Research Spotlight

2762 - Assessing the Impact of a Transfer Learning Community on Social Integration and Academic Success

Transition Programs and Supports, Diversity and Inclusion

Transfer students are a growing population of undergraduates who are academically at-risk but often underserved by 4-year institutions. We created a transfer learning community (TLC) for entering psychology transfer majors to enhance their social and academic integration and success. This study reports the positive impact of the TLC on the 170 transfer students who have participated in the program during its first two years.

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Assessing the Impact of a Transfer Learning Community on Academic Success and Retention

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ABSTRACT

Transfer students are a growing population of undergraduate psychology majors who are academically at-risk but often underserved by 4-year institutions. We created a transfer learning community (TLC) for entering psychology transfer students to enhance their social and academic integration and success. This study reports the positive impact of the TLC on the 170 transfer students who have participated in the program during its first two years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transfer students continue to be an overlooked population in institutional efforts to enhance student success and retention (Coston, 2019; Thomas et al., 2018). This is in spite of the well-documented phenomenon of transfer shock, marked by difficult transitions from 2- to 4-year institutions resulting in a decline in students' previous academic performance (Rhine et al., 2000) as well as notable performance gaps in comparison to non-transfer students (Hobbs et al., 2021). Learning communities are a popular high-impact curricular practice for undergraduate education and have been used effectively to improve academic performance and enhance student engagement, primarily among first-year students (Buch & Barron, 2012). Given the demonstrated success of learning communities for first-year students, and the persistent performance gaps for transfer students reported in the literature, we created a learning community for transfer psychology majors (TLC) in 2020. Since then, the TLC has served 170 first-semester transfers and shown a positive impact on their social integration and academic performance.

TRANSFER LEARNING COMMUNITY

The Psychology TLC is a non-residential, curricular-based learning community for first-semester transfer majors. It consists of a two-course black schedule that includes a course developed as the curricular center of the TLC, Transfer Success Strategies for Majors (PSYC 2100). And a pre-existing course, Positive Psychology (PSYC 2137). The courses are taught by the authors of this poster, and are integrated around the theme of successful transition and positive growth. For a complete description of the TLC and its courses, see an article on our first year during the Covid-19 pandemic published in the Teaching of Psychology, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00986283221098694

STUDY METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was used to compare the first-semester academic success and retention of TLC members across four academic semesters (N=170) with entering transfer majors who did not participate in the TLC (N= 269). De-identified success and retention data were provided by the Office of Institutional Research and T-tests and chi square tests, respectively, were used to test for between-group differences. An end-of-semester feedback survey using a blind response

feature in Canvas Quizzing was used to measure TLC participants' perceptions and self-reported behaviors. The survey included twenty-five 4-point Likert items and 4 open-ended questions. The pre-survey was administered the first week of each semester and the post-survey was administered the last week of the semester, following completion of both TLC courses.

RESULTS

Results found significant ($p < .05$) positive effects on all measures of academic success: lower rates of academic probation, higher levels of first-semester earned hours (ratio between attempted hours and completed hours), and higher first-semester GPA than non-TLC students. First-to-second retention rates were significantly (p<.10) higher for TLC members. Surveys used to assess student TLC member perceptions of the TLC and its impact on their academic and social integration also showed positive effects of participating in the TLC. Descriptive statistics (percent agree) showed that 90-100% of TLC participants reported the following as a result of their TLC participation: Easier transition; enhanced academic experience; developed relationships with faculty and peers; enhanced academic confidence; knowledge of success resources; knowledge of engagement opportunities. A thematic analysis of students' responses to the open-ended survey questions identified several themes related to transfer student challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, and their perceptions of how the TLC helped to mitigate them. Student quotes illustrating these themes will be presented during the proposed session.

DISCUSSION

Our findings support the use of learning communities at promoting both social and academic integration of transfer students. These findings are generalizable for others seeking targeted, flexible, resource-effective strategies at their own institutions. Our TLC model enables them to be customized to by each department to achieve a wide range of goals and outcomes, and can be used in both in-person and virtual formats. We implemented the TLC with no extra funds from Academic Affairs or the Psychology department, and feel our flexible curriculum-centered model can be easily adapted by other institutions of all sizes, and within any academic department, especially those with large numbers of transfer students. We believe our success, as reported here, will stimulate more interest in the important but overlooked population of transfer students, and the exploration of best practices that promote their academic success.

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