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Library experiences of transfer students at an urban campus

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Abstract

This study investigates the library experiences of transfer students at an urban commuter campus in the United States with approximately 20,000 students, 8,500 of whom previously attended another institution. Using a mixed methods approach, we surveyed and interviewed transfer students to gain a better understanding of their use of libraries and their comfort with locating information both before and after transferring between post-secondary institutions. Our findings indicate that there is not a standard “transfer student experience,” although usage of library resources at past institutions does affect students’ perceptions. Subsequently, librarians should develop outreach efforts and information literacy instruction that go beyond first-year students and acknowledge the research skills transfer students bring with them.

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Introduction and Literature Review

Transfer students are a large and important part of higher education, with Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, and Harrell (2015) finding that over one-third of college and university students in the United States (U.S.) transferred from one post-secondary institution to another between 2008 and 2014. Tag (2004) surveyed transfer students and makes a strong case for libraries to reach out to this population. Likewise, Phillips and Atwood (2010) consulted with several dozen librarians and argue that academic libraries must acknowledge their transfer student populations and address their unique needs, such as raising awareness of support services on campus. While academic libraries seek to support all students within higher education, the research surrounding library services actively engaging with transfer students is fairly limited. Several authors have advised libraries to partner with other campus departments to better serve these students (DaCosta & Dubicki, 2012; Lafrance & Kealey, 2017; Whang et al., 2017). In a specific example, Tipton and Bender (2006) outline a program in which a library partnered with the campus writing center highlighting the beneficial outcomes of a departmental partnership, including focusing on the individual needs of transfer students. Phillips and Atwood (2010) suggest modeling a transfer student information literacy program on the National Resource Center's work for Students in Transition, with the idea being that transfer students would be introduced to the same kind of support as their first-year peers (p. 344). Identifying and meeting all of those needs can be difficult, with some studies, which researched transfer students outside of the frame of the library, recommending that transfer students be considered like other underserved populations, including racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation students (Kraemer, Keyse, & Lombardo, 2003; Lafrance & Kealey, 2017; Switzer, 2008).

Many of these recommendations stem from the fact that transferring between institutions of higher education can be difficult for students, with Hills (1965) coining the phrase "transfer shock" to describe the drop in academic performance students experience after moving to a new school. More recently, Ishitani (2008) found that students who transfer as sophomores or juniors are more likely to persist through "transfer shock" and be retained than those who transfer as freshmen, and Townsend and Wilson (2006) note that students transferring between community colleges and research universities could often benefit from additional support. As it relates to librarianship, Ivins, Copenhaver and Koclanes (2017) reviewed the literature and suggest that academic libraries would do well to consult "transfer shock" research from other disciplines if they hope to better support the academic success of this population.

Regarding the specifics of what libraries can do to contribute to the transfer student experience, there has been a recent uptick in literature, with Nelson (2017) providing a valuable overview of the role of community colleges. Both MacDonald and Mohanty (2017) and Lafrance and Kealey (2017) make the case for assigning "Personal Librarians" to transfer students, and Whang et al. (2017) recommend that libraries use design thinking to better understand the user experience. Still, much of the literature discussing libraries and transfer students addresses the potential benefits of information literacy instruction. As defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2015) in their *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, information literacy is "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning." This concept is often taught by librarians, either in semester long credit-bearing courses, or more typically in one-time

course-integrated sessions (often referred to as “one shots” by practitioners). Multiple recent studies look into the information literacy abilities of transfer students (Kearns, Kirsch, & Cononie 2017; Tong & Moran 2017), though there is room for additional research in this area as it relates to transfer student preparedness. There is also no research related to transfer students’ comfort with locating information, similar to the model used by Gross and Latham (2012) to measure the self-perceptions of information literacy skills of first-year college students.

Beyond interventions at individual libraries, a number of studies from the U.S. have suggested collaboration across academic libraries and their larger institutions in order to better serve transfer students. DaCosta and Dubicki (2012) outline the process for developing formalised information literacy standards in New Jersey, with the intention of facilitating transfer between community colleges and four-year public schools. This is similar to a program of guaranteed transfer in Ohio, described by Phillips and Atwood (2010). In their study, they surveyed 24 librarians around the state and recommended the exchange of information between institutions to share successes and failures when teaching transfer students. Kessinger (2013) describes the creation of a framework for integrating information literacy into the curriculum of one community college, but also recommends expanding these discussions to include four-year colleges.

The present study aims to address multiple questions related to the transfer student experience and academic libraries. While past studies have addressed the information literacy skills of transfer students, there has been limited research into what kinds of research skills transfer between schools. There is also a gap in the research addressing the comfort of transfer students when it comes to using library resources by themselves to conduct research. Lastly, much of the literature has centered on library interventions for transfer students,

rather than investigating what students themselves think of library spaces, services, and resources, and how they relate to the broader student experience. To that end, we set out to investigate how students had used libraries in the past, how they currently use libraries, how comfortable they are with locating information on their own, and what kinds of research skills they felt transferred between institutions.

Methodology

Institutional profile

Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver) is an urban comprehensive institution located in Denver, Colorado, U.S., offering a wide variety of baccalaureate programs as well as master’s degrees in selected professional studies. Located on the shared Auraria Campus, MSU Denver shares a library and other facilities with the Community College of Denver and the University of Colorado Denver. MSU Denver has about 12,000 full time equivalent students, and a total headcount of just under 20,000 students (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2017). The university also attracts more transfer students than any other institution in the state, with transfer students accounting for more than half of all new students (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2018).

Data collection

In early 2017 we received data from the Office of Institutional Research at MSU Denver, following a review of our research proposal by the University’s Academic and Student Affairs Leadership Team. We began by analysing this dataset of transfer student information, including start date, number of previous institutions, and number of credit hours with which students entered the university. Because a single library serves all three schools, the data excluded students who transferred to MSU Denver from either the University of Colorado Denver or the Community College of Denver.

From there, we employed a concurrent transformative mixed methods design to evaluate students' use and perceptions of library services and their own research skills.

First, a 17-item survey (Appendix) was created and distributed to 8,522 students in Qualtrics, 459 of whom responded (5.39% response rate). The survey questions were created for this study based on the information literacy outcomes used at the Auraria Library and received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Denver. The survey included a few open-ended response fields where students could indicate the name of their previous institution and the number of credit hours they were transferring to MSU Denver. The qualitative responses were then re-coded into quantitative data for analysis. The survey also had multiple closed-ended questions addressing whether students had received information literacy instruction or taken English Composition¹ before or after transferring. The only demographic information collected in the survey was age range. This was to ensure the privacy of our students by not collecting demographic data that could identify them. The survey also asked students to use a Likert scale to rate their comfort with conducting tasks commonly associated with undergraduate research, such as locating a peer-reviewed article. These questions were derived from the learning outcomes of our library's first-year information literacy program, and reflected the skills that are typically addressed in an English Composition single class. We used the statistical software package SPSS to analyse survey data, and as this was a transformational study, we used that analysis to inform our interview questions.

While the online survey was active we also solicited students to contact the research team individually if they were interested in

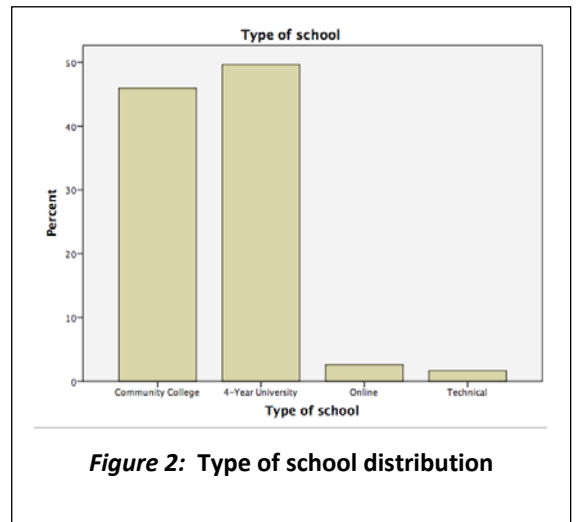
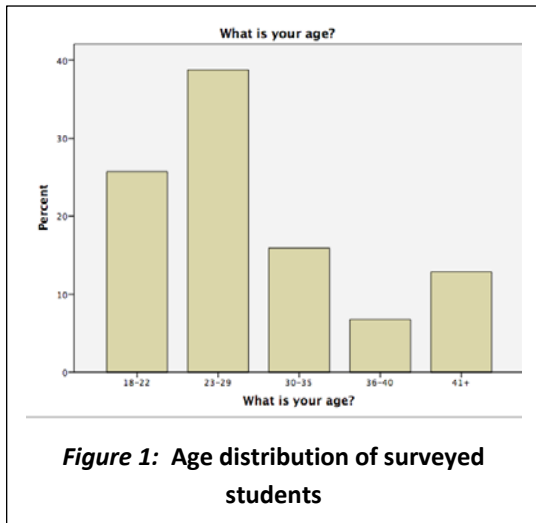
participating in a face-to-face conversation. There was no compensation for participating in these conversations, though we still conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups with a total of eleven students who were recruited from the survey respondents. The semi-structured interview and focus-group questions were open-ended, and encouraged respondents to discuss their experiences as transfer students, including how they use library spaces, online databases, and research help services. We also asked students more general questions related to the transfer student experience, including what kinds of research they conduct in their courses, how they use campus support services, and why they selected this institution. This was to give us a better understanding of our transfer students experiences outside of the frame of the survey and to give students a space to talk more openly than the survey permitted.

Results

Survey results

Analysis of data from the Office of Institutional Research indicated that the mean number of credit hours with which students transferred to MSU Denver is 45.2, with a standard deviation of 26.8. A full-time student is expected to complete 15 hours each semester, which indicates that students are, on average, transferring within their second year; while some students enter the university to complete upper division coursework, this high standard deviation indicates to us there is no "typical" transfer student. Some students enter with just a few credits, while others enter with more than 100. Likewise, survey responses revealed that students are of many ages, with 18 to 22 year-olds representing 25.7%, 23 to 29 year-olds 38.8%, 30 to 35 year-olds 15.9%, and 36 to 40 year-olds 6.8%. Of the transfer students we surveyed, 12.9% indicated that they are aged 41

¹ In the U.S. English Composition courses are designed to give students a firm foundation in basic writing skills and are usually taken during the first year in an associate's or bachelor's degree program.



or older (Figure 1). The survey sample was representative of the age distribution at MSU Denver.

Survey results also found that students transferred to MSU Denver from a variety of institutions, with two-year schools (41% of respondents) and four-year schools (44% of respondents) representing the vast majority (Figure 2). Most students (59%) transferred from within the state of Colorado, though we were surprised at the number of out-of-state students considering MSU Denver’s institutional focus on serving the local community. Students’ stated reasons for selecting MSU Denver included affordability, location, and the availability of certain academic programs.

Regarding coursework, the survey found 66% of respondents had transferred in with credit for a first-year English Composition course. Because this course is a major component of information literacy at MSU Denver, we included questions related to the research content typically covered in first-year sessions. The options for responses ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree (Table 1). These responses were then re-coded 1-5 in Qualtrics and analysed for statistical significance. Results indicated that 89% of these students either “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that they are comfortable locating peer-reviewed articles. In spite of this result, we found no statistically significant correlation between past library instruction and student

Table 1: Comfort with locating a peer-reviewed article. Based on a five-point scale ranging from 5 = Strongly Agree, to 1 = Strongly Disagree

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Attended Library Instruction</i>	4.47	.959	276
<i>Did Not Attend Library Instruction</i>	4.02	1.130	181

comfort with locating scholarly materials. However, interviewees and focus group attendees indicated that library experiences at their prior institutions did influence how they used and viewed the library at MSU Denver. Of the students who did not transfer credit for English Composition, only 31% have subsequently taken the course at MSU Denver. Results also indicate that only 34% of students had participated in library instruction at their previous institution or at MSU Denver and there is no statistically significant difference between students who had not participated in library instruction with those who had not participated in library instruction and with comfort in locating peer-reviewed articles.

Focus group and interview results

Interview and focus group participants consisted of a mix of students who had visited the library before, and students who had never stepped foot in the physical space of the library. Interviews and focus groups with transfer students revealed that they were more likely to seek supplemental instruction in the form of video tutorials rather than approach librarians and campus support staff in-person. This response was accompanied by the sentiment that, in order to succeed, students needed to be able to “figure things out on their own”, and did not indicate that they were uncomfortable with using librarians for help. Many students also indicated their preference for online courses, often because these courses accommodated their busy schedules.

There was also a trend where students indicated they viewed the campus library as a physical space for books, and that their main purpose for visiting the building was to locate print materials, not to study. Interestingly, these students also indicated that while they do not often use the campus library, they do frequent other libraries that are closer to their home or place of work as a space for doing homework and researching, including both public libraries

and other academic libraries in the Denver metropolitan area.

Multiple students who had participated in information literacy instruction at their previous institutions discussed their comfort with locating information based on their ability to identify authoritative information. Interestingly, none of the interview participants named specific library databases or resources, though several discussed the concept of evaluating quality information. We also noticed a trend where students mentioned they like to find the information themselves, with one focus group participant adding, “it’s not rocket science...”, meaning that library search tools are fairly intuitive to them.

Discussion and Conclusion

Learning that more students transfer to MSU Denver from other four-year institutions (44%), rather than mainly community colleges (41%), calls into question how much of the recent literature addressing library services to transfer students applies to our campus. While this area of research is still underdeveloped, what has been published tends to focus more on community college students (Kessinger, 2013; Nelson, 2017; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). These studies are still a valuable contribution to the literature, though our findings indicate that our library and campus should be focusing just as much on partnering with other four-year institutions.

The interviews and focus groups revealed that students do still use libraries as a space for studying and research, though several students indicated that they prefer to use a library that is more conveniently located to their home or work, which included both public libraries and the libraries of universities at which the students are not enrolled. This finding may indicate the need for researchers to expand their idea of library usage to include more than just the library at a student’s current or previous academic institution.

Regarding their comfort in being able to identify and evaluate scholarly articles for research, our survey results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between students who had attended library instruction and those who had not attended library instruction. However, the focus groups and interviews indicated that library usage was important for students to feel successful in their courses. This indicates the importance of talking with students to understand their experiences and individual perspectives.

Although our literature review found several studies advocating for libraries to partner with other campus departments (DaCosta & Dubicki, 2012; Lafrance & Kealey, 2017; Whang et al., 2017), our interviews with transfer students may indicate that some students prefer to work on their own, rather than seek academic support services. This finding calls into question how successful the “personal librarian” programs described by Lafrance and Kealey (2017) and MacDonald and Mohanty (2017) would be at MSU Denver. For that reason it would likely benefit our librarians to focus their efforts on partnering with course instructors in addition to support units to reach transfer students, similar to the model described by Einfalt and Turley (2013). At the same time, our interviews revealed that while some instructors promoted the library to their students, it is far from uniform practice on our campus, suggesting a need for future outreach from our library to MSU Denver faculty.

As our library develops services for transfer students in the future, we will need to provide online learning objects that supplement, or even replace, face-to-face research help and instruction for these students. Our results show that there is a high level of comfort perceived by transfer students when searching for academic information, with nearly 77% of students who had never received information literacy

instruction indicating that they were somewhat or very comfortable with locating a peer-reviewed article. This finding complements previous research by Tong and Moran (2017), who did not observe a difference in the information literacy skills of transfer students when compared with their counterparts who had not transferred. This high level of comfort was further supported by focus group respondents, who indicated that they prefer to do their research “on their own” and do not seek face-to-face assistance. Future research could investigate whether students’ comfort level with locating academic information correlates with their ability to indeed locate these sources, but for now we need to recognise that an information literacy program relying primarily on first-year English Composition will miss the vast majority of transfer students.

Our interviews also found that students rarely mentioned specific library databases when we asked them about their past and current research experiences, though they did provide details regarding how past library instruction had helped them identify and evaluate different types of information. This finding aligns with Kuglitsch (2015), who describes how information literacy concepts gained in one setting can often transfer to another, provided librarians emphasise the information seeking context. Staines (1996) likewise argues for information literacy skills which focus on the search process, rather than specific search tools. When considering how to partner with other libraries in the Denver metropolitan area, we will need to highlight those aspects of information literacy instruction that are truly of benefit to students transferring to a new campus.

There were several limitations to the study. The survey was sent out approximately one month prior to the end of the spring semester² to avoid overlapping with surveys from other campus

² Spring semester refers to the U.S. academic calendar year and is approximately 15 weeks from January through May.

departments, which likely reduced the number of respondents. This same limitation also applies to the interviews and focus groups that were conducted concurrently with the survey; more flexibility in the semester might have allowed for more participation. We also recognize that there is likely a degree of selection bias, in that students opted into completing a study focused on library usage are more likely to be using the library. Lastly, the survey was distributed to university email addresses, which not all students regularly check. Still, this study demonstrates the usefulness of surveying transfer students as a separate student population and seeking to better understand how they have used libraries in the past, as well as in the present.

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