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Enhancing Transfer Student Success: The Transfer Seminar

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Transfer students arguably constitute the largest and most diverse sub-population of college students today, and it is growing, especially in light of the national economy, rising student loan debt, and significant grant funding being channeled to community colleges, whose students constitute the majority of transfer students (Grites and Duncan, 2012). The issues that confront these students are multi-dimensional, yet often go unnoticed at the receiving institution.¹ No matter where the student attended previously, the new institution will most likely have different policies, academic standards, faculty expectations, advising systems, peer groups, and even vocabulary, leaving the transfer student uninformed, uninvolved, and adrift if they are not addressed. Assumptions made by both the students and the receiving institutions as to how these new students should be acclimated contribute to the lack of a systematic orientation that would enhance a successful transition and contribute to a better higher education experience.

“Transfer shock,” a term introduced by Hills (1965) and since amplified by many others, typically results in a lower GPA in the transfer student’s first term at the new institution and may lead to some transfer students’ early departure from the new institution. Some of the conditions that contribute to this characteristic include simply being overwhelmed by the new environment; fear of loss of credits; policy and procedure barriers such as a lack of transcript reviews prior to admission and/or of low priority in registration; ignorance of faculty expectations, course demands, and their own academic abilities relative to other students; leaving home for the first time; and being part of an invisible peer group—other transfer students are not readily identifiable to new transfer students on the campus.

An attempt to address these characteristics and issues for transfer students has been implemented at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey through the identification of faculty who are especially aware and supportive of the difficult transition for transfer students, and of courses in which only new transfer students are permitted to enroll. The balance of this paper describes the evolution of this concept, both quantitative and qualitative analyses of its success, and suggestions for adaptation and implementation in other public colleges and universities. The programmatic

effort described here reflects several initiatives of the Red Balloon Project, including new models of enrollment management, faculty engagement, curriculum, course design, and instructional design. The “transfer seminar” concept can be adapted to almost any curricular structure at any institution that has a significant transfer student population and/or that seeks to enhance the success of its transfer students. The concept is based on the Freshman Seminar course concept that exists in various formats, mostly in four-year institutions. The unique feature of the program described here is that it uses already existing courses to provide a transitional experience for transfer students that had been absent, perhaps ignored, until a pilot seminar course was attempted. Since the pilot in fall 2003, more than 30 different courses have been designated as “transfer seminars,” and the recent Middle States accreditation and reaffirmation report cites this activity in suggesting that “the institution may wish to consider whether the transfer seminar should be required” of all transfer students (Middle States, 2012).

Evolution of the Transfer Seminar

Richard Stockton College began offering Freshman Seminars in the mid-1980s. These Seminars were required of all new first-time freshmen and those transfer students who transferred fewer than 16 credits, since the latter were subject to the same academic requirements as those who had never attended college. The architects of these Seminars (faculty) did not want to add new courses or requirements to the curriculum, so they chose to use courses that were already developed and being offered through the General Studies curriculum. Individual faculty would teach their regular courses, but certain sections would be limited to 25 of the new students described above. Students would receive full academic credit for the course, since it was a regular course in the curriculum, and it would fulfill a General Studies degree requirement. Within the course various “transitional” aspects (study skills assessment, career planning, engagement in student life, introduction to student support services, etc.) were encouraged, developed, and made available to all, but specifically required of none. The faculty instructors were expected to integrate these aspects as they could and/or as they were appropriate to the course content. Using this model, no new policies, courses, or curricula were required – it was politically and economically free to permit immediate implementation. The same model for the Freshman Seminars exists at Stockton today.

In fall 2003, the lead author was working on a manuscript about transfer students at that time and had an “Aha!” experience – why not try the Freshman Seminar approach with new transfer students? Since Stockton

enrolls approximately 1100 new transfer students each fall and another 350 in the spring, the need for such an effort was obvious. Most of these students transfer from the state’s community colleges, but others represent all other higher education environments. Enrollment could be controlled by not making the course available until new transfer students registered. Thus the “transfer seminar” concept and an implementation strategy were created.

Since the transfer seminars are not required (unlike the Freshman Seminars), individual faculty members are simply recruited by asking them if they would like to offer one of their courses as such. They are encouraged to consider this option in an effort to provide more opportunities for new transfer students to engage in their new institution with their true peers – other transfer students. The assignments that attempt to meet the transitional aspects for these new transfer students include an introduction to the Library databases and other resources, a visit to any office on campus, attendance/participation in three different kinds of co-curricular events or activities, and a meeting with their academic advisor. A written and/or oral presentation is required for all assignments noted above. The range of courses offered and faculty teaching transfer seminars spans all but one of the six academic Schools at Stockton, yielding six to nine courses each fall and four to six courses each spring. These offerings accommodate only a little over 20% of all new transfer students each year, but growth is advocated as much as possible. However, identifying faculty to teach the Freshman Seminars must take priority, since these courses are required of all new freshman students.²

Assessment

Not until very recently was a systematic assessment of the effectiveness of this concept attempted, even though the initial pilot course has been offered by the same instructor every semester since fall 2003. Quantitative data were collected by the instructor via pre-post surveys in each class, and qualitative assessments were made by the instructor through several of the course assignments, a final reflective paper, and the standard course evaluation. In AY 2010-2011 a graduate student and former student assistant at Stockton (and co-author of this article) was in search of a Master’s thesis topic. After several discussions she decided to pursue the analysis of the above-mentioned pre-post survey data as her topic, which was approved by her advisor at Rowan University. Her findings are described here.

In using the pre-post survey data generated and provided by the instructor in *Contemporary American Education*, Farina (2012) addressed the following research questions:

1. What impact did the transfer seminar have on selected transfer students at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey?

2. Is there a significant change in college goals/outcomes based on participating in the transfer seminar at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey?

3. Is there a significant change in use of study strategies based on participating in the transfer seminar at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey?

Farina (2012) was able to use 328 paired surveys completed over eight years of the Contemporary American Education transfer seminar course. The *Transfer Student Survey* (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003) was used as the instrument to gather self-reported information in areas such as academic perceptions and behaviors, social connections, diversity, support systems, finances, and attitudes and concerns about Stockton College, along with various demographics. A paired samples *t* test was performed to compare the means of the two scores from the pre and post surveys to determine whether the two mean scores were significantly different from each other. With respect to her research questions, the following findings were made regarding the outcomes of the students' participation in the transfer seminar.

For research Question 1, significant changes ($p < .001$) related to the overall impact of the transfer seminar from pre-test to post-test were found in the areas of students' ability to finance their education, their high school preparation for college, the ability to schedule courses amid other obligations, their overall adjustment to a new academic environment, and the perceived need for a college degree (see Table 1).

Not surprisingly, one of these changes reflects perhaps the most pervasive concern of college students today – how to finance their education. The rising levels of student debt, coupled with the weak economy and job market, are constantly reported in the media and are alarming. Since most of the students in this study began their college careers at community colleges, the increased costs at the four-year institution perhaps became more acutely obvious during the initial semester.

Similarly, the concern about course availability became apparent, since these students were able to register only after all current students and new freshman students had done so. After having better access to preferred schedules, especially at the community colleges, their initial registration was difficult, as they were not able to balance course, work, and other life schedules as they had been able to do previously. Although these students did gain registration priority as a current student for the next term, they still experienced some difficulty in obtaining “ideal” schedules. Although

they were always able to select courses that were required and/or assuredly met graduation requirements, upper-level courses were offered less frequently than in the community colleges, which left them little choice in time preferences and to which they might have become accustomed at their previous institutions.

One item that reflected more of the academic transitional experience was the perception of their high school preparation for college. This item indicated a decreased confidence in their high school preparation. Although there is no suggestion of inherently less academic rigor, most of these students transferred from a community college environment, where they did not engage themselves as they were expected to do at the new four-year institution. Certainly some difference in academic rigor might have been experienced as well. For example, they faced an additional two-course writing requirement, irrespective of their previous institution or coursework, but most felt they had completed all writing requirements through English Composition I and II at their previous institution. Demands from a more research-oriented faculty might also have had an effect on this item.

Negative change might have been a reflection of the issues described above: these students would opt not to attend college if better jobs were available that did not require a college degree. The mounting debt, the frustration of obtaining a preferred class schedule, and the realization that they might be facing more rigorous academic demands might have been evident in this single item.

By the same token, the acknowledgement that the transfer seminar course was a valuable experience might have been seen in the single statement that asked whether they were concerned about adjusting to a new academic environment. The positive change shown in this global item suggests that the intended outcomes of familiarity with the new institution, understanding of its policies and resources, and a more comfortable learning environment, provided through a more systematic, course-based approach, were achieved.

No significant changes were found for research Question 2, which queried the participants' change in their college goals or outcomes. This suggests that students in the seminar remained committed to their intended majors and potential careers through their first semester in their new academic environment. Of some concern, however, is that this lack of significant change reflects the students' status quo satisfaction with their writing, speaking, technology, thinking, and leadership skills, as well as with their participation in community service and their appreciation of others' attitudes/cultures. This finding could be a reflection of complacency,

overconfidence, lack of motivation, or unrecognized needs. Whatever the reason for this finding, a more intentional assessment of transfer students' goals and expected outcomes for their experience at the new institution should be undertaken.

For research Question 3, significant changes ($p < .001$) were found in several of the students' study strategies (see Table 2). Although surprising, three of the items indicated a decrease in reviewing class notes, reading ahead for class, and putting off studying. If the students were responding only to this transfer seminar class, the responses are reasonably explainable. The class is essentially a discussion class and involves current issues, so few notes are really necessary; there is no assigned textbook, so reading ahead is really not applicable, other than by seeking news items on their own initiative; and there are no tests, so lack of studying is also not applicable per se. If they were responding in the context of their entire class schedule, however, more concern would need to be taken.

The significant finding for the other item related to this research question is puzzling. Students reported that attending class was less important from the pre-test to the post-test. There is an attendance penalty in this class that can affect the final course grade. This penalty is used as an attempt to indicate the importance of class attendance generally, but especially in a discussion class. There are voluntary extra-credit options available that can offset some of the excessive absences, but most students seem not to be concerned and do not use them; or perhaps they are simply so engaged in other commitments that attendance has not reached the level of priority in their busy lives.

The findings in this study substantiate the need for improved transitional experiences for transfer students. The findings also support the hypothesis that a course-based approach to achieving a more successful transition for these students is an optimal way to achieve it. Farina (2012) did acknowledge the limitations in her study in that it included only one course and one instructor, but was nevertheless consistent over the eight-year span. A variety of qualitative assessments have also been used by the instructor since the course was initiated. Written responses have been reviewed each semester from several writing assignments within the course, as well as from the standard course evaluation used in all courses at Stockton. Selected quotes from each source are included in Appendix 1 to reflect both the academic content of the course and the transitional benefits for transfer students that are integrated within it.

These testimonies validate the need, purpose, and effectiveness of such an approach to improve the smooth and effective transition of transfer students to a new institution. Without a planned, targeted, and sustained

approach, transfer students will likely be left to wander, succumb to their perceived isolation, and be susceptible to assumed and/or potentially erroneous information. The transfer seminars at Stockton provide a mode of delivery – any existing credit-bearing course in the regular curriculum – that enables students to be engaged in their transition through a classroom environment with all the same expectations and responsibilities for any course in the curriculum.

One unplanned additional outcome of this specific transfer seminar course (Contemporary American Education) is that Stockton learns more about itself. Through the writing assignments, guest speakers, and daily class discussions, students provide insights and experiences that are considered for a variety of improvements. Such areas as Orientation, Residential Life, Financial Aid, and the Wellness Center have all benefitted and modified small aspects of their operations as a result of feedback in the course. Informal judgments have been made regarding the academic advising and registration processes. In fact, several faculty development efforts have been generated resulting from informal student observations and assessments received through the class.

Observations and Suggestions

More institutions have recently recognized the value of the transfer seminar concept. For example, transfer seminar courses are in place at Illinois State University, Rutgers University, SUNY-Stony Brook, and the University of Florida College of Business to name a few; these courses vary in being required or voluntary and for-credit (variable) or not. Pima Community College (AZ) also offers a one-credit voluntary course for those students preparing to attend the University of Arizona. None of these courses, however, appears to use the structure described above, that is, to use existing courses exclusively for new transfer students.

The transfer seminar concept at Stockton was developed, has evolved and grown, and is sustained on a no-cost basis. Faculty and staff are recruited and volunteer to designate one of their courses/sections as such a seminar that will have only new transfer students enrolled in it. Adjunct faculty are not used, since a significant characteristic of the course is to be able to identify, recommend, and/or provide additional resources for these students, and regular full-time faculty and/or staff are much more familiar with these resources. Online courses are not used, since a goal of the seminar concept is to engage these students in the life of the college community, both academically and socially.

Faculty who agree to designate their course as a transfer seminar are not required to alter their course, but are certainly encouraged to use any

of the “transitional” components that are recommended for the Freshman Seminars as noted above. The fact that the enrolled students are all new transfers generates a sense of relief and camaraderie that facilitates inquiries about their needs and concerns as transfer students and enables them to engage in the class more readily. The class effectively becomes a type of learning community on its own.

The concept of the transfer seminar originated in courses that are in the Stockton General Studies curriculum, as are all the Freshman Seminars. But it quickly became apparent that courses in the major could also be used to accomplish the same goals. Several academic programs have recognized the value in having such a course for their new transfer students in order to introduce them to the expectations, rigors, requirements, and resources of the major degree program and now regularly designate one of the courses in the major as such each semester. The goal is to have all degree programs follow this pattern.

The concept can be implemented on a more limited basis, however, just as Stockton’s approach did in the beginning. Since all the designated courses currently exist, there is no course approval process required. The process to initiate such a designated course is simple – just do it. That is, any college, school, department, or individual can designate a course to be reserved exclusively for the enrollment of new transfer students. Of course the appropriate approval from the Dean or Chair would be required. Otherwise, the only necessary criterion is the commitment to try it.

The assessments described above validate the importance and effectiveness of such an approach. This effort supports the recruitment, engagement, student success, retention, and graduation of transfer students, all of which appear to be much more critical in the future of higher education. The “completion agenda” (Applegate, 2011; White House, 2009) and the numerous efforts to achieve it clearly suggest that the graduation of transfer students will be a significant factor in reaching the stated goals of both President Obama and the Lumina Foundation. Insuring such achievements may well rest with a more effective and sustained transition for all transfer students in the future.

Fulfilling the Red Balloon Project Initiatives

The unique transfer seminar concept incorporates a number of the models targeted by the Red Balloon Project. It is readily adaptable to any institution, curriculum, or course – at no cost – and it addresses a significant student population that is projected to become even larger and more important to the success of American higher education in the coming decades.

Specifically, the transfer seminar concept uses a slightly new *model for enrollment management* in that such courses provide a pool of available courses for each new transfer cohort, and a more controlled means of tracking transfer students. These courses also provide a means of identifying early warning signs for those transfer students who might experience adjustment issues, especially those who move vertically from the community college to the four-year public college or university.

There are minor changes in the *models for faculty, for course design, and for instructional design* in that faculty may need to integrate transitional activities into their syllabi, but without disrupting or minimizing any of the content taught in the course. Project-based learning and various forms of student engagement, both within and outside the classroom, will need to be developed in order to maximize the transfer students’ smooth transition over the length of a full academic term, which will hopefully carry its effects through to graduation.

There could be an impact on the *model for curriculum* and course planning if the concept is found to be successful and perhaps made a requirement for all transfer students, whether institutionally or on the academic program level. Again, the advantage with the approach advocated here is that no curricular changes are required or need widespread approvals. The implementation can be done on a micro level without affecting other programs or requirements.

The transfer seminar concept is one that deserves attention, irrespective of the delivery format. Transfer students are at risk of leaving without completing a degree, and the classroom format is the best way to provide a systematic introduction and sustained transition into a new institution.

Table 1
Paired Samples t-test Results for Transfer Seminar Impact

	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 3: I am concerned about my ability to finance my college education.	-.340	1.069	.059	-.457	-.224	-5.752	325	.000
Pair 4: My high school prepared me well for college.	.219	.854	.047	.126	.312	4.620	323	.000
Pair 5: I am concerned with creating a course schedule that meets my other obligations.	-.235	1.095	.061	-.355	-.116	-3.889	326	.000
Pair 8: If better jobs were available that did not require a B.A. degree, I would not go to college.	-.358	1.035	.057	-.470	-.245	-6.252	326	.000
Pair 9: I am concerned about adjusting to a new academic environment.	.272	1.179	.065	.144	.400	4.176	326	.000

Table 2
Paired Samples t-test for Student Study Strategies

	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 36: At present, how often do you revise/review/update class notes?	.268	.906	.050	.170	.367	5.363	327	.000
Pair 37: At present, how often do you prepare for class by reading ahead?	.277	.928	.051	.177	.378	5.413	327	.000
Pair 38: At present, how often do you put off study?	-.271	.862	.048	-.365	-.178	-5.702	327	.000
Pair 42: At present, how often do you attend class?	.246	.624	.035	.178	.314	7.107	324	.000

Appendix: Written Student Comments

From Writing Assignments

- “I came to Stockton thinking I was going to sit in class, learn, and leave, just as I did at OCC. I never thought I would actually become involved in school. Recently I attended a social work conference, showed up for a Psychology program spring meeting, and had a blast at the fashion show.”
- “Over the weeks this group stopped being just classmates and started to become friends. . . . I believe that this is what the group project is about not just researching a topic, but to really get to know the members of your group, so as a transfer student you don’t have to feel so alone at Stockton.”
- “As a student with a job and responsibilities outside the classroom, I might not have had a chance to explore the campus the way that I did this semester had I not had the extra push from this class. Sometimes students just do not know where to start.”

From Reflective Papers

- “When I signed up for this class I thought it was just going to be another class. However, this class was not that at all and I learned much more than I expected.”
- “One surprise during the semester was actually this class. I didn’t know it was designed to be more informative than an actual class on education in society. I enjoyed the surprise. This class gave me the chance to branch out, by visiting areas and attending events that most likely I otherwise wouldn’t have gone to on my own.”
- “I am glad that there was a course just for transfer students like myself because my first semester at Stockton was a bit overwhelming since I was new. This class offered a comfort zone where I felt relieved to be with other students who were in the same situation as I was.”
- “The class made my transition to Stockton easier because I was in a class with all transfer students. I met many people and we formed a bond, because we were new to the campus. This experience was a positive one and I am going to miss not having a class like this next semester.”
- “I compare my first semester at Stockton to a roller coaster ride. It began with anticipation followed by fear, then a multitude of highs and lows, twists and turns, a couple of loops thrown in for good measure, and now that it comes to an end – I can’t wait to get on this ride again. I no longer feel the need to transfer [again] or even drop out all together.”

From Course Evaluations

- “I felt intimidated in all my other classes.”
- “Before this class, I never knew that I am expected to vote on the school budget.”
- “It [the course] almost forces you to get involved in your education.”
- “This was the first time I’ve ever truly had to take care of myself, and juggle work, bills, rent, school, and my social life.”
- “This was definitely the most interesting and intriguing class I have ever taken in college...and it was at 8:30 in the morning!”

Endnotes

¹ Borst, Jones, & Cohen (2012) described six primary patterns through which students transfer: 1) Vertical – from 2-year to 4-year institution; 2) Transfer Up – directly from high school through dual credit/enrollment options; 3) Lateral – from 2-year or 4-year institution to the same type; 4) Swirling – multiple transfers between 2-year and 4-year institutions, with no specific directionality; 5) Reverse – from 4-year to 2-year institution; 6) Thwarted – from any institution to one that does not share articulation standards. These varieties of types of students, who transfer with varying numbers of credits and myriads of courses into a wide array of academic majors, present multiple conditions that make the transition to a new institution difficult to manage systematically. Although some progress seems to be occurring in this realm (Grites & Duncan, 2012), most institutions have not acknowledged the need for such a systematic transitional experience for this group of students, who are, in fact, first-year students at a new institution. In contrast, most of these same institutions have developed elaborate and costly transitional experiences for their first-year (freshman) students from the high school learning environment, as evidenced in the substantial literature and programming that has been produced by the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/>).

² To date other courses have included: Introduction to Music; Legal/Social/Ethical Environment of Business; Health Psychology; Perceptions and Perspectives; Cyberethics/Cyberculture; The Global Community; Memoirs of Mental Illness; World Perspectives on Health; Film Rhetoric; Research Design and Methods in Criminal Justice; Argument and Persuasion (writing); Writing in the Movies; History of Science; Documentary: Making Art of Facts; Migration and Immigration; Developmental Psychology: Childhood and Adolescence; Problems in Ancient History; The Nature of Cold; Families, Schools, and Communities; History of Medicine; Ancient Israel; Identity, Culture, and Imagination; Media, Public Perception, & Genocide; Conflict and Change in India; Medieval Cultural Encounters;

Social Research Methods; Stockton and Higher Education; Writing in the Workplace; 1930s America; and Financial Accounting.

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