Impacting Transfer Student Success at SCSU

Charge
At a time of declining enrollment, SCSU’s intentional focus on recruiting transfer students promises to be an integral strategy in the plan to impact undergraduate enrollment. In order to be an effective strategy, SCSU will need to become an institution that fully embraces the importance of transfer students, proactively recruits transfer students, streamlines the processes involved in transfer students’ entry into the university, and once enrolled, provides services and advocacy that propels transfer students toward timely graduation. SCSU is not currently perceived as “transfer student friendly” by transfer students who completed a survey administered by the Transfer Task Force. Given recent initiatives and directives from the Board of Regents, including the new ConnSCU Transfer Articulation Policy, SCSU has an opportunity to increase transfer student enrollment and satisfaction. However, SCSU will have to change its reputation among prospective transfer students, implement structural changes, and revise processes to meet the needs of transfer students. An example of a structural change is the establishment of a Transfer Student Services Office. An example of a current process that hinders transfer students is the transfer equivalency process.

Transfer students are an integral part of the Southern Connecticut State University’s undergraduate enrollment. Transfer students comprise approximately 40% of the undergraduate student body, and virtually every class at Southern contains transfer students. Although transfer students participate in campus life side-by-side with traditional freshman students, there are systematic differences between these two student populations.

SCSU’s enrollment planning team forecasts that because of prevailing economic factors, increased statewide focus on work force demand, emerging articulations as a result of the merger of Connecticut’s State Universities and Community Colleges under a Board of Regents and SCSU’s reputation for offering quality education at an affordable cost, recent positive transfer student enrollment trends will continue for the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is in the University’s best interest to assess current practices and policies; and implement new initiatives, processes, and programs which have a positive impact on transfer student success from recruitment through degree completion.

In fall 2011, SCSU’s Enrollment Management Council Co-chairs charged a Transfer Task Force to assess current transfer student services, define effective transfer student services, and make proactive recommendations which will have a positive impact on transfer student success. The Task Force included twenty faculty and staff:

Faculty
Polly Beals, Liberal Education Program
Nicole Henderson, First Year Experience
Elliott Horch, Physics
Heidi Lockwood, Philosophy
Kate Marsland, Psychology
Cynthia Stretch, English
Ces Thompson, Health and Human Services
Christine Unson, Public Health

Staff
Michael Ben-Avie, Assessment and Planning
Kimberly Crone, Academic Student Services
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Marge Fadden, Career Services
Marcia Glasper-Smith, Diversity and Equity
Frank LaDore, Academic Advisement
Kim Laing, Registrar
Paula Kennedy, Admissions
Rick Riccardi, Institutional Research
Jennifer Ruggiero, Secretary
Craig Schnur, Bursar’s Office
Angela Todaro, Residence Life
The Transfer Task Force met bi-weekly from November 2011 through May 2012. This report will summarize the group’s work and findings, and most importantly the recommendations which the Transfer Task Force believes will impact transfer student success at SCSU. The Transfer Task Force focused on the following:

1) Define the Transfer Task Force’s goals and objectives.
2) Provide an environmental scan via collection of transfer student data, benchmark best practices, and assess trends and survey information.
3) Identify and summarize current transfer student services.
4) Make recommendations for assessment/return on investment of initiatives.
5) Recommend new services and interventions which, if implemented, will have a positive impact on transfer student success/satisfaction.

Transfer Student Environmental Scan: Facts and Data

Transfer students comprise 40% of SCSU’s undergraduate enrollment.

67% of SCSU’s transfers come from Connecticut’s community colleges. Almost 60% of transfers come from five top feeder colleges: Gateway, Housatonic, Norwalk, Naugatuck, and UConn.

Almost 75% of transfers enroll in freshman or sophomore status (< 60 credits).

Transfers have higher SCSU GPAs, but lower SAT scores and HS class rank than native freshmen.

Almost 60% of transfers enroll declaring one of five areas as intended majors: Undecided (22%), Business (13%), Nursing (9%), Education (8%), and Psychology (6%).

SCSU’s transfer students are older than their native counterparts. Upon enrollment at SCSU, the average age of transfer students is 22; the average age of native freshmen is 18. Overall, the majority of students at SCSU are female, however a higher proportion of transfer students are male compared to native students (41% vs. 35%).

There are other demographic differences between transfer students and traditional college students at SCSU. A higher proportion of transfer students are African-American (15% vs. 12%). The average family income of transfer students is approximately $8,000 less per year than the families of native freshmen ($88,976 vs. $97,128). Both transfer students and native freshmen are overwhelmingly in-state students, though the proportion of transfer students who list Connecticut as their permanent residence (95%) is slightly higher than the native students (92%). Roughly 4% of transfer students are veterans, whereas less than 1% of the native freshmen arrive at SCSU with military experience.

Most transfer students (96.6%) enroll at SCSU as full-time students. Approximately 70% of transfer students transfer to SCSU from other Connecticut schools. Of the remaining students, 17% are from other New England schools, notably Massachusetts and New York, and 11% are from other parts of the U.S., notably Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Only 1% of Southern’s transfer students arrive on campus from overseas.
The majority of SCSU transfer students begin their college careers at a community college. Of all SCSU transfer students, two-thirds transfer from a community college. Of the remaining students who transfer from other 4-year colleges or universities, 14% transfer from private institutions, 11% from other Connecticut State Universities, and 8% from the University of Connecticut. The community colleges that provide SCSU with the largest number of transfer students are Gateway Community College (23.5% of all transfer students), Housatonic Community College (12.3%), Norwalk Community College (9.2%), Naugatuck Valley Community College (8.1%), and Middlesex Community College (5.1%). Approximately 75% of transfer students transfer into SCSU with 60 or fewer credits. Almost 40% of all transfer students have completed 31 to 60 college credits at their previous institution before arriving at SCSU.

Once they enroll at SCSU, transfer students are slightly more successful academically than their native freshman counterparts. From 2008 through 2010, transfer students had higher overall GPAs (between 0.1 and 0.2 points higher) than students who had only attended SCSU. In 2011, there was no statistical difference in GPAs between transfer students and traditional students. This level of academic achievement on the part of SCSU’s transfer students is particularly notable as transfer students as a group had a much lower high school rank than traditional students, and significantly lower SAT scores (936 combined SAT for transfer students, 949 for traditional students).

During their time at SCSU, transfer students are less likely to live on campus (only 22% of new transfer students live on campus compared to 67% of the new freshmen). Not only are transfer students far more likely to live off campus, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement, SCSU’s transfer students are also less likely to: work for pay on-campus, participate in co-curricular activities, work with faculty members on activities other than coursework, participate in a community-based project as part of a regular course, and attend campus events and activities. Their attitudes toward SCSU are also significantly lower in several categories, including the following: rating the quality of academic advising at SCSU, feeling SCSU helps them cope with non-academic responsibilities, feeling SCSU provides the support needed to thrive socially, and feeling SCSU generally provides the support needed to help them.

Environmental Scan: Benchmarking Best Practices

Members of the Transfer Task Force benchmarked Bridgewater State University’s (BSU) transfer student operations and services. BSU is a New England public institution similar to SCSU, where transfers comprise 50% of the enrollment. A comprehensive presentation including review of BSU’s admission, transfer equivalency evaluation process, orientation program, advising, and retention best practices was delivered to the Transfer Task Force. Most noteworthy was BSU’s clear evidence of transfer student success after 1) hiring a transfer student coordinator dedicated to transfer student success and 2) creating a transfer services office with dedicated space. These two decisions were closely aligned with the BSU’s mission/goal to improve transfer student services, and most importantly, impact recruitment, retention and ultimately degree completion of half of their undergraduate population.

Members of the Transfer Task Force, along with interested members of the campus community, participated in a “Transfer Student Support Services: Next and Best Practices” webinar. This webinar
emphasized the importance of creating a transfer-friendly campus culture and the necessary internal relationships for appropriate transfer student advocacy and integrated services from admission, advising, orientation and enrollment staffs.

Environmental Scan: Surveys

The Transfer Task Force considered information/data from several surveys.

SCSU’s results in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) noted ways in which the college experience of our transfer students is different from their native freshman counterparts. Transfer students are more likely to: work for pay off-campus, provide care for dependents, and spend more time commuting to and from class. Despite these obstacles, transfer students report being more likely to: contribute to class discussions, work with other students on projects during class, complete a culminating senior experience (such as a capstone course, senior project, etc.), and write reports of 20 pages or more.

Results of a survey to currently-enrolled transfer students conducted by SCSU’s Office of Assessment and Planning conducted on behalf of the Transfer Task Force revealed that transfer students are primarily attracted to SCSU because of the cost (70%), location (59%), and specific academic programs or majors (45%). The broad goals which transfer students cite in their reasons for enrolling at SCSU include: “Earn degree in a particular program” (84%); “This was the natural next step for me” (28%); “Improve career opportunities” (34%); and “Gain a liberal arts education” (6%).

However, transfer students report that they often encounter difficulties in the process of achieving their academic goals at SCSU. Out of 386 transfer student respondents, only 25% report that they attended an orientation at SCSU in order to help them acclimate to the University. Fifty percent or fewer of the transfer students surveyed agreed with the following statements concerning their transfer process to SCSU and their experiences upon arrival:

- “My credits transferred the way I expected” (31% agreement)
- “I was able to register for all the courses I wanted/needed” (48% agreement)
- “The transfer process was smooth” (42% agreement)
- “I would say that SCSU is a transfer student-friendly school” (41% agreement)
- “Since transferring to SCSU and experiencing the school first hand, I would say that the website accurately portrays the University” (50% agreement)
- “During the transfer process, it was easy for me to find what I was looking for on the SCSU website” (50% agreement)
- “Looking back, my experiences at SCSU have made me more confident in my decision to transfer here” (45% agreement)
- “When I walk around campus, I find that the people here at SCSU are warm and friendly” (45% agreement)
- “I spend time with my SCSU peers outside of school” (43% agreement)
- “Other people in my life would tell me that I made the right choice in transferring to SCSU” (45% agreement)
- “I would recommend that other students from my previous school transfer to SCSU” (38% agreement)

Only 54% of transfer students agreed that “The office personnel I dealt with during the transfer process were always polite to me during my interactions with them” and 58% percent agreed that “I do not know where to get help with questions about how to dispute a course that did not transfer in.” When asked to compare their experience at SCSU to that of their previous institution, only 38% of transfer students wished that they had started their college career at SCSU instead of at their previous
college/university, and 72% felt that SCSU had more General Education requirements than their previous institution.

What happens to transfer students across the trajectory of their academic careers was also analyzed for this report. According to StudentTracker, of the 807 students who arrived at SCSU in 2008 as transfer students, 35% have graduated from Southern. Approximately 40% of students from this cohort were still enrolled in college, and of those still enrolled, 62% remain at Southern, 25% enrolled in another four-year institution, and 13% enrolled in a two-year college.

For the 2009 cohort of 831 transfer students, 11.3% of students have graduated from Southern. Approximately 65% percent of students from this cohort are still enrolled in college; of those still enrolled, 77% of them are enrolled at Southern, 16% are enrolled in another four-year institution, and 7% are enrolled in a two-year college.

As of spring 2012, of 939 transfer students who arrived at Southern in 2010, 79% were still enrolled in college (84% at Southern), 3% graduated from SCSU, and 18% were no longer attending college, but have not graduated. As of spring 2012, 84% of the 943 transfer students who arrived at SCSU in 2011 were still enrolled at Southern.

Review of SCSU Current Practices Impacting Transfer Students

**Campus Culture** – Until recently, SCSU has focused most of its attention and resources on the enrollment and retention of first time, full time freshmen.

**Proactive Services/Campus-based Advocacy** – There is no office or staff designated as primarily responsible/accountable for transfer student success. Currently, responsibilities are shared amongst related offices/staffs cross campus. Until 2012, all new transfer students were advised and registered via individual appointments with an academic advisor in the Academic Advisement Center in Wintergreen. In fall 2011, five academic advisors advised and registered 935 new full-time transfer students between May and August. While one- on-one advising appointments have some advantages, this system is not efficient or consistent; nor is it aligned with the resources of the department. Despite this resource intensive, one-on-one approach, only 68.4% of transfer students surveyed felt the Academic Advising Office was helpful or somewhat helpful in their transition to SCSU.

**Proactive Services/External Advocacy** – Members of the Academic Advisement staff routinely visit SCSU’s primary feeder community colleges to meet with colleagues and prospective transfer students. This effort intensified in 2011-12 with SCSU’s implementation of the new LEP, with visits conducted by the LEP Director, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Interim Director of Academic Advisement. While these visits significantly contribute to professional relationships and collaboration between SCSU and the Community Colleges, SCSU needs to develop a comprehensive plan focused on providing community college transfer students with proactive, directed advising prior to enrollment. This would include necessary resources (staffing and operational) as well as the development of technology to support web-based academic planning and degree mapping.
Transfer Equivalency Process – The Admissions and Academic Advisement staffs are responsible for the administrative/clerical functions related to cataloging and maintaining accurate transfer equivalencies in the transfer articulation module of Banner. It is the purview of the Department Chairs to assess/approve existing and new course equivalencies. Each semester a letter is sent to chairs requesting they review and identify any appropriate updates to the transfer bank. This process is tedious and inefficient. There is uneven participation and response as a result. However, the greatest obstacle in the current process directly involves the transfer students who question or appeal a banked equivalency. Since the department chair makes the equivalency decision, students questioning equivalencies are sent directly to the chair for appeal/review. This is the primary reason transfer students frequently report being sent from “office to office” or feel they are getting “bounced around” to resolve issues related to transfer equivalencies.

Recommendations/Initiatives to Impact Transfer Student Success at SCSU

1. **Collaboration with other ConnSCU institutions** – The Transfer Task Force recommends that SCSU faculty, administrators, and advisers closely collaborate with colleagues from other ConnSCU institutions – particularly from the five Community Colleges which provide the majority of SCSU transfer students – as those institutions begin to develop and implement the general education core curriculum prescribed by Public Act No. 12-31 and determine the appropriate means for assessing progress toward the goals and learning outcomes defined by the Transfer Articulation Policy (TAP). Doing so would improve chances of transfer student success from those institutions, help ensure that transfer students and native students have a more uniform core curriculum experience, and encourage more students to achieve the outcomes specified in the TAP by clearly defining expectations.

   **Requirements for Implementation of Recommendation #1:**
   
   - Leadership from SCSU faculty representatives, working closely with Academic Advisement Office, the Deans’ Offices and the LEPC or LEP Director, will be needed to ensure that SCSU has either ex officio representation on – or effective communication with – the key committees and individuals at the Community Colleges responsible for planning and executing the development of the relevant curriculum frameworks and assessments.
   
   - Multiple offices at SCSU will need to work to establish formal and regular channels of communication between the Community Colleges and SCSU to ensure ongoing partnering on matters related to transfer student interests.

2. **Strengthen support for entering students** – The Task Force recommends that SCSU provide more comprehensive and effective support to meet incoming transfer student needs. Such support should be facilitated by a Transfer Student Services Office, which should coordinate and more effectively target the efforts of advisers, faculty mentors, and other staff who provide academic support services. It should also be facilitated by centralized, integrated, and student-friendly technology to better guide students in the development of education plans, and to help
departments and programs develop and more clearly articulate education pathways. Specifically:

2.1. The Transfer Task Force recommends that all incoming transfer students be required to: (1) complete an orientation, (2) participate in appropriate diagnostic assessments, (3) meet with both a member of the Academic Advisement team and a faculty mentor from their proposed program of study, (4) develop an education plan focused on completion of the degree, and (5) meet with a member of the Bursar and/or Financial Aid staff to develop a financial plan for payment for current and future semesters.

By requiring transfer students to participate in an orientation, SCSU would ensure that students are introduced to the academic and co-curricular services and programs vital to a successful transition and active engagement in the Southern community. In addition to exposing students to key services and opportunities, the orientation should: (1) offer specific academic, career, and financial planning advice, and (2) provide a structured and holistic introduction to the campus environment by providing information about expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom.

The Transfer Task Force recognizes that implementation of this recommendation would require allocation of existing and new resources (staffing and operating), and the development of new modes of service delivery in order to make the required services available to all incoming students.

The Transfer Task Force also recognizes that orientations and the administration of diagnostic assessments should be sensitive to the needs of students. Today’s students use laptops, smart phones, and tablets not only to communicate with friends and professors, but also for making appointments and online purchases, watching movies, and doing research. While not all students have the devices and skills to make effective use of the full range of available technology, growing numbers of students do – and those students have the expectation that the institutions with which they interact will utilize current technology to facilitate online assessments and orientation.

The Transfer Student Services Office should be able to exempt students from any of the requirements described above on a case-by-case basis.

2.2. The Task Force recommends that SCSU develop and use centralized and integrated technology, accessible through campus web portals, to better guide students in the development of an education plan.

Thoughtfully designed online technology would enable students to more fully participate in their own education planning, and would improve their ability to choose and follow an appropriate pathway to degree completion. It would also provide a useful tool for: (1) advisors to better assist students with education planning, and identify students who are off track so that timely intervention can be offered; and (2) administrators and faculty to plan
class schedules to ensure that students have access to the courses they need to stay on track and complete their plan in a timely and efficient manner.

2.3. *The Task Force recommends that the processes for updating the Transfer Equivalency Bank, requesting review of unbanked equivalencies, and appealing equivalency decisions be improved and streamlined.*

The results of both the Environmental Scan and conversations with colleagues at the Community Colleges clearly indicate that the current system is confusing and inefficient. The Transfer Student Services Office should work with the Deans’ Offices, LEP Director, Academic Student Services Offices, Office of Information Technology, and representatives from the Central Office and other ConnSCU institutions to design, implement, and maintain: (1) a system for the transfer equivalency bank to be automatically updated and systematically reviewed; (2) an online tool that would enable students to automatically request a review by the relevant Chairperson or department representative by uploading information, syllabi, and other materials from unbanked courses; (3) a system for tracking requests for review of unbanked courses, and automatically recording the relevant equivalency decisions in the transfer equivalency bank; (4) a system for appealing equivalency decisions; and (5) a system for proactively notifying other ConnSCU institutions of any relevant transfer equivalency changes.

2.4. *The Task Force recommends that incoming transfer students whose diagnostic assessments show a lack of readiness for upper level courses be encouraged to participate in a student success course, learning community, or other sustained intervention.*

Academic proficiency in English and mathematics are not the only predictors of success in higher education. College readiness includes other variables: cognitive strategies such as analysis, interpretation, and problem solving; skills-based knowledge such as technological fluency, the ability to read and write critically, and an awareness of email etiquette; attitudes and behavioral attributes such as study skills, time management, persistence, ability to utilize study groups; and context-based knowledge about how to identify resources and expectations at a particular institution.

Research and experience with the FYE program at SCSU has demonstrated that one successful model for supporting the success of incoming students is to ground campus-wide initiatives in a course designed to promote intellectual skills and behavior – the “academic habits of mind” essential to college success.

With this in mind, the Transfer Task Force recommends that SCSU consider offering “T” sections of LEP Tier 1 courses such as technological fluency and critical thinking. A “T” section would be a 1.0-credit expansion of an existing course, designed to provide an academic framework for the delivery of advisement and support appropriate for transfer students, including career and financial planning, and information literacy skills.
Requirements for Implementation of Recommendation #2:

• Substantial allocation of resources for the development of a Transfer Student Services Office equipped to meet the challenges described above.

• Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office, Student Affairs/Student Life Offices, Academic Student Services Offices, Residence Life, and other offices to develop and deliver a comprehensive orientation program, including an online alternative orientation, and an online diagnostic assessment system, including: (1) consistent testing and re-testing policies, and (2) a robust array of options to help students prepare to take the assessments.

• Collaboration between the Deans’ Offices, the LEP Director, the Transfer Student Services Office, Academic Advisement, Admissions, and Department Chairpersons to develop and implement an expanded transfer equivalency bank and online review system.

• Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office, Registrar, Academic Advisement, Deans, and Department Chairpersons to design and implement an online interactive system that would guide students in the creation of a formal education plan.

• Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office, the LEP Director, and the relevant Tier 1 affinity group faculty leaders in designing, proposing, and implementing a “T” course program.

3. **Strengthen support for continuing transfer students** – The Transfer Task Force recommends that SCSU provide more coordinated and comprehensive resources to identify and meet the needs of continuing transfer students. Such support should be facilitated by the Transfer Student Services Office, which should act as a hub to more effectively coordinate and target the efforts of advisors, faculty mentors, and other staff who provide academic support services. The efforts of the TSS office should be informed both by best practices and by SCSU transfer students’ experiences and persistence patterns. Specifically:

3.1. **The Task Force recommends that transfer students have a physical location – an office or center – to go to resolve problems or seek support.**

The Transfer Student Services Office should, minimally, be a physical location for new and continuing transfer students to receive information, positive support in obtaining answers, and question/problem resolution. It should not, in other words, be a station for giving students what some SCSU transfer students call “the bounce” – i.e., redirection to another office.

Ideally, it would also be a location for transfer students to develop peer networks and receive peer support. The benefits of peer-to-peer advising and study groups are well-documented, as is the importance of a physical space for both spontaneous and planned groups and networks to meet and to form.
3.2. The Transfer Task Force recommends that SCSU strongly encourage transfer students to declare a major or program of study upon admission, intervene if a declaration is not made by the end of the second semester, and require declaration by the end of the third semester in order to register for classes.

Declaring a program of study sets incoming students on a specific education pathway, and builds momentum for success. Of the 841 transfer students who entered in the Fall of 2012, at the end of September a total of 96 students, or 11%, had not declared a major. Research shows that students who declare a major or program of study in their first year are more likely to complete a degree compared to those who declare a major or program of study at a later point. A student who is unable to declare a major by the end of the second semester should be provided career planning services and specific individualized advisement. Students who fail to declare a program of study after their third term should be required to attend an individual career planning session before they are permitted to register for classes.

3.3. The Transfer Task Force recommends the Transfer Student Services Office work with the Academic Advisement and Registrar Offices in developing and refining the use of a centralized and integrated technology, accessible through campus web portals, to develop an “Early Warning System” to actively engage, mentor and advise students who are not on track to complete their chosen educational plan in a timely manner.

A carefully designed Early Warning System would enable advisors to assist students before the start of a semester, when there is still time for the students to change course selections or enroll in winter/summer session courses.

3.4. The Transfer task Force recommends that the Transfer Student Services Office work closely with the Office of Assessment and Planning to track enrollment, persistence, and retention patterns among continuing transfer students.

The Transfer Student Services Office should engage in a careful analysis of SCSU transfer student data in order to identify opportunities to improve retention and persistence among SCSU transfer students.

Requirements for Implementation of Recommendation #3:

- Allocation of resources and provision of physical space for a Transfer Student Services Office.
- Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office, Academic Advisement, Career Services, the Registrar’s Office, and Faculty Mentors for each program/department to support the efforts to encourage students to declare a major or program of study.
- Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office and the Academic Advisement and Registrar team to develop and implement an Early Warning System.
• Collaboration between the Transfer Student Services Office and the Office of Assessment and Planning to cull and analyze retention and persistence data.

In conclusion, the Transfer Task Force is mindful of the current fiscal pressures on the University, and the hesitancy some may have to allocate appropriate resources to establish a Transfer Student Services Office. However, it is expected that changing the way SCSU recruits, enrolls, and serves transfer students has the potential to be the most effective way to impact enrollment and degree completion rates.