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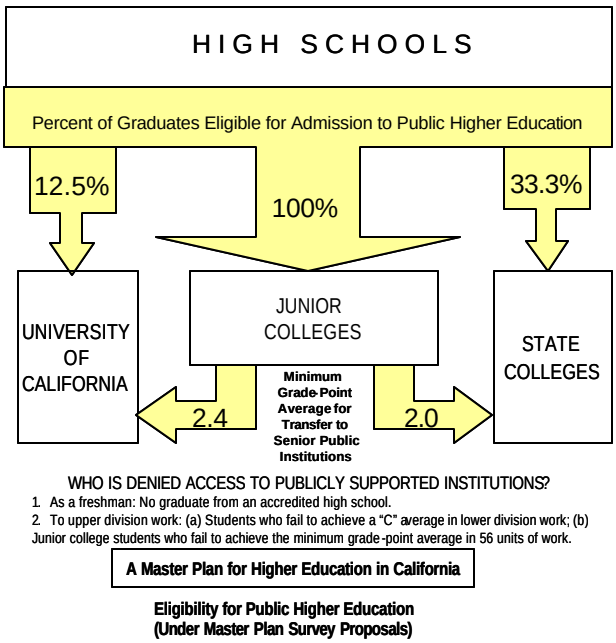
Transfer Students: Myths and Reality

By Art Amos

Introduction

The idea that transfer students are academically inferior to high school admits is exposed as more myth than reality.

Transfer students are an important segment of our undergraduate student population as mandated in the California Master Plan for Higher Education. This year, for example, we welcomed over 1800 new transfer students to the campus. To many, transfer students are an invisible population on the campus; to others, they are a population known only by limited personal experience. A number of myths about transfer students circulate on the anecdotal level. Often derived from personal experience with limited numbers of transfer students and expanded to the level of generalization, the myths develop power over time. In general these myths revolve around the central notion that transfer students are academically weaker than those students admitted from high school. Contrary to these notions, recent surveys performed by Student Affairs Research and Information[1] indicate that transfer students are remarkably similar to students admitted from high school. The idea that transfer students are academically inferior to high school admits is exposed as more myth than reality. However, the data do point to areas affecting the transfer student population that, with attention, could be improved. In particular, transfer students indicate that they do not feel socially integrated with the campus and this lack of social integration translates into a lower degree of satisfaction with their experiences here.



Eligibility for Public Higher Education (Under Master Plan Survey Proposals)

Background

The California Master Plan proposed a model for higher education in California. That model, graphically presented in the figure to the left from the *Master Plan* (p. 73), limited enrollment at the University of California to the top 12.5% of high school graduates and at the State Colleges (now the California State Universities) to the top 33.3%. The junior colleges, as they were then known, were to be open to every high school graduate and were, in part, to provide access to the "senior" systems (UC and CSU) for students who were not eligible from high school.

Despite changes in the demographics of high school graduates and despite the effects of

[1] See References section for a complete list of Student Affairs Research and Information studies that contributed information to this report.

fluctuations in the state budget over the last two decades, the model has worked stunningly well. As Chatman explains:

> *The genius of California's three-tier structure is that it codified institutional missions by specifying the role and scope of each sector and setting relative admission standards. This has served to limit mission creep and to maintain strong public support. The admissions standards are especially effective in promoting the California postsecondary dialectic of open-access and quality/selectivity. One key to the Master Plan's success in sustaining these guiding values of competitive excellence and populist egalitarianism (Neil Smelser, 1974) is the stipulation that 60% of four-year institution undergraduate instruction will be upper-division. The 60% standard, combined with community college preference in transfer admissions, produces a viable community college to UC route. In sum, Californians expect outstanding higher education options -- geographically accessible, inexpensive, open enrollment postsecondary education and research universities that can compete successfully with top public and independent institutions -- and they demand a reasonable route by which any citizen can achieve a bachelor's degree. (Chatman, 2001)*

… because the model saw community colleges providing access to students ineligible from high school, the notion arose that such students were academically inferior to those admitted directly from high school.

However, because the model saw community colleges (as they are now known) providing access to students ineligible from high school, the notion arose that such students were academically inferior to those admitted directly from high school. This myth survives even though the transfer population includes many students who could have been or actually were admitted to a UC campus but chose not to attend immediately after high school graduation for personal or financial reasons.

From the point of view of the campus, the transfer function is multi-purposed. It is used to adjust undergraduate enrollment generally, as well as to maintain the 60-40 ratio of upper division students to lower division. The function is also seen as providing a tool for increasing the diversity of the undergraduate population. As Chatman points out, both nationally and in California, students from historically underrepresented groups have attended community colleges in large numbers. Thus there is reason to expect that community colleges will continue to send many of these students to the University of California, especially as the Dual Admissions Program, offering high school students guaranteed admission to UC following completion of a program of course work at a community college, is implemented.

Research Findings

What are the characteristics of the transfer population at UC Davis? This paper looks at advanced standing admits who entered UC Davis with at least junior standing and will refer to these students as transfer students. (Where the source data is not limited to junior transfers, we will refer to advanced standing admits.) It examines where they come from, how they do, and how they feel about their experiences.

Who are they?

Far and away, the majority of transfer students (86%) came to UC Davis from two-year institutions within California.

Between Fall 1990 and Spring 2000, 14,509 transfers matriculated at UC Davis at the junior level or higher. They came from 401 different institutions from around the country. Far and away, the majority of these students (86%) came to UC Davis from two-year institutions within California. The five institutions sending the most students were American River College (8%), Diablo Valley College (8%), Sacramento City College (7%), De Anza College (5%), and Santa Rosa Junior College (4%).

Gender: Fifty-four percent of these students are female.

The ethnic distribution of transfer students is very much like that of students enrolling from high school.

Ethnicity: Although the transfer population is predominately white (54%), a substantial proportion is Asian (26%). Traditionally underrepresented groups make up a still smaller proportion (12%). It is worth noting that the corresponding percentages of the Fall 2000 new-from-high-school population were whites, 44%; Asians, 26%; and traditionally underrepresented groups, 13%. These numbers suggest that without additional programmatic efforts it is unlikely that the transfer function can make a significant contribution towards increasing ethnic diversity on the campus – in spite of the fact that community colleges have more diverse student bodies. The ethnic distribution of transfer students [See Table 1 for transfer students entering Fall 2001] is very much like that of students enrolling from high school.

Table 1 Ethnicity of Transfer Students Enrolled for Fall 2001

	Number	Percentage
African-American/Black	55	2.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native	19	1.0
Mexican/ Mexican-American/Chicano	167	8.6
Latino/Other Spanish	56	2.9
Subtotal Underrepresented Groups	297	15.2
Chinese /Chinese-American	222	11.4
East Indian/Pakistani	54	2.8
Filipino/Filipino-American	70	3.6
Japanese/Japanese-American	33	1.7
Korean/Korean-American	25	1.3
Other Asian	45	2.3
Vietnamese/Vietnamese-American	88	4.5
Pacific Islander	10	.5
Subtotal Asian Groups	547	28
White/Caucasian	894	45.8
Other	54	2.8
Decline to State	161	8.2
TOTAL	1953	100

Academic credentials and interests: Transfers begin their UC Davis careers with an average of 99 units and an average incoming GPA of 3.25.

Between 1990 and 2000, junior transfers have entered in 109 different majors, the five most popular are Psychology, English, Biological Sciences, Biochemistry, and Political Science. By comparison, the most popular majors among all juniors and seniors enrolled in Fall 2000 were Biological Sciences, Managerial Economics, Psychology, English, and Biochemistry. Political Science was the sixth most popular so the only surprise is the absence of Managerial Economics in the list for transfer students. Undergraduates think of this as the "Business Major" for the campus, but students may have to be on the campus to come to understand this "code".

Why did they pick UC Davis and when?

A majority of respondents (52%) reported having decided before completing high school to enroll in a community college and then transfer to a four-year institution.

We are developing a considerable body of evidence indicating transfer students from the community colleges make their decision to transfer to a four-year institution relatively early. In a recent web-based survey of advanced standing applicants admitted to UC Davis (in press), a majority of respondents (52%) report having decided before completing high school to enroll in a community college and then transfer to a four-year institution. More specifically, 39% report having selected the UC System as the transfer destination while still in high

school and 24% report that they decided to attend the UC Davis campus while still in high school.

The information collected with the web-based survey confirms information gathered in focus groups held in 1999 and 2000 (A. Davis, 2001). When asked why they attended a community college before attending UC Davis, the majority of focus group respondents said that they saw the path through the community college as being both efficacious and thrifty:

> The majority of discussants made a conscious decision to attend community college before transferring to a four-year institution before enrolling at the community college. 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 attending a major university. I knew what to expect before I got here!"*

Regarding competition, then, UC Davis must look to her sister campuses first—just as is the case for students coming directly from high school.

The question for these students was "Which four-year institution should I attend?" The primary competitors to UC Davis among the admitted transfer students who chose to attend UC Davis are in descending order of popularity: UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, UCLA, and UC Santa Cruz. The top five destinations for those who went elsewhere are: UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Santa Cruz. Regarding competition, then, UC Davis must look to her sister campuses first—just as is the case for students coming directly from high school.

Two such factors stand out when comparing those admits who have sent in a "Yes" statement of intent to register with those who did not respond or who declined the admission offer: the quality of the major and the location of the institution

The survey of admitted advanced standing applicants suggests at least one targeted group for recruitment. There is a large difference between the number of transfers who knew that they wanted to transfer to an unspecified four-year institution while still in high school and the number who had selected UC Davis while still in high school. This suggests that many students planning for a first enrollment at a community college might be recruited to UC or UC Davis while still in high school. This population, moreover, will become even more important and more identifiable under UC's Dual Admissions Plan.

The survey of advanced standing admits included a set of questions about the importance of various factors that applicants considered when selecting which institution to attend. Two such factors stand out when comparing those admits who have sent in a "Yes" statement of intent to register with those who did not respond or who declined the admission offer: the quality of the major and the location of the institution. Of those admits coming to UC Davis, 77% said that the quality of major was a very important factor in their decision process; 87% of those not coming said the same.

A. Davis (2001) found four characteristics were of particular importance to her focus group respondents in their selection of UC Davis. The four converging factors that contribute to participants electing to attend UC Davis are listed below in order of frequency with which they were mentioned.

- *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 *"homelike"* 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 specially toward transfer students. For example, one participant found the prospect of living in Primero Grove, then available as on-campus housing for transfer students, 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."*

Table 2 Hours Spent per Week

Undergraduate Experiences Survey:

Activity	Transfers	Native Students*
Studying	19.0	15.6
Class, lab, and studio	16.8	17.0
Class, lab, studio and study combined	35.8	32.6
Working for pay	17.7	15.2
Internship	8.4	8.4
Volunteer work and community service	4.7	4.9
Exercising/Physical Recreation	6.0	6.0

*Note: Native students who were juniors or seniors at the time of the survey.

How did they spend their time?

Once enrolled, how do transfer students spend their time and in what ways does their behavior differ from that of students who enroll as freshmen? In the spring of 2001, all registered undergraduates for whom e-mail addresses were available were invited to participate in a web-based survey. When the dust had settled, 10,174 students had responded. One set of questions dealt with the amount of time spent in various activities. The responses to these questions are presented in Table 2.

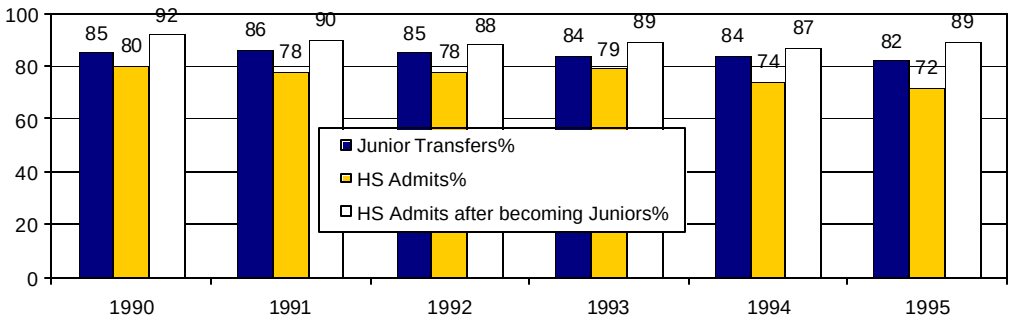
… transfers report spending more time studying.

Although transfer students' time commitments parallel in many respects those of other juniors and seniors, when the time spent in academic pursuits is added to time spent working for pay, transfers had, on average, 5.5 fewer hours per week of discretionary time than native students.

Graduation

Our transfer students graduate at higher rates than do students we admit directly from high school. Because the greatest attrition during the college years occurs between the first and second year of enrollment, other institutions, frequently the community colleges from which our transfer population comes, have already absorbed the attrition that occurs between the first and second year. Not surprisingly, however, all transfer students do not persist to graduation, and, in fact, the graduation rates of our transfer students over the last decade are not

Graduation Rates of Junior Transfers, Freshman and Freshman After Reaching Junior Status



quite as high as those of the students who start with us and achieve junior standing. Historically, transfer students enrolling in the fall and winter complete at higher rates than those beginning in the spring. Spring transfer matriculants experience a 46% lower graduation rate. Perhaps more attention should be directed to transfer students admitted in spring quarters.

Following matriculation at UC Davis, transfer degree recipients take on average 7.4 quarters to complete their studies. Non-persisters, those who had neither received a degree nor were still enrolled as of Spring 2000, registered for an average of 3.8 quarters.

Junior transfers graduated with degrees in 120 different majors, with the five most popular majors in descending order of popularity being: Psychology, Biochemistry, Biological Sciences, English, and Political Science. Interestingly, the only difference between this list and the list of the five most popular majors at entrance is the move of English from the second position to the fourth. Sixty-two percent of junior transfers who graduated did so in their major at entry. In contrast, those who enter as freshmen are much more likely to change majors.

Graduating junior transfers finish their careers with a UC Davis GPA of 2.85 and an overall GPA, including the work completed before transfer, of 3.13.

Graduating junior transfers finish their careers with a UC Davis GPA of 2.85 and an overall GPA, including the work completed before transfer, of 3.13. Students admitted from high school have an average GPA of 3.06 for work completed after achieving junior status and graduate with an overall GPA of 3.02. It is worth noting that the variance in UCD GPA for transfers (.421) is almost twice that of admits from high school (.246). This points to greater heterogeneity, at least on this measure, among transfer students and may suggest considerable variation in the preparation provided by different source schools over time.

Where did they go from here?

Table 3 Comparing Postbaccalaureate Outcomes

Percent Enrolled in Postbaccalaureate Studies	
Advanced Standing Admits	34%
High School Admits	40%
Percent Enrolled or Planning to Enroll Within 5 Years	
Advanced Standing Admits	81%
High School Admits	84%
Salary	
Advanced Standing Admits	$37,500
High School Admits	$39,200
Job Satisfaction (5 Pt. Scale)	
Advanced Standing Admits	4.0
High School Admits	4.0

No difference is statistically significant.

Every three years or so, Student Affairs Research & Information surveys recent graduates to determine the postbaccalaureate educational and occupational experiences of our students (Butler, 2001). Thirty-eight percent of the respondents to the most recent survey indicate that they have engaged in postbaccalaureate education within a year of graduation [See Table 3].

Students admitted from high school report a slightly higher likelihood of pursuing postbaccalaureate studies (40%) than transfer students (34%), but that difference is neither substantive nor statistically significant (A. Davis, 2001). When future plans are added in, an insignificant difference between the two groups remains [See Table 3]. The postbaccalaureate academic plans of transfer graduates and graduates who began as UCD freshman do not differ.

Transfer graduates do report slightly lower average salaries than students who were admitted from high school [See Table 2], but the difference, $1,659, is not large nor is it statistically significant. The earnings of transfer graduates and graduates who began as UC Davis freshmen do not differ.

When it comes to job satisfaction, there is no difference between the two groups. There does, however, seem to be more variation on both these measures (salary

and job satisfaction) for transfer students than for graduates admitted from high school, again suggesting considerable heterogeneity in the transfer student population's experiences.

What do/did they think of UC Davis?

Alumni. Student Affairs Research & Information's alumni survey offers evidence that transfer students are less satisfied with their experience at UC Davis than students admitted from high school. For example, one of the questions asked on the *1999 Survey of Recent Alumni* focused on satisfaction with UC Davis in general and with the academic experience in particular. The responses to this question ***differed significantly*** with admission category [See Tables 4 and 5]. In both cases transfer students had a lower average level of satisfaction than did high school admits.

Table 4 Satisfaction with UCD in general

Admission Level	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Advanced Standing	4.2	309	.79
High School	4.4	782	.64

Table 5 Satisfaction with Academic Experience

Admission Level	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Advanced Standing	4.1	309	.77
High School	4.2	781	.68

These lower levels of satisfaction for transfer graduates in the general categories are not reflected in the more specific categories that we might think of as making up the academic experience [See Table 6].

Table 6 Satisfaction with Academic Components

Academic Components	Advanced Standing	High School
Library	4.33	4.26
Faculty Instruction	4.11	4.02
Course Content	4.05	4.01
Faculty Attitude	3.97	3.90
Testing & Grading	3.82	3.87
Availability of Faculty	3.78	3.84
Computer Facilities	3.81	3.79
TA Instruction	3.71	3.67
Classroom Facilities	3.61	3.65
Academic Advising	3.59	3.55
Laboratory Facilities	3.55	3.54
Course Availability	3.51	3.49
Class Size	3.50	3.47
Use of Info. Technology	3.49	3.45

Rows in which transfer students have lower levels of satisfaction are highlighted.
None of the differences in this table are statistically significant (a=.05)

Not only are most of the differences in the opposite direction—advanced standing admits were more satisfied—but none of the differences are statistically significant and none of them are substantive. This suggests that lesser satisfaction with the academic experience is related to unspecified academic experiences or is a carryover of lesser satisfaction with the non-academic components of university life.

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The following lists are derived from Tables 3 and 4 in Chatman (2001). The lists are of areas where transfers and high school admits who had achieved at least junior standing are similar and different in satisfaction, exhibited behaviors, and preparation received.

Among baccalaureate degree recipients, transfer students indicate **significantly less satisfaction** ($p<.05$) in the following areas:

1. Overall academic experience
2. Sense of belonging on campus
3. UC Davis in general

In contrast, there was **no difference in satisfaction** with these areas:

1. Preparation for postgraduate education
2. Preparation for current position
3. Current position

Recent alumni who were transfer students are **less likely to participate** ($p<.05$) in the following activities:

1. Meeting with faculty during office hours
2. Working collaboratively with other students
3. Seeking academic advice from faculty

But transfers were **as likely to participate** in these activities:

1. Talking with faculty informally out of class
2. Working with faculty on research or creative projects
3. Talking with faculty about personal matters
4. Discussing graduate schools or career plans with faculty

They also **rated their preparation lower** ($p<.05$) than students who began as UC Davis freshmen in the following areas:

1. Interpersonal skills
2. Leadership skills
3. Cross-cultural skills

But **felt equally well prepared** in the following areas:

1. Computer skills
2. Problem-solving skills
3. Quantitative skills
4. Research skills
5. Speaking skills
6. Writing skills

Current Undergraduates. The lower level of general satisfaction found for transfer *alumni* is also evident among enrolled undergraduates responding to an undergraduate experiences survey conducted via the web in the spring of 2001. On the survey, the mean on a similar "general satisfaction" question for high school admits who had achieved at least junior standing by the time the survey was conducted was 4.00 while the mean for transfers was 3.75 (on a point scale where 5 = very satisfied and 1= very dissatisfied). In both cases, the ***differences in the means are statistically significant*** so we may be confident that the differences between the two groups are most likely due to differences in the experience of native and transfer students. It is important to note that the variance for advanced standing admits is greater than that for students admitted from high school—again, greater heterogeneity among transfer students.

Transfer students and juniors and seniors who began as freshmen at UC Davis **differed in these areas** (p<.01) with transfer students marking lower values[1]:

1. Satisfaction with overall academic experience
2. Whether they would recommend UC Davis to a friend
3. The rating they assign to their entire educational experience
4. The frequency with which they worked collaboratively with fellow students on course projects
5. Agreement with statement that they had developed strong friendships with other students
6. Agreement with statement that they had developed productive relationships with other students in their major
7. Satisfaction with opportunities for involvement in campus activities
8. Satisfaction with their sense of belonging on campus
9. Satisfaction with student involvement on University academic and administrative committees

Transfer students and juniors and seniors who began as freshmen at UC Davis **were not different in** these areas:

1. How often they had gotten to know a faculty member well
2. Talked with faculty informally out of class
3. Worked with faculty on research or creative projects
4. Talked with faculty about personal matters
5. Sought academic advice from faculty
6. Discussed graduate schools or career plans with faculty
7. Received prompt feedback from faculty on academic performance
8. Understood that faculty had high expectations for performance
9. Learned in a way that took advantage of individual talents and style of learning
10. Satisfaction with overall social and cultural experience
11. Satisfaction with concern for students as individuals
12. Whether they would go to UC Davis if they could start over

While many of the differences are in response to general measures of satisfaction, note that of the more specific areas, many are indications of social integration, or lack thereof, with the campus.

Lack of social integration appeared as an explicit issue in the focus group discussions as well. We learned from those discussions that while some participants spent large 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 coming to campus only 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*." (A. Davis, 2001)

Conclusion

Although transfer students enter UC Davis further along in their academic careers than students coming directly from high school, they resemble high school admits on most descriptive measures. Both groups graduate at similar rates with comparable grade point averages, go on to graduate and professional schools at equivalent rates, and earn comparable salaries. In so far as there is a problem, it centers on the lower levels of satisfaction with UC Davis in general

[1] There was one area where the difference between transfer and native students was in the opposite direction. Transfer students were more likely to meet with faculty during office hours.

reported by transfer students. That lesser satisfaction seems to stem more from weaker social integration for transfer students and a differing sense about the level of preparation received in key areas than from failures in instruction or academic advising.

The data indicate that areas requiring our attention include: (1) helping transfer students develop interpersonal skills, skills in leadership and cross-cultural competencies, (2) increasing their opportunities for social interaction class-related and otherwise, and (3) finding ways to increase the involvement of transfer students in campus activities and processes.

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