As the traditional college-age population continues to decline, transfer students will become more important in maintaining enrollment levels. Although colleges and universities should expand their focus to include equal efforts to recruit and retain transfers, they continue to ignore them. This study addresses enrollment management issues related to students who transfer to four-year institutions. Further, it makes recommendations for enhancing their recruitment, retention, and student services to ensure that transfers receive the recognition and assistance they deserve.

Our discussion is presented from the point of view of four-year schools and colleges although it can be applied to other institutions. The four questions that formed the basis of this study are listed as follows:

1. What are the historical patterns and trends relating to transfer students in higher education?
2. What are the concerns and issues of both the sending and receiving institutions with regard to transfer students?
3. What are the needs and expectations of transfer students as they enter a new institution?
4. What barriers do transfer students encounter in trying to complete their educational goals?

These questions are answered through a review of the literature, which is centered on higher education services and issues related to enrollment management, and from the perspective of the author’s keen interest in the well-being of transfer students.

**What are the historical patterns and trends relating to transfer students in higher education?**

The traditional route to the baccalaureate degree is no longer the only path to educational attainment. Students have more options than ever before. In fact, the sheer number of options affects their selection of a college or university, which, in turn, affects their progress through higher education. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) report, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the type of institution a student chooses has a significant influence on educational aspirations, persistence, and level of achievement.

Transfer behavior among college students is not uncommon according to Tinto (1987). The case can even be made that some students enter institutions of higher education with the precise intention of leaving prior to completing their degree. Although obvious for two-year college students, it may also be true for those at four-year colleges and universities who are unable to gain admission to their first-choice institution. Tinto further states that either type of student may enter a particular institution as a short-term step to a long-term goal.

The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (2002) indicates that of the more than eleven million students involved in postsecondary education, approximately 5.9 million attended public four-year institutions and 5.3 million chose public two-year institutions. Although the enrollment is split fairly evenly, the number of degrees awarded is not. About 560,000 associate degrees were awarded as compared to 1.2 million bachelor’s degrees. Forecasting to the year 2012, the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac does not show any substantial change in the current trend, leaving little or no obvious explanation for the significant difference between enrollment and degrees awarded.

National statistics also indicate that students who transfer to four-year institutions are somewhat less likely to complete baccalaureate degrees than students of similar age who remain in their original college choice. However, it is not reasonable to assume that this is the result of deficiencies in academics, skills, or motivation. Students who voluntarily...
withdraw might well be intelligent, motivated, and more concerned with educational goals and achievement than those who persist at one institution. Their departure may, in fact, correspond to a need or desire to discover an environment that is academically more challenging (Tinto 1987).

**What are the concerns and issues of both the sending and receiving institutions with regard to transfer students?**

The overriding concern of four-year institutions is the community college’s open-door admission policy. It is one of their most contentious, yet misunderstood characteristics. It has led the universities to label them as second-rate because they allow students to attend regardless of prior educational experience or demonstrated competencies. From the community college perspective, however, their admission policies reflect the need for access. Open-door admission provides opportunities at a two-year institution for any student to engage in learning who is capable of benefiting from this learning experience (Eaton 1994). With open admission, community colleges have provided a right of entry into a system that has not always given admittance to all who seek access. Cohen, Brawer, and Lombardi (1971) state that the community college’s “multipurpose comprehensiveness offers something for all who attend; it meets the needs of almost any student who can articulate them” (pp. 11-12).

Academic ability is a valid concern for the four-year schools and colleges who believe that community colleges have made it too simple for students to obtain access to educational institutions. It is also a subject of contention within the two-year institutions. In fact, the literature does suggest that students often experience “transfer shock” (Cohen and Brawer 1996; Eaton 1994; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Tinto 1987) during their first semester at a four-year institution. Cohen and Brawer (1996) described the situation:

> The reasons that students transferring to universities have had a difficult time there can only be surmised. Transfers may have satisfactorily completed their distribution requirements at the community colleges but could not do as well when they entered the specialized courses at the universities. Community colleges may be passing students who would have failed or dropped out of the freshman and sophomore classes in the senior institutions. And, as a group, the community college students were undoubtedly less able at the beginning (p. 65).

There is much discussion in the literature about the academic preparation of transfer students. Astin (1985) contends that the atmosphere at community colleges is not conducive to students who aspire to a bachelor’s degree. It is dominated by technical or vocational programs, and often, students involved in these programs are not interested in degree achievement. He further added that although community colleges downplay their importance in the transfer function, it remains an integral part of educating students who desire to pursue higher degrees.

The literature also describes a “cooling out” that seems to occur at the community college level (Cohen and Brawer 1996; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). This process attempts to lower the aspirations of individuals who may have initially desired a baccalaureate degree. What once may have been an aim to achieve educational goals at a four-year institution turns into a complacent satisfaction with enrollment at a community college. This initial enrollment misdirects students, making them no longer interested in pursuing a four-year degree or leaves them with a completed terminal vocational or occupational degree that will not assist them in achieving a bachelor’s degree. Many of these students must begin anew at a four-year institution when little or no credit in transfer is applicable to their four-year degree program.

According to Eaton (1994) community colleges have failed to provide a liberal arts foundation that facilitates transfer. Although their curriculum may be considered adequate, it is a weak foundation for students who will be advancing to higher academic pursuits. This could be a result of various challenges including the limitations involved with serving minority or low-income students or the difficulties of sustaining college-level standards.

Tinto (1987) believes that two-year colleges should attempt to provide coursework that serves as the equivalent of study in most four-year institutions: “Two-year colleges should concentrate on improving the academic quality of their programs to match, if not exceed, those offered in the four-year sector” (p. 197). Though this will not be relevant to all students, it may influence others to complete a full two years, usually at a lower cost, before moving on to a four-year institution.

In addition to academic standards, four-year institutions view community colleges as inadequate because of the lack of faculty and student involvement in campus activities. Astin (1993) again informs us that:

> ...the absence of any pressure to participate in the campus life might all be regarded as important conveniences by the adult student who needs a few more credits for a degree or who is pursuing a vocational credential, but the recent high school graduate who is pursuing the baccalaureate degree on a full-time basis pays a heavy price. The most obvious manifestation of the problem is that 18-22-year-olds attending a community and other types of commuter institution drop out of college at much higher rates than would be expected from their abilities, aspirations, and family backgrounds (p. 417).

He argues further that community colleges cannot and will not be successful because the achievement of a bachelor’s degree is less likely for those who begin their educational career in a community college than in a four-year institution. Tinto (1987) further substantiates this idea by stating: “Two-year college students, like commuting students generally, are much more likely to be working while in college, attending part-time rather than full-time, and/or living at home while in college than are students in the four-year sector. They, too,
are likely to experience a wide range of competing external pressures on their time and energies and to be unable to spend significant amounts of time on campus interacting with other students and members of the staff" (p. 78).

There is no evidence to dispute the fact that two-year community colleges, when compared with predominantly residential four-year institutions, offer a substandard social and intellectual life. The research also indicates that the type of student who matriculates in two-year colleges often has little time and/or little ambition to participate in campus activities. Tinto describes as well the difficulties transfers experience when they do try to connect with campus constituencies. However, he believes there is no reason that two-year institutions should do any less to provide quality educational experiences to their students than do four-year institutions.

**What are the needs and expectations of transfer students as they enter a new institution?**

The transfer process goes beyond simply attending a community college and then enrolling at a four-year institution. It should include academic and social integration into the new institution. Community colleges and baccalaureate institutions need to understand the choices transfer students make as well as their academic needs and interests, educational goals, and how they differ from other types of students in the areas of recruitment and retention. Issues like the acceptance or denial of credit, acclimation to a new setting, and availability of financial aid and scholarships all significantly affect the transfer student.

Tinto (1987) and Astin (1975) both stress the significance of goodness of fit between the student and the institution's environment. Astin encourages the development of programs that will support a smooth transition. He states that, "One obvious problem is that students who enroll after the freshman year in collegiate institutions with a tradition of yearly classes beginning as freshmen and continuing through graduation are, in effect, interlopers in an existing student culture" (p.154).

Faculty and staff would serve students well by advising them to examine their expectations of a new institution. Integration into the culture means providing many opportunities for transfers to become connected, along with strategies to help them become aware of and benefit from those opportunities.

Students need to be informed of the particular problems encountered by transfers while also being made aware of the services and programs available to help them become part of the campus culture. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) corroborate this idea by stating, “Beyond the obvious importance of academic achievement, the weight of evidence also suggests that one’s level of involvement or integration in an institution’s social system has significant implications for attainment” (p. 418). Academic and social integration are essential in contributing to the success of transfer students. A proactive approach to the incorporation of students into the institutional culture may consist, in part, of academic advisement and campus orientation programming.

In the literature, the most significant needs for transfer students were identified as effective advisement before, during, and after the transfer process, and targeted orientation programs. They want information about the transfer process that will help them plan their programs of study at the community college and facilitate a smooth transition into a four-year college or university. Alpern (2000) states that increasingly more students are choosing to begin their post-secondary education at a two-year or community college with the intention of transferring to a baccalaureate institution to complete their educational goals. If the information they receive is accurate and students are able to move through the process with minor difficulties, they will be more satisfied with the baccalaureate institution. Alpern further states that if students experienced difficulty in transferring credits or if they received inaccurate information, which resulted in having to complete additional coursework, they were not satisfied with the institutional support offered.

Tinto (1987) substantiates this claim and offers the following suggestion for two-year colleges, “They (community colleges) should take as a given, the desire of some students to transfer whenever possible to four-year institutions and should strive to provide those students with the advice, counseling, and assistance needed to make those transfers possible” (p. 197). Student interests should be the primary concern while institutional interests should always be secondary. By taking this approach, Tinto further states that students may be more likely to choose a two-year rather than a four-year institution when making their initial choice.

Closely related to the ideas of integration and advisement is the need for targeted orientation programs that integrate students into their new academic and social setting. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) describe orientation programs as an opportunity to introduce students to services, academic programs, and career planning, and as a chance for them to meet faculty in an informal setting. Noel (1985) suggests that orientation be linked with advisement programs that assist students in the registration process and continue to follow them through the critical first term of enrollment. Advising should also address uninform or unrealistic expectations students may hold and explain the institution’s academic demands and how college life is different from the other institutions they have attended.

Tinto (1987) expressed strong feelings about orientation programs for transfers.

It also follows that retention programs for transfer students should strive to provide those students with the same sorts of services and programs that first-time students typically receive. This means that orientation programs may have to be offered more than once a year so as to capture those students who enter the institutions after the beginning of the regular school year. It may also mean that transfer students should be provided orientation and contact programs specifically tailored to their needs and interests, namely the meet-
ing of students and faculty whom they are likely to encounter in their remaining years. This is still not a common occurrence. In the relatively few cases where transfer students are provided an orientation program, it is more often the case that this orientation is the same one provided to incoming freshmen. Transfer students are often channeled through those programs together with freshmen as if their needs and interests were identical. Here at least there is much that remains to be done to assist student retention (pp. 190–191).

Through practice, policy, and academic and social environments, institutions can and do affect the quality and success of the transfer student transition. Therefore, we must seek to understand the transfer student and present as few barriers as possible during the transfer process.

**What barriers do transfer students encounter in trying to complete their educational goals?**

Institutions assume that they have done this all before, but these generalizations may leave transfer students feeling confused or apprehensive. They are in a unique situation, and the transfer process is much different from the freshman's first year.

Noel (1985) identified some of the barriers to student success at an institution: academic boredom, indecision about a major, inability to transition, academic difficulties, unrealistic expectations of college, academic underpreparedness, lack of goals, or incompatibility. Other challenges students may encounter are change in institutional size, location, level of curriculum, or cost. It is essential that institutions address individual student needs and attempt to reduce those barriers within their control, which consist of, but are not limited to, academic advisement and articulation, support systems, economic support, and transitional assistance.

Little attention is given to the academic needs and interests of transfer students, specifically, the transferability of credits. Cohen and Brawer (1996) speak to this process saying, “The most pervasive and long-lived issue in community colleges is the extent to which their courses are accepted by universities” (p. 309). Universities have long dominated over two-year institutions by specifying what they accept for transfer credit. It has been a consistent pattern that when a two-year institution changes its curriculum, it has been in response to a nearby university changing their requirements for graduation. Even as late as the 1990s, one of the biggest challenges was to determine which courses taken at a two-year institution would be acceptable for graduation credit in which university. While most liberal arts courses are accepted, courses of a vocational or technical nature vary from university to university. Cohen and Brawer reported that some university departments may even require alternative coursework. Although the credits may be accepted in transfer, it does not guarantee that they can be used for admission to a particular program or apply towards a degree.

The lack of transitional assistance is yet another barrier for transfer students. A new environment, change in curricular focus, or difficulty integrating are just a few impediments that inhibit success of transfer students. Tinto (1987) believes this may be as much an institutional omission as deliberate policy. He sees the failure to provide transfer students with their own orientation programs as an unfortunate omission by many institutions. Transfer students are often socially and academically isolated when entering a four-year institution. Tinto says further that, unfortunately, these students are not integrated into the institution to the extent of first-time or native four-year students.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also believe there are many barriers in the path of transfer student achievement. They list several issues that need attention from four-year institutions including more flexible admission procedures, admissions criteria not solely based on test scores and prior academic records, adaptable transfer credit policies, access to more and varied forms of financial aid, sustained academic and other varied support programs, and curriculum that offers remedial coursework.

**Recommendations for Change**

In the review of literature, there were four over-arching concepts: orientation, advisement, academic preparedness, and data collection. These will be the main focus of the recommendations offered to colleges and universities.

- **Recommendation 1:** Colleges and universities should provide orientation programs for transfer students that focus on their needs and are separate, but equal to, those offered for incoming freshmen.

  The lack of orientation programming appropriate for transfer students was a pervasive theme in the literature, and substantial arguments were made for effective orientation programming by Tinto (1987) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Any institution with a significant transfer population (as defined by the institution) should offer a separate transfer student orientation. The transition to a four-year institution may often be intimidating, and little assistance is provided to help transfers find their way at a new institution.

  Orientation programs should also be continuous, especially during the first critical semester. The assistance of currently enrolled students, who originally came to the institution as transfer students, could provide a vital link for new students. They could help with integration, provide mentorship, and convey a sense of community and connectedness. This notion is supported in the literature by Astin (1975) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991).

- **Recommendation 2:** Appropriate student advising at both the sending and receiving institutions is critical to potential transfer students.

  Noel (1985) talked about linking advisement with orientation. While both sending and receiving institutions generally offer some type of advisement, the system does not allow for a smooth transition. Students need advisement and guidance in the various stages of transfer such
as pre-transfer, in-process, and post-transfer. Those who advise students in transfer, both at two-year and four-year colleges and universities, need to be cognizant of student issues such as changes in environment, unrealistic beliefs, and academic expectations. Faculty and staff at each institution should develop a collaborative advising approach that creates student awareness of particular differences in grading, academic rigor, instruction, student services, and the social environment. Programs or services offered to transfer students could include a transitional or bridge program, financial aid and scholarship seminars, or even something as simple as extended office hours to provide assistance with a variety of student services.

**Recommendation 3:** Academic expectations and the campus climate should be conveyed in clear, concise terms to help students make informed decisions and understand the differences in institutional types.

Advisement sessions with students, both at sending and receiving institutions, should consist of more than a simple exchange about courses and registration. Seldom are academic expectations and institutional climate addressed in campus literature or in conversations with prospective students. There is a definite need for students to discuss differences in institutions in relation to academic rigor, curricular focus, transition, and social environment. Collaborative advisement before, during, and after the transfer process will provide students the opportunity to make informed decisions and encounter few surprises as they begin a new and different academic career.

**Recommendation 4:** Institutions need to gather data about the retention and success of students transferring into their college or university since there is little information beyond enrollment numbers. Four-year schools and colleges should define the transfer population and identify indicators of institutional success and areas of concern. Such data collection should focus on persistence to graduation and on the identification of barriers and concerns of transfer students in the completion of their educational goals. Without sufficient information, we are unable to make accurate assessments about their performance, persistence, and enrollment patterns.

Looking at the research from Astin (1985), Tinto (1987), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Cohen and Brawer (1996), there are still no specific studies that relate solely to the transfer student. When they have been done, they usually only identify student performance. In order to do effective planning and strategizing, we need to determine the extent of their needs, why they exist, and what can we do to meet them.

**Recommendation 5:** Institutions should actively and directly recruit and work to retain transfer students through enrollment management practices that are targeted to transfer students.

Enrollment management issues related to transfer students that should be addressed more comprehensively include: scholarship amounts, allocated recruitment dollars, tailored publications, targeted marketing, and the identification of students at risk for attrition. There is substantial inequity in all these areas for transfer students. The literature does not contain any recommendations for the remedy of these matters but does indicate they are barriers to success when students engage in the transfer process.

In conclusion, transfer students are a necessary and vital part of our campus communities. Unfortunately, many organizational cultures are still more concerned with recruiting and addressing the needs of the traditional freshman. As that population declines in certain geographic areas and will continue its downward slide in years to come, transfer students will become more important in maintaining enrollment levels. We need to be ready to help them reach their goals.

**References**


**About the Author**

Heidi Kippenhan is currently the Director of Admissions at the University of North Dakota. She has a BSED in Elementary/Special Education, and an M.S. in Educational Leadership. Her experience with admission of transfer students to a four-year public university and a keen interest in the well-being of transfer students led to the article presented.