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Introduction: Community College Transfer Students

Community colleges have been in the news recently for their role in workplace readiness and career advancement. Often perceived as places only for those with poor high school performance, limited financial means or family responsibilities, these vital institutions also serve another significant and increasing segment of the community college population: students who plan to use the two-year college as a launching pad for four-year success. These students often have limited research skills and are inexperienced in navigating the intricate path transfer can be.

Background: LaGuardia Community College's Population

LaGuardia Community College is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). Fifty-four percent of students are foreign-born, hailing from 160 countries, and speaking 127 different native languages (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, LaGuardia Community College, 2011, pp. viii-ix). Eighteen percent are the first in their families to attend college and 44% are the first generation to attend college (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, The City University of New York, 2010, p. 9). Many students are from the public schools and have a neighborhood-sized view of the world. Those from abroad generally lack knowledge of the American system of higher education.

Teaching Research and Transfer

The authors, librarian Catherine Stern, and English professor Cecilia Macheski, each redesigned her respective research skills course to include a component on transfer. Macheski structured her course, *Writing the Research Paper*, so that students began with a familiar form, the autobiographical narrative, which they transformed into a traditional college application's Personal Statement. Students explored the common application, located the writing task, and completed the intimidating task as a normal class assignment. After writing the essays, students pursued research into the websites of at least five colleges that offered their major. They explored the websites of Harvard, Stanford, and other select colleges, and also reviewed the CUNY application in order to demystify the admissions process.

Asked to identify three obstacles to transfer to their "dream" school, virtually all the students pointed to tuition costs. Macheski then assigned the class to pursue a literature search on transfer and financial aid in academic journals, articles, government documents and personal interviews. Students then engaged in workshops where they analyzed the material, raised questions, and pursued further research. They next expanded their personal statements to include a narrative on how they fit into the current transfer environment. This was difficult, as students were not accustomed to moving from the personal to the conceptual, and employing research data to support assertions. Nevertheless, as they worked collaboratively to share findings and revise drafts, raise questions and, in a few cases, team up and visit local campuses for tours, they were internalizing what real research was about. Final papers incorporated a revised personal statement, an analysis of the research and a proposition on how the transfer climate nationally might be improved.

The first meeting of Stern's one-credit course, *Internet Research Strategies*, included an introduction of the topic and a guest appearance by Macheski who discussed transfer as a

research activity, recounted stories of students who had transferred to selective colleges, and invited students to tour the Office of Transfer Services (OTS).

The transfer material was integrated with a light touch. As an initial assignment, students posted to the class Blackboard discussion board the names of two colleges: one they considered transferring to; and any other school they had heard of. The results were overwhelmingly CUNY schools, with a few wider-ranging choices. Subsequent assignments had them build their knowledge base of the two colleges by finding related articles from the college library's licensed databases and using selected websites. These websites, which included *College Navigator* (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), and two commercial websites, were also used as part of a session on evaluating sources. Class readings included a timely article from *Inside Higher Ed*, entitled "Information Unstacks the Deck," (Berrett, 2010) which reported on Long's study (2010) calling for better consumer information about higher education. This led to a discussion of how information is controlled and delivered. The instructor combined all the college information into one list that eventually became a wiki posted on the Blackboard site where students shared with each other what they had learned over the course of the semester.

Assessment & Outcomes

A year later, when most of the students would have accumulated sufficient credits for transfer/graduation, Stern and Macheski visited LaGuardia's OTS to examine their student sign-in log in order to determine whether students had independently availed themselves of established transfer services. They found that the students had not gone to the OTS. They hypothesized that students felt that the materials in the courses enabled them to pursue their transfer goals using the knowledge gained in the classroom, and that they saw the classroom

work as a substitute for a trip to the OTS. In the future, the plan is to assign a visit to the OTS as a part of these courses.

In order to gain an institutional perspective, the authors approached LaGuardia's Office of Institutional Research. The IR staff reported that of the 63 students who completed the courses, 26 or 42%, transferred. The majority selected CUNY campuses. Five students transferred early. The transfer choices were as follows: 20 to CUNY four-year campuses; 1 to a CUNY community college; 1 to a SUNY community college; 3 to local private four-year colleges; and 1 to an out-of-state selective liberal arts college. In short, many transferred, but mostly to other CUNY schools.

Conclusions & Implications

The U.S. Department of Education has demonstrated the increasing importance of the community college population in two major studies of first-generation and transfer student success (Adelman, 2005; Chen & Carroll, 2005). LaGuardia's *Institutional Profile (IP)* contributes to this research as it tracks students from freshman aspiration through graduation and transfer. It reports that "One year after graduation, forty-five percent of the 2009-2010 graduating class had transferred to four-year college" (Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2011, p. 38). In another section of the *IP*, responses from incoming freshmen are recorded as follows: asked if they aspired to a bachelor's degree, 40% said "yes." The same students were asked if they planned to attend a four-year college and 70% said "yes" (p.16).

Many students could not, however, clearly identify the differences among associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees and thus benefitted from the courses in the project. This data supports the anecdotal evidence that student knowledge about transfer is inadequate, even as students aspire to move on. The transfer rate of 42% for the students in the project classes is on a

par with the college's data. While the sample is not statistically significant, the authors nevertheless offer tentative conclusions from examining the outcomes. Overall, students were better informed to make appropriate transfer decisions.

At the end of the semester students in LRC103 received a feedback questionnaire for the course. Question #2 asked: "What did you think of the theme: College Admissions and Transfer? Was it interesting or useful to you?" Fourteen out of 16 students returned the form and all made positive remarks. Some appreciated knowing where to find reliable information and others, who were about to begin the transfer process, commented on the timeliness of the course.

The responses suggest that students' research skills improve from the use of the transfer theme. By developing individual transfer narratives and bibliographies, students learn to see research as the collection and *application* of information to their own thesis, and even to their own decision-making. The temptation to plagiarize diminishes as they learn to analyze data in order to support their choice of a college, rather than simply compile facts about a college. They begin to appreciate the value of a writer's own voice in a successful paper, which leads to better writing.

One student from the cohort sent the following in an email as she was completing her first year as a transfer student at a selective, private, liberal arts college:

I would like to thank you for suggesting [Selective College] to me. Yes, ENG103 was really helpful in helping me make my decision to apply to [Selective College]. The course helped me learn about [Selective College] and other colleges I researched and applied for. I am really glad I enrolled.

Adding practical research applications to students' aspirations for education beyond the community college, therefore, can launch successful transfer.

Next Steps

ENG103 and LRC103 are sometimes taught as a “pair” at the College and the authors believe it would be worthwhile to try to schedule them together. In this case it might be interesting to see what, if any, difference publicizing the theme in advance makes to the courses themselves or to the transfer outcomes. The authors’ view the results with optimism and they hope to share the class materials with other faculty who teach these courses and to continue tracking the benefits.

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