

# First-Generation Transfer Students' Perceptions: Implications for Retention and Success

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*Obtaining and excelling in a satisfying career often depends on a college education. While community and junior colleges afford greater opportunities to obtain a college education, these opportunities do not always translate into increased educational attainment as only 9.7% of students who enroll at a two-year college complete a bachelor's degree (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Research indicates that a variety of factors contribute to the lower levels of academic success among community college students (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). This study examines the impact of transferring from a two-year college on first-generation students' perceptions of university experiences. The results indicate that students who transfer from two-year colleges have lower levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the four-year university; this trend is particularly pronounced for first-generation minority students. According to Tinto's model of student matriculation, commitment to the university is key to successful matriculation, and student perceptions and experiences play a role in developing that commitment. Therefore, lower levels of satisfaction may contribute to the lower rates of graduation among these cohorts.*

Postsecondary education is often a prerequisite for obtaining a rewarding career. Consequently, the number of high school students who enroll in some form of postsecondary education program increased from 62% in 2001 to 69% in 2006; the rate continues to fluctuate between 64% and 69% (Fast Facts, 2009). While community colleges have been criticized for limiting expectations of students who are from lower socioeconomic or minority groups (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998), the research indicates otherwise. Community college students who transfer to four-year universities and complete their bachelor's degrees have parity with four-year students in terms of employment, earning, job prestige, and job satisfaction (Pierson, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Flowers, 2003). Indeed, Pierson et al. (2003) argue that transfer students may be more likely to gain admission to prestigious universities than similar students who apply immediately out of high school.

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Unfortunately, increased educational opportunities do not always manifest as increased educational attainment (Alfonso, 2006). While the number of bachelor's degrees conferred per year remained constant over the last decade, there was an increase in the number of students who are still enrolled with no degree after five years (Fast Facts, 2009). Although preparing students to transfer to four-year universities in pursuit of a bachelor's degree is a primary goal of community colleges, only 10% of these students eventually transfer to a four-year university (Horn, 2009). Typically, community college students do not fare as well as students who begin their academic careers at a four-year university (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Although 38.4% of community college students attain some kind of degree (i.e., certificate, associate's degree), only 9.7% complete a bachelor's degree. This is in stark contrast to the 58.4% of students beginning at a four-year university who complete their bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

Despite efforts to identify factors that contribute to this disparity, the question has been only partially answered. Often, community college students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than first-year students at four-year universities (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Furthermore, these students typically have less academic preparation prior to entering the community college since they come from less prestigious high school programs and, therefore, may lack some necessary study skills. According to Dougherty (1992), however, the reduced level of academic preparation and more modest backgrounds typical of transfer students do not account for the lower levels of achievement. In addition, Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, and Terenzini (2003) found that differences in college preparation may not be as prevalent as previously thought. Nevertheless, transfer students remain significantly less likely to achieve a bachelor's degree than students who begin at a four-year university. Dougherty (1992) considered this an institutional effect that went beyond the differences in student characteristics.

Christie and Hutcheson (2003) further explored this discrepancy while controlling for the desired level of educational attainment in students who were older than 19 when they graduated from high school. By eliminating these students, the researchers focused their analysis more on "traditional" college students. They found that community college students had a 56% likelihood of earning their bachelor's degree compared to a 79% likelihood for students who began at a four-year university. Even after controlling for factors such as institutional type, institutional control, on-campus employment, ethnicity, gender, and high school curriculum, the authors noted that transfer students still had a 10% reduction in the likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree.

## First-Generation Students

One potential factor in the lower rate of degree attainment for community college students is that many of these students are first-generation students (i.e., no parent or grandparent completed a college degree) (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). According to the 2003 report of the National Center for Education Statistics, only 47.7% of community college students had at least one parent who completed

a bachelor's degree compared to 72.1% of university students. Typically, first-generation students encounter greater obstacles than second-generation students, and they often lack basic knowledge of the postsecondary education process that second-generation students possess (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). First-generation students tend to take fewer humanities courses, study fewer hours, and participate in honors programs less frequently. Furthermore, they perceive themselves as less prepared than other students (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to have dependents, come from a lower socioeconomic status, and work more hours, thereby making it more difficult for them to complete a degree (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008).

Interestingly, Zalaquett (1999) found no differences in grade point average (GPA) between first-generation and second-generation college students. The author hypothesized that student comfort levels with the environment mediated the differences between the two groups. However, Zalaquett only considered generational status, focusing on students in their third and fourth years of college. Consequently, many of the students who experienced academic distress were no longer enrolled, which contributed to minimal differences in GPA.

Zalaquett's ideas regarding the impact of students' comfort with the university setting may be a contributing factor in student satisfaction. According to Terenzini et al. (1996), first-generation students reported fewer close relationships with other students and were less likely to become involved in campus clubs and organizations. They also tended to be less satisfied with the university environment as a whole. Consequently, difficulties in adjusting to the unfamiliar academic demands and social milieu may decrease the likelihood of successfully completing the transfer process.

## Application of Tinto's Model

Students' experiences with faculty, staff, and peers are often a significant contributing factor in educational attainments. Tinto (1975) argued that matriculation is a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college. Students enter college with a set of personal characteristics, abilities, and expectations. Their interactions with the academic environment can either facilitate the journey toward a degree or lead to disappointment and dropping out of college. Consequently, low student commitment or low institutional commitment can contribute to student attrition.

Tinto's model was one of the first to identify institutional factors contributing to student attrition (Tinto, 2007). While previous efforts at identifying factors effecting student retention focused solely on student characteristics, Tinto considered the relationship between the university and the student as a driving factor in student success or failure. Although most research involving this model concentrated on the freshman year of college, the relationship between student and university extends throughout the educational program. Thus, it is possible for this relationship to continue contributing to students' commitment, or lack thereof, to

their education. This ongoing relationship is one factor that has received scant attention in student retention research and, therefore, is deserving of further exploration.

According to Tinto's model of academic attrition, the likelihood that students will successfully matriculate is influenced by personal commitment both to the goal of obtaining a degree and to the institution. That commitment may be influenced by the students' perceptions of and satisfaction with the academic environment. Institutional commitment is the result of interactions with peers and faculty. Transfer students are often disadvantaged in developing institutional commitment. Students beginning at a community college may perceive the professors in larger university classrooms as not caring about their success and persistence (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Furthermore, transfer students frequently reported frustration at their anonymity at larger universities and lack of connection to other students.

## Implications

Although community colleges offer an opportunity for larger numbers of students to obtain higher levels of education, this opportunity has not translated into success, particularly for first-generation college students. A variety of factors have been identified that may contribute to this disconnect between opportunity and attainment, including socioeconomic status, minority status, and academic preparation. However, Tinto (1975) considered the level of student commitment to be crucial to matriculation.

This study examines the perceptions of first-generation community college students who transferred to a four-year university. Based on Tinto's model, we predicted that student satisfaction with the university would contribute to overall intent to complete the bachelor's degree. We also predicted that first-generation transfer students would have different perceptions of the academic environment and experience than students who began their education at the four-year university, as well as second-generation students in general.

## Method

### *Participants*

This study included 178 undergraduate students from Texas A&M University-Commerce. Students were recruited during regular classroom hours with the permission of the instructors and received extra credit for participation. European Americans comprised the majority of participants ( $n = 70$ ), followed by African Americans ( $n = 51$ ), and Hispanic students ( $n = 14$ ). The original data contained three additional categories: Asian American ( $n = 3$ ), biracial ( $n = 2$ ), and other ( $n = 38$ ). Due to the small number of participants, these categories were combined to form one category of other ( $n = 43$ ). In addition to culture,

participants were categorized based on generation of college student [i.e., first generation ( $n = 95$ ) or second-generation ( $n = 83$ )] and transfer status [i.e., transfer ( $n = 90$ ) or non-transfer ( $n = 88$ )].

## Materials

Participants answered a set of questions designed to evaluate their satisfaction with the four-year university, satisfaction with the classroom environment at the university, satisfaction with the faculty at the university, and perception of faculty support. Responses were based on a Likert scale ranging either from one ("not satisfied") to five ("extremely satisfied") or one ("not available") to five ("very available"). Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire regarding gender, university classification, first-generation status, transfer status, financial aid, and the highest degree they expected to complete.

## Results

Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with Promax rotation was performed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) on seven components thought to influence students' intent to pursue a degree beyond the bachelor's level. PCA identifies factors that contribute to an outcome, while the Promax rotation ensures that only factors making large contributions are identified. Extracted communalities tended to be high, indicating a significant overlap and relatedness between the variables. Factor one (satisfaction with the academic experience) accounted for 40.87% of the variance, while factor two (personal background) accounted for 18.67% of the variance (see Table 1). These results support the idea that satisfaction with the academic environment influences students' future academic plans.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed using SPSS. The dependent variables were satisfaction with the current university attended and satisfaction with the instructors at the university. The independent variables were first-generation status, culture, and community college attendance.

Histograms indicated that although the sample sizes were unequal, there was only minimal skewness that was not adequate to violate the assumption of normality. No multivariate or univariate outliers existed, and the assumptions of linearity and homogeneity were met (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics).

Statistical differences were found among the satisfaction levels for students who attended a community college prior to enrolling in a four-year university (Wilks'  $\lambda = .940$ ,  $F(2, 162) = 5.137$ ,  $p = .007$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ). In addition, statistically significant differences existed in satisfaction based on culture and first-generation status (Wilks'  $\lambda = .901$ ,  $F(6, 324) = 2.364$ ,  $p = .031$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .042$ ) and on community college attendance and culture (Wilks'  $\lambda = .901$ ,  $F(6, 324) = 2.894$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta^2 = .051$ ).

A follow-up analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a significant difference for

students who attended a community college on satisfaction both with the university ( $F(1,163) = 7.597, p = .007, \eta^2 = .045$ ) and with instructors ( $F(1,163) = 7.069, p = .009, \eta^2 = .042$ ). Significant differences were also evident for first-generation ( $F(3,163) = 4.058, p = .008, \eta^2 = .069$ ) and second generation minority students ( $F(1,163) = 1.933, p = .049, \eta^2 = .043$ ) on satisfaction with the university. Finally, there was a significant difference on satisfaction with instructors for minority students who attended a community college ( $F(3, 163) = 2.138, p = .025, \eta^2 = .056$ ) (see Tables 3 and 4).

*Post hoc* analysis showed that first-generation students experienced lower levels of satisfaction with both the four-year university and the instructors than did second-generation students ( $MD = -.349, p = .014$ ). Both first- and second-generation students who attended a community college and then transferred to a four-year university were also less satisfied with the university and instructors than students who began at the university ( $MD = -.376, p = .007$ ). African American and Hispanic students experienced lower levels of satisfaction with the university than European Americans ( $MD = -.349, p = .027$ ;  $MD = -.509, p = .019$ , respectively).

## Discussion

With escalating numbers of college students failing to graduate, student attrition is increasingly relevant to academic administrators. While community colleges provide a stepping stone for academic attainment, transfer students often do not complete their bachelor's degrees. This problem is particularly pronounced for first-generation students who begin at the community college level. Based on Tinto's (1975) model of academic attrition, this study examined first-generation transfer students' perceptions of the four-year academic environment and how those perceptions may relate to academic success.

The first hypothesis that students' satisfaction with the academic environment would contribute to overall intent to complete the bachelor's degree was supported. Principal Components Analysis (PCA) showed that satisfaction with the university environment—which included interactions with professors, satisfaction with the university in general, interactions with peers, and perceived faculty support—accounted for 40.87% of the variance in students' plans to complete their bachelor's degree and/or to obtain an advanced degree. Thus, this finding lends support to Tinto's (1975) ideas regarding the influence of the academic environment on student commitment to the university and to the overall attainment of an advanced degree.

The second hypothesis—that first-generation transfer students would have different perceptions of the academic environment than students who began at the four-year university—was only partially supported. Students who attended a community college before enrolling at the four-year institution reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction with the overall university experience, but this was true for both first- and second-generation transfer students. Furthermore, first-generation transfer students who were also members of a racial/ethnic minority reported lower levels of satisfaction with the university and

instructor performance than did second-generation minority transfer students. This finding is of particular interest given the decline in minority students as they begin at the community college, transfer to a university, and complete the bachelor's degree. Combining minority status with being a first-generation transfer student seems to place additional stress on students who may already be struggling to succeed in academic endeavors.

In summary, transfer students tend to experience more dissatisfaction than students who begin at a four-year university. The stress of being both a first-generation and a transfer student particularly impacts students who are members of a minority group. According to Tinto (1975), the institutional environment can contribute to a lack of commitment to either goal attainment or the institution; the lack of commitment then contributes to high attrition rates. Currently, the higher education environment is one of diminishing resources, making student retention a pressing goal (Tinto, 2007). While this article identifies factors potentially contributing to or interfering with obtaining that goal, further research is needed regarding students' experiences in the university environment and ways those experiences influence persistence to the bachelor's degree as well as interventions designed to reduce transfer students' feelings of dissatisfaction.

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**TABLE 1****Variable Contributions to Each factor: Factor Loadings and Communalities ( $h^2$ )**

Item	1	2	3	$h^2$
University	.862	-.085	-.193	.788
Classroom	.852	.057	-.175	.760
Instructor	.885	.128	.121	.815
Faculty support	.773	-.073	.375	.744
First-Generation	-.042	.719	.530	.800
Community College	-.074	.393	.732	.695
Culture	-.043	.777	.127	.621

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**TABLE 2****Descriptive Statistics**

Source	n
First-Generation	94
Community College	90
African American	51
European American	70
Hispanic	14
Other	42

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**TABLE 3****Analysis of Variance for Student Satisfaction with the University Experience**

Source	df	F	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
First-Generation (FG)	1	2.345	.014	.127
Community College (CC)	1	7.597	.045	.007*
Culture	1	1.933	.049	.043*
FG x Culture	3	4.058	.069	.008*
CC x Culture	3	1.665	.030	.177

*\*Identifies differences between groups at  $p = .05$*

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**TABLE 4****Analysis of Variance for Student Satisfaction with Instructors**

Source	df	F	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
First-Generation (FG)	1	.451	.003	.503
Community College (CC)	1	7.069	.042	.009*
Culture	1	2.120	.038	.100
FG x Culture	3	1.648	.043	.064
CC x Culture	3	2.138	.056	.025*

*\*Identifies differences between groups at  $p = .05$*

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