Research Spotlight

(Dis)Connection and Stigma: Transfer Students’ Sense of Belonging
Transition Programs and Services

Sense of belonging is a complex and significant factor associated with student success. Yet, there have been few inquiries into sense of belonging among the transfer student population. In this session, we will share findings from a qualitative case study that explored sense of belonging among vertical and horizontal transfer students at two four-year institutions. Results will be useful for researchers and practitioners interested in supporting transfer student development and success.

Jeffrey Mayo, Assistant Director
The University of Texas at Austin

Catherine Hartman, Postdoctoral Research Associate
National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition
(Dis)Connection and Stigma Transfer Students’ Sense of Belonging

Jeffrey Mayo
The University of Texas at Austin

Catherine Hartman
The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Student in Transition

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Agenda

• Overview of current transfer research
• Study purpose and research questions
• Theoretical framework
• Methods
• Findings
• Questions/Discussion
Sense of Belonging & Student Success

- Correlated with GPA (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007)
- Predictor of student persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007)
- Influences social connectedness (Walton & Cohen, 2011)
Transfer Sense of Belonging

• Transfer students report institutional neglect and encounter instances of marginalization or differences between themselves and other students on campus that reinforce this, impacting how feel validated they feel within their new institutional environment and their sense of agency (Lipka, 2008; Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2016)

• Perceived disconnection between themselves and their peers can result in transfer students’ decreased engagement and, in turn, heightened feelings of isolation (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2009)
Research Questions

How do transfer students develop a sense of belonging throughout the transfer process?
Theoretical Framework

• Belonging Mindset
  ● Social & academic belonging uncertainty
  ● Stereotype threat
  ● Attributional ambiguity
  ● “People like me do not belong here”
    ● Confirmation bias then leads to students to give weight, or even seek out, evidence that supports this hypothesis
    ● Evidence that does not support this hypothesis is viewed with skepticism or dismissed
  ● No objective prejudice or discrimination necessary, only an event that implies lack of connectedness

Methodology and Methods

Part of a larger case study on transfer academic and social transition experience

52 students
- 27 Northern University
- 25 Southern University

- Student interviews
- Ethnographic data
- Observations
Research Site—Northern

- Private, doctoral university
- Selective: 38% admit rate for freshmen; 58% acceptance rate for transfers (Fall 2017)
- Urban environment
- Medium enrollment
  - Total: 9,000
  - Transfer: 19% of new students
- Cost of attendance: $33,000
- Pell grant recipients: 12%
- Race/ethnicity
  - White: 71%
  - Hispanic: 12%
  - Black or African American: 5%
  - Asian: 3%
Research Site—Southern

• Public, doctoral university
• Selective: 40% admit rate for freshmen; 48% acceptance rate for in-state transfers, and 27% for OOS transfers (Fall 2017)
• Urban environment
• Large enrollment
  • Total: 43,000
  • Transfer: 22% of new students
• Cost of attendance: $16,000
• Pell grant recipients: 24%
• Race/ethnicity
  • White: 43%
  • Hispanic: 20%
  • Black or African American: 4%
  • Asian: 18%
Findings

• Students like me do not belong here
  • Academic uncertainty
  • Social uncertainty
• Universities were built for first-time-in-college students
• Transfer programming provided a space and community for some students
• Confirmation bias reinforces uncertainty
Students like me do not belong here: Academic

• “My professor told the class, ‘if you took Calculus 2 at a community college, you screwed yourself.’”

• “So it would be, I guess I kind of touched on it, but yeah, like those situations where you're like sitting in a class, there's like 14 other kids or whatever and they're all joking about so and so professor how, you know, he always just this weird twitch or on all his PowerPoints, he always puts like a beam or something. You know, I dunno, something dumb and unless you've had that professor you're not gonna know and so sometimes you're like, oh, I'm laughing but I don't know the joke and I'm just laughing because I want to feel included. So I guess that was my very basic example of an instance where it's kind of very obvious that you don't quite belong.”
Students like me do not belong here: Social

• “Like I wouldn't feel ostracized, like nobody cares, but as soon as you label yourself a transfer, there's definitely a shift as far as I don't feel like I belong quite as much anymore”

• “You show up and you see a bunch of 19-year-olds driving BMWs or Lexus or Land Rovers, Range Rovers, that's not normal. So if you're a transfer student, and you're not used to having money, and then all of a sudden you come around this area where it's from a very wealthy background, and I think that can be a little bit intimidating for some, make them feel out of place a little bit”
Universities built for first-time-in-college students

- “The reason specifically for that is because as a freshman, [Northern] requires you to live on campus and so you meet a ton, a ton of people. They're all in the same boat as you and it's much more conducive to that community feel, right? As a transfer you're not required to live on campus, you're not required to really participate in very much, you don't really have opportunities to meet people that are existing students. So often the social aspect can feel like these cliques are sort of already established and I'm an outsider and don't really have people.”

- “A lot of the times I want to participate in something but there's a lot of nitpicky details about you have to be in your junior year, you have to be in your sophomore year, you have to be in your freshman year, and of course I came in so late I missed a lot of stuff just from that. So half time now, I don't even read them, because I've qualified to participate in like one thing, which is a bummer because I would love to do all those things.”
Transfer programming created a space and community

- “It kind of helped me catch up and really get an idea of what the business school is going to be like and how the classes are going to be...that helped me catch up with people I feel like, since this is my first semester there and some people are sophomores, like the same age as me.”

- “[Transfer student organization members] lessen the burden of being a transfer student, because you know this is a community of people who have had the same experiences as you, with transferring either from different university or community college. The same maybe type of problems, like home sickness, or classes that maybe, as they transitioned and they didn't realize would be so tough, and kind of give you advice how to navigate those. They're my people.”
Confirmation bias reinforces uncertainty

• “And so first semester was very rough in the sense that I was just like, ‘Do I really belong here?’ You know? I was questioning my intelligence. I was like, ‘Maybe I'm just not that smart.’ I was talking with my mom and I was ‘if I had the option, I would probably go back to [previous institution] not because of that... But this semester, it's better simply because I get ... I've talked to all my other transferred friends we all agree I think we have a chance to get acclimated to the Southern system. Take a deep breath like there is nothing in the world. And yeah, it's better. I'm not second guessing my decisions.”

• “I think that the first semester for a transfer student is like a really precarious moment. It makes transfer students feel like if they don't do well in their first semester then obviously Northern isn't for them, and I think that is a mentality that needs to be addressed... 'Cause I know three different transfer students that left [Northern], and this was their first semester. They didn't do well and they said, ‘Oh, I guess I'm going to go to [regional state university] or [local community college] 'cause Northern’s too hard.’ Northern is an intimidating school.”
Objective discrimination is not a requirement for belonging uncertainty

• "Like I wouldn't feel ostracized, like nobody cares, but as soon as you label yourself a transfer, there's definitely a shift as far as I don't feel like I belong quite as much anymore"

• "I don't think that it's, it's not other people giving me that feeling. It's myself. It's like as soon as I out myself that I didn't come here as a freshman, it just seems like oh I'm no longer included in these jokes or I'm no longer like, do you know what I'm trying to say?"

• "It's not an outward, it's not a stigma that is being forced on me from outward, it's more an internal stigma.”

• "I was told by this person that it was kind of the mission of the university to get transfer students out quickly, and I was told that that shouldn't inform my decisions.”
Practice, theory, and research

Implications
Discussion