

**Transfer Students**

An Inside Look at their Academic Advising Sessions

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Transfer students make up a large part of student enrollment at 4-year institutions, and most of them are coming from community colleges. Back in 2001, only about 42 percent of the populations at community colleges were under the age of 22 who were seeking credits for transfer. Students who were under 24 comprised of about 75 percent of first-year community college students (Adelman, 2005). In 2006, NSSE cited that over 55 percent of their students had transfer credits coming from community colleges. A common pattern known as “swirling” has become more frequent among undergraduate students as they transferred back and forth between different institutions both at community colleges and 4-year institutions. Some of these students are taking courses simultaneously during the same semester at two different institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2007). Swirling students occur more frequently among transfer students since research has cited that these are students who are trying to piece together their own education, but are still figuring out “the big picture” (Smith Bailey, 2003, p. 38). Swirling students struggle with commuting from institution to institution, in addition to understanding different intricacies for both their financial aid and academic plans. Transfer students may also be at risk of retention, adjustment, and overall performance compared to non-transfers (Gorden et al, 2011, p. 148).

On October 6, 2015, I interviewed Johnny Wang, senior public relations major at University of Southern California (USC), who transferred from Pasadena City College (PCC) last year. Wang shared his experiences as a transfer student; particularly indicating it was a smooth transition and was a transformative experience. I chose Wang to be interviewed for this paper because I knew he had several layers to his identity. He is a queer, first-generation Asian Pacific Islander student who transferred to USC. His academic advising session at USC mainly touched on his academic requirements being a transfer student. Wang explains his transition from PCC to USC was a pleasant one thanks to the smooth academic advising offered to him so he knew what courses would count toward his degree. Wang explains that his academic advisor was really helpful as it was mandatory for his academic advisor to

explain to him his expectations, map out what courses he would need to take, and clearly mention his additional GE requirements. Wang compared his transition from PCC to USC by saying, “At PCC, it felt very unorganized. I remember walking in there my first year and they were reading off the website. It sounded like advice a friend could have given me.”

When I asked Wang whether or not he experienced ‘transfer shock,’ which occurs when a transfer student’s GPA has a dip due to transition of environment, he says he did to some extent. Wang said that he went to community college to save money, to have more time to figure things out, and to be strategic with getting into the best college he could get into. He said,

I may not have been the best student in high school, but I took community college a lot more seriously because I knew it was my last second-chance to do well, get into a top college with an amazing program for my studies.

Wang specifically mentioned his GPA difference: his average GPA at PCC was a 3.8, but dipped just slightly to a 3.5 his first semester at USC.

I asked Wang to explain what were some of the factors that might explain his GPA dip. His explanation was a combination of things, this includes adjusting to both the academic rigor and social climate, being in a new institution and having to start all over, in addition to the pure need to fit into the environment. Wang said, “When I started at PCC, it was a lot easier adjusting since a lot of my high school friends came with me – so I had a support network already.” Wang continued saying that by his second year at community college, several of his friends had already transferred- so he felt a little isolated during that year.

Different factors may impact one’s academic performance including the institution’s environment, college policies and procedures, advising structures, and faculty and academic expectations (Grites, 2004). Wang agreed that being new to USC played a role in his academic performance because he was so focused on adapting to the new environment, but the biggest single area that he feels explains his drop in GPA from his 3.8 GPA at PCC to a 3.5 at USC was the heightened academic expectations of

USC. Johnny said that being part of Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) and living on-campus was most helpful in his transition, as opposed to orientation programs and welcome week. He explains that it was because he cultivated deeper relationships with his peers who ultimately provided him the most support.

An important first step for any student looking to transfer is taking the time to assess his or her own non-academic experiences (Holaday, 2005, p.1). A common reason that students transfer to a different institution in the first place is because the student may not feel like he or she fits into the institution they are currently at (Gorden et al, 2011, p. 149). For Wang, this was not the case. He intentionally came to community college due to the financial savings and the extra time to figure out what he wanted to major in. Nonetheless, Wang found some truth to how his social life directly impacted his academic experience. Wang cited that he received 4.0's throughout his first year at PCC. Although his academics became more rigorous his second year, he lost a good amount of his support networks who transferred a year before he did. This did impact his GPA slightly, but Wang said, "It might have also been due to the general coursework becoming more rigorous."

I asked Wang to describe in what ways his USC academic advisors did well and where they did not do so well. Wang said that his USC academic advisors were excellent in listing out the courses that would go towards his degree and giving him an understanding of all the different graduation requirements. He described the process as very smooth. An area of improvement Wang said was that his academic advisors could have listed some alternatives when he said he wanted to add a minor. His academic advisors simply said that it was not possible to add a communication design minor if he wanted to graduate on time. Wang wishes his academic advisor could have mentioned alternative options such as taking an additional semester, summer courses, online courses, or larger course-loads during the academic year. "If anything, that would be the one improvement USC's academic advisors could have made instead of outright saying 'there's no way.'"

In the lens of an academic advisor, it is important to be keen on students who swirl so that the

student can make well-informed decisions when deciding which courses to take and where to take them. It is especially important that the student is aware of what institution they ultimately wish to graduate from so that they are constantly satisfying the proper degree requirements (Gorden et al, 2011, p. 149). Those studying part-time will require different forms of advising compared to those who are full-time, as scheduling of courses will differ for these populations. Transfer students, for example, will need to assess and identify their next steps in their academic plan when selecting the institution they wish to transfer to. In Wang's instance, he said that he was never a part-time student – always full-time. Wang said, "Being a transfer student in general meant I needed to do a lot of research on my own. I remember struggling to find out whether the one online course I took at PCC would transfer to USC." Wang continued saying the specific online class he took was part of a larger online program at PCC, which had its own advisors. There were several layers of communication he had to battle through to get the information he needed.

Thurmond (2003) stated that transfer students who had no plans on transferring could have had a myriad of reasons to transfer such as relocation of employment, academic failure at their home institution, failed relationships, among other reasons that the student had little or no control over (p. 2). As a result, it is important for academic advisors to understand where the student is coming from and pay individualized attention towards the given students who need more one-on-one guidance. In addition, welcome weeks, orientation programs, and first-year transfer seminars serve as excellent forums for meeting fellow transfer students (Gorden et al, 2011, p. 149). Intervention from an academic advisor is essential for students new to these environments because they provide explanations on the purpose of these programs. Having these interventions early on is essential for minimizing transfer shock, as these students may feel better acclimated to the college environment. If institutions held strong accountability through clear articulation agreements, then the transfer process would become more seamless. According to Grites (2004), "The real value of articulation agreements has somewhat eroded as a result of recent trends toward legislated statewide mandates, common course numbering systems, and other seemingly well-intended guarantees for transfer students" (p. 1). Wang said that the articulation agreement PCC had with

USC served him well because it was clear and easy to understand what courses he needed to take, as it was all outlined for him. On the other hand, these articulation agreements may not serve as beneficial if it were not mentioned in one's academic program of study (Grites, 2004).

A recommendation Wang offered is having a post-orientation program that is for-credit, and is specifically designed to assist transfer students as they transition to the college environment. While many campuses may have these for first-year students, these services are not often mirrored for transfer students (Holaday, 2005). Wang said, "The transfer orientation at USC, I feel, could have been improved. It was mainly registration and that was it." Wang also recommended that future transfer students should think wisely about what two GE's they want to take at USC, since USC requires all transfer students to take two GE's at the university. Wang took a course on AIDS and another on history and sexuality. He did not realize that his course on AIDS would require so much chemistry knowledge and other areas within science. He was interested in learning more about it, but if he knew the level of depth it entailed – he would have avoided the course. His recommendation is to have any transfer student to look closely at the academic requirements of the institution they are planning on transferring to, and to do the research on what different coursework may entail.

In conclusion, some of the similarities and differences from the literature versus the interviewee would include the topic of swirling, academic and social impacts based on an institution, and reasoning behind wanting to transfer. Some of the specific similarities cited between the literature and Wang includes the reality of a transfer shock. The literatures states that it is common for transfer students to have a "dip" in their academic performance once they transfer due to the change of academic environments. As a result, transfer students may feel a need to have individualized guidance. The difference between the literature and my interviewee includes the concept of swirling. As I spoke with Wang, he said that most of his friends and himself mainly stayed at PCC to finish their coursework prior to transferring, as opposed to "swirling." The literature made it sound like transfer students swirl frequently, as in taking coursework simultaneously between different institutions. Wang said that swirling

sounds both stressful and unnecessary, and he did not find it common among his community college peers who transferred to a 4-year institution. Another discrepancy from the literature, based on the interview with Wang, is the concept that orientation, welcome week, and transfer seminars are among the most fundamental areas of transition for transfer students. Wang disproves this by stating his support network through VSA and living on-campus were more beneficial since he was able to develop closer relationships that later served as his support network. Wang highlights that a transfer student can perform just as well as non-transfer students, as long as the transfer student does their research and utilizes the appropriate resources provided by the university.

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