remains for them to qualify for transfer credits at the discretion of the receiving institution. Information to confirm whether these students received transfer credits was unavailable.

For the majority of the students, their transfer between college and university was swift with 26 starting university six months or less following the completion of their college requirements. Thirty-five of the respondents completed their college diploma before transferring to

university. The remaining six students transferred midway through their college experience. The majority of the respondents are female ( $f = 25$ ). Twenty-six of the respondents are under the age of 25. Thirty-seven of the respondents attend university full-time. Thirty-one of the respondents are employed with 25 of them being employed part-time. Thirty of the respondents are single and eight of them have one child or more.

#### Transfer shock

Transfer shock generally refers to the observed tendency for college student GPAs to temporarily drop within the first year of university and is used as a benchmark of college transfer smoothness (Cejda, 1997; Middlesworth, Carpenter-Davis and McCool, 2001). In this study, the focus group and questionnaire data uncovered a balanced array of experiences regarding the transfer shock experience. The overwhelming majority of focus group participants described a drop in their grades from college to university. Two students however mentioned how their grades actually increased; this increase from college to university is known as transfer ecstasy (Cejda, 1997, p.285; Laanan, 2001, p.7). The transfer shock was unexpected and disappointing for many students; it was like having to start all over again:

I was expecting the transition from college to university to go smoothly for myself. I thought I could juggle and I found that I wasn't able to. Being that I was an Honours student in college, it was like I had to start all over again in university. Starting back and getting C's and B minuses and then working my way back up into a B plus and moving on.

An examination of GPA information accessed at the university illuminates the transfer shock phenomenon. Table 1 presents 2004 GPA data (on a scale of 1 to 12) for a sample of 87 college transfer students. The students are also classified according to their college program of origin since all students who arrive at the university campus are admitted into its single multi-disciplinary program. Average GPA changes are provided at three points: after college (College GPA), after first year of university, and after the second year of university. Table 1 shows that, between their completion of college and the end of their first university year, the average GPA dropped by 2.37 points for the entire sample. Moreover, the students were also collectively unable to fully recover to their college GPA levels after two years of university (College to second year GPA change = -2.18) with only seven students from the entire sample experiencing either transfer stability or ecstasy after their first or second year university studies.

#### Table 1

Cejda's (1997) observation of transfer shock between academic disciplines suggests that researchers should not rely solely on aggregate GPA analyses for the assessment of the phenomenon. Table 1 presents the analysis of GPA averages within selected college programs where it shows that students, regardless of

discipline, experienced some degree of transfer shock. However, average GPA declines were lowest among students whose college programs were General Arts and Science (-1.38) or Business and Marketing (-2.19). The General Arts and Science findings have to be interpreted with caution given the small size of this subsample. Other Programs, such as college programs in the arts or journalism also experienced relatively moderate drops in their GPA. Looking at the remaining programs, Table 1 shows a higher than average transfer shock (with the 'All Areas' category representing grand mean GPA changes) among students from Social or Community Services or Law and Security and Police Foundations programs at every point of analysis. It appears that students coming from more specialized college programs experienced a greater degree of transfer shock.

It is also important to analyze transfer shock variations among college transfers according to GPA categories. Cejda, Rewey & Kaylor (1998, p.682) analyzed transfer shock by GPA categories to find greater transfer shock for transfers with a college GPA of 3.0 or more (on a 4-point scale) while transfers with college GPAs of less than 3.0 showed grade increases by the end of their first university semester. Table 2 offers a similar analysis of transfer students according to two GPA groups: students who completed college with a GPA equal to or greater than 9.0 and those whose GPA was less than 9.0. An average GPA increase was not found; however the figures replicate Cejda et al. (1998) in as much as students with higher entering GPAs experienced, on average, greater transfer shock. Unlike Cejda et al. (1998) is how college transfers in the higher GPA group recovered from transfer shock by an average of one-half of a GPA point while the grade decline experienced by those with less than 9.0 GPA remained, on average, relatively steady over the two year period.

## Table 2

### Expectations about university life

#### A. Workload distinctions between college and university

Focus group participants expected university to be challenging. For some, the feelings of nervousness and intimidation associated with these expectations held for a time, but for others the university experience became more relaxed. A student described his initial bout of nervousness followed by an eventual state of comfort:

I think my nerves were the biggest part of the whole transfer. The actual...filling out the forms for class, all of that was easy. That was a piece of cake. I was just extremely nervous about coming into the setting and then once I sat down in the first few classes, I completely got over it.

A student's ability to adapt to the workload and coursework expectations of university is crucial in the transfer experience. The accounts of students on this matter were given in the questionnaire data. Students overwhelmingly thought that their workload increased in university relative to college ( $f = 36$ ). A part of this was due to the

increased amount of homework at university. While just under half of the respondents (f =19) said that they spent 10 hours or more per week doing homework at university, only 9 students said that they spent 10 hours or more on homework per week at college. Eleven students thought that their time spent with homework was about the same. Overall, the course work at university was also said to be more difficult (f = 30).

Students generally found university to be an academic challenge due in large part to the workload and coursework differences. Not only did the intensity and amount of work increase for transfer students, but college transfers mentioned being unfamiliar or unprepared for the type of work expected. Students mentioned their difficulties with the amount of essay writing in university. This was in contrast to the commonality of multiple choice tests in college. Moreover, group work was mentioned to be a mainstay in college learning. As one student put it, college was "group projects all the time. And here it's essays. I haven't written an essay since grade 12 which is four years ago, so I struggled with the essays at first but now I'm graduating. I'm comfortable." Another student mentioned how the applied work of college, and the report-writing associated with it, contributed to a decline in her paper writing skills:

I found the workload very different. I was not familiar with writing papers or assignments from the program I took in college so this, for me, was very new . . . It's taken me three years now to be able to write a paper that I feel comfortable with.

In addition to essay writing, students also mentioned how university entailed more reading than college. Some of the students were forewarned about the reading and subsequently made sure to keep up with their weekly assigned readings. As one student remarked, "my reading tripled, but I expected that to happen. I knew fully coming in that I would go from reading 200-250 pages a week to about what I'm now reading which is about 720 just to stay up, to stay current."

Another difference between college and university for the transfer students concerned the amount of in-class-related interaction between students. The transfer students in this study came to a relatively small university campus and so the students expected an interactive learning environment that would be similar to their college experience. One student described how he expected the university campus and its programs to have a similar social atmosphere in the learning process to college:

So coming from a program in college, we had 55 people. We all kind of roamed to every class together and that's the way it sort of went. So when I came here I was sort of like, well, its smaller classrooms, so the odds are that I'll probably be in classes with people I graduated school with so it would be more like that.

Similarly, a student who expected more interaction between students observed the contrary when she said "I thought that there would be more people randomly talking to other people . . . But it's not

as much as I thought it would be.”

The relative absence of interaction in the university context was explained by what the students observed as a more autonomous learning environment. Whereas at college there was more group-work and where students in a program took the same courses, university was observed to involve more independent reading, assignments and course selection. One student remarked that “you’re doing more work outside of the class than you are doing inside. That was a thing I had to get used to.” Some insights into the impact of autonomy on university homework and course work were provided by the questionnaire results where students mentioned variations in the amount of direction given by instructors between university and college. When asked to rate the relative amount of direction given for homework assignments at university versus college, 14 students stated that the level of instruction is about the same while 13 said that the level of instruction is somewhat lower than what was provided at college. The remaining respondents said that the level of instruction was higher than what was provided at college.

#### B. Expectations of university professors

Prior to arriving at university, a number of focus group participants shared their concern that university professors would not be as approachable or as helpful as their college counterparts. Also, hearing about the impersonal character of the larger university institutions from media or other family members prompted some students to believe that the professors would be strict and dispassionate. As one student remarked, he “didn’t think that you would be able to discuss any questions with them.” He was subsequently impressed after his professors were unexpectedly supportive. Questionnaire results confirmed this as 37 students either rated their university professors as moderately helpful and supportive ( $f = 21$ ) or very helpful and supportive ( $f = 16$ ). Compared to the help given by their college instructors, the respondents said that the university professors were much more helpful and supportive ( $f = 12$ ) moderately helpful and supportive ( $f = 11$ ) or equally helpful and supportive ( $f = 11$ ).

Students also expected that university professors would not be as accessible as their college counterparts. It was expected that the professors would not attend their office hours or would not appear on campus as regularly as their college instructors. Again, the questionnaire results validated the surprise that many college transfers experienced with respect to professor accessibility. Eleven students said that their professors at university were equally accessible to their college counterparts. Eighteen students felt that their university professors were moderately more accessible while 5 believed that their university professors were more accessible.

Other focus group accounts illustrated the unexpectedly approachable, passionate and helpful qualities of the professors at university. One student remarked that “here you get much better teaching. More lectures are put together better.” Another student was surprised by the passion of his professors:



A lot of professors are just so passionate about the subjects that they're teaching. They just have so much passion that even if what they are teaching, what they are lecturing on is a little dry; it just comes out like the most exciting thing because they feel it's the most exciting thing. It just rubs off on the kids.

The unexpectedly positive interaction with university professors was the predominant view among focus group participants. Nevertheless, two students did observe the relatively impersonal aspects of professor-student relationships. This is best represented by one student's comparison between college and university professors in which the college professors seemed more willing to interact outside of the classroom:

Sometimes, you know, we went at the end of every semester. We went out to a restaurant and had a few drinks and some appetizers. And it was friendly. It was a lot friendlier, and I find that at university there are professors who don't know my name. There are some profs that, you know, you say hi to but you're like 'Do I even want to talk to this person after this semester?'

### **Social aspects of the college transfer experience**

The social aspects of the college transfer experience begin with orientation week. Not unlike the incoming high school graduates, transfer students have also been given the opportunity to participate in orientation week activities. For one student, orientation week was a second chance at an opportunity that he missed at college:

I never had that at [College X] and that's why I did it. I hear all of my friends talking about it. You know what? I'm just going to revert my age. I'm gonna turn the channel back by four years and I'm just going to get it. That's what I did. I had a great time but chose to like it, chose the attitude to have.

As the results of this study generally suggest however, the unique characteristics and experiences of the college transfer students call for unique orientation alternatives. For most of the students who participated in this study, the maturity difference between incoming high school graduates and the college transfers was regarded as a deterrent against their participation in orientation week functions. Comments like "I'm not going to cheer for the colour blue" or "It was sort of a silly thing" are indicative of the perceived maturity differences between the college transfer students and their high school counterparts.

When describing their entry into university many of the college transfer students described a process of identity construction. They already have the label of 'college transfer' which ascribes them with certain characteristics. These identity experiences dealt mainly with age, maturity and the occupation of physical space. For instance, one student discussed her apprehensions about living in university residence when she said, "I just couldn't go into residence with all of these kids that are much younger than me . . . But when you have 18-year-olds now coming in and you're 22 or 23, it's a big difference."

The age differences also set the transfer students apart in the classroom. One student remarked how “it was just the age difference in the classes. Like the whole immaturity, being in a class with 17-year-olds just out of high school.” Another student was more forthright about the maturity discrepancy when he observed that “a lot of the kids are just like the kids I went to high school with. All they do is talk in the back of the room. All they do is giggle at the professors . . .”

As students in the focus group discussions suggested, transfer students faced many ambiguities about where they belong in the university community. One student noted how the transfer experience made him feel uncertain as to which year he was actually registered in. In many ways, he academically felt as if he was a third year university student, yet he was also taking first-year courses: “We’re not really first year students. We’re not third year students. We’re sort of in between.”

A part of knowing whether the student belongs is also the extent to which the student is noticed by university faculty. Many students mentioned the uncertainties about being noticed by their professors. One student feared how she would simply be treated as a number. A female student at this campus even noted her fears about not being noticed by her professors due to the overrepresentation of women in her degree program in particular and at the university campus in general. She felt that male students would get noticed in a sea of anonymous female students. Another student commented on how a home room-like arrangement at college enabled him to build a strong rapport with one instructor. He admitted that such opportunities were harder to find in university.

The social adjustments experienced by the college transfer students are closely connected to the relative autonomy of the learning experience at university. The in-class structure of their work and the relatively lighter workload of college permitted the students to socialize more often outside of the classroom:

[E]very other night we would go out after the class and we had a drink with a group of five people. We stayed together and we studied together . . . Here, I hardly call anybody. I don’t have a social life that I had before. I don’t disconnect myself on purpose from everybody. But I don’t have time to do that because there’s simply no way I can do that.

Similarly, students were surprised by the lack of socializing on what is a smaller-sized university campus. Even at the college where three of these students attended, they would regularly attend performances by bands and comedians during what was called a “common hour”, a time during the middle of an academic day when students would gather to attend entertaining events. One student provided insight into the lack of social participation at university. She noted how college transfer students are already coming from the completion of one post-secondary credential. Being relatively older, more mature and being considerate of the costs of further postsecondary education, some college transfer students deliberately reduce their social activities as they become more committed to the

completion of their university degrees. The student candidly stated that "I don't want to be in school 'til I'm 30 years old. I want to get out of here."

The focus groups uncovered the relative difficulty of participating in extracurricular activities. Among the questionnaire respondents, 25 out of 41 said that they have participated in some extracurricular activities. Clubs, associations and volunteer activities were the most commonly mentioned activities followed by the attendance of guest lectures. However, while 14 of the questionnaire respondents said that their extracurricular involvement has been about the same as in college, 20 students mentioned how their participation has been lower at university. To explain their lesser involvement, students most often mentioned how they have been too busy with their studies, followed by family or personal responsibilities and an unawareness of the extracurricular options available.

Despite these obstacles for some, the college transfer experience was a potentially positive social experience for others. Several of the focus group participants mentioned how their university community involvement enhanced the totality of their university experience. For instance, one student enjoyed operating a karaoke bar which enabled him to meet many people on campus. For these students, the fundamental advice given to future college transfer students was to not fear university community involvement. As one student said, "Participate. Because if you kind of go in with the attitude that you're too mature, then you kind of miss out on the university experience. I do."

### **College transfer credits: Uncertainties, unmet expectations, perceived inequities**

Though the social aspects of the college transfer experience encouraged some lengthy discussions, especially passionate were the discussions about the process through which college credits are transferred to a student's university degree. Not only is this issue academically important for students, but the students also hinted at the implications that transfer credits have for the attraction of certain universities over others. As one student said:

The [University X] ended up giving me a lot more transfer credits than any of the other universities I applied for. I got three transfer credits here and at [University Y], a half credit. So clearly, that was really a big contributing factor to my coming here just because it takes that much more time off the time I have to be here. I'm doing an honors program but I'm trying to do it in half the time."

The logistical and emotional aspects associated with the awarding of transfer credits therefore have important implications for the success and reputation of college and university articulation agreements.

During the discussions, there were students who remarked about having a smooth transfer experience. On the other hand, the results of the focus group discussions revealed the many perplexities

that students experienced when being awarded college transfer credits. As recent media sources indicate, transfers credits can be a thorny aspect of articulation agreements (Dalby, 2005, p.K6). The perspectives of staff on this issue are addressed in a forthcoming paper (McGowan & Gawley, forthcoming), but for students the main issue concerned the inconsistency with which students received a certain number of credits. There were many students who received fewer credits than anticipated. One student described the transfer credit experience as a "fight" while another figuratively said how he "cried" when he saw the lower than expected number of credits he was awarded. Another student described the discrepancy between what the Head of his college program told him about transfer credits and the actual outcome:

I was in the [College X's] program. And I believe he [Head of the program] told me five or something like that . . . and then I only ended up with two. So he told me I was going to get five and only ended up getting two. That's the way it was. I was disappointed about that.

Confusion also emerged about why some students received more transferable credits than others. A student who participated in one program explained how she got five credits whereas students in other programs got a different number of transfer credits. She mentioned that, "I took the [College X's] program too but I got five." The students perceived an inequity in the number of college transfer credits awarded between students.

Subsequently, the students wondered how these credits are selected. Some students were puzzled about why they were not given transferable credits for certain courses, especially when some of their university courses turned out to be virtual duplicates of the college courses they completed. One student asked, "If I wanted to take psych[ology], do I have to take Intro to Psych even though I've taken three psych courses at [College X]?" Another student remarked about the redundancy of certain university courses: "I'm happy but, I mean, this [one course] was just a big review. I would rather take elective courses than take some courses all over again. I mean, it looks great. I get an A and it boosts my average, but it's sort of redundant."

The discussion of college transfer credits is normally discussed in the context of the students' arrivals to university. However, one student's pioneering experience suggests how the transfer of credits from college to university programs has important implications for college transfer students at graduation. This student was exempt from taking her entire first year of university courses due to her having five college credits transferred to her university program. She described this as a problem when she applied to Teachers College when the colleges replied to inform her that she did not have the credit requirements to be accepted into the teachers colleges:

I had two Teachers Colleges e-mail me back saying you don't have enough credits to apply. And what [University X] told me is that they're internally block transferred. So [the transferred credits are] just verbally transferred. It's not on my transcript. It doesn't show that I have four years. So I almost didn't get in. I had to fight with [University

Y] for a week to try to get in. I had to get them to write a personal letter to each Teachers College that I applied to say that she will have a four year honours degree. No one knew they had to do it. I was the first. So they didn't know that this was going to be a problem.

The university staff interviewed for this study discuss the clarity and availability of transfer credit guidelines for students (McGowan & Gawley, forthcoming). When explaining their confusion about college transfer credits however, students mentioned the alleged lack of available information about the credit transfer process. In particular, students noted the inconsistency of the information given between college and university advisors. One student was particularly direct about her frustration when she described an exchange with a counselor at her college about transferring to university. When she asked for help, the student described the counselor as saying "I really don't know what to do. Here's a little pamphlet. See if that helps. Try going onto some websites. If that doesn't help, we'll try and figure something out later.' And I'm like 'Thanks'."

Students mentioned their reliance on other sources of information to acquire some understanding of their situations. As the applicant to teachers college illustrates, some students independently sought out information to clarify their situations. Students also used other transfer students as sources of information about transfer credits. As another student revealed, she even felt it necessary to contact an alumnus from the university to get information regarding her transfer. Consequently, students suggested the need for strengthening the connections between the university and the colleges so that information and procedures are coordinated and that information is consistently available to students. This could include heightening student awareness about existing college-university connectors such as the Ontario College University Transfer Guide.

### **Summary and suggestions for current and future college transfer processes**

In her extensive overview of college-university collaboration in Ontario, Wendy Stanyon (2003) encourages further research into "the contextual, institutional, and leadership factors that influence college university collaboration and what might be done to facilitate the development of collaborative programs between the colleges and universities in Ontario." The growth of articulation agreements between colleges and universities in the province of Ontario provides a unique moment of social and institutional change within which the findings regarding previous articulation cases can be tested across different institutional circumstances and where new understandings can emerge. The political and economic challenges of articulation between two post-secondary systems are always important, but the success of these agreements also depends on the efficiency, effectiveness, quality and accountability of these arrangements as viewed by the students who act and interact within the organizational realities of their postsecondary institutions. Hence, the purpose of this paper has been to examine the academic and social aspects of students who have transferred from community colleges to one Southern Ontario university. The observations and suggestions that

have emerged from this case study come from the comments of students at an institution that is relatively new to the articulation scene, but it would be worthwhile for other college and university administrators to consider the utility of these (as well as their own) student voices when evaluating the development or success of their articulation agreements.

Overall, this study's conclusions are in line with previous college transfer studies. Despite learning and conquering the challenges of college, many transfer students are starting over again academically and socially at university. While adjustments are to be expected, the main concern is the intensity to which these adjustments are impacting the academic performance and social well-being of college transfers. The study finds that the phenomenon of transfer shock exists at this institution. On average, transfer shock occurred for the overwhelming majority of the college student sample regardless of their previous area of college study. Arts and science and business and marketing students experienced less shock than occupation-specific programs. Significant was the observation that transfer students did not recover to their original college GPA levels after two years of university studies which is contrary to the findings of previous work. To account for this, students explained the differences between colleges and universities with respect to workload and course work differences, especially in the differences between the report-style writing and multiple choice exams of college and essay writing in university. Students also mentioned their adjustment from group-based and directed-studies to autonomous and less-directed work while highlighting the differences between professors at colleges and universities.

The social aspects of the transfer college experience suggest the need for unique services and experiences for college transfer students. Age, maturity and experiential differences between college transfers and incoming high school graduates suggest a need for tailored orientation options for incoming transfers as well as formalized and sustained social arrangements throughout the duration of a transfer student's time at university. Particularly stressful for the students was the awarding of college transfer credits.

Students were left confused about transfer credit selection, both with respect to the types and numbers of courses being approved. Students also lacked consistent information between college and university administrators, staff and counselors regarding the transfer process. Information was even perceived to be nonexistent or inaccessible. According to students, the administrative decisions that are made with respect to college transfer credits require clarity and accountability.

Students offered numerous suggestions for developing strong college transfer processes. They suggested that future students take preemptive responsibility for preparing themselves for university. This involves learning what services or workshops are available to them, particularly with respect to writing. Students also suggested that future students approach the university professors. Related to encouraging professor-student interaction is getting to know the expectations of

university course work. By going to the professors, the college transfers suggested that future students can learn what is expected of them. Despite the reservations discussed earlier about becoming socially involved at university, a number of students suggested that future transfer students get involved in their university communities. Some of the students in this study certainly understood the personal responsibilities required in preparing themselves for the transfer from college to university. While suggesting how students could take certain personal initiatives to enhance the quality of the transfer experience, they did not make any references to how the actual transfer process may be changed. A lack of comprehension about the complexities of the transfer process may have contributed to the students' attentiveness to the everyday accomplishment of the transfer rather than to its formal administration.

The success of articulation agreements cannot depend solely on the self-efficacy of students. University and college institutions are not exempt from taking their own responsibilities for providing coordinated, useable, equitable and accountable processes and services for what is becoming a significant group in the postsecondary landscape. As the number articulation agreements increase, it is fundamental that participating institutions can develop and sustain the administrative capacity required for keeping up with growing demand. The dissemination and coordination of information between institutions is vital so that students can easily access and understand the transfer process. Services must be available at the universities and colleges for students who require assistance in understanding several aspects of the process, including credit transfers. The establishment of university-college liaisons at universities and colleges could ensure ongoing connections and understandings between institutions in these areas. Academic counseling services at colleges and universities can also coordinate their efforts to more directly advertise the academic services required of incoming transfer students such as writing, reading, studying or lecture workshops. Though these services are readily available for incoming university students, the relatively autonomous lives of transfer students (i.e., as commuters, as off-campus students, as parents, etc.) impact the ability of transfer students to receive this information compared to incoming high-school graduates who receive this information during orientation in a more collective fashion.

As the number of transfer students increases so does the number of transfer students who are graduating from university. Universities in particular can ensure that students are provided with the information required to make post-graduation decisions. Included here is a assurance by participating institutions that their articulation agreements are formally documenting students with the credits necessary for meeting the qualifications of graduate and professional programs. Arrangements such as explicitly stating the number of credits that have been transferred toward the completion of a university degree on (or along with) a student's final official transcript would help students convey their credit information more clearly for prospective employers, graduate or professional schools.

Finally, the social aspects of the transfer experience could be

addressed with the examination of orientation functions as well as the ability to which transfers can interact with each other throughout their years of university study. Student perspectives are perhaps the most vital for assuring or enhancing the quality and success of articulation agreements. Nevertheless, other viewpoints, including those of the staff and administrators who also experience the complexities of these arrangements, can provide precious insights into the development and operation of our institution's articulation agreements.

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