



**Carleton**  
UNIVERSITY

## **Supporting the Success of Transfer Students**

**Benchmarking Project**

Presented to the Organizational Excellence Steering Committee

November 2013

### **PURPOSE**

The goal of this benchmarking project is to improve support services that best address the needs of transfer students.

## Executive Summary

The Credit Transfer Innovation Fund supports a specific range of activities aligned with MTCU's current priorities for development of credit transfer pathways in Ontario as well as research on the student experience of transfer, including experiences during the process of transfer and experiences after transfer, such as communication of transfer credits granted, orientation to new institution, academic preparation for new institution, etc. This benchmarking project was undertaken not only as part of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) five year \$73.7M commitment to improve student mobility in Ontario but also supports Goals 1-1 and 1-2 of Carleton's Strategic Integrated Plan to "*develop new programs and initiatives that build on academic strengths and respond to societal needs*" and "*to diversify the student population at Carleton in order to offset the projected decline in the traditional domestic student market*".

Carleton University already offers a number of transition and academic support services for first-year students. Transfer students see themselves as a distinct population and even though they need many of the same services, they often assume that the workshops and programs are designed for younger students. In addition, transfer students have unique needs around registration and integrating with already established peer groups. The purpose of these recommendations is to develop timely, targeted communications, to promote already existing services as well as to coordinate and enhance current services to better meet the specific needs of transfer students.

One of the measures of the strategic plan is to increase the number of students transferring to Carleton from Ontario Colleges. Reaching out to these students with targeted services that best addresses their specific needs will have a positive impact on their transfer experience, help optimize their time to degree completion and help ensure their academic success.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Develop a position of Coordinator of Pathways to advocate and coordinate interdepartmental efforts to continually improve support services and programming for transfer students.**

It is recommended that Carleton pilot a new position of Coordinator of Pathways to advocate and coordinate interdepartmental efforts to continually improve all aspects of the transfer student experience. This portfolio ultimately falls under the direction of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Enrolment) however there currently is not a role dedicated to enacting the types of initiatives recommended in this report on a consistent basis. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) currently has a Credit Transfer Innovation Fund that may be a source of funding for this position, at least on a pilot basis.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Implement a peer mentorship program to allow for student-to-student advice and support, including referrals to campus services.**

Transfer students with personal connections with returning students identified them as the most important resource for advice, information and transition. To offer all transfer students this type of resource, it is recommended that a peer mentoring program be created to match new transfer students with a trained, upper-year peers to offer them advice and support, including providing referrals to the appropriate campus services.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Actively promote pre-registration advising in early June for transfer students, including in-person and virtual advising sessions.**

It is recommended that the Student Academic Success Centre and/or departmental advisors actively promote pre-registration advising in early June (prior to the Fall registration period) for transfer students. This should include in-person advising appointments for those in the Ottawa area and virtual (email, phone or video conferencing) advising sessions for those who cannot visit campus. Showing students how to access and read their audit, helping them in course selection,

confirming expected course restrictions, and referring them to registration and academic support would allow students to have a much easier registration experience so that they can be confident they are in the right courses.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Encourage the two faculties involved to explore methods to allow upper-year transfer students to register in first-year seminars.**

It is recommended that the Faculty of Public Affairs and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences be encouraged to investigate methods by which spaces in FYSM courses could be made available to second-year transfer students. In addition, promoting the advantages and importance of these seminars to all transfer students transitioning into the Carleton environment should be undertaken.

It is hoped that the small class sizes emphasizing group work, instructor mentorship, interactive learning, and early assessment/evaluation will help students achieve their academic goals and have a positive impact on transfer students, as they transition to university and prepare for upper-year studies.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Further align programming and services to the needs of transfer students**

It should be noted that radical change in service delivery is not necessary to meet the needs of transfer students but more nuanced adjustments are recommended in the area of communications, language, targeting and workshop design. This is expected to better promote the value of student services to transfer students as well as better matching service offerings and programs to their needs. These needs are expected to evolve over time and the main role of the Coordinator of Pathways role (see Recommendation 1) will be to solicit ongoing feedback in order to keep abreast of the changing needs of transfer students and advise academic departments and student support services to make the necessary adjustments to meet those needs, when required.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Develop a communications strategy to specifically target the transfer student population (new and existing) including targeted email, centralized web resources, and social media.**

Transfer students need much of the same information as other students however the language needs to be adjusted and, in some cases, they should not receive information that is not pertinent to them. Clearly flagging email as for transfer students is one way to alert them to a message that they should pay attention to. Having a centralized website as a key information resource that they can refer to is also a way to minimize the information gap. Curating news posts and web information and customizing that information to provide clarity for transfer students would offer them a singular information resource they can refer to. Lastly, use social media to connect transfer students with each other, especially new students with returning, can offer an informal, two-way information source that can also facilitate personal connections amongst students. It can also be used to proactively see where students are having difficulties and adjust other communications mediums as a result.

**Table of Contents**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND..... 5

OBJECTIVES..... 5

PROJECT METHODOLOGY.....5

    Team Membership..... 5

    Research Strategy and Primary Findings.....6

OVERALL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS..... 9

    Internal Findings..... 9

        Profile of a Transfer Student..... 10

        Services and Programming..... 10

        Ownership of Portfolio..... 11

    External Findings..... 12

        Transition and Adjustment..... 12

        Registration Challenges..... 12

RECOMMENDATIONS..... 13

    Recommendation 1:

    Coordinator of Pathways position..... 13

    Recommendation 2:

    Peer mentorship program..... 14

    Recommendation 3:

    Pre-registration advising..... 15

    Recommendation 4:

    Upper-year access to first-year seminars..... 15

    Recommendation 5:

    Continuous development of programming and services..... 16

    Recommendation 6:

    Communications strategy and improvements..... 16

CONCLUSION..... 16

NEXT STEPS..... 17

APPENDICES..... 18

- Appendix A: Benchmarking Project Charter**
- Appendix B: Transfer Student Focus Group Guide**
- Appendix C: Pedagogical Objectives for First-Year Seminars**

## Background

Transfer students are new students to Carleton who bring with them previous post-secondary studies. Transfer students are admitted into Carleton at varying year levels based on the amount of transfer credit awarded at the point of admission.

This proposal is initiated partly in response to the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities' discussion paper on "Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge" but also to support Carleton's proposed Strategic Mandate Agreement. In the government vision for postsecondary education, "*Ontario's colleges and universities.....will put students first by providing the best possible learning experience for all qualified learners in an affordable and financially sustainable way, ensuring high quality, and globally competitive outcomes for students and Ontario's creative economy.*" The government hopes to further improve student mobility between colleges, between universities and between colleges and universities.

This project will determine the characteristics and service needs of the transfer students attending Carleton and identify the challenges that these students encounter upon entering their degree program. This project will involve benchmarking of existing programs at other institutions, focus groups with transfer students, and an assessment of current student services offered for their relevance to transfer students. This initiative will make recommendations for a coordinated set of services to support the needs and address the challenges of transfer students.

## Objectives

The goal of this benchmarking project is to develop and improve support services that best address the needs of transfer students that are currently in their program of study.

Specifically, the project has five key objectives:

1. To identify the characteristics of transfer students attending Carleton.
2. To gain an understanding of which services transfer students use and identify gaps in providing services to them as a distinct population.
3. To develop a list of measures to enable tracking and assessing the effectiveness of services to transfer students.
4. To identify the challenges faced by transfer students.
5. To make recommendations for a coordinated service model for transfer students.

The Benchmarking Project Charter can be found in **Appendix A: Benchmarking Project Charter**.

## Project Methodology

### Team Membership

#### *Project Owner:*

Suzanne Blanchard, Associate Vice-President (Students & Enrolment)

#### *Team Leader:*

Janice O'Farrell, Director – Admissions Services

#### *Team Members:*

David Taylor, Transfer Student Advisor – Student Academic Success Centre

Richard Nimijeau, Assistant Dean – Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

Perry Legakis, Director – Student Awards

Stenley Philippe, Telecounselling Supervisor – Undergraduate Recruitment

*Facilitator:*

Scott Gonsalves, Senior Quality Advisor (Office of Quality Initiatives)

## Research Strategy

The data collection was structure to first get a high-level understanding of transfer student support issues and challenges, and then focusing on uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of the current support model at Carleton University. Once that was understood, the team consulted with other institutions to identify best practices that may be applicable to addressing areas of improvement for Carleton.

Specifically, the internal and external data were gathered in *five* key ways:

### 1. Institutional Data

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) supplied the benchmarking team with current and historical data, including the number of students, level, year standing, previous higher education, program of study, retention, and performance. This provided a clear picture of the number of student affected by the outcomes of this project, where they come from, and how they do academically.

*Primary findings included:*

- Transfer students are equally split between those coming from college (49.7%) and university (50.3%)
- 72% of transfer students are with the Faculty of Arts & Social Science (FASS) and the Faculty of Public Administration (FPA).
- For both college and university transfers in FASS, the most popular major is Psychology with 38.7% of college transfers and 25.4% of university transfers.
- For college transfer in FPA, the most popular major is Criminology and Criminal Justice at 36.5%. For university transfers, the most popular major is Political Science at 25.3%.
- Most college transfer students enter into second year of their degree program. For university transfer students, it is equally dispersed between first and second year.
- Graduation rates for transfer students are lower than rates for all new, traditional students.

### 2. Literature Review

The team reviewed a total of nine of reports, journal articles and news articles on the topic of transfer student services to identify trends and common issues on this topic. Sources included: the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), the College-University Consortium Council (CUCC), the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, the Journal of College Student Development, the British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT), and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT).

Literature reviewed included:

#### REFERENCES

- Reznick, A. *Transfer-specific programs work to bridge gap*. The Daily of the University of Washington, January 30, 2013.
- Townsend, B; Wilson, K. *A Hand Hold for a Little Bit: Factors Facilitating the Success of Community College Transfer Students to a Large Research University*. Journal of College Student Development. Volume 47, Number 4 (July/August 2006) pp. 439-456.
- BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (2012) *2011 Admissions and Transfer Experiences of Students Continuing their Studies in British Columbia*.

Kerr, A; McCloy, U; Shuping, L. (2010) *Forging Pathways: Students Who Transfer Between Ontario Colleges and Universities*, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, At Issue Paper No. 4.

Decock, H; McCloy, U; Shuping, L; Hu, B (2011) *The Transfer Experience of Ontario College Graduates who Further their Education*, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

[unknown] (2007) *Measuring the Success of College Transfer Students at Nipissing University 1994-2005*. College University Consortium Council.

Arnold, C.H. (2011) *Following the Ontario Transfer Student: From College to University Inception*. Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, January 2011, Number 31.

Shinberger, D. *Transfer Student Experience Provides Smooth Transition*. News Release: Western Illinois University, May 11, 2010.

*Primary findings included:*

- Traditional orientation programs are designed for younger students and focus on the social experience - generally not what more mature transfer students are looking for.
- Transfer students, notably those coming in with advanced standing, face difficulty integrating in established peer study and social groups.
- Differences between college and university are a shock for college transfer students. Ability to engage with professor, grading and assessment, and relative independence/accountability are key distinctions.
- Techniques to assist transfer students include program-specific interest groups, learning communities, prep courses, and peer support programs.

### 3. Student Focus Groups

Speaking directly with current transfer students (new and returning) allowed the team to identify positive aspects of their university experience and to uncover the specific challenges Carleton students were facing and how they see those challenges being addressed for future transfer students. Students were asked to share their experiences on a number of related topics including transition, registration, in-class experience, and social integration.

A total of 55 participants were involved in three separate focus groups. In addition, five students that were unable to attend provided comments on the topic of student support. The students involved represented a broad range in both age and year status. The question guide can be found in **Appendix B: Transfer Student Focus Group Guide**.

*Primary findings included:*

- New Student Orientation is 'demeaning' for transfer students (who happen to be older) and not focused enough on academics, which is their primary focus at university.
- Transfer students reported experiencing challenges academically (class sizes, access to professor, course expectations) and socially (getting involved with established peer groups).
- Perceived lack of targeted communications leading to information and knowledge gaps.
- Registration restrictions are common among transfer students and represent a key barrier in taking required courses.
- Requested changes included:
  - Hold a transfer student-specific orientation session and include an academic transition component.
  - Develop a peer mentoring program to connect upper-year transfer students with incoming students.
  - Social media groups to connect transfer students with each other.
  - Mandatory advising session (pre-registration) for transfer students with 'check-ins' throughout the year.
  - Consolidated website for information appropriate for transfer students to know.

### 5. Service Provider Consultations

Student services units and academic departments at Carleton University were specifically targeted to share their experiences with transfer students and to discuss improvements with the team. These units were identified through the institutional data and the student focus groups as key impact areas for transfer students.

Seven service providers, including two academic departments with a large population of transfer students, participated in the consultations:

DEPARTMENT/OFFICE
Student Experience Office
Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice
Learning Support Services
Writing Tutorial Service
International Student Services Office
Department of Child Studies
Career Services

*Primary findings included:*

- Comprehensive services to transfer students already exist in academic departments and student services units.
- Most units do not differentiate services to transfer students as a distinct population but students self-identify themselves as such.
- Transfer Student Orientation exists but was not well known or attended in the past.
- Clear challenge with academic literacy however good support mechanisms are in place at Learning Support Services, Writing Tutorial Service, Library and in prep courses (for Child Studies students only).
- Convincing students to use existing services is the biggest challenge.
- Suggested changes included:
  - Incentive marks for completion of academic-related workshops
  - Improved registration management such as blocked courses and overrides (pre-registration)
  - Mandatory advising session(s), specifically focusing on recommended course pattern
  - Bring student services into the classroom
  - Publish a transfer student handbook or guide
  - Connect upper-year with incoming transfer students
  - Targeted and early communications
  - Rebrand 'frosh' or 'orientation' to 'academic transition' for transfer students

**6. External Interviews**

Learning from the experiences of other institutions is the core component of benchmarking. The team looked to other North American higher education institutions, including Ontario colleges to gain best practices in the management of support services for transfer students. Questions to these institutions covered such topics as services/programming, orientation, advising, social integration, registration, financial arrangements, metrics, and communications.

A total of ten universities and colleges participated in this interview.

INSTITUTION	POSITION
Trent University	Director, Post-Secondary Partnerships



University of Arkansas – Little Rock	Director, Office of Transfer Student Services
Algonquin College	Dean, Academic Development
Brock University	Web Research
Seneca College	Coordinator, Degree and Credit Transfer
University of British Columbia	Director, Enrolment Services
Wilfrid Laurier University	Manager, Admissions
York University	Recruitment Officer, Mature and Transfer Students
Ryerson University	University Registrar
Niagara College	Manager, Academic Quality

*Primary findings included:*

- Institutions with strong and robust articulation agreements have an easier time anticipating student service needs and designing transition programming around those needs.
- Most universities hold a dedicated transfer student session within orientation.
- Resources (director, coordinator, manager) to address needs of transfer students from admission to graduation can influence subtle differences in student services that have a noticeable impact on the transfer student experience.
- Dedicated website for transfer students can connect students to timely and necessary services and resources. Targeted emails remain a key communication mechanism.
- Mixed approaches on whether to treat transfer students as a distinct population or consider them like any other student. Recognition that this should be unique to the needs of each institution.
- Mandatory advising (pre-registration) is used at some institutions to proactively address registration difficulties.

## **Overall Findings and Analysis**

The benchmarking team adopted a phased approach and collecting data by primarily focusing on internal data to clarify the challenges and opportunities with Carleton's support of transfer students, and then looking to external research to aid in identifying established solutions to those challenges. The recommendations included in this report were only developed after all data was collected and analyzed.

In general, the research undertaken forms a consistent picture of a growing population of transfer students that require a little extra institutional effort, in terms of support services, in order to be on par with the experience one might get as a traditional student. Communication (of information, advice, procedures/policies, events) seems to be a common theme with transfer students. Given their reluctance to be categorized as a first-year student, they often miss out on the benefits and information that is specifically targeted to them. This reluctance has academic and social repercussions.

## **Internal Findings**

The internal findings were compiled and analyzed from Carleton's institutional data, student focus groups, and service provider consultations. The research suggests that transfer students at Carleton University do face unique challenges vis-à-vis traditional students (i.e. those coming directly from high school) and, as a result, they experience lower completion rates. That being said, Carleton makes available a host of services and programming that could assist transfer students in a myriad of ways, should those students see the value and take advantage of these offerings. Generally, students were unaware of the resources at their disposal, due largely to the

perception that the communications received were not applicable to them. Lastly, services to transfer students span multiple portfolios including admissions, advising, registration, student experience, and academic support. The existing support model doesn't identify a clear 'owner' who can work with the various support units to better promote campus resources and ensure the needs of transfer students are taken into account.

#### *Profile of a Transfer Student*

Both data from the Office of Institutional Research and Planning and student input from focus group gives us a clear picture of transfer students as having a unique experience in relation to traditional students.

Starting with the obvious, transfer students at Carleton tend to be older than their counterparts from high school. Although the difference between an 18 year-old and a 21 year-old may not seem like much, this does form a social disconnection between the groups that emerges during transition initiatives (e.g. orientation programming) and in the classroom (e.g. forming project groups). In regards to the latter, transfer students that are admitted with upper-year standing face challenges integrating with established study groups where relationships tend to have been formed in first-year studies. In fact, much due to their age, transfer students tend to be more focused on the academic aspects of their experience, with a singular determination on the completion of their degree.

In reality, college transfer students report not being fully prepared for the academic demands of university studies. Although they do bring unique experiences from their collegial studies, they find themselves underprepared in the areas of academic literacy, research, critical thinking, and analysis. This is further exasperated by the shock of the size of classes and the perceived lack of access to their instructors, who can play a crucial role in supporting these students and/or referring them to the appropriate services.

Even the act of registration, one of the first tasks all new students must complete, is a source of much confusion for transfer students. Transfer students almost exclusively have a complex registration pattern that is not easily self-addressed. Issues of being prevented from registering in courses required for their degree, year-level challenges and, generally, what courses to select are commonplace.

That being said, academic programs with formal articulation agreements such as Child Studies, Criminology and Social Work report more positive experiences from their students. These departments have developed advising and support services specifically for transfer students.

#### *Services and Programming*

Based on current student expectations, Carleton University provides all of the necessary support services that transfer students would require. These would include, but not limited to:

- a) *Admissions* – support with the admissions process and transfer credit(s)
- b) *Academic department and faculty* – academic support with choosing courses, connecting students with other students and faculty in the department, academic advising, prep courses, events.
- c) *Registrar's Office* – registration support including how to register, how to overcome errors, how to access key information, and be aware of dates and deadlines.
- d) *Student Academic Success Centre* – understanding which courses to choose, reading their audit, discussing program choices
- e) *Student Experience Office* – academic and social transition and developing a connection to the university
- f) *Career Services* – discuss career options, career preparation, part-time employment opportunities and work experience
- g) *International Student Services Office* – support to international transfer students
- h) *Learning Support Services* – on-campus and online study skills workshops, one-on-one appointments, drop-in sessions, tutor referral service

- i) *Writing Tutorial Service* – development of academic writing skills
- j) *Library* – access to information resources, student research, research workshops

The difference between those that recounted positive experiences as students versus those that expressed challenges had much to do with their use of services. Although they were in the minority, those that took advantage of those services, especially as it relates to academic transition and registration, seemed to face less dire challenges than transfer students that did not take advantage of these services.

This begs the question, *why aren't students taking advantage of the services available to them?* Communications and student perceptions are key factors to consider. Firstly, communications to 'first-year students', were generally ignored and not seen as applicable to those transfer students who enter the university with advanced standing (e.g. may have second year status). In addition, although they may be coming to Carleton for the first time, transfer students have experience in a post-secondary environment and don't necessarily identify with the "new student" label, therefore communications to "new students" are also often disregarded. That being said, communications that are clearly labeled for transfer students are more likely to be paid attention to. Transfer students relate to that label, even if their statuses are quite varied. Thirdly, the sheer volume of communications students receive is generally recognized as an issue for all students. Those transferring from college are accustomed to their instructors reinforcing important communications in the classroom (e.g. deadlines, services), which may not always occur in university courses. Transfer students that had personal contacts in upper years at the university expressed that as a key success factor in informing them of resources available and/or showing them how to resolve their situation themselves.

In terms of the quality of the support services available to transfer students, those who reported using services found them beneficial, with the exception of orientation. Transfer students, who tend to be older than traditional students, reported not attending orientation events or disliking the experience. They viewed orientation as a primarily social activity whereas they were looking for one that focuses more on academic transition. Again, they also felt that orientation was designed for first-year students and not all transfer students had that status. Lastly, all of the focus group participants had not heard of Transfer Student Orientation held by the Student Experience Office but were very positive to the idea and would have liked to attend had they'd known about it. It should be noted here that the Benchmarking team advised the Student Experience Office about the findings during the planning of orientation for September 2013 and some changes to Transfer Student Orientation were implemented.

Lastly, the Child Studies program in the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies has, up until 2013, been a pathway program for college graduates looking for a university degree. Child Studies welcomes 30 students per year into the program and has identified academic literacy as a key deficiency with these students. To address this, they've introduced courses focused on reading and understanding methods of study (CHST 2503), and writing skills and oral communication (CHST 2504). These courses also bring academic services (e.g. Library, Writing Tutorial Service) into the classroom. By all accounts, this has had a positive impact on students in terms of academic transition and performance.

#### *Ownership of the Transfer Student Portfolio*

The needs of transfer students are unique, but not totally divergent to the needs of traditional students. Their needs, and the approaches to satisfying those needs, are more nuanced as opposed to treating them completely differently. Many of the services provided to them fall into the domain of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Enrolment) and it can be said that ultimate responsibility for the transfer student portfolio falls on that role (as evidenced by the owner of this Benchmarking project). However apart from transient initiatives like this one, there is no person on campus who is charged with understanding the needs of this growing population and working with service providers to improve their programs and resources to meet the needs of transfer students. To that end, many service providers welcomed any direction on how to serve

this population better as they already recognize transfer students as a vulnerable group, whether that involves slight tweaking to existing programming or completely new offerings.

### **External Findings**

External findings were collected by analyzing existing literature on the topic of support services to transfer students and through interviews with other North American institutions. Transition/adjustment is a major challenge for transfer students and universities are making deliberate efforts to address this. Likewise, overcoming registration challenges due to a transfer student's near-personalized path to their degree test system capabilities, course set-up, registration support and advising services. Lastly, transfer students exhibit challenges with building social connections that have implications on their general student experience and their sense of belonging.

#### *Transition and Adjustment*

Much of the literature suggests that transfer students have difficulty transitioning to university life – both academically and socially. This is particularly true for those transferring after attending college. Their perceptions of higher education are formed by their experience at the college level and students become frustrated with the differences in environments.

The literature posits that transfer students have a difficult time connecting with their instructors. Large classes sizes, lack of understanding of the purpose of office hours, and the availability of instructors form the main reasons transfer students experience difficulty connecting with their professors. Transfer students become frustrated with a university professor's focus on research in comparison to the strong teaching background of college instructors. This sentiment of, "I'm just a number" is commonplace.

The importance of self-motivation is also a new reality for those transferring from college. The idea of a personalized schedule, with no attendance taken or reminders of deadlines by instructors, relies on the motivation of individual students to attend classes, keep up with their studies, and plan for deadlines. Even grading for some classes, that puts pressure on a single project or midterm exam is seen as stressful to the college transfer student who is used to a staged, progressive model of evaluation.

In terms of social transition, transfer students find it difficult to integrate with students in their classes that already have previous peer groups established from their first year or even their residence/orientation experience. The large class sizes also contribute to not being able to make connections with peers. Lastly, the age difference between a transfer student taking first year courses versus a high school applicant can be a limiting factor when it comes to social connections.

Ideas from the literature to address transition issues and encourage adjustment include the development of learning communities (cohorts of students that share an identical schedule), transfer student interest groups (informal meetings of students with student affairs staff and faculty), and peer mentoring (advise from upper-year students).

#### *Registration Challenges*

Information on academic websites and brochures are designed for new students with the assumption that they have no advanced standing and their subsequent years of study are clearly laid out in terms of the credits they must achieve to earn their degree. To varying degrees, transfer students (by definition) do not follow this model and therefore experience a great deal of confusion in both choosing classes and completing registration. In short, each transfer student follows their own, unique path to complete their degree.

For example, a transfer student with advanced standing may be admitted into second-year but still have some first-year credits to complete and may even have equivalencies in some second-year courses. Their optimal registration may include a mix of first-year, second-year and possibly, third-year courses. Published information is not sufficient enough to advise them what courses they need to register for in a given academic year. This is exasperated with the registration restrictions of their required courses where they may be restricted by year-standing, program, or major.

Many universities face similar challenges in this regard. The existence of articulation agreements, which add structure and predictability to a student's progress, helps alleviate this problem. Proactive universities look to build formal bridges like this in areas with a high percentage of transfer students that allow them to tailor their information to show students the courses required to complete their degree requirements and pre-answer student questions that otherwise would have necessitated academic advising.

These challenges were also found in the internal research. Students reported being confused by what courses to select and encountering a number of registration errors when they tried to register for required courses. Not knowing enough about overrides they could request to gain access to their required courses, they select other courses that may or may not put them in an optimal place to achieve progress in their degree. By the time they see an advisor in September (two months after registration began) or later, they are told of their registration mistakes and are faced with courses at capacity and the challenge of getting into their required courses and achieving a full course load at such a late point in the registration cycle.

### **Recommendations**

Transfer students at Carleton are almost equally split between those coming from college (49.7%) and those coming from university (50.3%). These transfer students tend to be older than their counterparts from high school and over half of them enter into studies in upper years. This results in difficulties integrating in established peer study and social groups. In addition, large class sizes also contribute to not being able to make connections with peers. College transfer students report not being fully prepared for the academic demands of university studies. They find themselves underprepared in the areas of academic literacy, research, critical thinking, and analysis.

Carleton already offers a number of transition and academic support services for first year students. Transfer students, however, see themselves as a distinct population and even though they need many of the same services, they often assume that the workshops and programs are designed for younger students. In addition, transfer students have unique needs around registration and integrating with already established peer groups. By developing timely, targeted communications, promoting already existing services as well as coordinating and enhancing current services, these recommendations aim to better address issues of adjustment to the Carleton community for students with previous post-secondary experiences.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Develop a position of Coordinator of Pathways to advocate and coordinate interdepartmental efforts to continually improve support services and programming for transfer students.**

Although this project was focused on student services to transfer students during their studies, the management of transfer students begins with agreements and relationships with other institutions, and continues onto the recruitment and admissions phase prior to them becoming current students. The experience the student has while they are at Carleton is influenced by their experiences in these preceding phases. When the Benchmarking team surveyed other universities, many did not have primary contacts to answer questions about student support services as this portfolio was shared across many units on campus, without strategic oversight.

Institutions with a single role responsible for the all aspects of the transfer student experience seemed to have a more intentional approach to servicing this growing population of students.

It is recommended that Carleton pilot a new position of Coordinator of Pathways to advocate and coordinate interdepartmental efforts to continually improve all aspects of the transfer student experience. This would include such activities as:

- Building formal and informal agreements and relationships with other higher education institutions, particularly in Ontario.
- Working with academic departments to review common pathways and identify recommended course patterns for transfer students.
- Coordinate recruitment and transition activities with colleges.
- Collaborate with service providers to develop materials to promote available services and to adjust service delivery (language, scheduling, workshops, communications, content, programming) to better meet the nuanced needs of transfer students.
- Develop a communications plan to keep the transfer student population informed and connected including a central website, social media, targeted email (see Recommendation 6).
- Implement regular measures to assess the satisfaction of transfer students, and their unfulfilled needs in order to monitor the impact of improvement activities.
- Oversee the implementation of the recommendations of this report.

This portfolio ultimately falls under the direction of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Enrolment) however there currently is not a role dedicated to enacting the types of initiatives recommended in this report on a consistent basis. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) currently has a Credit Transfer Innovation fund for credit transfer initiatives which could be a source of funding for this position on a pilot basis.

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Implement a peer mentorship program to allow for student-to-student advice and support, including referrals to campus services.**

Transfer students with personal connections with returning students identified them as the most important resource for advice, information and transition. To offer all transfer students this type of resource, it is recommended that a peer mentoring program be created to match new transfer students with a trained, upper-year peers to offer them advice and support, including providing referrals to the appropriate campus services. Many upper-year students involved in the focus groups indicated that they would be open to becoming peer mentors to others.

This program would involve mentor profiles on a centralized website where a new transfer student could go to choose the mentor that best matches their needs. These mentors would be trained on the campus services available and would be supported by the Coordinator of Pathways. The program would also feature mentor-organized drop-in sessions, hosted at different departments throughout the school year as an informal forum for transfer students to answer their questions and feel supported. These drop-ins would feature a guest speaker on a particular topic of interest and timing to transfer students.

The goal of this program is to offer an informal source of information for new transfer students to complement official university services and departmental resources (e.g. administrators, instructors). This peer-delivered support is expected to allow student to; 1) increase use of student services, 2) improve timeliness of their use of student services (e.g. registration support at early stages of registration), 3) use online tools and resources more effectively, and 4) build personal connections with other students.

**RECOMMENDATION 3: Actively promote pre-registration advising in early June for transfer students, including in-person and virtual advising sessions.**

Stories of confusion with the registration process, specifically course selection and access, are commonplace among transfer students. Their advanced standing causes a number of complications in registration that often cannot be easily answered via information on a website. Getting clarity on what courses they are exempt from and what courses they still need to take is problematic for them. Once that is ascertained, students are often faced with course restrictions that limit them from taking courses outside of their official year standing. Finally, by the time they arrive on campus and take advantage of advising services available to them, there is often no space in the courses needed to adjust their registration. Knowing how to overcome these barriers, including the navigating of them via Carleton Central, is a challenge in itself.

Registration advising is available to students at any time after their acceptance, should they wish to take advantage of it. The Student Academic Success Centre (SASC) has a dedicated Transfer Student Advisor on staff to assist them. By September, many transfer students are seeking assistance from various resources on campus however it is often too late.

It is recommended that the Student Academic Success Centre and/or departmental advisors actively promote pre-registration advising in early June (prior to the Fall registration period) for transfer students. This should include in-person advising appointments for those in the Ottawa area and virtual (email, phone or video conferencing) advising sessions for those who cannot visit campus. Showing students how to access and read their audit, helping them in course selection, confirming expected course restrictions, and referring them to registration and academic support would allow students to have a much easier registration experience so that they can be confident they are in the right courses. It is imperative that this occurs prior to the registration period, where possible, so that the student can be prepared for their registration time-ticket and have addressed any course restrictions (through departmental overrides) prior to that time.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Encourage the two faculties involved to explore methods to allow upper-year transfer students to register in first-year seminars.**

University seminar courses are small classes (usually with 30 students) designed to give students the opportunity to discuss and research topics of interest in a core subject area. The instructors involved in FYSM's are committed to teaching and mentoring students as they make the transition into university life. First-year Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Cognitive Science students are provided this experience through enrolment in a First-Year Seminar (FYSM). With the majority of transfer students from within the BA, and over 60% of them being admitted with second-year standing, these new students miss out on this opportunity.

It is recommended that the Faculty of Public Affairs and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences be encouraged to investigate methods by which spaces in FYSM courses could be made available to second-year transfer students. In addition, promoting the advantages and importance of these seminars to first-year transfer students transitioning into the Carleton environment should be undertaken.

There are six pedagogical objectives for FYSM courses at Carleton University (see **Appendix C: Pedagogical Objectives for First-Year Seminars**), all of which have advantages for new transfer students. It is hoped that the smaller class sizes emphasizing group work, instructor mentorship and advising, interactive learning, and early assessment/evaluation will help students achieve their academic goals and have a positive impact on transfer students, as they transition to university and prepare for upper-year studies.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Further align programming and services to the needs of transfer students**

It should be noted that radical change in service delivery is not necessary to meet the needs of transfer students but more nuanced adjustments are recommended in the area of communications, language, targeting and workshop design. This is expected to better promote the value of student services to transfer students as well as better matching service offerings and programs to their needs. These needs are expected to evolve over time and the main role of the Coordinator of Pathways role (see Recommendation 1) will be to solicit ongoing feedback in order to keep abreast of the changing needs of transfer students and advise academic departments and student support services to make the necessary adjustments to meet those needs, when required.

To exemplify this, consultation has already begun with the Student Experience Office on how best to design and promote a specific orientation session for transfer students. This begins with promoting it appropriately as students clearly did not know that this exists. This starts with targeted communications that are clearly customized for transfer students. Branding is also an issue to be addressed given that this student population does not associate themselves with 'orientation' or 'frosh' and prefer terms that are focused on academics such as Academic Transition Workshop. Lastly, there needs to be a component of the orientation session that involves one-on-one advising with the student. This might involve going through their audit, reviewing their registration, and/or referring them to campus services/workshops. A little 'hand-holding' at the early stages can go a long way to setting them on the path to success.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Develop a communications strategy to specifically target the transfer student population (new and existing) including targeted email, centralized web resources, and social media.**

The information gap between what students need to know and what they are paying attention to is great for the transfer student population. As we have seen with other student groups, they are receiving the required information but have trouble distinguishing what information is pertinent to them. For example, they might receive an email to "new" students that is clearly written with the assumption that the student is in the first year of their studies. This confuses "new" transfer students that have advanced standing.

Transfer students need much of the same information as other students however the language needs to be adjusted and, in some cases, they should not receive information that is not pertinent to them. Clearly flagging email specifically for transfer students is one way to alert them to a message that they should pay attention to. Having a centralized website as a key information resource that they can refer to is also a way to minimize the information gap. Curating news posts and web information and customizing that information to provide clarity for transfer students would offer them a singular information resource they can refer to. Lastly, the use of social media to connect transfer students with each other, especially new students with returning, can offer an informal, two-way information source that can also facilitate personal connections amongst students. It can also be used to proactively see where students are having difficulties and adjust other communications mediums as a result.

To accomplish this, it is recommended that a comprehensive communications strategy be developed that involves a diverse set of communications mediums including email, web and social media.

### **Conclusion**

The recommendations, when implemented, aim to address challenges faced by transfer students in their transition to the Carleton community. Reaching out with coordinated and targeted services will have a positive impact on their transfer experience, help optimize their time to degree completion and help ensure their academic success.



Although Carleton delivers a number of service programs that help address some of the academic challenges, most units do not differentiate services or communications to transfer students as a distinct population leading to information gaps. Transfer students are unaware of the resources at their disposal, due largely to the perception that the communications received were not applicable to them. Those who received advice from friends at Carleton fared better. Connecting with current upper year students allowed them to take advantage of lessons learned and make use of existing services. The creation of a peer mentorship program aims to increase effective use of services for transfer students and create a network of connections for support. Participants from the focus groups have agreed to take part in the formation of such a mentorship program.

Overcoming registration challenges is another major transition issue for transfer students. Because transfer students begin their studies with advanced standing in courses, they almost exclusively have a complex registration pattern that is not easily self-addressed. Registration restrictions are common among transfer students due to year level standing and represent a key barrier in taking required courses. The individualized nature of their pathway requires more customized support from academic units and advising services in a timely manner to ensure an appropriate course pattern. As part of a pilot project, the Student Academic Success Centre received funds from the Credit Transfer Innovation Fund to have a dedicated transfer credit advisor. This position can be utilized to promote and offer pre-registration assistance. In addition, SASC has also begun offering telephone advising sessions which could be used for early outreach to transfer students.

Services to transfer students span multiple portfolios including admissions, advising, registration, student experience, and academic support. There is no one overseer who is working to understand the needs of transfer students and working with the service providers to better promote campus resources and ensure the needs of transfer students are taken into account. Many of Carleton's service providers welcomed any direction on how to serve this population better as they already recognize transfer students as a vulnerable group. Learning Support Services recently establish a workshop "cluster" for transfer students. As part of this cluster, Writing Tutorial Services is offering workshops for transfer students in essay writing, proofreading and research. Communicating the current and new services designed specifically to address the needs of transfer students is critical. Development of a communications strategy designed to reach transfer students in a timely manner as well as assessing the feasibility of a transfer student website can be undertaken within the position of Coordinator of Pathways, a pilot position being funded by the Credit Transfer Innovation Fund.

### **Next Steps**

Given the discussions that this project has initiated, some progress on the recommendations has already occurred. Fiscal funding for the pilot position via the Credit Transfer Innovation Fund has been requested. The Student Experience Office consulted with members of the benchmarking team on the design of an orientation session for transfer students that was offered this summer and those consultations will continue for the 2014 session. The Writing Tutorial Service is now offering a newly-designed cluster of workshops specifically for transfer students.

Upon support from the Organizational Excellence Steering Committee (OESC), it will be important to present the findings and recommendations of this report to the Academic Research Committee (ARC) to particularly inform the deans of how support for the transfer students within their faculties will be improved. It is also critical to have early conversations with the Student Academic Success Centre on their preparation and support needs to facilitate increased pre-registration advising for transfer student groups in early June 2014.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Benchmarking Project Charter

Name of Project	Supporting the Success of Transfer Students
Project Owner	Suzanne Blanchard, AVP (Students & Enrolment) & University Registrar
Project Leader	Janice O'Farrell, Director (Admissions Services)

#### Purpose

The goal of this project is to develop and improve support services that best address the needs of transfer students.

#### Description

Transfer students are new students to Carleton who bring with them previous post-secondary studies. Transfer students are admitted into Carleton at varying year levels based on the amount of transfer credit awarded at the point of admission.

This proposal is initiated partly in response to the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities' discussion paper on "Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge" but also to support Carleton's proposed Strategic Mandate Agreement. In the government vision for postsecondary education, "*Ontario's colleges and universities .....will put students first by providing the best possible learning experience for all qualified learners in an affordable and financially sustainable way, ensuring high quality, and globally competitive outcomes for students and Ontario's creative economy.*" The government hopes to further improve student mobility between colleges, between universities and between colleges and universities.

This project will determine the characteristics and service needs of the transfer students attending Carleton and identify the challenges that these students encounter upon entering their degree program. This project will involve benchmarking of existing programs at other institutions, focus groups with transfer students, and an assessment of current student services offered for their relevance to transfer students. This initiative will make recommendations for a coordinated set of services to support the needs and address the challenges of transfer students.

#### Objectives

1. To identify the characteristics of transfer students attending Carleton.
2. To gain an understanding of which services transfer students use and identify any gaps in providing services to them as a distinct population.
3. To develop a list of measures to enable tracking and assessing the effectiveness of services for transfer students.
4. To identify the challenges faced by transfer students.
5. To make recommendations for a coordinated service model for transfer students.

#### Strategic Alignment

This proposal is aligned with Carleton's 2009 strategic plan, *Defining Dreams*, in the area of striving for excellence in education and support services for students.

The project also supports objectives 7.1 (Expand University-College Academic Collaboration) and 7.2 (Explore a Regional Post-Secondary Partnership) of the Carleton Academic Plan. As Carleton continues to improve our transfer credit protocols and actively promotes student mobility and access, it will be key to have effective services in place to support students during their studies and ensure success through to graduation.

## Scope

In Scope (Project Deliverables)
Identification and analysis of new undergraduate students that bring with them previous post-secondary studies
Review of how current services cater to the unique needs of transfer students
Identify gaps between current services and needs of transfer students
Recommendations for a coordinated service model for transfer students

Out of Scope
Graduate and Special students with previous post-secondary studies
Students on Letter of Permission
Admissions and course articulation policies

## Team Membership

Team Leader: Janice O'Farrell, Director (Admissions Services)

Team Members: David Taylor, Student Advisor (SASC)

Richard Nimijean, Assistant Dean (FASS)

Perry Legakis, Director (Student Awards)

Stenley Philippe, Telecounselling Supervisor (UG Recruitment)

Benchmarking Facilitator: Scott Gonsalves, Senior Advisor (Quality Initiatives)

## Milestones

Milestone	Completion Date
Project Charter approved	December 2012
Team members identified	January 2013
Benchmarking training delivered to team	January 2013
Meeting schedule set	January 2013
Internal data collected	February 2013
External data collected	March 2013
Recommendations identified	April 2013
Final report completed	May 2013
Report recommendations approved	June 2013
Implementation plan created	June 2013
Project closed	June 2013

## Success Criteria

Metric	Intended Outcome	Baseline Measure
Transfer student satisfaction	Increase	TBD*
Number of transfer students	Increase	TBD*
Graduation Rate of transfer students	Increase	TBD*

\*To be collected during project

**Appendix B: Transfer Student Focus Group Guide**

1. First, we will start with some introductions. Let's go around the room and share your 1) *first name*, 2) *program of study*, and 3) *one word to describe how Carleton University supports its transfer students*.
  - a. Does anyone care to further explain their choice of word?
2. (For transfers from college) Why did you choose to further your studies with a university education?
  - a. Did you begin attending college with the intention of transferring to university?
3. Thinking back to your expectations of embarking on a university education, what expectations were met/not met once you actually got here?
4. What, if anything, makes transfer students unique from students coming from high school into 1<sup>st</sup> year?
5. Do you feel that you were prepared for university? Please explain.
  - a. How could your previous institution prepared you better?
  - b. How could Carleton have prepared you better?
  - c. What could you have done to prepare yourself better?
6. What was the hardest part about attending university for the first time?
7. How did you find your experience with selecting and registering for courses?
8. Did you feel well prepared for dealing with the financial aspects of attending university (paying for tuition/residence? accessing funding? etc...)
9. Was the process of purchasing books similar to your experience at other institutions?
10. Was the experience getting your accounts set up (email, library, LMS, student card, etc.) a seamless one? Why/why not?
11. Have you had any challenges using the library for your research (including online resources)?
12. What activities did your academic department offer to you upon entering university?
  - a. Did you take advantage of those activities?
  - b. Were those activities helpful?
13. There are a host of services available to students, academically and otherwise. Which services have you taken part in? (e.g. Student Experience Office, Academic Advising, Library, Athletics, registration support, fee payment/awards support, Health Services, Residence Life...)
  - a. Did those services meet your needs?
  - b. If you didn't use those services, why not?
  - c. What services to you plan to use going forward?
14. What was the one major factor that eased your transition to university?
  - a. Academically?
  - b. Socially?
15. Has anyone taken part in Orientation activities (SEO, departmental)?
  - a. How did you find it?
  - b. Did it help point you in the right direction in those initial weeks?
  - c. (For those that entering into 2<sup>nd</sup> year) How can we best orient you to the Carleton University experience (e.g. resources, services, processes, support)?
  - d. Did you attend the special orientation for transfer students (offered in summer)? Why/why not?
16. How did you find it *socially* upon arriving at university?
  - a. (For those entering in 2<sup>nd</sup> year) How did you manage to make social connections?
  - b. What opportunities did you have to connect with other transfer students? Was that even necessary?
17. If you were to mentor a new transfer student to Carleton University, what advice would you give them?
18. What, if anything, should Carleton University do differently to help students like yourselves in the future?
19. Is there anything else on the topic of services to transfer students that we didn't discuss that you'd like to share?

## Appendix C: Pedagogical Objectives of First-Year Seminars

1. **Close Analysis**  
Some of the assignment, student-faculty interaction, and group work in First-Year Seminars should be designed so that students carry out close analysis of some texts, theories, mathematical models, explanations, narratives, artifacts, aesthetic objects, or symbolic systems that are central to the course.
2. **Interactive Learning**  
First-Year Seminars should be designed so that all students have some regular opportunities for learning by interacting with the instructor. The type of interaction will vary for different fields and instructors; it could include problem-solving sessions, Socratic conversations, discussion of student drafts or presentations, and many other formats.
3. **Early Assessment and Evaluation**  
First-Year Seminars should be designed so that the students receive early feedback (i.e. within the first six weeks) on short assignments, so as to convey clear expectations for university-level performance. In the case of written work, these might include standards for literal meaning, clarity, organization and reasoning. A series of modest assignments starting early in the term will give students multiple opportunities to improve their work without the risk associated with final examinations and term papers.
4. **Culminating Project**  
First-Year Seminars should be designed to culminate in a project or essay that is transitional to upper-year work. The assignment should be structured so that students are guided systematically through phases of formulating a question, research, writing, critique, and revision, as appropriate to the discipline or interdisciplinary field of study.
5. **Teamwork**  
First-year Seminars should be designed so that there are occasions on which students work in groups. Group work is to serve not only as a pedagogical method, but also to support the development of interpersonal skills and to encourage students to “find a social and intellectual home.”
6. **Consultation & Advising**  
First-Year Seminars should be designed so that instructors consult with students from time to time about their work in this and other courses, and about institutional concerns. This will provide an opportunity to help students understand and communicate about the university and the services that might assist them.

*Source: First-Year Seminar Review Report – January 2007*