

Understanding Transfer Students: Perceived Needs for Successful Assimilation

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Literature Review

Transfer Students

Research on transfer students over the past decade points to institution specific barriers that inhibit matriculation and retention. Davies & Kratky (2000) indicated information availability (a step-by-step checklist of how to transfer), campus visit, and peer mentoring as potential interventions to overcome these barriers. “The transfer process is difficult for students and continues to affect their retention and matriculation toward earning a baccalaureate degree” (Davies & Kratky, p. 409).

Jacobs, Busby, and Leath (1992) revealed that transfer students felt ready for college; however, financial aid and work were concerns that needed to be addressed. Advising did come up as an area that students also looked for assistance with, but it was one that should be managed delicately. Students were not interested in a direct style of advising, but one of more guidance as a result of their confidence based on previous collegiate experience.

Some transfer students believe that institutions themselves have erected barriers that inhibit a smooth transition. A combination of policies, procedures, and/or campus climate and culture are areas that have been noted (Zamani, 2001). Zamani suggested that institutions look at creating on-site transfer centers, establishing cooperative admissions agreements, extending outreach activities, clarifying articulation agreements, hosting transfer information sessions, conducting campus tours, and creating innovative approaches to academic skills acquisition.

Assimilation

Crandall (1978) supported assimilation programs as vital in reducing attrition in a variety of settings—especially in schools. Ilgen and Seeley as well as Tracy (as cited in Crandall) noted that helping newcomers get acquainted with a new group setting reduced attrition later. Therefore, the following two research questions have been developed to advance research on the assimilation of transfer students.

R1: How do students report their transfer experience into North Dakota State University (NDSU)?

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R2: What do transfer students perceive that they need in order to successfully assimilate into North Dakota State University?

Methodology

Participants

Transfer students who participated were chosen from a purposive criterion sample. In this case study completed spring semester 2004, 21 transfer students participated in the focus groups which contained 11 males and 10 females. Participant age breakdown was as follows: 3 were 18-19 years old (14%); 9 were 20-21 years old (43%); and 9 were 22 years old and above (43%). Students were asked to indicate which semester they transferred, of which 14 transferred in the fall and 7 in the spring.

Procedure

A qualitative study was chosen as the most appropriate research method to explore the transfer student experience. Stage (1992) supported the need for qualitative study in saying, “Increasingly, those who study college students have discovered that many of their most burning questions could not be answered through simple quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis” (p. 4). Data from this study were analyzed inductively to compile emerging themes from the participants’ stories. With relatively easy access to the participants, focus groups were chosen in order to hear detailed explanations of students’ experiences.

Data Analysis

Following each focus group, the results were reviewed by the researcher to find general themes and categories. As consistent with the method recommended by Landis and Koch (1977), a second coder was trained to code 10% of the data, which amounted to four pages, to ensure reliability. These previously identified themes were presented to the second coder, who then categorized the comments on the four pages into the identified themes. Cohen’s Kappa was then performed to ensure inter-rater reliability when coding qualitative data, which resulted in agreement of .8750.

Results

Question #1: Transfer Process

The first focus group question asked students to think back to the process of transferring to NDSU, to express what it was like, and to explain what they remembered. Although each student’s experience was unique, reoccurring responses were categorized into four themes: social, staff assistance, process/procedures, and academic.

The social theme was the most dominant. Students repeatedly expressed concern about how difficult it was to meet people. “When I transferred here I was excited at first, but when I got to campus, I hated it. I had a really hard time meeting people. It wasn’t very much fun” (Focus group participant, April 7, 2004). The following dialogue between two students also was valuable. “Did anyone else have issues when it came to feeling like a part of the college? When I walked around the...campus [it] felt like everyone knew somebody and I didn’t know anyone” (Focus group participant, April 6, 2004). A second focus group participant replied, “Yes, I totally know what you are feeling. I felt like everyone had someone to say “hi” to, and I really didn’t” (April 6, 2004).

Students continually had positive remarks about excellent staff assistance. “I was treated like an individual” (Focus group participant, April 29, 2004). “Everyone out here is really nice and helpful in my opinion.... I have honestly never met people so nice in my life” (Focus group participant, April 27, 2004). Clearly, students were pleased with the assistance provided by offices across campus.

The process and procedures students encountered throughout the transfer process seemed manageable, for the most part. Students mentioned filling out the application for admission, needing transcripts from the previous school, and completing financial aid paperwork. Students expected to go through these procedures. “I agree that NDSU does a really good job when it comes to documentation. They make sure to notify you if deadlines are coming via e-mail or post” (Focus group participant, April 6, 2004).

Some students reported experiencing difficulties. One said, “[It was] confusing. I had to figure everything out on my own” (Focus group participant, April 7, 2004). Another student reported:

For me the major problem was that I didn’t know who to talk to about any of my problems, like getting a sign-in for the computers. So I had to bounce from person to person to find out to whom I should be talking to get it fixed. (Focus group participant, April 7, 2004)

The final theme covered in the initial focus group question revolved around academics. In general, students felt frustrated when having to take general education classes. As expected, students hoped more credits from the previous institution would count toward general education or major requirements.

Questions #2 and #3: Academic and Social Adjustment

For question two, students overwhelmingly felt that they had adjusted academically; however, when asked of their social adjustment in question three, it was not as fluid. Students told of the struggle to meet new people early in the semester, but later talked of friends they had met in class, clubs, and in the residence halls. The primary phenomenon that affected their adjustment was best summarized by a student who said, “. . . The social relationships mean everything” (Focus group participant, April 27, 2004).

Question #4: Effects on Adjustment

That same social theme was evident in responses to question four as well. When

asked what affected the student's adjustment into NDSU, the presence or absence of social support was most notable. A student who had support said:

I have a lot of family in the surrounding area, so they really helped. My brother goes to [another school] so anytime I got bored, I could head over to his place. This was a huge lift until I started to meet my own friends. My resident adviser was a big help as well. He gave me a lot of information on what was going on around here. That made it easier to find things to do and meet new people. (Focus group participant, April 27, 2004)

Another participant said, “. . . When I finally started to make some friends, things got 100% better. Not knowing anybody on campus was a big adjustment. Trying to do things completely on my own was very challenging” (Focus group participant, April 27, 2004).

Question #5: NDSU Role

In question five, participants were asked what they appreciated about NDSU during the transfer process. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated helpful staff members. Other appreciated services were the online registration system and Orientation. Although the vast majority of students were grateful for the help they received, a few students said they completed the process without guidance.

Question #6: Communication

Question six asked how students felt about communication from NDSU through the transfer process. Most students felt the communication from NDSU was very good. Phone, e-mail, and postal mail were methods noted.

Question #7: Process Influence on Decision

When asked if the transfer process influenced their decision to attend NDSU in question seven, students predominantly said “no.” Although they had already made the decision to attend, they very much appreciated the service they received. “Well, I knew I wanted to come to NDSU before I talked to anyone . . . It certainly made me feel welcome, and [it] reassured me that I was indeed making the right decision” (Focus group participant, April 27, 2004). For one student, the process was very influential. “It was a huge influence. I had also applied to [another college] and they treated me as a number, not an individual like NDSU” (Focus group participant, April 29, 2004).

Questions #8 and #9: Decision to Attend and Graduate

Question eight asked if the students were considering other colleges as well, which resulted in a mix of responses. Some students knew they would be coming to NDSU because of their major while others made the decision because of a family tradition. A

number of other students, however, applied to various other schools. The final question revealed that all but one student intended to graduate from NDSU. The one student who was not sure planned to make the decision after experiencing the curriculum in his/her particular major. If the program did not meet his/her expectations, other colleges would be considered.

Discussion

From this study, it has been learned that four primary factors impact a transfer student's experience at North Dakota State University. These factors include the process, staff assistance, an academic component, as well as a social component. Students reflecting on their experience recalled a simple process, in part due to the helpful nature of the people who were assisting them and treating them as individuals. Having a specific transfer admission counselor as well as a transfer coordinator may guide students in completing the process more completely and easily. Also, special programs initiated by the Office of Admission fully explain and streamline the process for transfer students. For instance, transfer students are invited to a campus visit specifically designed for them where transfer issues, such as credit evaluations, are covered. While transfer students are visiting campus, they have the opportunity to meet with a specific transfer counselor. This person is attuned to transfer needs and is able to accommodate and answer questions accordingly.

Staff from the Office of Admission and the Office of Registration and Records also travel to seven key feeder two-year schools to work with transfer students at their current home school. During this visit, students receive help applying, gaining admission, and registering for their first semester courses to be taken at North Dakota State University. This initiative is especially helpful as students are able to take care of everything at one time and for those students who have not experienced a web registration system, assistance is available to guide them through the process. NDSU staff is available to introduce and guide these students through the process and systems. As questions arose, students recounted instances where staff communicated with them to get necessary information and for help in resolving issues.

When asked about their academic transition, students reported that they had adjusted quite well overall. Adjustments were made by some individuals as a result of larger classes while others were more connected to the curriculum as they were now taking courses in their respective majors. Students appreciated the connections they had made with professors and had a sense that professors cared about their success.

The most notable issue that affected students' transfer experience was social. Many students felt lonely and had a strong desire to meet people. Unfortunately, they did not indicate that this need was met. Hess (1993) articulated the importance of group membership and interpersonal relationships when assimilating newcomers into an organization. "Social interactions can help newcomers start to feel part of the group These relationships can help build identification with each other . . ." (p. 199). A transfer student organization, which was suggested by a focus group participant, is a perfect example of an opportunity to connect students with others like themselves to

develop group membership.

In conjunction with the development of groups, the interpersonal relationships that are formed are critical. Having a peer mentor was expressed as a desire to form interpersonal relationships in this study, an idea supported by the work of Davies and Kratky (2000). "I wish I would have had someone in my college...to...introduce me to a few people in the program, like a mentor," reported one focus group participant (April 6, 2004).

While elements that have contributed to a successful transition for students, including clear and timely communication and helpful staff, should be maintained and continued, the university clearly should provide opportunities for transfer students to meet each other.

One avenue that could be implemented is the formation of a transfer student organization. Reports one NDSU transfer student:

I really wish this school would have had a special group just for transfer students. They have that sort of program at other colleges; why don't they have them here? It would have made things easier. Do any of you feel that way? (Focus group participant, April 7, 2004)

In addition to a transfer organization, a peer mentor program also could be implemented. Mentors would be current students who had previously transferred to NDSU and would serve two main purposes: social and procedural. Mentors could befriend the student and introduce them to other students. New transfer students could ask questions of these mentors, such as how to get an e-mail account or how to sign up for Blackboard. A focus group participant (April 27, 2004) had a similar idea, saying, "If I had a friend to go through everything with me at the same time, it would be very helpful."

A welcome social for transfer students during the first week of class might also be beneficial. "...a place or group [where] you could meet other transfer students—people that are in the same boat as you are" would be helpful, according to one focus group participant (April 29, 2004). New transfer students could meet each other at this social, while mentors mingle among the group. Having staff present with whom these students have already interacted would offer familiar faces and be welcoming. It would also be helpful to include staff from offices where students might have remaining questions.

Although the information gathered from this study is useful in generating ideas, institutions should further study transfer students in order to determine what intervention might be beneficial on their own campuses. As students and institutions change, so will expectations. Thus, understanding current transfer students will help each institution respond appropriately and meet those expectations.

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