

## Reasons for Reverse Transfers: In Students' Own Words

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Attention to reverse transferring (i.e., student mobility from a four-year to a two-year institution) has increased in recent years due to its association with extremely low rates of bachelor's completion (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Lichtenberger, 2011). Using Perna & Thomas' (2008) framework for student success, this pilot study used a mixed methods approach to examine four-year-starter students' reasons for transferring to a community college. Responses to "Why did you transfer?" from seven telephone interviews and 29 completed online surveys with students who transferred from their four-year to two-year institution related most often to school context (e.g., program of study, integration/fit) and internal context (e.g., motivation to be in school, personal economics). Policy implications include developing comprehensive, statewide transfer policies and establishing more formal systems to support all types of transfer students.

#### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, attention to reverse transferring (i.e., mobility from a four-year to a two-year institution) has increased due to its association with extremely low rates of bachelor's completion. In light of the national completion agenda to increase the number of students with higher education degrees/credentials, examining reasons related to reverse transferring is pertinent. Recent research has established that nearly one-fifth of college-going students reverse transfer; but more alarmingly, less than a quarter of reverse transfer students eventually earn a bachelor's degree and even fewer earn a certificate or associate's degree while at their respective community college (Goldrich-Rab and Pfeffer, 2009; Lichtenberger, 2011). Hence, reverse transfer students account for a disproportionately high number of college dropoutsapproximately one-half (Lichtenberger, 2011). Understanding why students reverse transfer would be beneficial as policymakers develop strategies to increase the proportion of individuals with quality postsecondary degrees.

Perna & Thomas' (2008) conceptual model of student success, with the following nested contextual levels, was used to guide this study: - internal context (e.g., students' attitudes, motivations, personal economic situation):

- family context (e.g., family financial support, live close to home); - school context (e.g., integration/fit, readiness, program of study):
- social, economic, and political context (e.g., financial aid,

Previous research on reverse transfer students utilizes data on high school graduates from 1992 – cohorts that have graduated nearly two decades ago. Therefore, the timeliness of the data remains an issue, as enrollment patterns have changed over the last 20 years. Conducting in-depth phone interviews and open-ended online survey responses with a more recent cohort afforded for more rich and timelier data. In addition, we wanted to consider a qualitative approach to increase our understanding by drilling down into specific issues to better answer why such enrollment patterns are occurring, thus augmenting our quantitative research.

#### **METHODS**

The results presented here focus on the global question "Why did you transfer to the community college?" to hear in students' own words their reasons for reverse transferring. Interview and online survey data were collected from students who reversed transferred from a four-year institution to one of two regional community colleges. Questions were based on Perna & Thomas' (2008) model of student success. Tinto's (1975) theory of integration, and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement. After numerous attempts to recruit participants, seven students completed telephone interviews and 24 students completed an online survey (out of a possible 839) students). Email reminders, an automated phone call, and posted flyers were utilized for recruitment. Students completing the interview received a \$25 gift card from a national retailer. Students completing the survey by the deadline were entered into a drawing to receive one of the following awards: one of three \$100 gift cards r one \$25 gift card to a national retailer.

Nearly all of the survey respondents were traditionally-aged college students, under 25 years of age, and single. Just over 20% of the survey respondents had children. The interviewed students were primarily non-traditionally-aged, with most between 26-35 years old. Only two of the interviewed students were under 25 years old. Three of the interviewees were married with at least one child.

For the qualitative analysis, responses from the telephone interviews and open-ended online survey responses were coded based on Perna & Thomas' (2008) model of student success. The first author conducted the primary coding which was then reviewed by the second author.

#### **RESULTS**

Overall, students' responses related to school context (49 responses) most often, followed by internal context (42 responses) as their reasons for reversing transferring. Reasons pertaining to family context received the third highest endorsement (29 responses), while economic context received fewer responses (12 responses). The figure below displays a word cloud which represents the frequency of key words (larger words have higher frequency) used by students when explaining their reasons for reverse transferring. As seen in the figure, words related to school context (e.g., classes, program, degree) are the largest which signifies words used most often by interviewees and survey respondents. Further discussion of each context area is provided, in order of highest endorsements by students. Quotes from students' responses are also included to illustrate the findings.



<u>School Context</u>. Students' responses relating to school context occurred most frequently and included topics of convenience, program of study, and better fit for the student.

Convenience. Convenience was frequently cited as a main influence for reverse transferring. Convenience was multi-dimensional, including flexibility in course scheduling and proximity to home or work. Many interviewees associated their ability to maintain work schedules or fuffill other family responsibilities with the community college's flexible course scheduling.

"[The community college] offers a lot more night classes and online classes, helping with my work schedule, and making time management a lot easier."

Program of Study or Degrees. Many students reverse transferred because the community college had a specific degree program (e.g., nursing), including that it was accredited, had a highly regarded reputation, or was not available at their four-year college. The opportunity to immediately take courses of interest (no prerequisites), to complete in a shorter timeframe, and to complete an associate degree or certificate were also cited by students as influencing their decisions to reverse transfer.

"I wanted to switch majors and begin the dental hygiene program. [The four-year college] does not offer this program and [the community college] is an accredited program. It was a no brainier."

/ Fit. Some students described a better fit in terms of the smaller size of the community college (relative to their four-year college), additional academic supports, feeling safe, and less rigorous course work to ease them back into postsecondary education.

"I had positive experience at other community colleges is terms of receiving help and support."

"To ease my way back in ...less rigorous coursework."

Internal Context. Students frequently mentioned reasons relating to internal context as influencing their decision to transfer, with most comments concerning affordability and personal expense.

Affordability. Many students cited affordability as the driving factor behind their decisions to reverse transfer. Some students mentioned the perceived affordability of community colleges in general terms (i.e., "less expensive", "cheaper"). However, in many cases, affordability was viewed in relative terms with students comparing the community college expense to that of their initial four-year college, particularly related to the expense of general education courses. Affordability was also defined in terms outside of tuition and fees, such as being able to save money by living with family or being able to maintain work schedules due to close proximity to the community college. Lastly, several students indicated they were paying for colleges "out of their own pocket", thus, cost was extremely important to them.

"I'm living at home because it's cheaper, and the tuition at [the community college] is a lot cheaper than [the four-year college]."

"I transferred to [the community college] because it is cheaper for me to get my first two years done."

"Classes are cheaper, and I am working full time and paying for my own college so this is a major plus."

Other items relating to internal context included the desire to stay in school and to increase their confidence, particularly when they did not do well academically at their four-year college.

"[The four-year college] was an awesome school with excellent education, athletics, and involvement but at times it was so overwhelming being so big and far away from home. Transferring to [the community college] made me feel more comfortable and confident in my choices at the time."

<u>Family Context</u>. Responses relating to family context fell nearly equally into two general categories: knowing someone who attended/recommended and close proximity to home.

Influence of Family/Friends. Students remarked that the influence of family/friends impacted their decision to transfer to the community college. Several individuals knew someone who attended (e.g., boy/girlfriend, friends, co-worker) or had someone highly recommend that they attend (e.g., teacher, parent, friends). Knowing other students also helped the student feel more comfortable in the college environment:

"Many students from my high school and surrounding high schools in the area attend and it's nice to finally know people in my classes."

Close Proximity to Home. Several students said that the community college's close location to their home played a part in their decision. While some students didn't specify what about being close to home was advantageous, a few comments explicitly linked close proximity to being near family:

"[The community college] is only 15 minutes from my house which is nice to be able to go home at night and see my family and sleep in my own bed rather than three hours away in a dorm bed with a troublesome roommate."

"I wanted to stay close to my family, so [the community college] was a perfect fit."

Social, Economic, and Political Context. Fewer comments from students related to the macro perspective that may have influenced their decision. Comments generally discussed issues relating to debt load and job opportunities.

Concerns about debt load. Several students mentioned concerns about accumulating too much student loan debt as influencing their decision to reverse transfer. It appeared as though community colleges were generally viewed as affording college opportunities without requiring a heavy debt burden. While community colleges were perceived as less expensive to attend, changes in financial aid were not viewed as all that impactful.

"The cost was the biggest reason why. [The community college] was way more affordable than [the four-year college]. I really didn't want to be in a lot of debt when I left college."

Job Opportunities. A few students indicated that transferring to a community college was related to their job or job prospects. In addition, the need for a degree to obtain a good paying job and to help with promotions/salary increases were also mentioned. Somewhat related was students' comments that the convenience of the community college (flexible course offerings and proximity) allowed ample time to maintain a longer work schedule.

"I needed classes to better understand my current job."

"I know there are job opportunities for nursing. I like the idea of moving to another state and nursing gives me that flexibility."

#### **DISCUSSION**

Results from this pilot study provide an initial examination of why students reverse transfer in their own words. Students reported school- and internal-related factors as most prominent in driving their decisions to reverse transfer, with family/friends-related aspects to a lesser extent. Students' preference for a specific associate's program, need for flexibility in scheduling and course delivery, and desire for lower cost were examples of primary decision levers related to their transferring to a community college. While the results from this small sample limits the generalizability of the study, the findings provide suggestions for next steps in further understanding students' reasons for reverse transferring. These include: 1) delving deeper into the multi-dimensional factors (e.g., internal/family - living at home to save on expenses); 2) exploration of the push and pull between institutions in terms of students feeling pushed out of the four-year (e.g., academic difficulties) and pulled into the community college; and, 3) development of effective programs to assist students in selecting their initial institution that best meets their needs to reduce switching institutions which delays their progression and completion.

In addition, more effective recruitment strategies to engage college students in research studies should be considered. Despite the financial incentives, relatively few students responded to the invitations. Other qualitative mobile methods (e.g., text messages to prompt participation or surveys available on mobile devices) may be more effective in reaching the college student population.

#### Importance to Illinois Education Policy

In terms of policy implications, information that addresses why students move from their four-year institution to a community college would be particularly salient as policymakers develop strategies to increase the proportion of individuals with quality postsecondary degrees. As argued by Adelman (2005) and Goldrich-Rab and Pfeffer (2009) and echoed in Lichtenberger (2011), it would be helpful if community colleges and "parent" feeder four-year institutions of reverse transfer students established joint monitoring and advising systems for potential reverse transfers at early stages of their college careers. Lastly, given the rise in student mobility for reverse transfers, comprehensive, statewide transfer policies are an important component in order for states to reach their ambitious college completion goals (ECS, May 2014).

#### REFERENCES

See handout for references

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