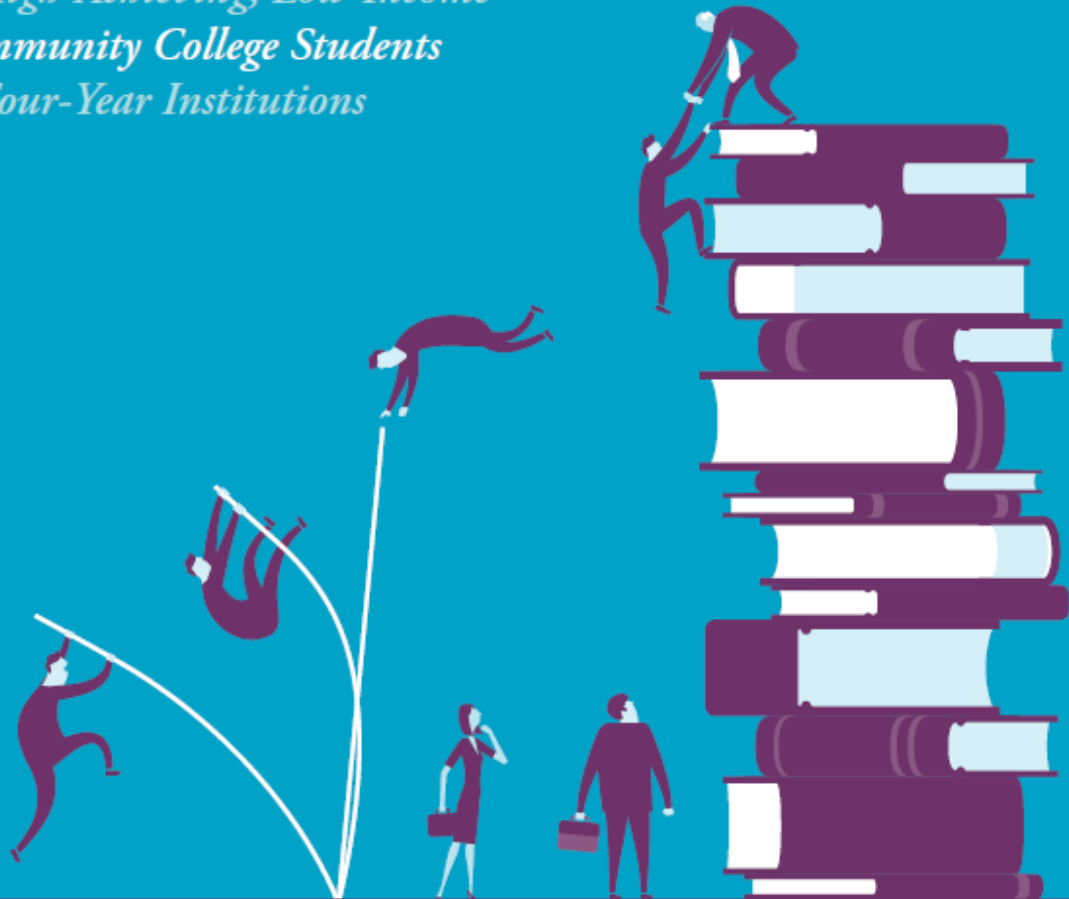


JACK KENT COOKE
FOUNDATION

MAKING THE LEAP!

*Understanding the Successful Transfer
of High-Achieving, Low-Income
Community College Students
to Four-Year Institutions*



Barbara Schmertz, Ph.D. and Jennifer Carney, Ph.D.

**Making the Leap:
Understanding the Successful Transfer
of High-Achieving, Low-Income Community College Students
to Four-Year Institutions**

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OBJECTIVES

This research seeks to understand the transfer of high-achieving, low-income students from two- to four-year college degree programs, addressing two research questions: What challenges do high-achieving, low-income students face in completing their first transfer year? What strategies do students use to mediate these challenges?

CONTEXT

Over 7.5 million students are enrolled at American community colleges (NCES, 2011). Representing 40 percent of all undergraduate enrollments, these students are disproportionately from low-income and minority families (Dowd, et al., 2006). Community colleges thus fulfill an essential democratizing function, educating under-privileged students and setting them on the path to upward social mobility through education.

Despite policies meant to facilitate transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions, low-income students face numerous barriers (Anderson, Alfonso & Sun, 2006; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008); those who do transfer earn bachelor degrees at rates 40 percent lower than students who enrolled as freshman (Auds & Hannes, 2010).

Why do so many students aspiring to complete a bachelor's degree fail to do so? Barriers include "transfer shock," wherein transfer students experience a dip in grades after transfer (Hill, 1965; Laanan, 2004; Laanan, 2007). High tuition costs coupled with insufficient financial aid can inhibit completion for transfer students, who often are debt-averse and receive less generous aid packages (Handel, 2011; Hoxby, 2000). In addition, certain risk factors, such as being first-generation (Ishitani, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), non-traditional age (Porchea, Allen, Robbins & Phelps, 2010), and employed (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) can affect transfer student persistence to degree.

A bright light amongst the transfer student narrative is the successful degree completion of **high-achieving, low-income** students. Academically gifted college students are often identified by common measures of academic performance (e.g., standardized test scores, high school GPA) or selectivity of college attended. Past research has explored their academic experiences tied to race, ethnicity or family educational background (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2012; Perez, et al, 2010) finding that the pressures that come with being "othered" can overwhelm and undermine academic success.

Other research reveals that educational outcomes for those attending selective schools see greater gains. Dowd et al. (2006) found that 75 percent of transfer students at elite colleges graduated within 8.5 years of completing high school. High-achieving low-income transfer students often graduate at higher rates than “native” students (Melguizo & Dowd, 2006). Success can be attributed to student characteristics, such as drive, determination, academic talent; and institutional factors, such as access to and quality of college counseling, financial aid, selectivity, and institutional agents with power (Dowd et al., 2006; Dowd, Pak & Bensimon, 2013).

Ultimately, 59 percent of high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds graduate from a four-year college, compared with 77 percent of their high-income counterparts (Wyner et al., 2007). Better understanding high-achieving, low-income students’ pathways to and through bachelor degree completion can improve our knowledge of how to support low-income students generally and high-achieving ones specifically.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

We draw upon two conceptual frameworks of student retention to support our work. Tinto’s theory of student departure (1988) posits that successful transition to college life is tied to stages of separation and integration. According to the theory, students progress from a separation of their past lives (work, school, family) toward an understanding and acceptance of the norms of their new environment. Those who face barriers to integration are more likely to depart before graduation (stopping out or dropping out altogether). In addition, we used Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon’s (2003) revision of Tinto’s theory as another construct of our work focusing primarily on the external and internal campus environmental factors that affect persistence (see Appendix Exhibit A1).

METHODS

This research utilizes a non-experimental, mixed-methods research design to identify and understand the challenges encountered during and strategies used to successfully navigate the first year of transferring to a four-year degree program.

SAMPLE

We are following 111 high-achieving, low-income students from the summer before transferring through graduation of their bachelor’s degree. Study participants were drawn from applicants to a foundation-funded scholarship program that provides high-achieving, low-income community college graduates with financial and advising support to complete their bachelor’s degrees. The *TransferUp* program (pseudonym) selects approximately 60 students every year out of over 700 applicants to pay for their bachelor’s education costs (up to \$30,000 annually). TransferUp students also receive academic advising, a peer support network, and a pre-transfer summer orientation.

This study examines 111 applicants who made it to the penultimate round of selection for TransferUp, including 54 students who received the TransferUp award. Collectively these students have transferred into bachelor degree programs at 72 institutions. The students are diverse demographically across gender, race/ethnicity, marital and parental status. The institutions they attend are similarly diverse, varying across control (public/private), size, and selectivity (Exhibit 1). TransferUp selection criteria include academic measures and income indicators. Eligible applicants must have a minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.5 from all undergraduate coursework; demonstrated pursuit of the most rigorous curriculum available at the community college is taken into consideration, too. Test scores are not used to assess academic achievement. All of the study participants are academically talented and economically disadvantaged, with community college GPAs of 3.5 or above and average annual income of \$13,000. Together, these students' experiences paint a robust picture of the transfer experience of high-achieving low-income students.

Exhibit 1: Sample Characteristics

% of students		% of students	
Student Characteristics			
Gender		Have Dependent Children	
Female	58%	Yes	19%
Male	42	No	81
Race/Ethnicity		Marital Status	
White	49%	Not Married	80%
Hispanic	20	Married	10
Asian	13	Divorced/ Separated /	10
African American	11	Widowed	
Multiracial	6		
Native American	1		
First Generation			
College Student			
Yes	68%		
No	32		
Institutional Characteristics			
Selectivity of four-year institution		Four-year Institutional Control	
Most Competitive	23%	Public	57%
Highly Competitive	34	Private	43
Very Competitive	19		
Competitive	21		
Less Competitive	1		
Special	1		

DATA SOURCES

This study draws upon three data sources: (1) the TransferUp application; (2) surveys administered throughout the students' first transfer year; and (3) semi-structured qualitative interviews.

Applications

When applying to TransferUp, students provide their community college transcripts and demographics (including age, family status, race/ethnicity, gender, and income). These data provide us with initial measures of student entry characteristics that may influence students' persistence.

Surveys

All participants were surveyed in September 2012, January 2013, and July 2013. Survey 1 asked about participants' motivations, community college preparation, impressions of the four-year institution, orientation experiences, perceived levels of preparedness and support, and anticipated challenges. Survey 2 explored students' first-term experiences, challenges encountered, supports, grades, financial aid received, and planned spring semester coursework. Survey 3 collected perceived challenges and supports, reflections on their first year, and plans to continue in their degree program. All survey items link directly to Braxton et al.'s model of persistence (Appendix Exhibit A2).

Interviews

A subset of 19 study participants was qualitatively interviewed using an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol, including 11 TransferUp Scholars and 8 Other Applicants. Interviews were conducted at the beginning of the spring semester, between the second and third surveys. Interviewed students were selected to maximize variation across the selectivity of their four-year institution and perceived challenges of their first semester. The interviews were designed to gain detailed information about how students navigate the transfer process and explore aspects of their transfer from community college to the four year school. Each interviewee's protocol was tailored based on respondents' perceived challenges (Appendix Exhibit A3). Interview transcripts were coded using a primary coding scheme derived from the theory presented in Appendix Exhibit A1; we also created emic codes derived from the interview data (Appendix Exhibit A4). Once the coding structure was in place, the interviews were re-read by two members of the research team to create and test emergent themes.

Limitations

This is a descriptive study. We are not exploring the causality behind why some students succeed or perceive certain factors as more or less challenging. Rather, we are taking a first descriptive look at the experiences of *high-achieving low-income* students and strategies that

they report as useful during their first transfer year. Future research will explore correlations between student characteristics and transfer experiences.

Our methods employed in this study have several limitations. First, our sampling may be biased due to self-selection. Our participants, all applicants to a competitive transfer scholarship program, are not necessarily representative of the larger transfer student population. Despite this limitation, our sample is diverse along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, age and type of institution attended, which allows for some generalizability. Secondly, we are limited by the relationships we have with a portion of the study sample. Over half are recipients of our scholarship funds, which may have affected their answers to survey and interview questions. We addressed this through several means, including having interviews conducted by staff not affiliated with the scholarship program and the assurances of anonymity by such means as the use of pseudonyms and password protecting the stored electronic materials.

Lastly, our survey data are self-reported, which limits the validity of our analysis. Triangulation of the survey data with the interview data help address this limitation.

RESULTS

In this paper we describe the challenges faced by high-achieving, low-income students during their first transfer year and the strategies they use to address these challenges. In examining these students, we sought to understand whether the challenges faced by high-achieving, low-income students mirrored those described in the transfer literature generally. We also wanted to learn more about the strategies these students used to overcome these challenges. Why are they more likely to persist than other transfer students? Is their greater likelihood of persistence the result of focusing on academics, or something else?

We frame our study around four broad categories of challenges students might face, derived from the literature on academic persistence: academic, social, personal, and financial. **Academic** challenges included managing the academic work load as well as getting good grades (As and Bs) and being a strong student. In addition, it included connecting with faculty and tapping university resources. **Social** challenges revolved around making connections with other students. Students may face **financial** challenges including paying for school, or **personal** challenges related to their health, family, or personal motivation. Delineating specific challenges related to each of these four areas (Exhibit 2), at the close of the Fall and Spring semesters of their first transfer year we asked students to rate the extent to which items were challenging for them. Students rated each factor on a Likert scale as well as identified the three factors they perceived to be their biggest challenges that term.

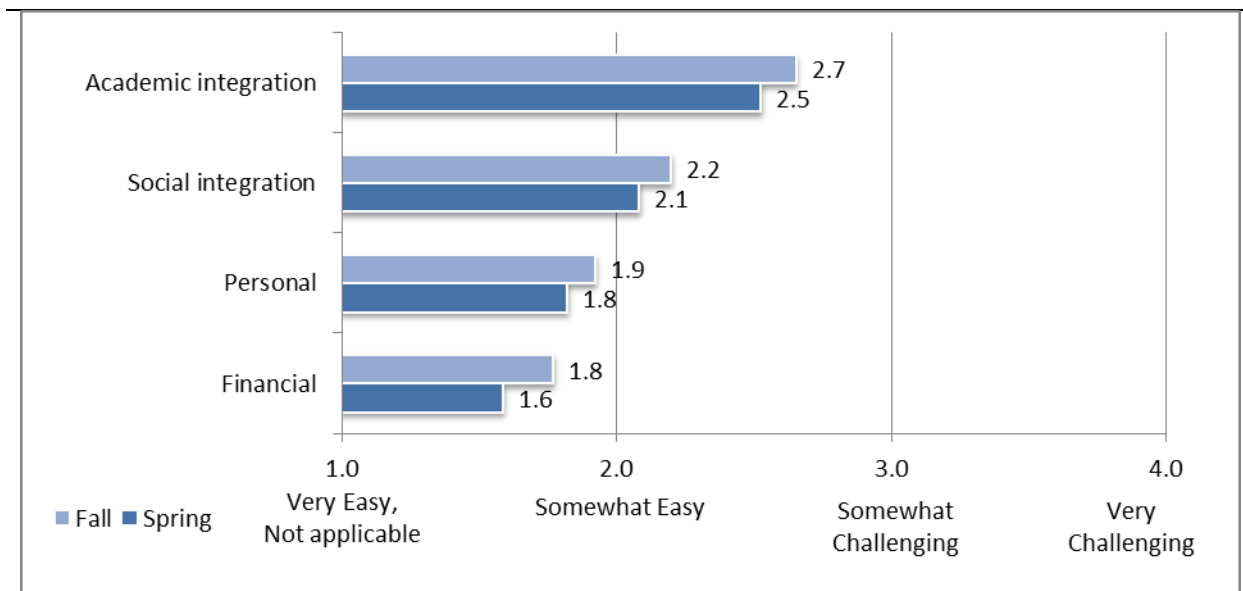
Exhibit 2: Possible Challenges Rated By Students

Academic integration	Managing the academic work load Getting good grades (As and Bs) Being a strong student Finding a faculty mentor Connecting with faculty members Figuring out how to access university resources
Social integration	Fitting in with other students Making friends Finding a group of students with whom I could study Having people to turn to for help Feeling isolated or lonely Finding extra-curricular activities that match my interests
Personal	Leaving my family and home community Meeting the demands of my family Suffering from ill health (mental or physical) Being motivated to complete my academic work
Financial	Meeting the demands of my job Paying for school

When examined in composite form, students perceive the overall intensity of their transfer experience as ranging from “Somewhat easy” to “Somewhat challenging” (Exhibit 3). Factors associated with academic integration were perceived as more challenging than social. This result was the opposite of what we expected. We had hypothesized that high-achieving students, well-prepared by their community colleges, would transition to four-year institutional academics relatively smoothly, but might find the social integration most challenging due to their low-income background. Instead, students’ primary concern their first year was their academic performance. What’s more, students’ perceived level of overall challenge declines only slightly from the Fall to Spring semester.

The overall average ratings of challenges mask the individual nature of the transfer experience. Upon examination we found that nearly all students (98 percent) reported one or more individual items as “Very Challenging” at some point during their year.

Exhibit 3: Average Rating of Composite Measures of Challenge (Fall and Spring Semesters)



Reporting composite averages of all items that mapped to a broad category as outlined in Exhibit 2. We note that receipt of the TransferUp scholarship mitigates financial concerns; the level of concern among non-scholarship recipients was considerably higher than the scholarship recipients (2.2 versus 1.2 in the Fall, for example). The role of financial concerns with and without a major scholarship like TransferUp will be examined in a future paper.

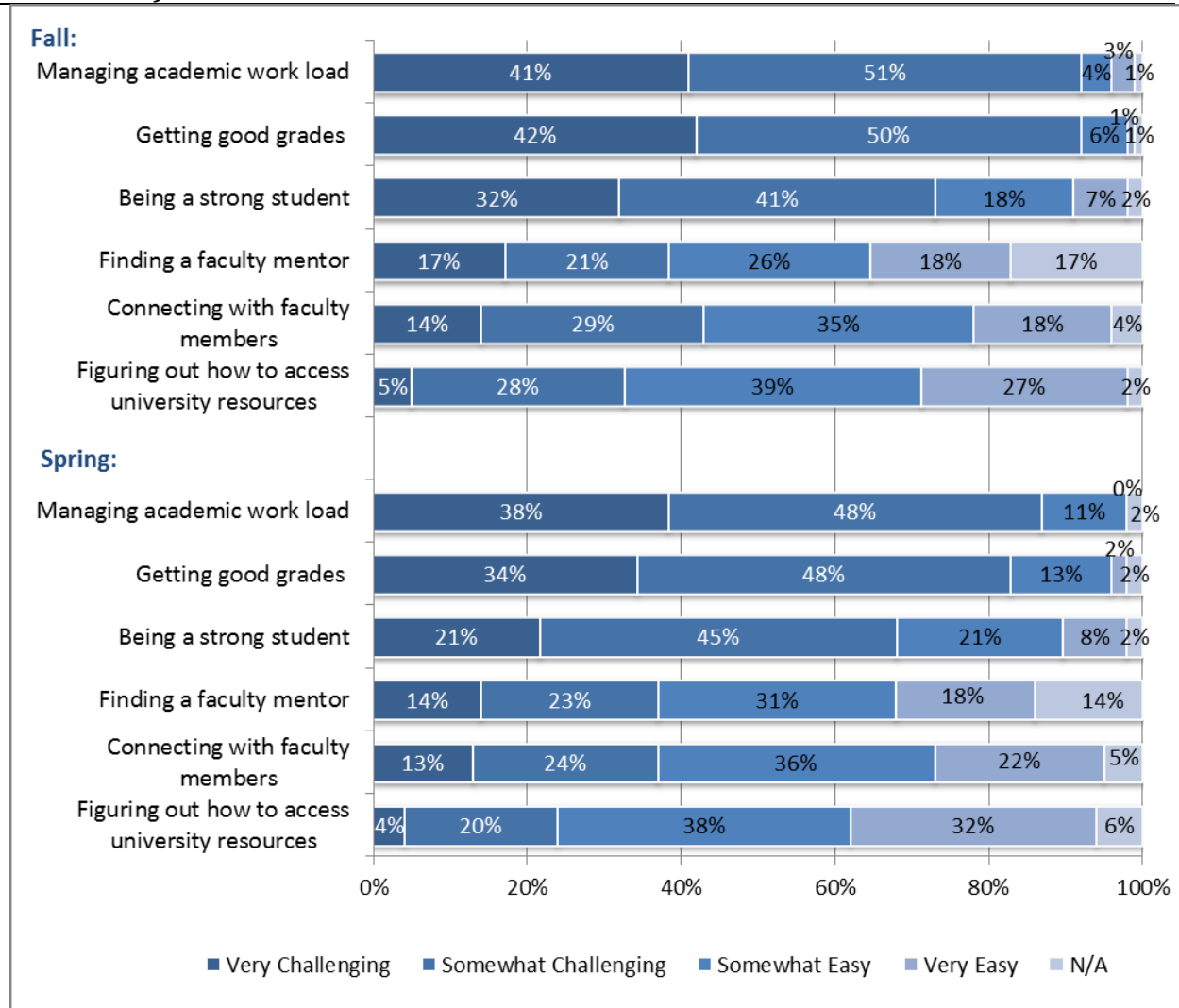
As we were most interested in identifying factors that could be addressed through institutional or external student support services, below we present more detailed findings related to the top two areas of challenge and integration: academic and social.

Academic Integration

Academic integration hinges on informal and formal experiences students have with the academic functions of the institution. Integration takes place in and out of the classroom through such activities as attending office hours, participating in study groups and engaging in undergraduate research (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Transfer students can face challenges to academic integration as they adapt to instructional style, coursework demand, and faculty expectations (Townsend, 1993). In addition, their time commitments with family and work can affect integration as they try to balance their personal lives and school work.

When we examine the sub-components of our academic integration construct, we find that students perceived the greatest challenge around the rigor and magnitude of the academic work being produced for their classes. Nearly all of the students in the study reported that receiving good grades and managing the academic work load were somewhat or very challenging (Exhibit 4). These perceptions held steady between Fall and Spring semester, with only a slight shift towards less challenge. Fewer students (approximately one third) struggled to connect to faculty or university resources. Below we examine these constructs.

Exhibit 4: Perceived Challenges to Academic Integration (Fall and Spring Semesters)



Academic Rigor and Coursework

Two-thirds of students questioned some aspect of their academic abilities or choices during the course of their first year, including their desired major, ability to compete, or sense of belonging academically at their institution (Exhibit 5). These survey results were surprising to us. These students are arguably some of the most academically prepared students coming out of community colleges. At the start of their first semester, 81 percent reported that they had developed good strategies for taking notes, studying, and taking tests while enrolled at their community college, and only 7 percent had struggled to complete their coursework. As they went into school, most felt that they would seek resources (automatically or as needed), and most felt ready to take on their first term (Exhibit 6). At the beginning of their Fall semester, 74 percent of students reported that their community college had prepared them well for the academic work at their new institution. By the end of the term, however, this figure dropped to 59 percent. Interviews revealed the complexity of students' feelings

regarding their “new” academic identity. No longer academic superstars at the community college, many students reported feeling shocked and overwhelmed by the adjustment to the four-year institution. Retrospectively, a number of students felt underprepared for their new academic demands and quickly had to adjust both their identities and their actions to their new environments.

Exhibit 5: Academic Self-Questioning

“Did you do any of the following this year?”

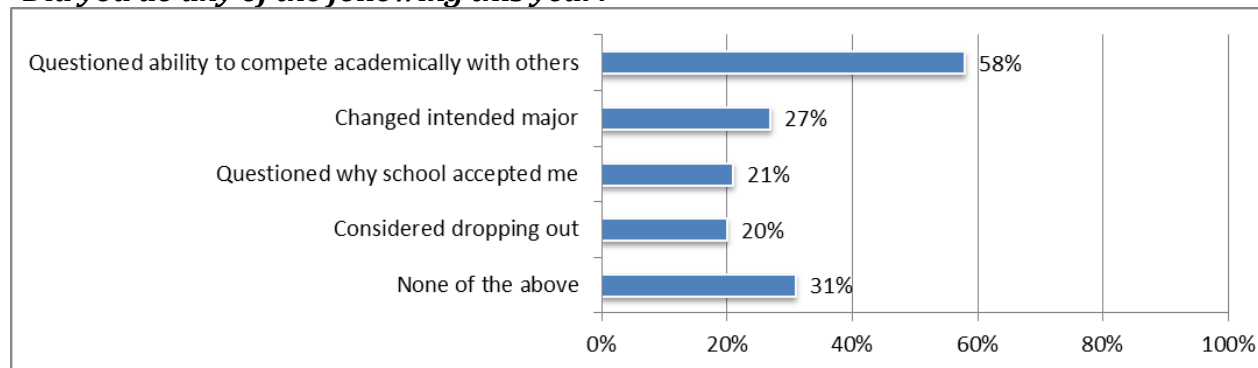
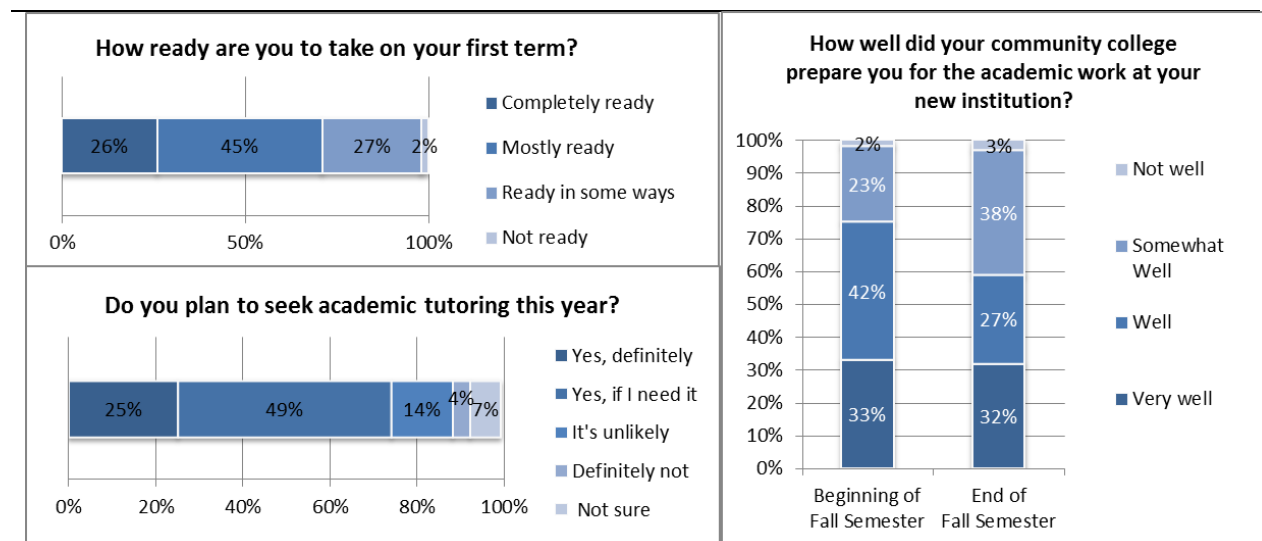


Exhibit 6: Students’ Sense of Readiness at Beginning of Fall Semester



One student, Rick¹, called his community college education a “sham”, and shared:

One of my professors [said to] me, ‘Where did you learn to write like this?’ That was pretty shocking, considering I got As in all of my honors political science classes...I got the highest grade on every single essay that we turned in ...and here, the teacher told me, ‘Where did you learn to write?’ Having those kinds of challenges is really difficult,

¹ All interview participants have pseudonyms.

because, you know, I was held like this kind of genius person over there. And then coming here, it's like you don't even know how to write basic essays.

Many students reported struggling to keep up with the amount of work assigned. While 9 in 10 students reported spending more than 10 hours per week preparing for class and working hard to meet their instructors' expectations, 7 in 10 reported they had at some point come to class without completing readings or assignments. Khulan admitted she earned top grades at her community college with little effort. But reflecting on her first months at the private, large urban university she stated;

I was really shocked, because when I was at community college—I know they are not the same, but before I never really worried about my grades. I don't know. It is like, you know, before you were the top score, and now you are in the middle, and it was like, "Oh, my god! What did I do?"

When prompted to discuss his primary challenges academically, Andrew, a student at a small liberal arts school near his home community shared "I would have to say that managing the workload within the amount of time while still managing working for money left little extra time in the day... So I've had to scale back on the workload to be able to put out a quality of work that I demand of myself."

Andrew shifted his work responsibilities to make room for the academic demands. Other students like Martha altered study habits to meet the new expectations.

I found out that I didn't know how to read, so one of my friends from the same school, from the same community college, told me that I shouldn't read every single line, every single word. That I should basically skim through and get the main point out of the reading, so that's how I've been able to like get by and participate in class and write my paper instead of reading every single word.

For those who struggled academically, adaptation seemed paramount in getting them past those first bad grades and proceeding toward academic success.

Connecting with Faculty and University Resources

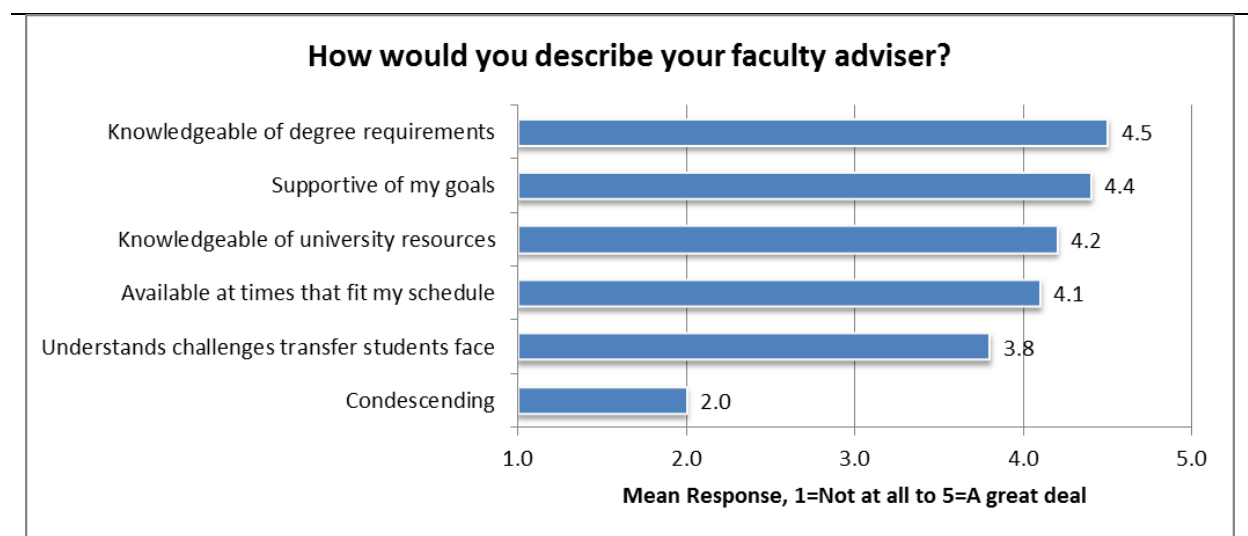
While keeping up with academic work was intense, the majority of students found it relatively easy to connect with faculty. This may reflect good academic networking skills they developed at their community colleges. The transfer students in this study reported high levels of engagement with faculty at their former community colleges; 87 percent said they spoke to their professors outside of class at least once a month. They also knew who to go to within their college's administration when they needed help with an issue (83 percent). Upon arriving at their new institution, the majority of students thus felt relatively comfortable connecting with faculty and navigating access to university resources and the physical campus environment.

In interviews students credited their community college relationships, their age and their natural affinity for the subject matter as drivers of connecting with faculty each term. Unlike other aspects of students' integration, meeting faculty, attending office hours and seeking additional research opportunities with faculty seemed like an easy step in their transition. Anwar's response in the interview to faculty relations reveals the ease and familiarity he had in getting to know faculty. He stated:

I sat down through professor's office hours often, many times, for them to get to know me by first name, last name, and kind of talk to them, you know, ask them questions, ask them what they are expecting, be specific about things that you are responsible maybe or in general, you know, like how to do well in the class, things like that.

At the start of the year, 86 percent of students had been assigned a faculty adviser. Ninety-one percent of the transfer students reported meeting with their faculty advisor at least once during the Fall semester. These students described their adviser as knowledgeable about the university resources and degree requirements, but slightly less understanding of the challenges faced by transfer students (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7: Students' Perceptions of Faculty Advisers



For the interviewees who discussed their adviser, many credited him/her as a key component of their academic integration. They described their adviser as “approachable,” “helpful” and busy but “worth the wait,” and advisers often served as the central administration resource for students, providing advice and insight into the bureaucracy of the school. This was mirrored in survey responses: when asked in the spring semester whether they knew of someone on campus whom they could ask for help if they were facing a challenge, 80 percent of students said yes. Half of them cited their faculty advisor, a third cited another faculty member, and a fifth cited a university administrator or counselor.

This finding is not surprising in light of recent work highlighting the importance of institutional agents for transfer students (Dowd, et al, 2006; Dowd, Pak & Bensimon, 2013). As students in our study sought to navigate their transfer institution, many found the faculty a beacon of assistance and information as they tried to adapt and learn the institution's norms and expectations. For many, feelings of isolation and a lack of connection socially loomed large and was more difficult to navigate than faculty relationships and expectations.

Strategies to Foster Academic Integration

The survey results show that students drew on a variety of supports their first semester to deal with the academic challenges they experienced (Exhibit 8). Strategies included increasing their personal efforts (working hard to meet instructor expectations, asking questions, managing their time better), tapping institutional resources (tutoring centers, teaching assistants), and connecting with other students (study groups).

Analysis of interview data reveal varying trends and strategies regarding students' navigation of the four-year institution system. Academically, students found that relationships with faculty, advisors and teaching assistants helped them transition. One student acknowledged how not having a supportive faculty network might hurt a transfer student; her small elite liberal arts school "is very good about making sure students interact with faculty. At most of the events, faculty are present...you get to have dinner with your professor. I think those kinds of things really made it very easy for me. But at schools that don't offer these types of services, I can see how it would be hard [to interact with faculty]."

The majority of interviewed students reported actively seeking out faculty through office hours, email and other means to make connections, consciously noting it as a necessary strategy to meet their academic goals. For some of these students, they were encountering new territory, never having had to "work so hard" to connect to faculty and other academic resources. Mary compared her efforts to connect with faculty to trying to get a job. She shared:

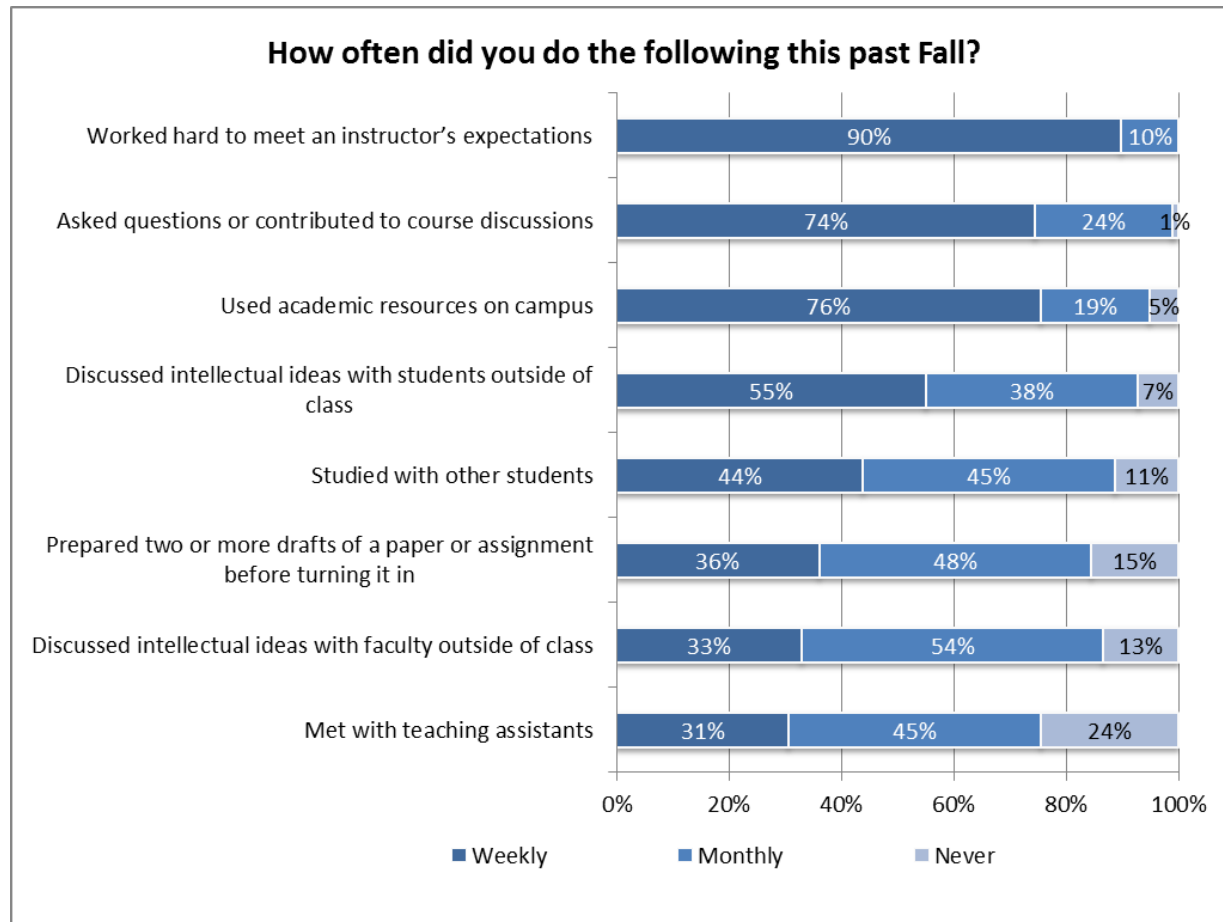
I was diligent with follow-up, sending emails, and sending follow-up emails, and calling during office hours. I felt like I was trying to gain a job or trying to get some kind of privilege outside of the norm. So I was really frustrated. My entire first semester, I was really, really frustrated. It wasn't until probably the last month that I was finally able to connect with the professor that I was trying to connect with, who then kind of gave me some feedback...

Others continued the successful strategies they had employed on the community college campus. Rick, an older student, held a formal role on his community college campus that put him in contact with faculty. He credited that with his ease and comfort engaging with faculty at his new institution. He shared:

I had no problem interacting with anybody, really. So I've always engaged my own professors and I go and meet with them probably every week. And I think that has

been a big part of my success in catching up or trying to catch up to the pace of what you should be at [my public elite university]...

Exhibit 8: Reported strategies for addressing academic challenges



When comparing Rick and Mary's stories, it is noteworthy that they both employed a similar strategy but faced different results. Mary's persistence eventually paid off but it took several months of effort to see change. Rick was instantly rewarded for his efforts, thereby reaffirming it as a worthwhile pursuit.

Despite feeling challenged, questioning their abilities and employing new strategies for success, most students performed well academically. The average grade point average was 3.6, with 90 percent of students maintaining a 3.0 or higher in both semesters. What makes a difference? Descriptive data suggest that students' work ethic upon arrival is more important than the kinds of courses they took at their community college. Students who had taken honors courses on average reported feeling more prepared than those who had not (44% versus 19% felt "Very Well" prepared at the start of the Fall term). However, they were equally likely to earn a 3.0. Students who maintained a 3.0 average, however, were more

likely to report that they asked questions during class, prepared multiple drafts of assignments, and worked hard to meet their instructor's expectations.

A theme of content mastery arose from the interview data. Students elucidated on strategies they employed, especially efforts they were finding successful. Khulan shared her trajectory in her fall semester of "failing" her physics class (she received a B+ as her final grade). In the spring, she found discussing the classwork with fellow students to make a big difference in her success. She shared:

After they teach me, I have to go over the material again and again. But it's not really like it's *yours*. Then for this semester, after I study something and then I discuss with my classmates and then I discuss with the TA, I just feel like it's mine. You know what I mean? It's mine here. It is not something really abstract out there.

Key to Khulan's success and others interviewed was their efforts to keep trying new means by which to be successful students and meet faculty expectations. Time and again, interviewees shared stories of efforts made, assessments obtained (through grades, feedback from teachers or peers) and a reworking of processes for further improvement. Interestingly, these students' perceptions of failure or difficulty was not necessarily reflected in bad grades by the institution's standards but by their own mediated assessment of the quality of work they expected from themselves.

Social Integration

Social integration is aided by informal interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators and is an important factor in continued persistence (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) for college students. Social integration for transfer students hinges on an ability to incorporate into the culture and community of the institution. Often this happens for students through orientation sessions or joining clubs or sports activities. Informal connections frequently happen in the classroom or in other shared spaces or activities. Age differences, employment and family obligations can hinder social integration for transfer students (Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

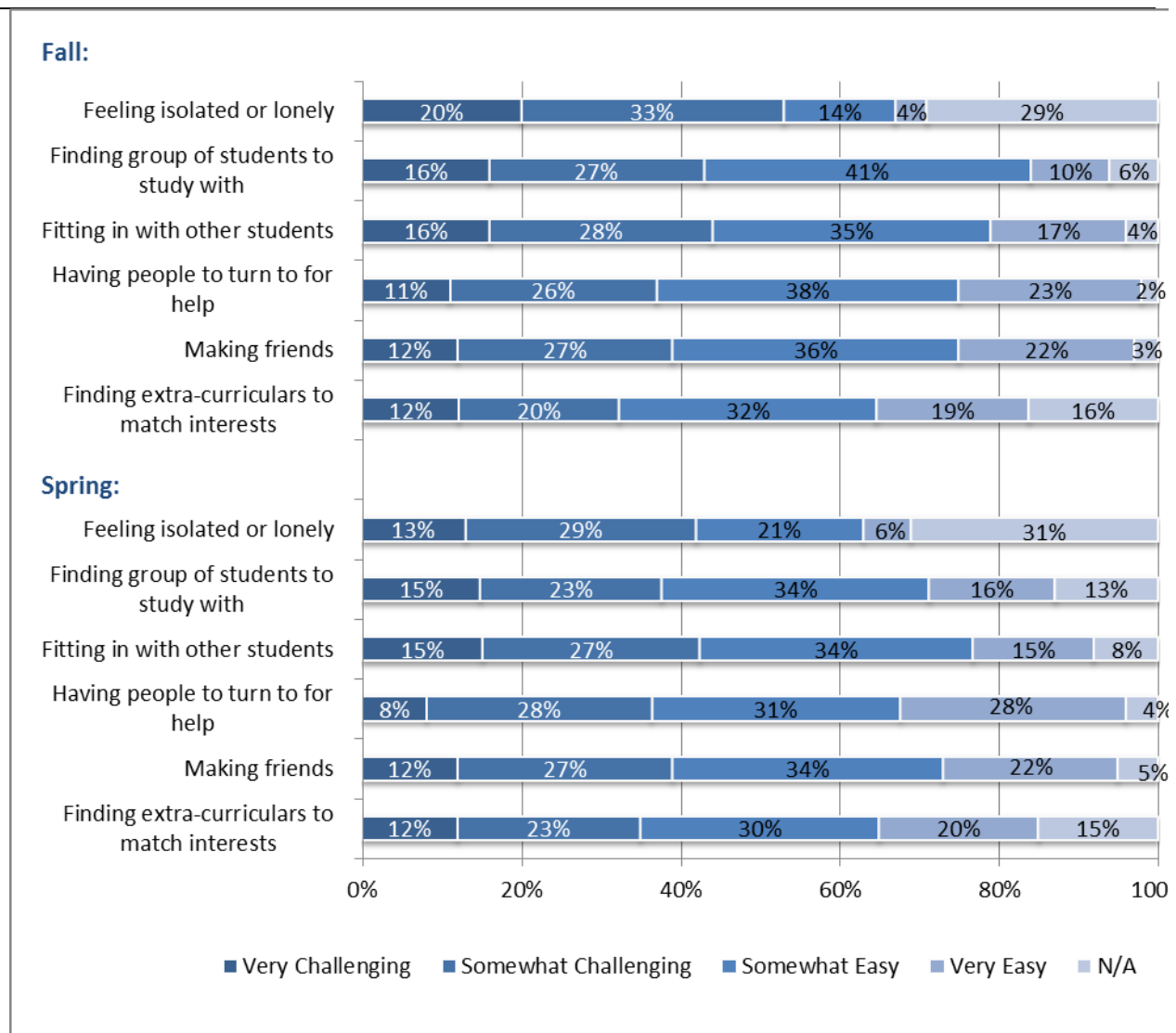
Many students reported feeling lonely or struggling to connect to other students during their first year (Exhibit 9). Furthermore, 67 percent of students rated at least one item as "Very Challenging" at some point during their first year.

The majority of those interviewed had a common narrative of feeling lonely and out of place when they first arrived on their new campus. When the interviews took place, many students discussed the time taken and the challenges they faced in finding their niche. Claudia was stymied by perceptions of intolerance on her new campus and this served as a barrier to making friends and finding a social group. She shared:

I would definitely say that I have had a hard time connecting with other students at the school. I'm at a private institution, and a lot of the students here are coming from

a different economic backgrounds. I guess that's really the way to put it. And so a lot of the comments that they make are... seem – sound intolerant and not very thought out. I don't know. They come off as elitist and arrogant oftentimes, so it has taken time to find those people that don't fit into that kind of norm.

Exhibit 9: Perceived Social Integration Challenges (Fall and Spring Semesters)



Other students were still seeking their place at the school, expressing growing doubt that they would feel comfortable and make friends in their first year. Mary shared:

I just have not found my place there yet. I kind of feel like I'm a zombie just going to classes, going with the flow, and it's not the engaging experience that I had envisioned for myself when I transferred. So I'm really struggling, trying to figure out what is it that I'm not doing, what is it that I'm not taking advantage of, and what

is it that I need to be doing, and maybe I'm being too hard on myself. Maybe that's part of what the expectation is. Maybe I'm trying too hard, I'm not sure.

In many interviews, students discussed perceptions of their own “failings” and the larger sociological context of arriving at a school where many of their peers had already formed friendships as freshmen. Some, like Maria, discussed making progress in connecting socially. She shared, “I feel like I’m connecting more with more students but still [feel] isolated from the inner circle. That’s just something that we all have to deal with....” Maria and some of the others explained their dissatisfaction with not having found a friendship group as they had done so easily at their community college. Maria stated:

I am a completely non-traditional student. And the large majority of students attending are the traditional, out-of-high-school, very young students. And so just to be able to relate with any of them is difficult. So I've tried study groups, but I failed. I tried getting groups together and that failed. I still rely on colleagues from my community college to get together. Some of us have the same majors, and one of them is attending the university that I attend. So I'm still relying on those old connections because I'm having a heck of a time trying to connect to new ones.

Like our findings regarding academic integration, our interviewees reflected back for the most part, on past challenges with a shared hope that the social aspects of their new campus were falling into place.

Strategies to Foster Social Integration

Despite this initial setback, however, many of the students discussed concrete steps they were taking to make connections. Students perceived that just talking with other students after class was the most effective way to get to know other students on campus (Exhibit 10). Joining student clubs and organizations or study groups were also perceived as effective by half of the students in the study.

The transfer students in this study reported that the best mechanisms for integrating into the social student fabric were **academic** in nature. Casual interactions (hanging out, parties, talking within dormitories) were not perceived as effective. Interview data backs up this finding with students discussing using the classroom setting as their primary locus of connecting with students. This may be because students do not identify with other students socially, only academically, and because they perceive other students as being focused on academics. When asked to describe the majority of students at their new institutions, transfer students described other students as coming from backgrounds different from their own and receiving financial support from their parents. They also indicated that students at their institutions spent a lot of time studying and were competitive (Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 10: Most Effective Ways of Getting to Know Other Students

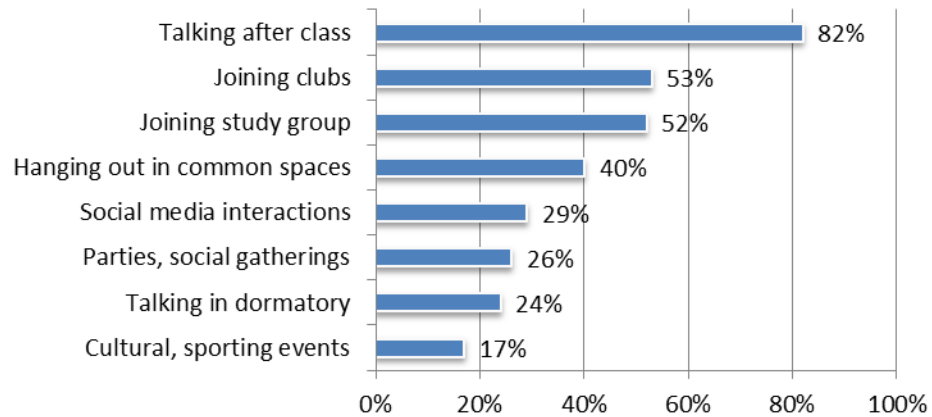
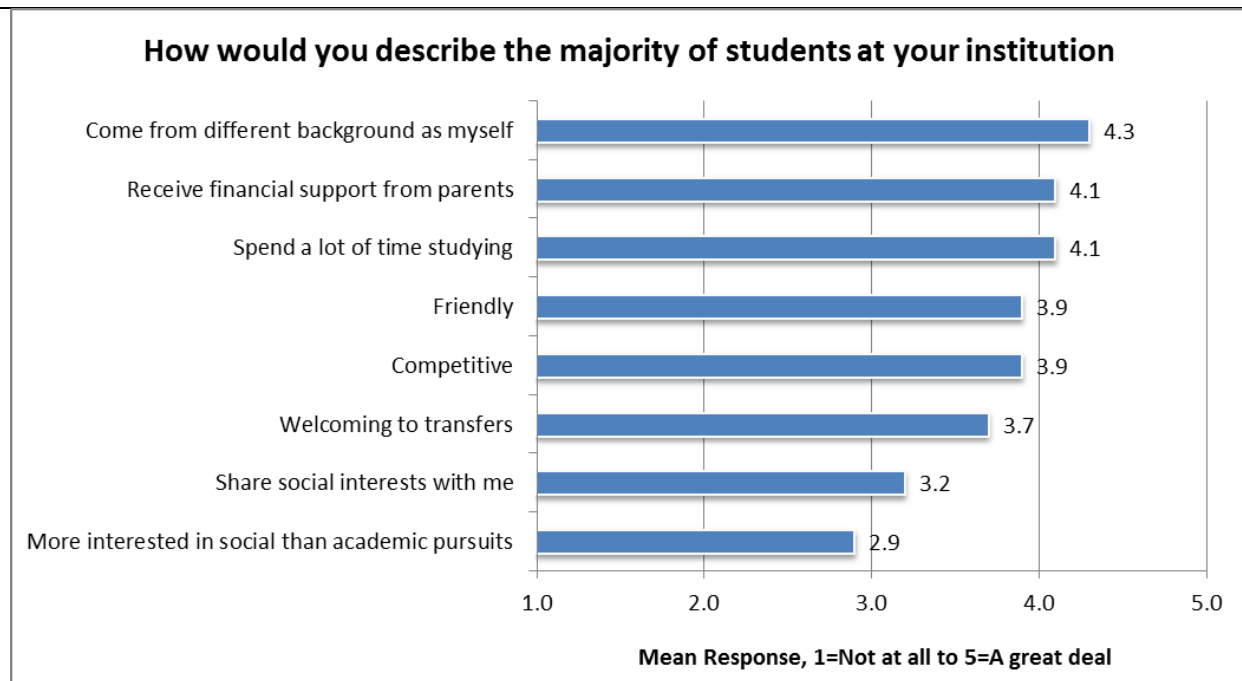


Exhibit 11: Student Perceptions of Other Students at Their Four-Year Institution



In seeking social connections, some students declared little to no interest in making friends at their new school, seeming satisfied with relationships with family and faculty. Others worked hard to find a peer group and a set of college friends with whom they could relate, often including other transfer students because of their shared backgrounds and experiences. Samjhana stated “I do have friends, and they’re also from community colleges... it’s easier connecting with them than the regular [university] students, maybe it’s because of the age difference, I guess, and definitely, common interests as well.”

In addition, 29 percent of students felt that interacting through social media was a helpful way to develop or strengthen peer connections. For some, the institution implemented Facebook groups or other means of reaching out to students by common area of interest (major, transfer, status, dormitory) and for others, they actively created social media connections where none had existed, drumming up study groups or other academic/social outlets. Despite these, and other, navigation strategies students were employing, many revealed that at the beginning of their second semester they were still “in the middle” of the process, having not quite found their footing at their new institution.

Discussion

Returns on college education are clear for both individuals and society. For society’s marginalized individuals (e.g., low income, first generation) education facilitates social mobility. Yet low-income students are less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than their higher-income counterparts. The high-achieving transfer students of our study represent positive success stories of low-income students who are beating the odds. These students, arguably some of the best-prepared students emerging out of the nation’s community colleges, successfully completed their first transfer year while earning good grades. At the same time, however, these students report struggling with the transition. Two thirds of them questioned their ability to complete their degree or their sense of belonging at their institution. One in five considered dropping out (and one actually did). Conventional wisdom holds that if students are good enough to get into a four-year college, the well-resourced environment of the institution will carry them through. And it is likely that the vast majority of these students will graduate. From a college completion standpoint, these students are a success. Yet if our best-prepared community college students perceive transferring to be such a struggle, how much harder is transferring for all the other students who don’t have the same level of preparedness? Is it little wonder that so many of them drop out? The students in our study report using their academic prowess to connect with students at their university, because socially they “don’t fit.” They were less likely to get involved with clubs, sports, or on-campus living. This suggests that institutions interested in better supporting transfer students might focus more on the academic integration as a means for increasing social integration. Fostering student study groups and faculty interactions might better connect transfer students to the university.

Students’ perceptions of the challenges they faced did not significantly diminish between their first and second semesters, which also speaks to the importance of providing institutional support for transfer students throughout the first year, not just at the beginning of the fall term. However most of the interviewees indicated they felt that by mid-Spring semester they were no longer in the midst of their greatest academic difficulties; many had begun employing solutions (e.g., study and time management strategies) in an effort to meet academic demands. Khulan, Rick and others interviewed discussed their stories of adjusting to their “new normal” during their first weeks and months of school. Once the spring semester arrived, they perceived the worst was behind them and that the efforts they were

employing were paying off with stronger grades, greater mastery of the content and richer engagement with faculty.

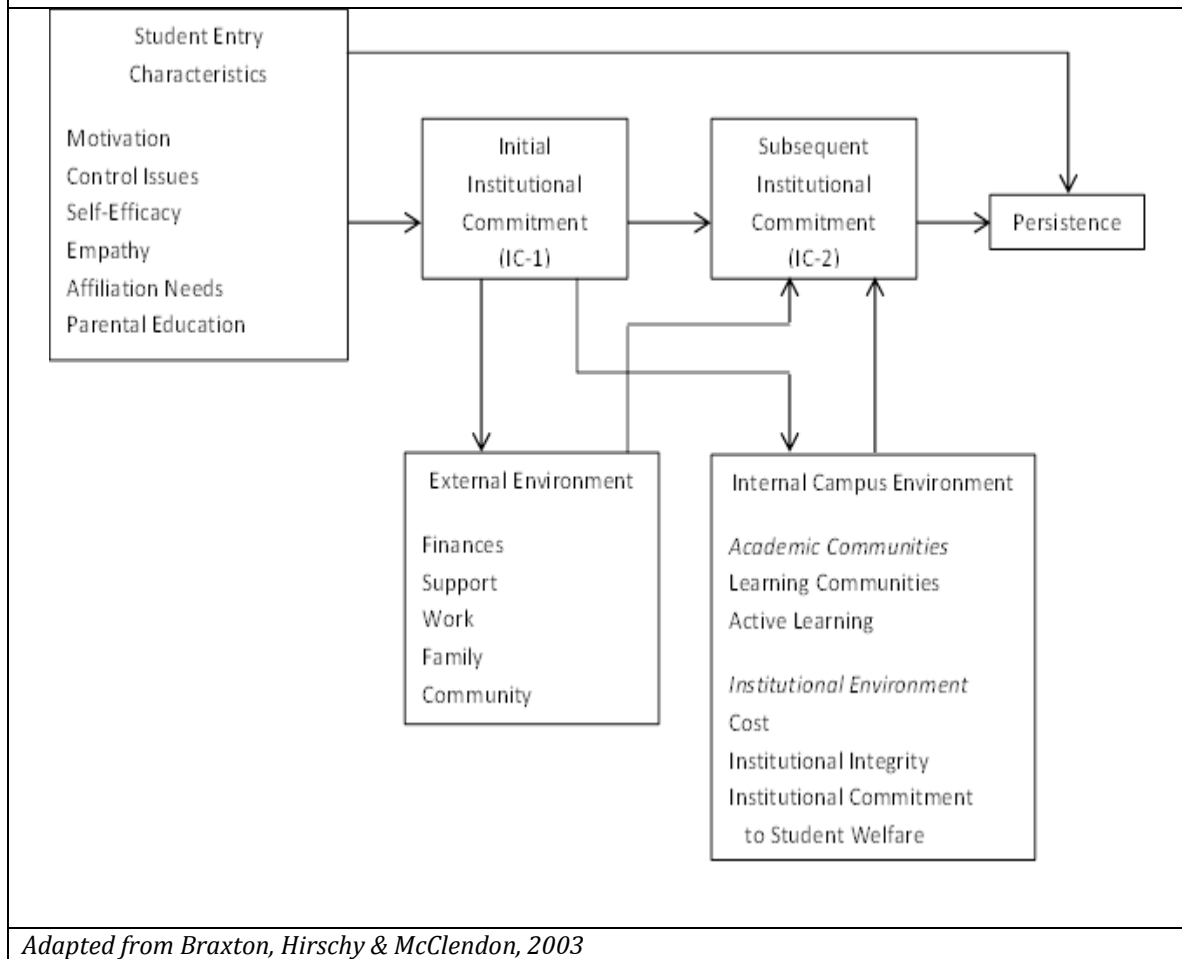
Directions for future study

This paper is the first paper in a series of papers envisioned from this research. In subsequent years we intend to follow students through completion of their bachelor's degree, collecting additional data through surveys and interviews to inform these analyses. We will use these data to explore in more detail the strategies students use to navigate the transfer experience. As the students in our sample are attending a range of institutions, and building on Dowd's finding that transfer students at elite colleges are more likely to graduate, subsequent research will examine the differing experiences of high-achieving low-income transfer students at more (versus less) competitive institutions. We also plan to test Braxton et al.'s theory of student departure with high-achieving, low-income transfer students at four-year institutions, using correlational and regression analyses to examine the relationship between measures of student commitment and students' entry characteristics, external environments, and internal campus environments. Finally, we will examine the role of the TransferUp program in facilitating students' transfer experience and mediating perceived challenges, using the Other Applicants as a quasi-experimental comparison group.

Collectively, these results will inform researchers seeking to understand the transfer experience, and institutional stakeholders at community colleges and four-year institutions as they seek to support the successful transfer and integration of students into the four-year college community. As our nation grapples with its global economic well-being, ensuring that these students achieve their educational goals is not only beneficial for the individuals but our society as well. We cannot allow this intellectual potential to fall through the cracks.

APPENDIX A

A1: Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities



A2: Survey Topics Mapped to Aspects of Conceptual Framework

Three surveys were piloted in Summer 2012 and fielded in September 2012, January 2013, and (pending) June 2013.

Student Entry Characteristics

- *Prior Academic Preparation*
 - Took honors courses at Community College (CC)
 - Degree to which student engaged in campus and academic life at CC
- *Motivation, Control Issues, Self-Efficacy*: Reasons for pursuing a bachelor's degree in general and at the chosen institution
- *Status as a first-generation college going student*
- *Race/ethnicity*
- *Gender*

External Environment (four year institution)

- *Finances* (working, number hours)
- Support perceived from friends and family
- Institutional proximity to home town
- Housing situation (on-campus, off-campus)
- Roommates (family, friends, other students, none)

Internal Campus Environment (Academic Communities)

- Time committed to course work, academic preparation, studying
- Interactions with faculty, teaching assistants, tutoring/library staff, study groups, other students

Internal Campus Environment (Institutional Environment)

- Perceptions of institutional priorities, support for transfer students, student body characteristics
- Engagement with faculty adviser
- Engagement with peer adviser
- Time committed to extracurricular involvement

Institutional Commitment

- Desire to attend chosen institution
- Perceived level of connection to institution
- Questioning degree to which self belongs at institution

Persistence

- Continued enrollment
 - Grades earned
 - Plans to continue in coming year
 - Anticipated graduation date
 - Desire to drop out, change major
-

A3: Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was piloted in Summer 2012 and fielded in December 2012.

Thank you for speaking with me today. The purpose of this call is to learn more about your experiences to date as a transfer student, including what has been easy or challenging, and what has helped you adjust to your new institution. This call should last about 30 minutes. I'll be recording us so that I won't be distracted taking notes; after our call we will transcribe the conversation so that we can review across calls for themes; you will have a chance to review the transcription if you like. Upon conclusion of the study, we will destroy the recording. I and the other Foundation members on the team will review the transcriptions anonymously to identify themes across you and the other students we talk to. We will never identify you by name in anything we report or write about the findings. We may create a pseudonym if we use any data tied specifically to you.

Do you have any questions before I begin?

If yes, answer questions. When ready...

***Jot questions down in case they help us with clarification of our study.**

CHALLENGES

Great. So I have five questions. I'm going to ask you a few framed by all results of the surveys and some tied to your specific responses. OK? We start with discussing challenges and finish with a brief exploration of supports you have...

- 1) So my first question has to do with the academics at your current institution. Our study includes over 100 students who, like yourself, were academic super-stars at their community college and are now working on their bachelor's degree. Would you believe that nearly all of these students – 95% – said that some aspect of the academics at their new institution was challenging, whether that be managing their work load, getting good grades, or being a strong student. Could you talk about why you think this might be? What has been challenging for you, academically?

a) *If they say something has been challenging, get description of their challenges, then ask...*
How are you coping with these challenges? Are you doing anything differently this term to help address this?

OR

- b) *If they say that academics have not been challenging, ask:*
Why do you think the academics have been easy for you?

- 2) Another area that many of the students in our study reported as challenging was interacting with faculty. Over half said they're still trying to find a faculty mentor or connect with faculty members. Have you had any challenges that relate to interacting with faculty members?

a) *If yes* – tell me what's been challenging? How have you dealt with that?

OR

- b) *If no* – tell me why you think this has been easy for you? How have you succeeded in connecting and interacting with faculty members?

A3: Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was piloted in Summer 2012 and fielded in December 2012.

- 3) A third area that many of the students in our study reported as challenging was connecting and interacting with other students at their institution, including fitting in with other students, making friends, or finding students with whom they could study. Can you tell me about your experiences connecting with other students? What has been challenging or easy for you?
- a) *If challenging* – How have you dealt with that?
OR
- b) *If no challenges* – Why do you think it's been easy for you to connect with other students?
- 4) Finally, students on the survey listed other challenges. The main other areas of challenge were: needing to work and balancing the demands of their job with their school work; needing to take care of family members and balancing those demands with their school work; or dealing with mental or physical health issues.
- a) *If this student said one of these three areas (work, family, health) was challenging, then say:* On the survey you indicated that _____ was [very/somewhat] challenging. Could you tell me more about that? What's been challenging and how have you dealt with it?
OR
- b) *If this student did not have any of these areas, then ask:* Aside from these three areas - - academics, interacting with faculty, and interacting with other students - - what would you say has been the biggest adjustment to your new institution? How have you dealt with that?

UNIVERSITY CONNECTIVITY

5. Could you tell me a little bit about what makes you feel connected to your University?
Or, is there something lacking at your university that leads to a sense of disconnect?

Question for TransferUp Scholars Only

If they are living out of state from last year (see survey) then ask:

I notice you are attending a university in a different state than you attended community college. Would you still have gone out of state if you hadn't received the TransferUp scholarship? (Why or why not)

Thank you so much! Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that you think would help me understand what your transfer experience has been like to date?

A4: Coding Scheme for Interview Data

- ❖ Student Entry Characteristics
 - Age
 - Determination
 - Drive
 - International student
 - Parent
 - TransferUp
 - Psychological
 - Self-efficacy
 - Race/Ethnicity
 - Type of transfer student
 - Underrepresented
 - ❖ Challenges
 - Academic
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Family
 - Finances
 - Health
 - Stress
 - Navigating the system
 - Norms and expectations
 - Social
 - Cultural
 - Time Management
 - Transfer Shock
 - Work
 - ❖ Community College and 4 year Dichotomy
 - ❖ External Mediating Factor
 - Family
 - Finances
 - Location
 - Peers
 - TransferUp
 - Scholarship Aid
 - TransferUp
 - ❖ Internal Mediating Factors
 - Academic Support
 - Advising
 - Campus Affinity
 - Alumni Network
 - Transfer Group
 - Course management
 - Dedicated Space
 - Faculty
 - Financial aid
 - Friends
 - Major choice
 - Peers
 - Staff
 - ❖ Personal Touch
 - Lack of
 - ❖ Social Media
 - ❖ Strategy
 - From past
 - New since transfer
 - ❖ Suggestions for practice
 - ❖ Word choice
 - Tied to others
 - Tied to self
-

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