

Issues and Obstacles for Lateral Transfer Students to Selective Colleges

by Sarah Kinney Contomichalos

While the application process is quite streamlined for freshman applicants, no such consistency exists for lateral transfer applicants to selective colleges, posing a number of issues for these students.

In the 1980s, most students matriculated in the fall of freshman year and, four years later, graduated. As recently as the early 1990s, the federal government did not even bother to track data on transfer students.¹ But, at many institutions today, transfer students are an integral part of enrollment management and are quite numerous.

For example, for the fall of 2012, a number of private universities, including Boston College (MA), Boston University (MA), Emory University (GA), Georgetown University (DC), University of Miami (FL), New York University, Northeastern University (MA), University of Southern California, and Vanderbilt University (TN), each accepted more than 200 transfer students.² I did not list public universities, as in many cases they have articulation agreements with local community colleges that include clear guidelines for the admission criteria.

Students transfer for a variety of reasons, including academic, financial or social circumstances, or a combination of the three. Potential transfer students usually look to transfer during their sophomore year, as many institutions require the student has completed a minimum number of credits at the originating institution. An appealing aspect of transfer students is that, by virtue of being older than the average college applicant and having already completed some college, they are more mature and have demonstrated their ability to be successful in college. The transfer process itself is often less supported than the freshman application process, and in most cases, it really is the student driving the process.

For students interested in transferring to a selective university for the fall, the deadlines range between February and the end of March. The transfer application process is quite streamlined and similar to the application process for freshman, with firm deadlines and clear requirements. The problem lies in that there is no common notification date—universities respond to the applications any time from within two weeks of receiving the application up to early June. In addition, often the student is given a reply deadline two weeks after receiving his or her acceptance. This creates a problem: the student usually has to accept one of his or her offers before having all of the replies to his or her applications.

Queries to my colleagues about how to handle this issue prompted the following suggestions:

- Ask the colleges that have not yet replied if they can move up their acceptance date.
- Ask for an extension of the response date from the university that has accepted the student.
- Accept the earlier offer and give up on the colleges with a later notification date.

- Accept the earlier offer, and if the student receives an acceptance later, withdraw from the first college and deposit at the second.

There are problems with each one of these scenarios, and all of them place the transfer applicant in a difficult position. Admission rates for transfer students to selective colleges are often lower than for freshman applicants to the same schools. For example, in 2012, the admission rate for freshman applicants at Boston and Johns Hopkins (MD) Universities were 44.5 percent and 17.74³ percent versus 28.6 percent and 8.31 percent,² respectively, for transfer applicants. Georgetown University, Harvard University, New York University, and the University of Southern California notify students of the outcome of their application at the very end of May or even early June. In light of the growing number of transfer students, it would be helpful if colleges could move to a common response deadline for accepted transfer students.

The second major obstacle for transfer students is the question of which college credits from the originating institution will transfer. The majority of universities will not evaluate a student's credits from his or her originating university until after acceptance. Absent an articulation agreement, while colleges provide guidelines, final decisions are not always available when the transfer applicant receives his or her acceptance. While I recognize it is a time-consuming process, the number of credits accepted by the second university is key, as it has a direct effect on the cost for the next two or three years of college. Financial or merit aid is often limited for

transfer students and in particular is not available for international transfer students. Northeastern University’s website includes a transfer equivalency database,⁴ which is a terrific tool for transfer applicants, allowing them to have a preliminary idea as to which classes will transfer.

Thanks to articulation agreements between community colleges and, in most cases, public universities, one of the biggest barriers to transfer students—how many credits from the original college will transfer—is usually addressed for community college students. In their Fall 2013 *Journal of College Admission* article, “Anxiety of Change: How New Transfer Students Overcome Challenges,” Christina S. Chin-Newman and Stacy T. Shaw discuss in detail the issues experienced by students transferring from community colleges to four-year universities.

Transfer students can be a great addition to any class, which is why it behooves all of us to make the application process for transfer students uniform and clear. It is only fair that transfer applicants be able to select where they wish to complete their undergraduate education once they have received all of their acceptances.

My specific recommendations are:

- Implement a common reply deadline for transfer applicants.
- Provide a transfer equivalency database on individual college websites.
- Include on your college’s website the approximate number of transfer students accepted each year versus the number of applicants.
- Public universities should show in-state versus out-of-state acceptance rates for transfer students.
- Provide an admitted student transfer profile.

- For those colleges with large numbers of transfer applicants, appoint an admission officer dedicated to transfer students who can provide an early read on the number of credits likely to transfer.
- Incorporate the treatment of transfer students into NACAC’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice.

Endnotes

¹ Selingo, J. (2012, March 2). The Rise and Fall of the Graduation Rate. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
² Transferweb.com Transfer Acceptance Rates at US News Top 50.
³ Caldwell, T. (2012, June 6). 2012 Admissions Decisions. *The Choice Blog of The New York Times*.
⁴ Northeastern University. Retrieved from <http://neubos3ss375v.nunet.neu.edu/transfercredit/TransferCreditEvaluatedStudent2.asp>



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