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# Assessing Students' Transition from Community College to a Four-Year Institution.

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## **Disciplines**

Community College Leadership | Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Higher Education

## **Comments**

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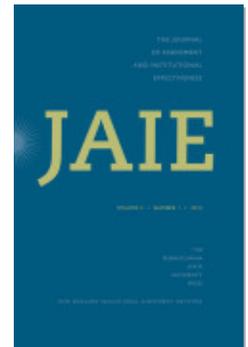
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## Assessing Students' Transition from Community College to a Four-Year Institution

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### ABSTRACT

*Many four-year institutions are experiencing increasing enrollment of students transferring from two-year institutions. While many institutions collect quantitative data that illustrate enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of transfer students, little is known about the transfer-student transition experience. For this qualitative assessment, 22 traditional-age students who transferred from a two-year community college to a four-year institution were interviewed. Specifically, this assessment looked at reasons why students first enrolled at the community college, the mechanics of the transfer process, and academic and social integration. Student responses provide insight into how institutions can better support the transition and success of transfer students*

The recent report, "Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Pre-Degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions," by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) and Project for Academic Success (2012), highlights the complex reality of college student enrollment patterns. About one-third of college students have transferred institutions at least once with transfer from two-year public institutions to four-year institutions being most prevalent. In the most recent data from the National Center of Education Statistics (2011), the highest percentage (40%) of college students begin at

two-year institutions and of these students two-thirds intend to pursue a bachelor's degree (NCES 2008). In other words, two-year institutions serve as a critical gateway into college for a significant proportion of college-going students but frequently are not the final degree destination. Although students may have been successful adjusting to and navigating their two-year institutions, research on "transfer shock" (Laanan 1996) suggests that transitioning from one institution to another can be difficult. Transfer students may struggle to do well academically or socially and may be at risk of dropping out (Davies and Casey 1999; Flaga 2006; Townsend and Wilson 2006).

These transfer patterns and the potential difficulties of students successfully transitioning from a two-year institution have consequences for four-year institutions concerned about the academic success of their students. An increase in transfer students, coupled with public pressure to improve retention and graduation rates, calls four-year institutions to more closely examine the transfer-student experience.

These national trends mirror the current situation at Iowa State University. The number of transfer students at the university has increased by 22% in the past five years (Board of Regents State of Iowa, 2011), but the retention rates and graduation rates of transfer students are also lower than their peers who began at Iowa State University (Iowa State University 2012). As Iowa State works to improve institution-wide retention and graduation rates, it is important that the transition process for transfer students is more clearly understood. While the university has quantitative data illustrating transfer-student demographics, choice of major, graduation rates, and so on, little is known about the lived experience of students transferring here. Therefore, using qualitative research methods, this assessment sought to more closely examine the experience of such students.

## **Context**

Iowa State University is a public land-grant institution located in central Iowa with 24,343 undergraduates enrolled in over 100 undergraduate majors, and approximately 5,544 students enrolled in graduate programs or the veterinary school (Iowa State University 2012).

In the fall of 2011, 1,781 of Iowa State's 6,829 new students were transfer students. Twenty-six percent or about one in four students had transferred to Iowa State University from another institution. Of these transfer

students, 1,050 (59%) came from one of 15 Iowa community colleges (Iowa State University 2012).

In 2005 Iowa State University began the Admissions Partnership Program (APP), which established articulation agreements between the community colleges and the university. The primary purpose of the program was to provide a more seamless transition process between the two institutions. Any community college student who had graduated from high school and was taking coursework leading to transfer was eligible for the program. Students in the program were assigned an academic advisor at both institutions, were provided degree audit information for their intended degree at ISU, and were guaranteed admission to Iowa State if requirements were met. In addition, participants could choose to live on Iowa State's campus and participate in Iowa State activities, even as community college students.

To begin to understand the transfer-student process, this assessment focused on students who transferred to ISU from one Iowa community college, subsequently referred to in this document as ICC. Since community colleges in Iowa differ in terms of student demographics, structure, geography, and resources, this initial assessment intentionally narrowed its focus to one community college in order to minimize the potential impact of such extraneous factors.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this assessment was to collect data on the transfer process as told by students transferring to Iowa State University from ICC. Using qualitative methods, the study focused on three areas: (1) the reasons why students chose to attend ICC; (2) the mechanics of the transfer process; and (3) the academic and social adjustment process of transfer students.

In this assessment, the mechanics of transfer referred to the formal process of transfer and included timing of the application process, academic advising, transfer of credits, and orientation programs (Townsend 2008). Such components, which included solid articulation agreements, transfer-specific orientation programs, and accessible and user-friendly resources, are critical for a smooth transition into the university (Flaga 2006; Townsend and Wilson 2006).

Adjustment of transfer students refers to the academic and social integration of the student into his/her new institution (Townsend 2008). As

Tinto's (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model predicts, both academic and social integration are critical for students. While there is extensive literature on "transfer shock" or the decrease in students' overall GPA when changing institutions, there is less research on the effective practices to reduce transfer shock, the needs of transfer students, or the underlying characteristics of successful inter-institutional partnerships (Flaga 2006; Laanan 1996; Mattis and Sislin 2005). The intent of this assessment, therefore, was to gather information that could be used to enhance the transfer student process and ultimately improve the retention and academic success of students.

Much of the existing literature on transfer students utilizes quantitative or survey data, and other research methodologies, including more qualitative data, are needed to fully understand the experiences of community college students (Davies and Casey 1999; Laanan 1996; Townsend 1995; Wolgemuth, Kees, and Safarik 2003). Similarly, Iowa State University collects a significant amount of quantitative data regarding transfer students (e.g., retention rates and GPA) but lacks data that more thoroughly examine the experiences of transfer students that, in turn, may impact the retention rates and GPA. This assessment sought to fill this gap.

This study was informed by other research on transfer students but was targeted at the transfer process from one specific institution to another. Although more narrow, we believe that such an approach can be adapted for other institutions and the findings can add insights into the broader discussions regarding the transfer student experience.

## Methods

A phenomenological approach was the methodological framework for this study. *Phenomenology* is defined as "the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on an assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated" (Marshall and Rossman 1999, 112). Phenomenological research is a "strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of the human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants." This type of research describes both people's experiences themselves and their thoughts about those experiences (Creswell 2005). The phenomenon in this case is the experience of the students who transferred from ICC to Iowa State University.

## **Participants**

This assessment focused on students who transferred from ICC to Iowa State University in the fall semester of 2011. Comprehensive selection strategies (LeCompte and Preissle 1993) were used, as all students who transferred from ICC to Iowa State University ( $N = 410$ ) were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study. Over 60 students responded to the initial request and of these, 29 students were selected based on their availability for an interview. Among these participants, 22 were traditional-aged students between the ages of 19 and 21; 7 were adult students ranging from their mid-20s to late 50s. Given time and space limitations, this article will focus on the results of the interviews with the traditional-aged students. Of the 22 participants, 11 were male and 11 were female. Seven participated in the Admission Partnership Program, 2 were students of color, 1 suffered from a visible disability, and 11 lived on campus or in a fraternity or sorority. The participants represented all six Iowa State University undergraduate colleges.

## **Data Collection**

Approval from Iowa State's Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to data collection. Individual interviews were conducted in February 2012, one semester after the students had transferred to the university. The intent of this study was to capture student reactions to the transfer process. Interviewing students in their second semester allowed them the time to reflect on their experience while still close enough to the move itself to remember the experience. Interviews were semi-structured; there was a list of prescribed questions that allowed for follow-up questions by the interviewers. All sessions were held on campus in a central location and lasted approximately 40 minutes. They were audiotaped, transcribed, and supplemented by fieldnotes if gaps existed.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to make sense of the data, a summary profile and file that included fieldnotes, a draft of the transcription, and any correspondence was created for each participant. Using Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach, the data were analyzed by condensing transcriptions into summaries of participant experiences. Once completed, the summaries were then

coded and general categories developed as themes relevant to the project emerged. In order to ensure trustworthiness, transcripts were shared with participants and feedback on the initial analysis was requested. Only one participant responded with clarification to a response. Finally, researchers not involved with the interviews or initial analyses were consulted to cross-check the themes generated as a form of researcher triangulation (Creswell 2005; Esterberg 2002).

## Findings

Findings were based on the 22 participant interviews and were organized around the three focus areas: (1) reasons why students began at ICC and subsequently enrolled at Iowa State University; (2) the mechanics of the transfer process; and (3) the academic and social adjustment process of transfer students.

### ***Reasons Why Students Began at ICC***

Participants cited one or more of the following reasons for choosing to attend a community college prior to attending Iowa State: ambiguous future goals, lack of academic preparation, the desire to save money, and hesitance to leave home.

As Maddie shared:

It was always on my radar to do a four-year degree. That was the plan I set with my parents: 2 years at ICC and 2 or more years at a four-year school. Iowa State was kind of always my plan anyway. Before I went to ICC, I planned to go to Iowa State. Then I looked at [two other institutions] while I was at ICC also, and I applied to all three. I chose Iowa State because I liked the campus best.

John shared similar reasons for attending ICC:

It really was the most reasonable choice at the time. It was in my hometown; it was really cheap. I thought it would be easier for me to transition into a community college. It was just that norm of going to a community college before going to a university.

Samuel indicated that he felt attending ICC would make the transition easier because he was the first in his family to attend a four-year institution. Michael shared:

I graduated and I detassled all summer. I met some kids from a neighboring town. They were going to ICC. I don't really need to save money in my financial situation, but I decided I might as well. . . . I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I wanted to take it slow at first.

Many of the participants were like Michael and John and had planned all along to attend Iowa State. To them, ICC represented one step on the journey to their bachelor's degree. As Colin, an agriculture student, recalled:

Ever since I was a kid I knew I wanted to come here [Iowa State]. When I was a freshman in high school I was in FFA and we had a contest up here so we would come up here and would go into Kildee, and I saw the big mural on the wall and that is when I fell in love with the Iowa State campus.

Others, like Spencer, had not considered Iowa State as an option until enrolled in ICC:

Right after high school I attended summer class at ICC to get a head start. At the time I wasn't sure what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go. I didn't have ISU in mind at the beginning.

Many of the traditional-aged transfer participants were still exploring majors and, in the midst of figuring out what major to pursue, decided that Iowa State University offered the curriculum they needed to achieve their degree.

Of those using the community college as a pathway to Iowa State University, only two participants were initially denied admission to the university and used the community college to gain access. All except for two participants in this group had lived at home while attending ICC, and many had attended multiple campuses. All participants had worked 25 hours or more a week and attended ICC full-time. Only two had participated in athletics or student organizations while attending ICC, and the majority of them were still connected through their high school networks.

## ***The Mechanics of Transferring***

This section will focus on the findings on the mechanics of the transfer process for traditional-aged students. The mechanics of the transfer process include the application process, the credit transfer process, and resources (online, academic advising) participants used in their transfer process.

### *Timing of the Transfer Process*

Regardless of whether or not participants knew they would attend Iowa State University or another four-year institution, traditional-aged transfer students typically waited until their last semester before the transition to Iowa State was to occur to apply or connect with academic advisers at either ICC or Iowa State. As Jason states:

It was sort of always in the back of my mind that I would eventually transfer to a university and transfer to get a bachelor's and possibly a master degree, but I didn't seriously start looking and applying until the last semester there [ICC].

Jane described a similar approach:

I did get connected to an adviser but I didn't use [the adviser] as much as I should have . . . you know. . . . Towards the end of my second semester I did because I was coming to school.

Such responses coincide with the application pattern reported from the Office of Admissions. Unlike direct-from-high-school students who primarily apply in the fall semester before their enrollment, the majority of transfers start the process in the spring semester before enrollment in the fall.

### *Transfer of Credits*

The transfer of credits from ICC to Iowa State University was a significant concern for participants. Despite access to online resources and the availability of academic advisers, students were anxious to know how their ICC courses would be incorporated into their degree program at Iowa State University. As Olivia commented:

It was making me kind of nervous because I didn't know what I wanted [to major in]. So by getting my Associate's degree I kind of

left it [the decision to choose a major]. I was getting my stuff done in my courses but I wasn't being very specific.

While expressing general satisfaction when asked if there were any surprises along the way, a few students experienced a course or two that would not transfer. Michael regretted a “genetics class that didn't count for anything. If I'd known that it wasn't going to count for anything . . . it was a really hard class.”

The traditional-aged participants were generally satisfied with how their credits transferred, and pointed mostly to how their change of major after their first semester at Iowa State University was what put them behind, not their time at ICC. This finding argues for the continued use of academic advisers at both institutions to assist students in choosing classes that will apply to their Iowa State degree program. However, there may be courses needed for a degree program at ICC that may not fit neatly into Iowa State's requirements, or students may choose to change their major after they enroll at Iowa State. This may be unavoidable as ICC students often mentioned that they went to ICC in the first place because they lacked a clear idea of a major and then, when they picked a major at Iowa State, they were left to complete only classes specifically related for their major.

All of [my credits] went pretty much to electives—I was kind of surprised about that. I won't take any electives if I want to graduate on time. I can't take any and that is one of the things I really regret. I don't get to do all the fun stuff offered at Iowa State.

### *Resources*

Online resources, academic advisers, ICC faculty, and admissions counselors were the most frequently mentioned resources that students used in their transfer process. Almost all of the participants accessed information online to help them navigate the transfer process. Most commonly accessed were the application checklist, college or departmental transfer plans, and the TRANSIT system, a system that allowed students to see how their ICC credits would transfer to Iowa State. Some students, like Colin, used online resources almost exclusively: “I am pretty sure that I was assigned an adviser but I have no idea who. . . . I would check in over and over online.” Others would reach out to academic advisers or admissions counselors to verify the information they found online.

### *Reliance on Family and Peers*

Participants relied on family and peers for advice regarding many of the decisions they made throughout the transfer process. Although Iowa State offers several programs to acquaint transfer students to campus (e.g., campus visit days), few students participated in any of these formal programs. Instead, they tended to rely on a family member or a friend to show them around campus and answer their questions. This was a resource that was used in every aspect of the transfer process, from the application to ICC into their second semester at Iowa State University. The participants in this study relied on such advice in lieu of talking to academic advisers at either institution. How they connected and got involved at both institutions was in large part due to what an older sibling or friend had experienced as a student at Iowa State.

### ***The Process of Adjustment***

Participants reported that they had expected Iowa State to be different from ICC. They had difficulty in articulating just how it would be different, expecting only that it would be “harder.” They commented on the physical differences—in both size of campus and number of students—and their anxiety over large classes. Spencer, who had chosen to enroll first at the community college because of its proximity to home, recalled:

It went smoother than I thought it would. One of my biggest fears was the big lecture hall. What if I can't get a seat in the front of the lecture hall and I can't copy down notes fast enough?

### *Academic Adjustment*

Participants reported that they had expected the academic workload to be more rigorous and consistently discovered that, except for a few courses at ICC, Iowa State University classes were indeed more challenging. Samuel, who transferred into an engineering program, enjoyed the challenge:

I found it more challenging here but in a good way. . . . I wasn't trying to pass my classes [at ICC] and I just got by. But I like the difficulty around here because I feel like I am learning.

Survey respondents reported experiencing a drop in their GPA during their first semester at Iowa State. Students indicated a myriad of reasons

for the drop in GPA: work, credit load, and not attending class. Ryan, who transferred after just one year at ICC, shared:

At ICC I could slack off and stay ahead—those high school things coming back to me—but at Iowa State I just couldn't do it. So I have a whole new attitude towards it. Going to class more—it helps a lot.

One student, Spencer, had a better GPA at Iowa State University but was taking a lighter class load:

Some of my [grades] have raised. I have a better GPA here. Where before at ICC I would take 16 credits and have no problem. Over here I have to do a smaller class load—maybe 12 credits.

### *Social Adjustment*

Participants had anticipated struggling with academics when transferring but seemed unprepared for the stress that the change would bring to them socially. While succeeding academically was important to students and played a substantial role in their integration, only those who lived on campus, participated in a sorority or fraternity, or had a long-term connection with faculty reported a sense of belonging to the institution. Transfers who did not have one of these connections reported feeling “isolated” or “lost,” did not exhibit a sense of belonging to the university, and were generally less satisfied with their experience.

An example of this difference can be seen in Jason and George. Jason, who lived off campus after having difficulty finding campus housing, shared:

I didn't think it would be this hard to adjust. I just expected it to come to me. I didn't have much mental preparation for that I guess. I go home on the weekends because I don't really have anyone to hang out with here in Ames. I don't have any friends here.

George, an agriculture student who joined a fraternity on the recommendation of a high school friend, indicated:

I adapted really well and I have a lot of people that can help me if I have questions. Most of the guys I live with are in the same type of degree.

[My fraternity] has helped a lot with getting involved, transition, and doing homework.

Another Liberal Arts and Sciences student who joined campus organizations shared:

I just love the extracurricular activities. College is amazing. If I hadn't come here I would have missed it and it has been a life-changing experience. I really have to thank Iowa State University for that. It is so diverse but yet everyone is so connected and that is one of the things I love about this place and the [major] program.

Those participants who were living on campus and became involved in campus life expressed much greater satisfaction with their college experience. However, the challenge of balancing additional social commitments with academic expectations proved difficult for some students. John, who joined a fraternity and lived in the residence halls, shared:

[My GPA] went down a little bit but I think it was more factors with ICC. You just had to balance sleep and work [at ICC], and here it is the social factors as well and you have to balance those as well.

Those who lived off-campus mentioned their lack of connection to the larger campus and difficulty in meeting new people. Michael, who chose to live off-campus, revealed, "I still hang out with friends from before [high school]. It's harder to meet people. Next year I need to join clubs. Next year I have a lot to figure out. It has been hard." Maddie reported that she had been interested in living on campus but chose not to since she thought it might be more expensive and so chose to live with some of her sister's friends from home:

I feel like it [living on campus] is important though because you meet all of those people. Because in an apartment, it can get lonely. I felt pretty isolated coming in. I didn't really meet many people by living off-campus.

This sense of isolation was prevalent, especially among the female participants as only one of them had joined a sorority and few had elected to

live on campus. Jennifer, who had chosen to live on campus, found it easy to make friends. Paired with another transfer student, she explained:

I get along with my roommate really well. . . . People struggle that first semester, so it was nice to have each other to help out. It made it easier to talk to people and make friends with people in my major. It was nice to have a support system that is like in-house.

When asked if they had considered joining a club or student organization, several participants shared that they had signed up at ClubFest, but no one from the organization ever responded. Another participant said she had attended a few meetings of her departmental organization but “no one talked to me and I ended up feeling pretty awkward.” Others, in hindsight, recognized that they should have made more of an effort to get involved. Alexandria reflects this perspective: “if I would have known how to get involved right away and if I would have made a decision faster to come here. It was kind of my own fault.” And Jane shared, “Probably if I had been more motivated; I should have gone out and gotten more involved in things.” Nevertheless, students shared the sentiment that getting involved in campus activities outside of class can aid significantly in the successful transition to Iowa State University.

## **Discussion**

The results of this assessment provide useful information regarding the transition process for transfer students. Although focused on only one group of transfers, the information gleaned from participants can be used to improve the experience for the broader transfer student population.

### ***Reasons for Attending a Community College***

Similar to national trends (NCES 2008), the assumption that community college is the choice for students who are not eligible to attend a four-year institution is no longer valid. While this assumption applies to a few students, the majority chose the community college for other reasons: a pathway to discover their interests, following what their friends had done, and a cheaper, less academically rigorous alternative that could help to bridge

the path between high school and a four-year institution. Some students had intended on transferring to Iowa State when they enrolled at the community college, but others had considered this option only after enrolling at ICC.

### ***Mechanics of the Transfer Process***

Best practices on how institutions can facilitate the transition of transfer students include strong articulation agreements, accessible resources to examine transfer credits, and access to advisers (Handel 2007; Townsend, 2008). Student responses at Iowa State verify the need for such resources. The primary concern of transfer students was the efficiency with which their credits would transfer and apply to degree requirements at the four-year institution. Thus, institutions that provide information on degree programs, requirements, and how credits will transfer make it more likely that students will choose to transfer.

### ***The Adjustment of Transfer Students***

Transfer students had expected that enrolling at Iowa State would be an adjustment. Many had anticipated that the academic rigor at Iowa State would be more difficult than the community college. Students' experiences mirrored their expectation—they found the four-year institution more challenging than the community college. However, students also were able to articulate what they needed to do differently in order to be more successful academically and felt it was possible to make these adjustments.

The lack of social integration was perhaps the biggest surprise for transfers. Students who chose to live on-campus, join a fraternity or sorority, or get involved in clubs and organizations felt connected to the institution and expressed a greater satisfaction and easier transition to Iowa State. These results concur with Gard, Paton, and Gosselin's (2012) study, which also found that difficulties fitting in socially had a negative impact on transfer students' transition. Those who chose to live off-campus or did not get involved in out-of-class activities struggled with making connections. Students mentioned that they had not considered the advantages of being engaged socially prior to transferring to the four-year institution but, in retrospect, regretted not making the choice to get more involved.

## **Recommendations**

This assessment sought to better understand the transfer process, specifically for students transferring from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, with the intent of gaining information that could be used to enhance the process. The data gathered from this exploration highlighted three themes related to improving the transfer transition.

### ***Importance of Online Information***

The majority of students are self-navigating the transfer process. Thus, the importance of online information, especially as it relates to the transfer of credits, degree programs, and degree requirements, cannot be minimized. Students' primary concerns are related to their transfer of credits and the time required to complete the four-year degree. Inadequate or confusing information can deter students from engaging in the transfer process, while easily accessible and accurate information may encourage them to pursue a four-year degree. Institutions that have established articulation agreements that are available online—or a system that outlines how credits will transfer from a given institution—will encourage and enhance the transfer student process. While academic advisers also play an important role, many students will contact them only after they have done their research online.

### ***Importance of Connecting Students to Resources***

The results of this study suggest that institutions must not only provide resources, but must also find ways to engage students with the resources. Programs such as the APP program that connect students with staff at the four-year institution can help to prepare students for a more successful transition, but students may be unaware of these resources or not understand their value. Assigning an academic adviser is useful but does not guarantee a student will make use of this assistance. Admissions offices should of course provide campus-visit opportunities, but students may continue to rely on family and friends for the campus tour. Programs like APP, learning communities, clubs, and organizations are developed to ease the transition of transfers, and yet not all students are aware of these services. In developing support programs, strategies to ensure that transfer students will connect with these resources also need to be developed.

## ***Consider the Social Aspects of Transition***

Transfer students were aware of the academic transition they would face but had not considered the social transition. Students struggled with getting involved and feeling a part of the larger community. This feeling may be even more pronounced for traditional-aged students at institutions such as Iowa State University, which is a residential campus that values both in-class and out-of-class experiences. Students who lived in on-campus housing or in a fraternity or sorority had a greater sense of belonging than those who lived off-campus. Students mentioned signing up for clubs but often noted that no one subsequently contacted them and they didn't pursue follow-up. As mentioned earlier, students were hesitant to engage in the resources, clubs, and organizations initially but in retrospect realized it would have been helpful to make such connections. Transfer students, as mentioned earlier, are focused primarily on their academic transition to the institution, but institutions also have a role to play in educating transfers to consider the importance of their social transitions. Just as four-year institutions develop articulation agreements and focus on transfer of credits, they must also educate students on how to be successful at socially transferring into the institution.

## **Limitations and Implications for Future Assessment**

This assessment focused on traditional-aged students transferring from one community college to a large four-year public institution. As such, the findings may be limited to these contexts. For example, the need to be socially engaged may be more pronounced for full-time traditional-aged students who expect to be involved in extracurricular activities than for older, working-adult transfer students who come primarily to take classes. In addition, students who transfer from a community college to a small liberal arts college with smaller class sizes may not have the same fears as those associated with transferring to a large research institution.

As a result of interviewing students in the spring semester, the responses were based on students who had successfully completed their first semester. Interviewing students who began their first semester but were not successful may elicit additional information about the transfer-student process.

Despite such limitations, this assessment provides insight into factors that are important in the transfer-student transition process. It also illustrates

the importance of using qualitative research methods in understanding the process. Whereas quantitative data can answer “what is happening,” information gleaned from individual interviews can help to answer “why.” Institutions can quantitatively assess retention rates, graduation rates, and GPA of transfer students for benchmarking or accountability purposes. However, as institutions look to improve the transfer-student experience, qualitative data similar to what was collected in this assessment are essential.

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