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The Theory and Reality of Transfer Choice
Current Research, Enrollment Management
NISTS Sponsored Research Project

Within a six-year period of time, almost 40% of college students transfer at least once, yet little is known about how students select their transfer institutions. In this session, researchers will present the results of four focus groups and follow-up individual interviews conducted with transfer students at two four-year institutions in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and two Chicago-area universities. Results show transfer is both simple and complex, often influenced by non-academic factors.

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The Theory and Reality of Transfer Choice

Barbara Tobolowsky and Trudy Bers
NISTS, February 8, 2018



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for funding this study.

Rationale for the Study

- ▶ Majority of college students transfer
- ▶ Transfer students face challenges (e.g., loss of credits, increased costs, increased time to degree, less likely to graduate)
- ▶ Most past research focused on student experiences and challenges
- ▶ Little research on transfer school choice

This study explores transfer students' college choice processes and factors affecting choice of transfer school(s).



Literature Review

- ▶ Understanding transfer - patterns, student experiences, facilitating mobility
- ▶ College choice models
 - Hossler & Gallagher(1987) - 3 stages: predisposition, search, choice
 - Perna (2006) - layers of influence - student's background (cost/benefit analysis) and community, higher education context, policy issues

- ▶ Why students choose four-year institutions—
“academic reputation,” “graduates get good jobs,” and institutional size (Eagan et al., 2016)
- ▶ Why students choose community colleges—
Credit transferability, program availability, location, cost, available facilities and technology, and suggestions from family and friends (Barreno & Traut, 2012)

Research Questions

- ▶ When, why, and how do transfer students select their postsecondary institutions?
- ▶ How do students who have transferred more than once describe their decision-making process? Has it changed from their initial college choice decision?

Method

- ▶ Selected universities with large number of transfer students, in metropolitan areas where students have many choices
- ▶ Four focus groups with students from two Dallas-Ft. Worth and two Chicago-area four-year institutions (N=41)
- ▶ Individual interviews with four students (one from each campus) who have transferred more than once

- ▶ Relied on universities to make initial contact with eligible focus group participants
- ▶ Researchers contacted those eligible for follow-up interviews



Criteria for Inclusion

- ▶ Between 18-26 years of age
- ▶ Enrolled in Fall 2016 with transfer occurring no earlier than Fall 2015
- ▶ Transferred with at least 30 credits



Analysis

- ▶ Interview audio recordings transcribed by independent company.
- ▶ Transcripts reviewed and corrected by researcher who conducted that interview.
- ▶ Both researchers coded all interviews. No codes were a priori.
- ▶ Trustworthiness - Discussed codes to serve as “reliability check.” Developed agreed-upon codes through the discussion.

Findings

▶ Initial Intention

- ❑ Planned route
- ❑ Save money
- ❑ No lost credits if planned ahead and stayed with major
- ❑ Limited search efforts when attended community college first

What factors do you think affected the choice of a transfer institution?



▶ Choosing Transfer

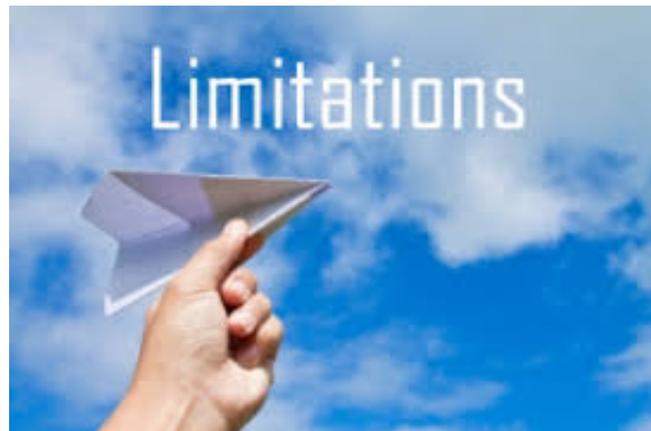
- ❑ Unplanned and often abrupt route, especially for those who began at 4-year school
- ❑ Precipitating issues: cost, academics (e.g., program) and/or personal issues
- ❑ Transfer effects: cost, lost credits, less involvement in institution (degree is all that matters)

- ▶ Choosing Transfer Institutions
 - ❑ Limited search efforts
 - ❑ Considerations: course availability, reputation, cost, proximity to family and friends, credit transferability



Limitations

This study reflects the views of only a small group of transfer students on four campuses. Other transfer students on these campuses and at other institutions may have different experiences.



Implications

- ▶ For research:
 - ❑ Quantitative Research - large-scale study of college choice factors for transfer students.
 - ❑ Qualitative Research - follow-up studies focused exclusively on students who transferred more than one time.

► For practice:

- ❑ Institutional websites should provide easily accessible information for (potential) transfer students.
- ❑ Connect with advisors and counselors at all levels, including high schools, to educate them about transfer.
- ❑ Keep potential students/families in the loop.



- ❑ Assist with credit transferability information, preferably prior to transfer.
- ❑ Identify and assist students whose personal circumstances affect academic performances.



Conclusion

Transfer students...

- ▶ often make sudden college choice decisions.
- ▶ do not always follow linear paths from community college to baccalaureate institution.
- ▶ rely more on family, friends, and social media than institutional or other “official” information sources.
- ▶ may struggle because of uninformed decisions - cost, lost credits, extended time to degree.

Questions and Discussion

