Transfer Students 2001
Focus Group Summary

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Introduction

To increase our understanding of students who transfer to UC Davis from California’s community colleges, Student Affairs Research & Information (SARI) conducted a series of focus groups with recent transfer students. These discussions allowed students to relate their experience at the community college to their life at UC Davis and provided a forum to discuss issues specific to transferring to UC Davis. Transfer students from California’s community colleges are critically important to UC Davis. In fall 1999, these students represented approximately 26% of new undergraduates and 88% of students who transferred to UC Davis.

A series of five focus group discussions were conducted in March 1999 and June 2000. Eight to ten students participated in each group. Though an attempt was made to include students with diverse characteristics, approximately three-fourths of the participants were women and one-half were white. As a result, some groups had little or no representation by men or students of color. In addition, most students who agreed to participate lived in the City of Davis or in on-campus housing.

For the purpose of these focus group discussions, SARI’s objectives were fivefold.

- To gain a more complete understanding of students who transfer to UC Davis from community colleges;
- To explore UC Davis’s image among California’s community college students and the variables that most influence this perception;
- To determine when community college transfers make their decision to attend a four-year institution and who or what most influences that decision,
- To explore the reasons why community college transfers select UC Davis as opposed to another four-year institution, and
- To examine the impact that the Transfer Admission Agreement Program and the Transfer Opportunity Program have on students who participate in these programs.

Summary of Points

- For as long as they could remember and certainly before enrolling at the community college, the vast majority of focus group participants planned to enroll at a four-year college or university. For these students, the issue was not whether they would transfer to a four-year institution but which university or college they would attend.

- Focus group participants reported that their parents and family, personal goals and aspirations, and desire for economic enrichment were the main factors that influenced their decision to attend a four-year college or university.

- Most discussants made a strategic decision to attend the community college before transferring to a four-year institution. Most viewed the community college as a “more efficient way” to achieve their educational goals.
There were concomitant reasons why students selected UC Davis: most were drawn to UC Davis by its outstanding academic reputation, especially in the sciences; some were interested in pursuing careers in medicine and veterinary medicine; and many were impressed by the Davis atmosphere and described it as friendly, comfortable, safe, clean and home-like.

Most discussants agreed that UCD had a positive reputation among community college students. According to participants, UC Davis is mostly known for its agriculture and science programs and medical and veterinary medicine schools.

Students who participated in the Transfer Admissions Agreement program and Transfer Opportunity programs spoke highly of them. Most agreed that these programs aided their transfer process.
WHY COMMUNITY COLLEGE?
For as long as they could remember, the vast majority of focus group participants planned to enroll at a four-year university or college. For these students, the issue was not whether they would transfer to a four-year institution but which university or college they would attend.

- **More Efficient Route.** The majority of discussants made a conscious decision to attend community college before transferring to a four-year institution. Most believed this to be a prudent decision as they viewed the community college as a more “efficient route” to achieving their educational goals. According to one participant, “Not only did I save a tremendous amount of money by attending a community college, but I was able to get my feet wet before attended a major university. I knew what to expect before I got here!”

- **Major & Career Uncertainty.** Although the exception to the majority, a few discussants admitted to making last minute decisions to enroll at a community college. Most were accepted to a four-year institution but due to their uncertainty regarding a major and/or an occupation, believed that the community college was a more appropriate precursor.

INFLUENCES TO ATTEND A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY
Focus group participants reported that their parents and family, personal goals and aspiration, and desire for economic enrichment, were the main factors that influenced their decision to attend a four-year college or university.

- **Family.** Parents and family had the greatest influence upon focus group participants’ decision to attend a four-year college or university. As stated by discussants, their goal to proceed to a four-year college/university was not only supported by parents, but assumed to be a given.

- **Economics.** Other participants believed that their economic futures relied upon successful completion of a four-year degree program. As one student stated, *to have a future and to get a good job, you must complete a four-year degree!*

- **Career Choice.** Other participants stated that their matriculation at a four-year institution was simply a catalyst to achieving their personal career goals. For example, these participants’ career aspirations were professions that clearly require post-secondary degrees: teaching at the university, community college or high school level; working as biologist or chemist; and pursuing careers in medicine or veterinary medicine.

- **New Surroundings.** Lastly, a few students mentioned their desire to leave home and to meet other students within their age group as influences to attend a four-year institution.

PERCEPTION OF UC DAVIS AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
Overall, participants agreed that UC Davis had a fairly positive image among community college students.

- **Rural.** According to discussants, many of their community college peers were familiar with UC Davis’s Medical and Veterinary schools and the agriculture and science programs. Additionally, most mentioned the cows and often stated that City of Davis was too rural and agriculturally based.

- **Awareness of UC Davis.** The few participants from Southern California reported that their community college peers knew very little about Davis; “Most don’t even have a clue as to where the campus is located. A few were familiar with Davis’s reputation for agriculture and some had heard of the medical and veterinary schools, but the majority knew little else.”

- **Serious Students.** Most community college students felt that the town and campus were decidedly lacking in social activities. Students often described UC Davis as, “a very boring school that never has parties or other fun events.” In a similar context, the typical UC Davis undergraduate was perceived to be “a very intense student.” For example, when selecting a four-year institution, one participant received this precaution about UC Davis. “You have to be serious if you attend UC Davis. It is a good school with a good reputation in the sciences, but you will have no life outside of school.”

- **Good Reputation and Reputable Back-up School.** Participants from the San Francisco Bay Area emphasized the considerable number of community college students from that region who choose to matriculate at UC Davis as a positive factor. They also mentioned the quality of the academic programs in addition to the University’s positive reputation. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that many of their community college peers described UC Davis as a “reputable back-up school for those who did not get into UC Berkeley or UCLA.”
IF TRANSFERRING, WHY SELECT UC DAVIS?
One participant summarized her reasons for choosing UC Davis as a combination of different factors: her boyfriend, job, the close proximity of the campus to her home, and the curriculum offered by her major program. Although her reasoning may have been unique, the statement illustrates the converging factors that contribute to participants electing to attend UC Davis.

- Friendly. Most discussants mentioned the Davis environment as a very positive influence. They liked the friendly students, college-town atmosphere, and the safe feeling of campus. Others stated that UC Davis had a “home-like” appeal, which some described as comfortable and welcoming. This was especially true for those who had previously resided in small towns in Northern and Central California.
- Location. Location was also an important factor for students. Many liked the proximity of campus to their homes; it was not too far or too close. A few participants simply stated that they preferred Northern California to other regions within the state.
- Best Choice School. UC Davis was simply the better choice for some participants who were admitted to other institutions, but determined that UC Davis had a better reputation and/or had better degree programs. A few students not accepted to their first-choice school, stated that UC Davis was their back-up school.
- Opportunities. In addition to its good reputation, some maintained that UC Davis offered better opportunities for internships, jobs, and housing geared specifically toward transfer students. For example, one participant found the prospect of living in Primero Grove, the new transfer dorm, very appealing. This participant was considering UC San Diego, but recognized that, “A decision to matriculate there [UC San Diego] would also entail finding a bunch of roommates in order to afford a place to live.”

EXPECTATION OF UC DAVIS
What did transfer students expect during their first quarter at UC Davis?

- Academic Environment. Academically, some participants expected to encounter unapproachable professors and intense competition among students. They also anticipated an arduous course workload. Although most students echoed that their first quarter was easier, or about the same, as expected, a few acknowledged that the transition to a quarter system proved to be challenging. For example, some students had difficulty adjusting to the pace of classes in a quarter system. As these participants stated, “It wasn’t the course work per se, rather the swiftness of the quarter system.” Others revealed that it simply took time for them to learn what was expected. They explained that UC Davis and community college faculty used different standards to evaluate performance. To succeed at the community college, students were required to absorb information and then regurgitate it back. However, at UC Davis, professors expected them to analyze the subject matter by applying concepts and comparing and contrasting the issue with current theories. This point was reiterated by a student who stated, “At the community college I did extremely well on all of my tests, which were by and large multiple choice. But now I am expected to analyze and write essay exams which I find challenging.”
- Social Environment. Socially, some expected a quarter filled with fun and others expected the contrary. Although a few participants felt isolated, the majority, especially those who lived in the transfer dorm, spoke highly of their first quarter.

PREPARATION FOR UC DAVIS
Is there anything UC Davis could have done to better prepare you for your first quarter here?

- Quarter System. As a result of their community college experience, the majority of focus group participants felt ready for the rigor of the university. Admittedly, a few had difficulty transitioning to the pace of the quarter system and a few had trouble adjusting to new testing procedures. However, most stated that there really was not much that UC Davis could have done to better prepare them academically for their first quarter. As stated by the group, “The biggest problem encountered by most of us was adjustment to the quarter system. You can’t imagine or effectively tell someone about the quarter system. It’s simply something that you, as an individual, have to experience for yourself.”

SPECIAL ADMISSION PROGRAMS
Transfer Opportunity Program. The Transfer Opportunity Program (TOP) is available at eleven community colleges in the Sacramento and northern San Joaquin Valleys and the San Francisco Bay Area. TOP encourages community college students to transfer to UC Davis and provides support services to ease their transition. The cornerstone of the program is the TOP transfer advisor, who regularly provides assistance to students and counselors at each participating community college. Ten participants attended community colleges that had TOP advisors available.
- Valuable Program. Although contact with TOP advisors varied, these sessions were viewed as extremely valuable. According to participants, “TOP advisors provided an action-plan on how to actually move from the community college to UC Davis.” Before meeting with a TOP advisor, some students shared that they actually felt
trapped at the community college. As one of these discussants stated, "I knew what I wanted to do – transfer, but the advice that I received from the community college counselor was pointing me in a different direction." Another student stated that, "It was nice to finally have someone who knew for sure that I was on the right track".

- More TOP Advisors. Because of the inadequacies in advising encountered while at the community college, discussants emphasized the importance of having increased access to TOP advisors. According to one participant, "Those other counselors at the community college were kind of unsure while the TOP counselor was really able to say -- good you’re doing the right thing and you take this specific course to get to UC Davis." Other participants agreed with this statement and added that many had been advised to take courses that were not required or even transferable.

Transfer Admission Agreements Program. Sixteen students participated in the Transfer Admission Agreement (TAA) program while attending a community college. Through this written contract, students who complete a specified series of courses, earn a certain grade point average, and apply for admissions during the open filing period, are guaranteed admission to UC Davis.

- Alleviate Confusion. Due to the confusion over IGETC requirements and transferable coursework, participants stressed the utility of the TAA program. Students knew the exact requirements for acceptance to a particular major and thus the stress and ambiguity often associated with transferring to a four-year institution was alleviated.

- TAA Exposure. When asked how they received information about the TAA Program, participants’ responses ranged from ‘by accident’ to “a counselor informed me.” Specifically, some learned of the program while thumbing through books and catalogues in the Transfer Centers, while others happened upon flyers posted on campus or encountered a peer who knew about the program. A few participants also received information while in high school. According to one participant, this early information helped him select his community college. He said, “The transfer admissions agreement gave me a guideline to determine what I really needed to take to get into UC Davis.”

Housing

- Primero Grove. Students paid tribute to Primero Grove, the transfer dorm. Participants were pleased to discover that these dorms were actually small apartments that provided single room dwellings and cooking facilities. As one participant stated, "Primero Grove is so different than the freshmen dorms – it’s quiet and people can actually study." Participants repeatedly emphasized that they had no desire to live among freshmen. They described themselves as more adult, serious and disciplined. As one student said, “We have already experienced the freshman party scene and are now ready for business.”

- Social Engagement. Not only did transfer students describe Primero Grove as an aesthetically pleasing place to live, but they also emphasized that living in Primero Grove encouraged contact with other transfer students who shared similar experiences and coursework. It should be noted that the experiences of participants living in Primero Grove were clearly different than those who lived in other on-campus facilities or off-campus. By and large, those living in Primero Grove felt more engaged and less isolated.

- Housing. A significant number of discussants had complaints about on-campus housing. Some were frustrated due to late room assignments. As one student stated, “I didn’t even know if I would have a place to live until the week school started.” A few had been promised space in the transfer dorm but were placed in other facilities. Others were denied campus housing and were not notified in time to make other arrangements.

TRANSFER STUDENTS’ RECOMMENDATIONS (MARCH 1999)

- Transfer Admission Agreement Program. The process that some community colleges utilized to inform students of the TAA program appears unstructured and inconsistent. During the discussions, it became evident that students from the same community college had different levels of exposure to this program; some were well informed while others were hearing about the program for the first time during the focus group session. As a consequence, most discussants conceded that community colleges ought to do a better job of publicizing the TAA program. Simply stated, “It is a valuable program so more students should be informed.” Discussants suggested that community colleges mail flyers and sponsor classroom presentations as means of providing potential applicants with information on this program. Furthermore, they believed it advisable to increase the amount of time that UC Davis recruiters spend on respective community college campuses. Lastly, emphasis was placed upon publicizing the program in high schools. Students stated that this strategy would effectively incorporate those students who plan to attend a four-year institution via the community college system.
Transfer Opportunity Program. To meet the demands of students interested in transferring to UC Davis, participants believe that TOP advisors will have to increase their on-site time at community college campuses. Students reported that these advisors were in extreme demand and often had long lists of students waiting to see them. As one student observed, "Although the TOP advisor tried to help as many students as possible, there was always someone in her office. She was a really useful person, but I don't think that she had enough time during the week or could actually stay long enough at each community college to help every single person waiting."

Academic Advising. UC Davis should provide better counseling services for transfer students. According to discussants, counselors often lacked essential information (i.e. community college transcripts), so were limited in regard to the type of assistance they could provide. One participant alleged that their UCD counselors "provided them with absolutely no help. We were required to figure everything out for ourselves and then presented our findings to a counselor for validation." To alleviate this problem, participants recommend providing a counselor who would work solely with transfer students, and moreover who is equipped with the expertise required to effectively address their issues.

Social Environment. Because some felt isolated during their first quarter, participants also wanted help meeting other transfer students and adjusting to their new surroundings. They stated that, "It was hard to break the ice and meet people. Most students already know each other from their freshman year and have established networks, while we on the other hand, are older and really don't know anyone." For this reason, the contention of transfer students is that they warrant some of the same social-event services as new freshmen. As one student stated, "There are a lot of programs for freshmen and even though we are older, we are still facing a new environment; we don't know a lot of people and really don't know our way around campus."
WHY UC DAVIS?
- Reputation. Most discussants were drawn to UC Davis because of its academic reputation, especially in the sciences, and its safe, comfortable, and friendly atmosphere. Others mentioned that the location and/or the availability of housing enhanced UC Davis’s appeal.

NEED FOR QUALITY ADMISSIONS:
- Quality Advising. Advising was one of the prevailing themes of each focus group discussion. Due to the incongruity between some community colleges and UC Davis, many students were having a difficult time weaving their way through the transfer process. Accordingly, participants reiterated the need for quality advising pre- and post-transfer.
- Transferable Courses. Most of the advising concerns expressed by discussants involved transferable course work. Some were not sure if their courses from the community college would transfer while others wanted guidance regarding specific courses to take for their majors. Discussants acknowledge that articulation agreements were helpful, but as the list of transferable courses change annually in some cases and vary by institution and system (i.e. UC vs. CSU system), discussants expressed apprehension.

TRANSFER ORIENTATION:
- Transfer Orientation. Discussants did not reach a consensus concerning the usefulness of transfer orientation. Some students considered it helpful. Others thought that the orientation did not place enough emphasis on academics or other topics applicable to transfer students. As one participant stated, “The students on the panel began their academic career as UC Davis freshmen, so most of the topics covered during the orientation (i.e. how to adjust to the dorm life) were focused toward students just leaving high school.”
- What Works. Participants who found the orientation most useful reported that an experienced staff or faculty advisor from their major department was available to answer individual questions and to help schedule courses.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION:
- Interaction with Faculty. The frequency of interactions with UC Davis faculty members varied among discussants. The majority of participants, however, agreed that these interactions were usually pleasant and useful. “Even though, students are ultimately responsible for initiating the interaction, most faculty are very accessible – much more so than at the community college. They encourage and sometimes even beg students to make use of their office hours.”
- Time on Campus. Although some participants spent big blocks of time on campus, most were not involved in co-curricular activities. There were a few who participated in intramural sports; yet the majority reported only coming to campus to attend lectures and labs, to conduct research, or study in the library. Some had family responsibilities and work requirements that didn’t allow time to participate in outside activities while others “felt uncomfortable hanging around campus because they didn’t know anyone.”
- Housing. A significant number of discussants had concerns with on-campus housing. Due to late notification and the lack of available spaces, many were forced to live off-campus.

TRANSFER STUDENTS’ RECOMMENDATIONS (JUNE 2000)
- More UC Davis Representatives. Again, transfer students expressed a lack of confidence in the counsel received at the community college. Reportedly, the resolutions offered by community college advisors were often inaccurate. Therefore, discussants emphasized that it was “extremely important for students interested in transferring to UC Davis to speak directly to an UC Davis representative early in the transfer process rather than taking the information received at the community college as face value.”
- Transfer Orientation. Recommendations on how to improve the transfer orientation process included having transfer student representation on the discussion panel, assuring that staff specifically trained to deal with transfer student issues are available at the time, and focusing more on academics. Participants also recommend extending the orientation process by conducting a series of orientation sessions that begin during the summer and continue through the fall. “Most students really don’t know what to ask during the summer so one orientation is not sufficient.”
- Transfer Club. Participants reiterated the difficulty that many of them encountered when trying to meet and integrate with other students. They believed that an informal club specifically for transfer students could ease their transition into life at UC Davis. The club could serve as a venue for them to collaborate, discuss issues relevant to
their population, and ultimately feel less isolated. It could also put them in contact with upper-class transfers who could offer advice on professors and courses.
1. First, let’s go back in time a little bit and talk about the period before you transferred to Davis. Who, or what, most influenced your decision to attend a four-year school? [Then: UC Davis?]

2. What were the main reasons you selected UC Davis? [What other schools did you consider?]

3. In general terms, what would you say is the perception of UC Davis among the students at the community college you transferred from? What influences this perception?

4. Now let’s narrow our focus a little bit and talk specifically about the UC Davis Transfer Opportunity Program. How many of you were TOP students?

5. Did you meet with a TOP counselor? If so what happened during this interaction?

6. What was most valuable to you about TOP? [Least valuable?]

7. How could the campus improve the TOP program?

8. How many of you had Transfer Admissions Agreements?

9. What was most valuable about the TAA program? [Least valuable?]

10. How could the campus improve the TAA program?

11. Overall, how did your first quarter at Davis compare with your expectations?

12. Is there anything UC Davis could have done to better prepare you for your first quarter here?

13. Is there anything that UCD can do to better meet the needs of its transfer students?

14. Anything else you would like to share regarding your experience as a transfer student?
Focus Group Script: June 2000

1. First, let’s go back in time a little bit and talk about the period before you transferred to Davis. When did you first consider transferring to a four-year school? [Then: when did you make the firm decision to transfer?]

2. Who, or what, most influenced your decision to attend a four-year school? [Then: UC Davis?]

3. What were the main reasons you selected UC Davis? [What other schools did you consider?]

4. In general terms, what would you say is the perception of UC Davis among the students at the community college you transferred from? What influenced this perception?

5. Tell me about your experience as a transfer student

6. Now let’s narrow our focus a little bit and talk specifically about the UC Davis Transfer Opportunity Program. How many of you were TOP students?

7. Do you remember meeting [or did you meet] with a TOP counselor? If so what happened during this interaction?

8. How many of you had Transfer Admissions Agreements?

9. What was most valuable to you about TOP? [Least valuable?]

10. What was most valuable about the TAA program? [Least valuable?]

11. How could the campus improve the TOP [TAA] program?

12. Overall, how did your first quarter at Davis compare with your expectations?

13. Is there anything UC Davis could have done to better prepare you for your first quarter here?

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