

# TRANSFER STUDENT SUCCESS

*Academic Library  
Outreach and Engagement*

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## Introduction

It all started at the Association of College and Research Libraries 2017 Conference in Baltimore. Mark had completed a research project and accompanying journal article on transfer students and their use of the library at his institution and wanted to expand the study to additional academic libraries that served different student populations. Ann and Nancy immediately agreed to participate. We agreed that transfer students were an overlooked population at our respective institutions, and that learning more about their unique strengths and needs would help us develop outreach and services to support them.

As we delved into the literature on libraries and transfer students, we discovered that a number of our librarian colleagues were already supporting their transfer student populations in a variety of creative ways through orientations, library instruction, and partnerships with like-minded campus groups. But the published library literature on transfer students was almost entirely very recent: with few exceptions, the bulk of the articles were from 2017 or later, when contributor Tammy Ivins edited a special double issue of *Reference Services Review* dedicated to this topic. Those two issues represent a shift in momentum among librarians toward thinking about transfer students, and the subsequent years have seen a small flourishing of research in this area. The idea for an edited collection of chapters grew from our enthusiasm to further this emerging conversation and to offer those librarians serving transfer students the opportunity to share their good work. It is our hope that these case studies will inspire readers to learn more about the transfer students on their own campuses and to develop programs to support their educational transitions.

Why else is an entire book on transfer students and academic libraries needed right now? In part because the number of transfer students is sure to rise during the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years. Even in the prepandemic

era, the number of undergraduates at US institutions who could be classified as “transfer students” was higher than one might expect. According to data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), among college seniors graduating in 2016 who had started at public four-year institutions, 17.5 percent had transferred one time, and an additional 15.6 percent had transferred twice or more. The numbers were only somewhat lower among college seniors graduating in 2016 who had started at private four-year institutions: 12.5 percent had transferred one time, and an additional 9.9 percent had transferred twice or more (NCES 2019). According to data from a different NCES program, the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, among all undergraduates who started college in 2011 and attained a bachelor’s degree within six years, 32.3 percent had transferred institutions at least once (NCES, n.d.). Transfer students are thus a large contingent and have been for some time. And now, as American higher education faces down subsequent waves of COVID-19, many students are experiencing disruptions to their academic careers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way higher education operates. Remote learning started suddenly in mid-March 2020 for many students and, at many institutions, will continue for the foreseeable future, either in part or in full. Financial hardship as a result of pandemic restrictions and closures could cause many students to transfer to a community college to stay closer to home. The lack of an in-person college experience may cause others to put off returning to their previous institutions and attend a less-expensive online option until campuses reopen. Indeed, during the summer of 2020, television commercials were abundant, enticing students to transfer their credits to institutions with prominent online programs, such as Southern New Hampshire University, Maryville University, and University of Maryland Global Campus. Such moves could result in an increase in the number of transfer students during the 2020/21 academic year and possibly for several years afterward, challenging universities and colleges to engage an often-overlooked segment of the student population. This is an even greater challenge when one considers that much of the advising, orientation, and transitioning support will happen virtually.

## ROAD MAP THROUGH THE BOOK

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The book is divided into three sections: “Welcome to the University: Orientation and Outreach Efforts for New Transfer Students”; “Engagement beyond the Classroom: Cocurricular Efforts to Engage with Transfer Students”; and “Building on Transfer Capital: Instruction, Information Literacy, and Research Efforts to Support Student Success.” You do not need to start at the beginning to get the most out of this book, but can delve into the content that is needed by your institution at the moment. We think you will benefit from

all the chapters, including those where the institution may be quite different from your own. There are projects that the authors designed from scratch—inventive, new ways to think about both library instruction and outreach for transfer students. Equally provocative are the ways the authors have adapted others' ideas—taking what another institution has done and creating something new out of it. We want to encourage you to do the same. How might you be inspired by one or several of the chapters to create a transfer student-motivated project that is crafted especially for your library and your university?

We were thrilled when Julie Still, who wrote one of the earliest articles about the library's role in advancing transfer student success ("Library Services for Transfer Students," Still 1990), submitted a proposal to write an updated overview of the literature with her colleague Samantha Kannegiser. Their literature review launches the book and provides a foundation of current scholarship on the topic. Readers who are new to this conversation will find their review a useful entry point.

The section "Welcome to the University" starts the book with a focus on orientation and outreach efforts. Whang, Hornby, and Vrbancic used a design-thinking research methodology to better understand transfer students at the University of Washington. An encounter with a transfer student and her peer mentor led Dempsey to create a specially targeted workshop for transfer students. McCallister, Rhodes, and Gregor describe the myriad targeted relationships, services, and resources they have developed at Appalachian State University, including their outreach to student veterans. Pemberton and Ivins share the strategies they have employed to evolve their transfer student efforts over time. By relying on strong campus partnerships and modifying existing online content, Harrick developed a virtual orientation. Fountaine and Hallman (North Carolina State University) and Clement (University of Wyoming) each illustrate unique strategies for adapting personal librarian programs to support transfer students.

The next section, "Engagement beyond the Classroom," focuses on cocurricular efforts. The Library Ambassador Program at East Tennessee State University is a peer-mentoring program designed to build relationships between transfer students and the campus community (Gwyn). Ziegenfuss and Swartzmiller used autoethnography to enhance the collaboration between a librarian and transfer student participating in an undergraduate learning experience at the University of Utah. At the University of Washington Tacoma, the library collaborated with the Center for Equity and Inclusion to organize a book club for transfer students focused on social justice themes (Bull and Jacobsen Kiciman). Krzykowski and Jacobson describe how collaborations between the library and the Office of Student Engagement, in addition to survey data, shaped programming efforts in support of transfer students at the University of Albany. Deeke and Espinoza used a strengths-based approach and collaborated with campus partners to create a community-based approach to support these students.



The final section, “Building on Transfer Capital,” highlights instruction, information, and research efforts that support transfer student success at a variety of institutions. The idea of transfer student capital as advanced by Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010) challenges the traditional lens through which educators see transfer students. Whereas traditionally the research has framed transfer students in terms of their deficits and disadvantages, the theory of transfer capital suggests that these students use the accumulated knowledge and experiences from their previous institutions to navigate the transfer process more successfully. This concept has important implications for libraries’ information literacy work with these students. Dahlen and Corrigan reviewed student work for evidence of information literacy competencies and used the results to inform their work with transfer students at California State University, Monterey Bay. Moreton and Grigg describe a unique bridge program for health sciences students who are transferring into programs in order to attain professional licensure to achieve a terminal degree. At California State University, San Marcos, a librarian and social sciences faculty member collaborated on a project that used students’ reflections on their research processes to develop and revise information literacy instruction for transfer students (Atherton and Carr). Another library developed online refresher activities to be used in courses that had a large number of transfer students (Lam and Nesvig). At Texas A&M University–Central Texas—an upper-level undergraduate and graduate university where all undergraduate students are transfer students—a learner-centered instruction program supports these students in transition (Dawson).

## IMPLEMENTING NEW INITIATIVES

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Planning a new transfer student initiative may at first seem like a risky proposition. Transfer students are a largely invisible population on many campuses, and transfer students might not fit many of our commonly held assumptions about incoming students. The chapters in this book will collectively provide you with a rich and nuanced picture of the transfer student experience at a variety of institutions. With these potential challenges in mind, however, this collection makes a compelling case for how crucial it is for libraries to learn about and plan for the specific transfer students at their own institutions. Simply put, if librarians don’t include transfer students as a part of the library’s mission, library instruction and programming will fail to address a significant dimension of their student body. The chapters in this volume include a number of provocative stories about how this process of planning for transfer students is also iterative: because transfer students tend to be multifaceted in their needs and contributions, it may be necessary for you to go through several rounds of finessing your plans for your transfer student initiative to truly show results. Our own research taught us that it is

difficult to generalize the demographics and academic experiences of transfer students: some are nontraditional students with a decade of work experience, a full-time job, and a family to care for, while others are 19-year-olds joining significant others at a new institution. (Perhaps the only truly generalizable characteristic of transfer students is this: they adamantly do not want to be treated like freshmen.) Nevertheless, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all mentality has the potential to help libraries also better meet the needs of returning adults, veterans, “bridge” students, and students choosing a new major, as well as students who are making a change from a community college or another four-year institution.

Another strength of the chapters in this book is that they represent an incredible diversity of institutions and an equally varied number of approaches to library initiatives for transfer students. As you are exposed to this wide range of institutions, these chapters will help you delve into your own college or university’s particular circumstances regarding transfer students. In your reading of this book, we encourage you to ask thoughtful questions about your own campus, such as: Are transfer students coming to your institution from a small handful of nearby community colleges, or are they transferring from dozens of universities around the country and even the world? To what extent are transfer students traditionally aged, residential students? Perhaps they tend to be nontraditional commuters with families and previous work experience or even full-time jobs? Of greatest importance, as you begin to plan for transfer students, what individuals, offices, and other entities on your campus should you reach out to and partner with? Your institution probably already has an infrastructure in place for recruiting, advising, and welcoming transfer students. If so, how might you tap into this infrastructure and provide the unique support that only the library can offer?

Of course, no one right answer exists to these questions, and individual librarians and library administrators should consider how to craft their own approach to getting to know and reaching out to transfer students. In addition, as the chapters in this book make evident, planning for transfer students has the potential to build bridges across campus, and for libraries to demonstrate leadership in making transfer student initiatives successful. Finally, there is also a deeper and more subtle potential inherent in planning for transfer students. If we develop this more expansive understanding of our student bodies, then we may discover a subtle yet profound shift in our library planning overall as we adapt our view of our mission to include transfer students.

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FOR REVIEW ONLY

## Literature Review

### Library Services to Transfer Students

**T**he library and higher education worlds have changed dramatically since 1990, when one of the authors of this literature review wrote a bibliographic essay on library services to transfer students (Still 1990). At that time there was little written in the library and related literature on transfer students; most of the research for that article was tangential to libraries themselves, focusing instead on general demographics of transfer students. Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in transfer students within academic libraries. What has changed over time? First and foremost is the development of the internet, which has added multiple dimensions to higher education—online instruction, online databases, course management software, citation management software, email, and Google! The demographics of college students have also changed. More older students are attending college. Veterans are using earned benefits to start or finish degrees. For economic reasons, students are starting at two-year colleges and then transferring to four-year colleges to finish degrees or to add a bachelor's degree to their associate's degree. While these factors were also true in 1990, there is more competition for the student dollar now and a greater emphasis on student outcomes, in part due to the focus on student debt. Online education aimed at working adults and stretched budgets at brick-and-mortar institutions has led schools to compete for students, and transfers are a prime market.

This literature review shows that libraries are at the forefront of reaching out to transfer students, offering them specialized resources, and doing their best to make them feel welcome on campus. For this study, the authors searched several relevant databases and evaluated all the scholarly articles found. This review spans the relevant literature published from 2010 to 2019, capturing research published in the last ten years. All searches were conducted in January 2020. In the two EBSCO databases Library Literature and Information Science Full Text and Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts,

we searched for “*transfer students*” as a subject heading, and excluded reviews of fiction, short editorials, and articles that had the word *transfer* in the subject heading but did not pertain to transfer students. We selected twenty-six items for individual review. Additionally, in the ERIC database we used “*transfer students*” as a subject combined with the word *library* or *librarian* or *libraries* within the text. Using a similar selection policy, we found ten items. Furthermore, in Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest) we searched for “*transfer students*” in the abstract, excluding high school students. This approach yielded seven titles, subtracting two that dealt with elementary and middle school students, for a final grouping of five articles. The last database we searched was Psyc-Info (Ovid), looking for articles with “*transfer students*” and “*college students*” as subject headings. This yielded twenty-five results with one duplicate. A few articles were retrieved in more than one database. Thus, we started with a total of sixty-one unique articles. After reviewing those articles, we grouped them into categories (instruction and transfer capital, orientations, library as place, and cocurricular engagement), and we will provide an overview of a representative selection of this research below.

## **LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AND TRANSFER CAPITAL**

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Librarians are using a mix of instructional approaches in their work with transfer students. Many acknowledge that students with prior college experience have some level of transfer capital, where these prior experiences help them succeed at their new institution. The understanding of transfer capital aligns with a strengths-based approach to interacting with transfer students—one in which librarians and other educators acknowledge transfers’ varied experiences, self-sufficiency, and transferable skills when addressing transfer student needs (Heinbach et al. 2019). Recognizing the strengths that transfer students bring with them to college, however, does not negate that they also experience challenges—namely, those related to institutional knowledge, feeling a sense of belonging on campus, and balancing the responsibilities of school, work, and life (Heinbach et al. 2019; Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2020).

Transfer capital often shows up in assessments of information literacy (IL) skills. Transfer students with prior IL instruction often demonstrate a higher level of knowledgeability with IL concepts or increased confidence in their research skills than those without prior instruction (Grigg and Dale 2017; Robison 2017; Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2018; Tong and Moran 2017). Confidence is a form of transfer capital, but—particularly when coupled with transfer students’ feelings of self-sufficiency—it has the potential to prevent students from asking for help when they need it (Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2020; Heinbach et al. 2019). This is an issue when considering that although these students carry capital in forms of experience and

knowledge, they can simultaneously have a deficit in institutional knowledge, such as understanding the library's range of resources and services or their professors' expectations for research (Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2020). Library instruction for transfer students should balance these components of the transfer experience.

A caveat to the relationship between IL instruction and transfer capital is that not all transfer students receive information literacy instruction equally; many older transfer students, who may have gone to college years earlier, did not receive any library instruction at their previous institutions (Grigg and Dale 2017). Older transfer students without prior exposure to IL instruction have different needs than their transfer peers. This may speak to the necessity of not treating transfers as a homogenous group. In one author's recent review of literature on transfer students, a common question emerged: Should transfer students "be treated as a single group or as subgroups based on characteristics such as age or previous educational attainment?" (Sandelli 2017, 407). Understanding the differences within groups of transfer students can help libraries better meet different needs. Since providing instruction solely to transfer students is not always possible, considering the needs of transfer students in all library instruction becomes all the more important.

A multipronged approach to IL instruction for transfer students is one way of addressing their varied experiences and information needs. One library, in an effort to identify and address any IL needs of transfer students, created an IL competency exam that, when passed, allows transfers to gain three hours of credit equal to native students' passing of a first-year seminar (Yeager and Pemberton 2017). Therefore, if transfer students entered their new institution with prior experience, they could test out of an introductory IL class. However, results of the exam showed that many of the transfer students lacked information literacy proficiencies, so addressing that gap in knowledge became an important part of the library's instruction in the transfer student seminar. When planning and providing instruction, librarians are cognizant that these students have likely performed research and written papers at a previous institution, but still require instruction related to the current institution and level of research required (Coats and Pemberton 2017). Another study showed similar results, with transfer students scoring below proficiency levels in many IL competencies; however, native upper undergraduates scored similarly low on the same exam (Tong and Moran 2017).

Some librarians have attempted larger, systemic solutions to ease the transition of transfer students by standardizing IL instruction. In response to New Jersey's Lampitt Law, which regulates transfer requirements between state institutions, librarians created Information Literacy Progression Standards based on various IL frameworks. By mapping information literacy skills to two levels (novice and developing), the IL Progression Standards prompted collaboration between academic librarians, administrators, and teaching faculty at different institutions as well as school librarians in K-12 schools

(DaCosta and Dubicki 2012). Standardizing IL skills as part of general education requirements helps librarians and teachers to expose students to IL early and guide the progression of skills over time and across institutions.

## **LIBRARY ORIENTATION**

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A creative way to assess transfer students' IL knowledge gaps is via a library orientation. At University of South Carolina Upstate, transfer students participated in an interactive adventure game as part of a library orientation that informed them of both the expectations of research at the university and the library's resources and services (Kearns, Kirsch, and Cononie 2017). By assessing the answers to questions posed during the orientation, librarians can better understand the IL skills of their incoming transfer students and design library instruction for transfer students around those skills. Other orientations created for transfer students respect the knowledge and experience of the students while also meeting their information needs at the new institution. Through a socially interactive card game orientation, librarians refreshed students' memories of previous IL concepts and informed them of the new services, resources, and spaces to which they had access at their new library (Giles et al. 2019). This type of orientation can meet multiple transfer student needs: acknowledgement of their already-acquired skills, exposure to institutional knowledge, and an opportunity for social engagement with students of similar backgrounds and experiences.

Since transfer students are not a homogenous group, a single orientation may not reach everyone. It is important to consider not only transfers' prior experiences, but also the potential time constraints they have if they are working or caring for family members or children (Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2020). Students report that they need information about libraries early in the semester but that they prefer to receive that information on their own and in a variety of formats (Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2018). This confirms the need for multimodal outreach to transfer students, which can include a traditional orientation but also be supplemented with other forms of contact. Other suggestions for reaching the transfer population include increasing online support for students with time constraints, offering more one-on-one help, and adopting approaches used for groups such as adult learners and commuter students to target transfer students specifically (Sandelli 2017).

## **LIBRARY AS PLACE**

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Library as place also plays a role in transfer student success. This consideration is twofold. Social integration is an important factor in students' adjustment to a new school. One avenue toward that end is for students to have a place to



gather with friends and study together. A study of Latina/o transfer students found that they liked having a place to be in a comfortable social group, even if they were not really talking. However, the same study showed that students also liked to have a place to study alone, and that the solitude the library could provide was just as important as the ability to gather (Andrade 2018). Another study found that students with long commutes liked having a place to study, especially if they could use onsite technology and avoid carrying a laptop back and forth from home to school (Regalado and Smale 2015). The concept of library as space is an elastic one and provides for both group and individual study, the primary point being that the idea of the library as a space has both symbolic and practical use. These studies, however, do not really include an in-depth understanding of the library as a permanently accessible space through online resources, or as a place containing librarians and other staff.

## **COCURRICULAR PROGRAMMING**

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Programs for transfer students need to be coordinated not only within the library but across campus. Instruction, as all librarians know, should be integrated into the curriculum as much as possible. Library programs for transfer students should also be part of campus-wide efforts (Jacobson et al. 2017). Some libraries have designated “student success librarians” whose responsibilities include transfer students; others with a large transfer population might have librarians with specific responsibilities toward transfer students.

A growing body of research finds that students who form a connection to the campus are more likely to graduate. Part of this is social integration with the student body. Libraries can be an important part of what is sometimes called cocurricular engagement—that is, student activities outside the classroom. As mentioned above, some transfer students prefer special events aimed just at them, while others prefer to blend into the larger student body (Ivins and Mulvihill 2017). Another aspect of cocurricular engagement is a connection to one or more faculty members outside the classroom. These connections could involve talking during office hours, research assistantships, campus events, or other academic interactions. To date, no studies have addressed how librarians fit into this dynamic. Studies do show that students, including transfers, who spend more time in the library or use library resources are more likely to graduate (Brown and Malenfant 2015), but very little research has been done on how interaction with librarians and library staff impact this.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Libraries are important to the success of all students, including transfer students, and the library should be an integral part of any outreach program for



them. Library instruction and orientation, the library as place, and cocurricular programming are all definable, measurable ways that the library interacts with transfer (and other) students. The articles reviewed here show that many transfer students understand the way the library is useful to them, whether through the resources it provides or simply as a place to study alone or gather with friends. This neutral area provides a safe space allowing students to gather together in their own communities, however that may be defined. Many transfer students understand that they need to know how to use the library, even if they did not learn to use the library at their previous institution. The library as an ideal differs from other campus spaces, like the dining hall or student center. The symbolic meaning of the library is as the center of the university and a place full of educational resources and learning. Creating a connection to the learning endeavor requires in some ways a connection to the library. Students may think it possible to graduate from college without going to the library, but that is in a solely physical sense; they have surely used resources that the library has purchased. More research is needed on the impact of the library on transfer student success, and whether this is different from for the student body at large. If libraries are to better serve and connect with this student population (and with others), we need to know what elements of outreach, collections, service, and space are the most effective, and to continually update that research as the student body and resources change over time.

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