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Understanding Transfer Shock Among Community College Students

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Introduction

Community colleges are a key component of American higher education system and play a substantial role in producing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates.[1] They provide affordable access to post-secondary education to many students including low-income, first-generation, and under-represented minority students.[2,3] They also play a key role in broadening STEM participation and facilitating upward transfer to baccalaureate programs.[4] Despite these initiatives, almost 80% community college students aspire to complete a bachelor's degree, yet only around one-third transfer, and less than half of those complete within six years.[5] The disparity highlights transfer and transition related challenges which contribute to student attrition. Transfer shock is one of the well-documented contributors in the literature.

Transfer shock refers to the temporary decline in academic performance that students typically experience in their initial semester(s) after transferring, most commonly measured by a drop in grade point average (GPA).[6] This literature brief examines research on transfer shock among community college transfer students. It identifies theoretical frameworks, highlights key themes in literature, and presents implications for policy and practice. Hence, understanding *transfer shock* involves more than GPA decline, it highlights a critical barrier to baccalaureate completion.

Theoretical / Conceptual Frameworks

Following is a selection of theoretical and conceptual models that have been developed in the literature to understand how community college transfer students adapt to and succeed at four-year institutions.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Tinto's student integration model[7] suggests that both academic and social integration are crucial for student persistence. Students' pre-entry characteristics like academic background and family support can influence this process.[8,9,10] However, research shows that integration among community college transfers differs from traditional students. Their academic and social integration are interdependent and develop simultaneously through classroom discussions and collaborative learning experiences.[11,12,13] Deil-Amen[14] calls these interactions "Socio-Academic Integrative Moments", in which students become socially integrated primarily through academically oriented social interactions. Their success depends more on academic and career-related opportunities than on campus social life.[15]

Weidman's Socialization Framework

Weidman[16] emphasizes the role of socialization factors in shaping students' educational experiences and outcomes. This framework has been used to examine how interpersonal interactions, peer support, and institutional environments influence transfer student adjustment in a four-year university.[17]

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's[18] model of human adaptation to transition focuses on how individuals manage significant life changes. When applied to community college transfer students, this model helps explain how students navigate academic, social, and emotional adjustments during the transfer process.[19,20]

Laanan's Transfer Student Capital Framework

Laanan[21] conceptualizes transfer student capital (TSC) as the information, skills, and strategies students accumulate throughout the transfer process. TSC helps students negotiate the transfer process, which requires understanding credit transfer agreements, grade and major requirements, and other logistics. Students with higher levels of TSC are more likely to transfer and persist successfully.[22,23]

Eaton's Academic Transfer Model

Eaton's[24] academic transfer model emphasizes the critical role of collaboration between two and four-year faculty in easing academic transitions. This model explains how institutions that promote aligned curriculum and mutual understanding reduce transfer shock and improve student success.[25,26]

Key Themes in the Literature

Academic Performance and Adjustment

A central focus of transfer shock research is the decline in GPA commonly experienced by community college students upon their initial transfer to a four-year institution.[27,28,29] This academic decline is more prominent in STEM disciplines, where students need to adjust to more rigorous course demands, larger class sizes, heightened expectations, decreased access to faculty, and minimal scaffolding.[30,31,32,33,34] The transition from the teaching-focused, supportive environment of a community college to the research-oriented model of many four-year institutions exacerbates these challenges. As a result, this initial GPA impact can affect students' academic self-efficacy, confidence, and persistence.[35,36]

Social Integration and Sense of Belonging

Social support systems are critical for transfer students' social integration on campus.[37] Because community college transfer students enter the four-year institution midstream—after social networks and communities have already formed— they are often at higher risk for social anxiety than their peers,[38] and that affect their academic experiences in the new institution[39]. Students often feel a strong sense of belonging at community colleges due to small class sizes and close faculty connections, but this sense of belonging can weaken after transferring to larger institutions.[40] Negative perceptions or stigma surrounding community college backgrounds can further isolate students.[41,42] A lack of peer support can lead to disengagement from campus life, which exacerbates feelings of academic and emotional isolation.[43] The absence of inclusive spaces or communities where students feel represented can impact their willingness to seek help or participate in class activities. Transfer students who developed social connections and a sense of belonging to their new institution during their first term were more likely to perform better in their coursework and avoid transfer shock.[44] For community college students, social integration does not necessarily emerge from separate social or extracurricular activities.[45] It can develop simultaneously with academic integration through class participation, collaborative learning, and meaningful interactions with peers and faculty.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

Community college transfer students often face institutional barriers during transition that can exacerbate transfer shock. These include lack of accurate and clear information, unclear credit articulation policies, inconsistent academic expectations, poor advising, and unwelcoming campus cultures.[46,47,48,49] Elliott and Lakin[50] describe a "disjuncture in academic norms"

between community colleges and four-year institutions—including differences in help-seeking behavior, assessment formats, classroom interaction, and instructional methods—that can result in academic setbacks for transfer students. Mentorship and advising for transfer students in STEM fields are critical to success in upper-division coursework, and the lack of it can derail persistence.[51] This is because four-year institutions may lack support services for transfer students, and academic advisors may not assist students in navigating the complexities of transfer pathways. Transfer students often feel overlooked or unsupported by institutional staff and services, which can reduce help-seeking behaviors.[52] As a result, students may face extended time to degree completion due to loss of credits or not meeting course expectations.

Student Identities and Transfer Shock

Research has identified a number of characteristics that can affect the intensity of transfer shock experienced by community college students. For example, community college students in STEM majors report higher levels of academic difficulty and lower rates of persistence compared to non-STEM transfer students.[53] Students' personal background (gender, race, class) with previous academic experiences and interaction with mentors contribute to transfer experiences.[54] Additionally, students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, and first-generation college students often face greater challenges.[55,56,57] Younger white students with less work responsibilities tend to experience a smoother transfer process than students of color, who are more likely to take a deferred route than following a linear path.[58] Female students, despite entering the four-year institution with higher GPAs than their male counterparts[59] still encounter barriers[60] and face a slightly higher GPA shock.[61] But they also exhibit better resilience in the face of academic difficulty after their first year.[62]

Further, Bahr et al.[63] point out that women from disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups face added barriers such as, doubts about persistence, lower academic satisfaction, racial tension, pressure to conform.[64] Working students and those with familial obligations are more susceptible to early setbacks as they struggle with balancing the academic demands of the four-year institution.[65] Stereotypes based on their age and socioeconomic status can affect transfer students' sense of belonging and academic experience.[66] These intersecting identities can lead to unequal experiences of transfer shock, with some lending themselves to more severe outcomes in terms of academic persistence and self-confidence.

Transfer Shock Recovery

While transfer shock presents serious challenges, the literature also highlights that transfer shock is temporary and students demonstrate resilience and the capacity for academic and

social recovery. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as transfer recovery[67,68] or transfer ecstasy,[69] is observed when students recover from their initial GPA drop within one or two semesters. Students who are proactive and engage with faculty, have access to academic support services, and build strong peer connections are also more likely to recover academically and persist toward graduation.[70,71] Strong familial support, prior preparation through honors programs, and community college support services can build the foundation for recovery from transfer shock.[72,73] Moreover, students with higher levels of transfer student capital are better equipped to navigate institutional norms, advocate for themselves, and engage with the campus community.[74]

Policy Recommendations

Transfer shock can disrupt academic success for community college STEM students. Those with severe academic challenges who experience transfer shock often change their majors or even leave college before graduation. This, in turn, impacts their employment and career trajectories. The academic progress of community college transfer students is hindered not by a lack of academic preparation, but mainly by administrative barriers and social challenges related to transferring to a four-year institution.[75] Therefore, to improve transfer student success, institutions must adopt a coordinated, data-informed, and equity-oriented approach that spans both community colleges and four-year universities.

Strengthen Institutional Collaboration

Stronger partnerships between two- and four-year institutions are essential. Collaborative efforts, such as aligned curricula and shared academic expectations, can ease academic transition and reduce transfer shock.[76,77,78] Faculty collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions can help build trust and reduce deficit views of community college students, which enhances curricular alignment.[79,80] In addition, institutions can adopt evidence-based practices from the *Transfer Playbook*[81] for transfer student success. These includes, (a) sharing significant resources to support transfer student; (b) providing clear academic pathways supported by high quality instructions, and (c) offering tailored, need-based transfer student advising both before and after transfer, because their academic goals, timelines, and challenges differ from traditional students.[82] Besides, institutions should also ensure that information and resources are clear, organized, and accessible through formal systems and partnerships within and across campuses.[83]

Build a Transfer-Receptive Culture

Four-year institutions should share responsibility for transfer student success by adopting a transfer-receptive culture. This framework encourages community colleges and four-year universities to share the responsibilities of providing students with pre- and post-transfer support, seamless transition processes, and adequate resources. It shifts the responsibility of transfer student success from community colleges alone to a shared institutional commitment between both sending and receiving institutions and enhances the recognition of transfer students as assets to the university.[84] To this end, institutions should utilize tools such as the Transfer Self-Assessment Inventory[85] to evaluate and improve their transfer culture.[86]

Enhance Academic and Student Engagement

Community colleges should align STEM curricula with university expectations and clarify transfer pathways. Furthermore, active learning pedagogies and practices should be incorporated throughout two-year program, including transfer courses.[87] Efficient advising and credit transfer transparency are key to enhancing academic transfer preparation.[88,89] Universities should implement transfer-specific orientation programs focused on academic expectations and available resources.[90] In addition, programs such as academic counseling, mentoring, tutoring, student transfer organizations, and inclusive residential life initiatives can enhance students' social integration and well-being.[91,92] Overall, institutions should focus on intentional orientation, advising, and classroom practices that help transfer students feel connected both academically and socially.[93]

Promote Faculty Interaction and Mentorship

Knowledgeable advising and mentoring are crucial in the transfer process.[94] Confidence-building and transfer oriented advising are critical components in supporting STEM transfers.[95] Faculty should build relationships with students early in the transfer pipeline and offer mentorship that supports both academic growth and self-efficacy.[96] Besides, institutions must prioritize inclusive pedagogy and proactively identify students at risk of GPA decline to ensure early interventions.[97] Additionally, Jackson and Laanan[98] emphasize that faculty mentorship and inclusive classroom practices can foster academic confidence and a stronger sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Transfer shock presents a significant concern for community college transfer students in university-level STEM education. This makes them an 'at risk' student subgroup,[99] as they are

more likely to change majors, drop out, or fail to complete their degrees. Therefore, future research is needed to understand the causes, variations, and recovery trajectories of transfer shock. It will also help to inform policies and practices that promote persistence and success among community college transfer students.

About the Author

Geeti Anwar is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of South Florida studying how social, economic, and institutional factors influence experiences and pathways in higher education.

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