

POSTSECONDARY STUDENT MOBILITY FROM COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY: EXPERIENCE AND POLICY

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August 2012

1. Outline of the Study

This study investigates college-to-Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) mobility from 4 key perspectives:

- i) A comprehensive environmental scan of Ontario university transfer policies reported by registrars;
- ii) Comparisons of transfer student baccalaureate performance based on random WLU samples of “college transfer” and “non-college transfer” students drawn from each cohort between 2008 and 2011. Using this data base, the researchers
 - a) calculated overall averages,
 - b) compared course/program success rates,
 - c) compared scores across groups, and
 - d) compared scores in areas in which degree credit was granted;
- iii) A focus-group and interview based investigation of transfer student and university faculty and staff perceptions of the feeder college and WLU transfer processes and practices; and
- iv) Recommendations for enhancement of the process based on analyses of the above data.

The 77 page inventory appended to this report is an impressive provincial resource listing current university transfer policies.

The recommendations are summarized below.

2. Findings

2.1 Success of Transfer Students

Through the analysis of random samples of WLU transfer student academic records, this report affirms that credit transfer students outperform non-transfer students in their degree studies. Specifically, transfer credit students earned a GPA that is 8% higher than non-transfer students. When comparing full- and part-time students, similar results were found. Additionally, the academic performance of students receiving more transferable credits tended to be higher (by a GPA of 4%) than those receiving less credit and higher still (by a GPA of 11%) than non-transfer students.

The student focus groups confirmed that the colleges offer a “more structured academic environment” (p. 8) and a university’s greater independence contributes to ‘transfer

shock'. However, most students found that warnings of a full letter grade drop after transfer did not materialize. (p. 5) Significant differences relate to the expected use of the additional 'free time' (p. 25), the expectation that students will search out the assistance they need, and the critical and analytical nature of writing (p. 27) particularly in arts programs.

The paper questions some of the more traditional comparisons between the college and university experience. The nature of evaluation, such as the use of group projects and multiple choice examinations, was seen to differ more by discipline and class size than between college and university teaching and learning.

2.2 Key Issue 1: Accessing Information

Student focus groups identified student concerns about the completeness, accuracy and search-ability of information on the websites; the relevance of orientation packages; the consistency and knowledge of advisers; and the timeliness of responses to enquiries, acceptance, information and credit transfer approvals.

2.3 Key Issue 2: Recognition of Disparity in Transfer Demographics

The report cautions that the transfer student population is diverse and each market segment has different needs and preferences. Institutions are advised to employ relevant communications and orientation strategies to:

- Similar program transfer students;
- Alternate program transfer students;
- Mature students; and
- International students.

2.4 Key Issue 3: Credits

A wide range of credit definition and application issues was raised by the student focus groups and their observations are discussed in some detail. The following summarizes their concerns:

- The university's and the colleges' role in transfer, particularly the timely provision of needed information, was seen as inadequate. They particularly note insufficient information on the value, transferability, limitations, category, and number of diploma credits that are applicable towards the degree program. (p. 33)
- The amount of transfer credit approved by the university often fell short of student expectations. Indeed, transfer pathways may "appear more robust and advantageous than is likely in the case in practical application". (p. 11) Given that some transfer students would have "attended whatever institution gave them the highest number of credits", they were felt disappointed and misled. (p. 34)

- Some students feel that their approved credits are applied in a “seemingly arbitrary manner” and some find that at least some of these cannot be used to shorten their degree completion studies.

3. Recommendations

The key issues summarized above and discussed in the study set the stage for the following recommendations:

- Provide “one online location for all formal articulation agreements and transfer credit policies” to ensure that prospective college transfer students “obtain the information they need to make an informed decision regarding which institution to attend and how their credit will be applied upon admission”. (p. 41)
- Colleges and universities should develop “transfer streams” – “programs designed specifically for students whose desire is to transfer to a university”. This approach could be designed so that “the credits [that the students] are earning are clearly defined units of the program they are entering into”.(p. 41)
- Improvement of advisory services including such options as “a university adviser at the colleges”, university representatives holding “information sessions” on college campuses and the effective use of “4th year students” to coach transfer students. (p. 41-42)
- “The creation of Headstart programs and/or Orientation Week events specific to college transfer students” in order to assist them to navigate in a new system, and develop support links. (p. 42)
- Provide the “rationale for why certain college courses are not equivalent to certain university courses” would address the perception of arbitrariness reported by students. (p. 42)
- To prepare transfer students for the university’s different writing expectations, improve awareness and help transfer students develop adjustment strategies. Suggestions include:
 - “Mandatory writing intensive courses for transfer students”,
 - Closer engagement of existing support services (such as the writing centre) to meet the specific needs of transfer students, and
 - Provide “multiple, smaller, writing assignments” so transfer students can be coached on, and incrementally develop skills applicable to the writing demands of the university. (pp 42-43)