

Practices from the Field Exploring the Needs/Impact of Non-traditional Transfer Students Participating in a Discipline-Based Learning Community

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Abstract

The landscape for higher education has never been more challenging. In the last four decades higher education in the United States has been transformed through a dramatic increase in the number and types of colleges and universities and with that comes a student body that is increasingly more diverse (Lord et al. 2012; Smith, et. al. 2004). For example, today's typical college student is no longer an 18-year-old recent high-school graduate who enrolls full-time and has limited work and family obligations. Students today are older, more diverse and have more work and family obligations to balance (National Center for Education Statistics 2012; Choy 2002). Further, the lines between community colleges and universities are becoming more blurred as more and more students move back and forth between two year and four-year institutions. This research explores the impact of a disciplinary specific learning community that was designed to meet the needs of transfer students. Specifically, the research focuses attention on the stressors faced by traditional and nontraditional transfer students.

The Problem

There are approximately 1200 community colleges across the United States, enrolling about 13 million students, causing the potential number of transfer students entering four year colleges and universities to be significant (AACC, 2000). The result is a considerable number of students who are falling into the “vulnerable” category: low retention and graduation rates (Coston, Lord & Monell, 2011). There are also growing numbers of students who transfer from four-year colleges and universities (Weir 2009). Weir (2009:5) further asserts that 60% of our college students transfer from at least one college or university and that about half of the 60% are non-traditional students. The demographic changes are also occurring at a time when colleges and universities are facing enormous political and financial challenges. As a result, higher education administrators are placing greater attention on student retention and graduation rates as indicators of success. Furthermore, there is increasing concern ensuring that undergraduate students are prepared for a rapidly changing world.

There has been a growing emphasis on redesigning curricula to ensure that undergraduate students are having opportunities for “deeper” learning (Kuh, Krintze & Whitt, 2012; Buch & Spaulding 2008). Thus, one of the trends in higher education is to develop more intentional, structured opportunities for undergraduate students to more easily connect the in-class and out-of-class educational experiences with the intent of providing students with a richer educational experience. Additionally, there is growing consensus that one way to enhance student retention and graduation rates is to provide opportunities for students to develop connections – connections to the university, to staff and faculty, and to their fellow peers (Lord, et. al., 2012; Kuh et al. 2010).

This paper focuses attention on a learning community that was developed to meet the specific needs of students who transfer from a community college to a four-year research-intensive university. This is important because most previous research on LCs focus attention on programs designed for first year students (Lord et al. 2012; Pennington 2014). Second, this study examines a disciplinary specific learning community – one designed for students majoring in criminal justice & criminology. Research on the impact of discipline-specific LCs has been very limited (Lord et al., 2011; Buch & Spaulding, 2008a; Dabney, Green, & Topalli 2006) and only three previous studies focused exclusively on an LC within the criminal justice discipline (Lord et al. 2012; Coston et al., 2011; Dabney, Green, & Topalli 2006). Within the major of criminal justice/criminology, the large numbers of transfer students to four-year academic institutions are particularly prominent (Lord et al. 2011; Fredrickson 1998; Townsend 2006). Third, this research examines academic outcomes of the specific needs of nontraditional transfer students, an area that has not received much attention in the literature on learning communities. Finally, we explore nontraditional and traditional transfer student participants' level of identified stressors associated with the transfer experience during their participation in our LC program.

Addressing the Needs of Transfer Students at UNC Charlotte

Each year the University of North Carolina at Charlotte welcomes about 2,700 new transfer students to our campus, the highest number of new transfer students enrolled in the UNC system (Fact Book, 2009). Regardless of their prior experiences, all transfer students face significant adjustment/transition issues. The shift from one institution to another can be particularly challenging for those students who move from a community college to a four-year research university. Although the four-year university may offer more services than two-year schools, students may need help navigating the system and obtaining information about the resources, the procedures needed to request services, related fees, and location of services (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Further, a large proportion of students coming from community colleges hold full- or part-time jobs while attending school, and many have family and personal responsibilities that place additional burdens on them. As a result, many transfer students feel isolated and have difficulties connecting with other students and faculty.

Overall UNC Charlotte's first-year retention rates for transfer students have consistently been lower than the retention rates for native students (e.g., those arriving at UNC Charlotte as freshmen). In short, it appears that retaining transfer students beyond their first year is more difficult than retaining native students after their first year. Thus, the administration wanted to develop programs that would best assist transfer students. The university already had a myriad of programs focusing on the traditional freshman student (such as freshman seminars and learning communities), but there was concern that more attention needed to be placed on the specific needs of transfer students. The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at UNC Charlotte might be a unique unit in terms of transfer students. Approximately 8.9 percent of the student population entering UNC Charlotte in Fallfall 2006 were transfer students, and approximately 52 percent of the majors entering Criminal Justice are transfer students. Many of these students also have low retention rates.

Program Employed to Address the Problem

The Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students (CJLC) was launched in fall 2008. The CJLC is a yearlong, voluntary program designed to enhance transfer criminal justice majors' academic and social transition to the university generally and to the criminal justice major specifically. Most of the LCs at this university are living-learning communities in which students are housed together in one residence hall. Because many criminal justice students transfer from community colleges and tend to be slightly older than typical undergraduate students, participants in this LC were not required to live on campus. The inaugural program consisted of 13 students and yielded interesting descriptive data. Over the last five years this program has grown to 100 past participants.

A learning community is a cutting-edge academic undergraduate learning program that strives to promote student success. Learning communities are designed to help students transition through academic and social challenges by providing small, supportive living and learning environments. LCs helps reduce the lost and isolated feeling that is common among new students entering a large university. The past 20 years demonstrate that LCs are effective and can be substantial levers for institutional change and improvement (Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003). A growing body of research suggests that LCs significantly impact student development, academic performance, and attitudes and perceptions.

Several studies have linked LCs to desired outcomes of college, including greater levels of intellectual and social development, more cocurricular involvement and engagement, and higher grades and persistence rates (La Vine & Mitchell, 2006; MacGregor, 1991; Pastors, 2006; Tinto, 1997). Other results suggest that participation in an LC does not affect students directly in these three areas but rather has an indirect relationship by facilitating growth in these areas (Buch & Spaulding, 2008b; Eck, Edge, & Stephenson, 2007).

Students in the Transfer Criminal Justice Learning Community are required to take a sequence of two learning seminar courses. In addition, students are blocked scheduled into some of the required courses for the major (Introduction to Criminal Justice, Statistics for the Social Sciences, Criminal Justice Theory and Research Methods). There is also a requirement that students participate in structured study groups for these courses.

The first LC seminar course is designed to provide the transfer students with knowledge about university support systems and to immerse them into the culture of the Criminal Justice & Criminology Department. Because the LC students are upperclassmen, the second LC seminar course has a service-learning component where they gain familiarity with a variety of criminal justice agencies in the Charlotte area as a way to help them to explore career opportunities and gain practical field experience. Throughout this course, the Learning Community students are required to volunteer for 25 hours with a criminal justice related agency of their choice. During this course students meet with professionals from the University's Career Center to discuss topics such as job interviewing skills, resume writing, professional appearance, and other job related skills. Lastly, the students are instructed to interview a professor within the Criminal Justice Department in an attempt to acquaint them with the professors' service, teaching and research initiatives. Students who complete the yearlong program receive six criminal justice electives, as well as three credits towards their mandatory writing and three credits toward their oral communication general education requirements.

Non-Traditional Students

As a subgroup of students within this transfer student population, the non-traditional student is an especially at-risk population when it comes to retention and graduation (Lord et al. 2011). Most curricula and programming in four-year universities are geared toward the needs of the "traditional" undergraduate – one who is characterized as being between 18-22 years old, enrolls in college immediately after completing their high school degree, is financially dependent on their parents, and either does not work during the school year or works part time. Yet, the reality is that traditional 18-22 year-old students are now the minority in higher education. In 1999–2000, just 27 percent of undergraduates met all of these criteria. As of 2008, more than a third of undergraduate students were over the age of 25 (Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) there are 17.6 million undergraduates. Thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in higher education are over the age of 25 and 25 percent are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another twenty-three percent by 2019.

Although there is no set definition for what constitutes a nontraditional student, common characteristics for nontraditional status includes: financial independence, part-time attendance, delayed enrollment, full-time work, dependents, single parenthood, and lack of a high school diploma (Coston et al. 2011; Choy, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) determined that a student is considered to be "minimally non-traditional" if they meet one of the requirements below, "moderately non-traditional" by meeting two or three, and "highly non-traditional" by meeting four or more of the following characteristics:

1. Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school).
2. Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year.
3. Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled.
4. Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid.
5. Have dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others).
6. Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents).
7. Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Although non-traditional students face stressors that the typical college student faces (such as expense of books and a high amount of academic schoolwork), non-traditional students often face additional stressors that the typical college student does not undertake.

These stressors include factors such as commuting, parking, choosing the right major, balancing full time work with studying, acclimating to the U.S. after military deployment, being a single parent or having other dependents, or being older than the majority of the other students in their classes. All or any one of these stressors can lead a non-traditional student to have feelings of loneliness or alienation.

Observations

The population from which the following observations were made is comprised of all 100 students who have been enrolled in the Criminal Justice Department's Learning Community for Transfer Students from its inception in 2008 through 2012. Data were gathered using secondary data analyses from university records. This included information on the demographic and background information of each student, academic grades before, during, and after their participation, and G.P.A at the time of graduation for those who had earned their Bachelor degrees. The purpose of the current research is to provide an exploratory analysis that examines whether non-traditional students differ from traditional aged student in terms of their demographic characteristics (such as age and race), the type of institution transferred from, their major, grades earned in required CJ courses along with their grade point average at the time of graduation. Additionally, this study examines the personal, academic, and work-related stressors impacting students, and the rankings of their stressors during their participation in the LC program.

Stressors

At the beginning of the first semester both traditional and nontraditional students were instructed to identify a personal stressor that they believed would inhibit their successful transition into the university. After identifying that stressor, they were then asked to rate the intensity of that stressor, using a six-item Likert-type scale that ranged from 0 (no stress) to 5 (extremely stressful). The students then rated this academic stressor again at the beginning of the second term, and then again at the end of the academic year. Consequently, the 100 students rated their stressors at three different periods during their learning community experience: the beginning, midway, and at the end.

Stressors for this study are grouped into three separate categories: personal, academic, and work-related. Examples of personal stressors include, but are not limited to, commuting, health problems, or financial aid. Examples of academic stressors include, but are not limited to, transferring credits and learning a new campus. Work-related stressors include, but are not limited to, balancing their academic schoolwork while also working full time. Unfortunately, there was not a control group of transfer students who participated in the study. However, those transfer students who participated in the study were asked if their stressors were reduced was it due to their participation in the LC. This practice from the field lays the groundwork for more rigorous explanatory studies in the areas of stressors among LC participants.

Results

Prior to explaining the results of the stressors, one must view the descriptive characteristics of the LC student population. A student's race, gender, age, as well as the type of institutions that they transferred from, and status of whether they are a pre-major or major or past transfer status can impact stressors. Therefore, all of these variables were taken into account in this study.

Table 1 provides descriptive information on the LC participants. These results separately examine non-traditional and traditional students in the LC.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics LC Participants

	<u>Non-traditional Students</u> (N=53)		<u>Traditional Students</u> (N=47)	
	f	%	f	%
Race*				
White	30	57	24	51
Black	15	28	18	38
Hispanic	7	13	2	4
International	1	2	3	6
Gender				
Male	24	45	23	49
Female	29	55	24	51
Type of Institution Transferred				
2 Year College	36	68	25	53
4 Year University	14	26	15	32
Multiple Transfers	3	6	5	11
Median age (and standard deviation) of transfer students	25 (2.1)		21(2)	
Status of Major*				
Pre Majors	32	68	41	77
Majors	12	23	12	23
Past Transfer Status				
< two year degree	44	85	39	83
two year degree	8	15	6	13
Four year degree	-	-	1	2
Type of College				
Community College	36	68	25	53
4 year College	14	26	15	32
4 year University	3	6	7	14

*Non- US citizens: one nontraditional student was from Brazil. One student was from Africa and two students were from Asia comprised the traditional student population. Students who do not have all requirements for entry to the major are first admitted as “pre-majors”.

Results indicate that most participants were white males regardless of whether they were in the traditional or nontraditional participant group. Most of the non-traditional students transferred from two-year community colleges. The non-traditional and traditional students did not differ much in terms of whether they came to UNC Charlotte as a criminal justice major or pre-major.

Table 2 provides information on the academic performance for both the traditional and non-traditional students.

Table 2: Median Grade Point Averages (GPA) in Required Classes

	<u>Non-traditional Students</u> (N=53)	<u>Traditional Students</u> (N=47)
Intro CJ	3	2
Statistics	3	2
CJ Theory	3.5	3
Research Methods	3.5	3
GPA at Graduation	2.9	2.9

Note: Percentages may not round to 100 due to missing values.

Comparisons of the Means tests showed that non-traditional students made the better grades in required criminal justice courses:

Statistics grade $<.001$, Non-traditional students earned the better grades; Introduction to Criminal Justice grade $<.01$, Non-traditional students tend to earn a better grade; and Criminal Justice Research Methods and Criminal Justice Theory , respectively $<.001$, Non-traditional students tended to earn the better grade. the median amount of credits transferred by each subcategory and the median number of criminal justice credits transferred. Specifically studied when looking at the criminal justice credits was whether Introduction to Criminal Justice and/or Statistics was taken before.based upon student transcripts, we identified those students who had taken Introduction to Criminal Justice and/or Statistics along with their grades. As seen below, the median grades in Criminal Justice Theory is 3.5 for non-traditional students, and a 3 for traditional transfer students. The median grades for Criminal Justice Research Methods are a 3.5 for non-traditional students and a 3 for traditional transfer students. Grade point averages for those learning community participants who have graduated participating in the Learning Community resulted in a 2.9 for both non-traditional and traditional transfer students.

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Criminal Justice Research Methods and Criminal Justice Theory, respectively $<.001$, Non-traditional students tended to earn the better grade.

Results of the exploration of the stressors identified by the participants can are illustrated in Table 3. Out of the 53 non-traditional students, 10 students identified a personal stressor, 38 identified an academic stressor, and 5 identified a work-related stressor.

Table 3: Rank Ordered Stressors of Non-Traditional and Traditional Students

Non-Traditional Students (N=53)

Traditional Students (N =47)

Personal Stressors

- Commuting
- Learning a new campus
- Financial aid
- Learning a new city
- Health problems
- Acclimating to the US after serving in the military
- Parking

- Expense of tuition
- Learning new campus

Academic Stressors

- Transferring credits
- Amount of paperwork
- Choosing the right major
- Different teaching styles
- Problems registering for classes

- Transferring credits
- Amount of paperwork
- Delays in acceptance to school
- Size of school
- Problems registering for classes
- Struggles with Statistics course

Work-Related Stressors

- Balancing full-time work and studying

- Balancing full-time work and studying

Out of the 47 student identified as traditional students six identified personal stressors, 30 acknowledged academic stressors, and 11 identified work-related stressors associated with the transfer experience. Each student ranked his or her stressor at the beginning of the academic year, the middle of the academic year, and at the conclusion of the academic year. They were also asked to acknowledge the intensity of the indicated stressor with the number five representing the greatest intensity and 0 as the lowest intensity. The median of the intensity ratings lowered significantly as the academic year progressed. The non-traditional studentsstudent’s rankings of the same stressor at three different periods of time throughout the year were 5, 3, 1and 1.

Likewise, traditional student stressors were reportedly reduced as the year progressed: 4, 2, 1. Non-traditional transfer students reported higher initial stress levels than their traditional transfer student counterparts.

Other comparison data

Data obtained from the University's Institutional Research Office indicates that transfer students who did not participate in the Learning Community had an average first year grade point average of 2.2 compared to students who participated in the Learning Community program who averaged a 3.0 grade point average. Learning Community participants who have graduated have higher grade point averages upon graduation than those transfer students who did not participate in the program, 3.0 and 2.8, respectively.

Conclusions

The observations found with this group of students appears to demonstrate that a Criminal Justice Learning Community can be a valuable program that assists nontraditional and traditional transfer students while they transition into this large, urban research university in the south. The Criminal Justice Learning Community program introduced the students to speakers from the university services, including financial aid and registration. Speakers from the university support offices were able to alleviate a lot of the concerns the LC transfer students had as they made the transition to the university. For example, several of the students who identified limited transfer credits accepted as a stressor met the university contact who could directly help them understand the process to have other potential courses reviewed and accepted (Coston, Lord, and Monell 2011).

Representatives from the student associations were able to speak to the class and encourage them to belong. According to the learning community students, the largest impact on stress reduction was the feeling of belonging to their learning community cohort, a Criminal Justice major, and to the university and local communities. It appears that students were able to solve problems and stressors together, resulting in the fact that they were able to support each other in many areas of their lives, not only within their course work. In other words, the cohorts of learning community students were able to help support each other in all three stress categories: academic, personal, and work-related. In focus group studies previously conducted by Lord et al. 2011, results indicated students used the group to help relieve their stressor associated with the transfer experience regardless of whether they were nontraditional or traditional students

This research consists of a small number of students and is therefore limited in the fact that this cannot be generalized to the non-traditional and traditional transfer student population, nationally. While this study is more exploratory, it sheds light on important issues surrounding the stressors faced by non-traditional and traditional transfer students. We are continuing to assess the impact of the LC and as the number of participants grows we will conduct more rigorous examinations to assess the impact the LC has on the students' academic and personal achievement. However, early indications are that this LC is helping the students be successful and thus can provide a useful model for other universities and disciplines seeking to meet the needs of their transfer student population.

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