

Transfer Orientation and Acclimation  
An Examination of the Transfer Student Experience

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### **Abstract**

This paper summarizes a semester long research project done for an English class at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The research was conducted in response to a series of self-proposed questions developed over the course of several reflective assignments, listed as follows:

- 1) How do transfer students identify with their second school? What factors influence this?
- 2) Are transfer students being adequately supported through their transition to life at Marquette?
- 3) Being a transfer student myself, was my experience transferring a fairly typical one?
- 4) What can be done to improve the transfer process at Marquette?

My findings indicate that the motivation to transfer and social connections a student has greatly impacts the level of ease or difficulty they have adjusting to a new school, which in turn affects their identification with the campus community. The transfer orientation programs at Marquette, specifically winter orientation, would benefit from a renewed consideration for new student issues such as social engagement and campus identity. Adding more interactive socializing events for new students earlier in the orientation schedule, and providing more information on general campus life issues and procedures would not be difficult to implement into the existing schedule and would greatly improve the transfer student experience.

*Keywords:* college, transfer students, new student orientation, social development

## **Transfer Orientation and Acclimation**

### **An Examination of the Transfer Student Experience**

A report released by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (Flagel, 2010) found that one third of students beginning at a four year college in fall of 2010 were transfer students. To be fair, this statistic includes students who transfer from two year and community college, with students transferring four year to four year college only a minority of this percentage. However, it still shows that transfer students, as a whole, make up a fairly significant percent of the national student population. At Marquette, the transfer student population isn't as large as the national level, but it's still more than noticeable. A data sheet from Marquette's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (Marquette, 2011) shows that in addition to the 1,931 freshman who enrolled for the first time in fall of 2011, there were also 176 transfer students. This means roughly ten percent of students who enrolled for the first time at Marquette this fall were transfers.

Ten percent is far from a fringe segment of the student population at Marquette, which is why this research is relevant to the campus community. Regardless of the final conclusions, simply bringing the issue to light serves to affirm or if need be, offer improvements to the quality of the Marquette transfer experience, and also bring attention to the issues relating to transfer students themselves. For example, I was a winter transfer student, beginning at Marquette for the spring semester of 2010. I felt like my overall acclimation to the Marquette community was, for the most part, not at all assisted by Marquette. My winter orientation seemed to cater more towards parents, intensely focusing on things like public safety, health services, and counseling. I relied on other students and my roommates to learn the more practical aspects of being a student at Marquette.

My motivation for this research is wanting to know whether my less-than satisfactory experiences as a transfer coming to Marquette was an anomaly, or if transfer students really are an overlooked segment of the Marquette student population. The questions I hope to answer in this paper are: how do transfer students adjust after coming to Marquette? Is the transfer process at Marquette beneficial to establishing new students both academically and socially? Finally, how much do transfer students fully assimilate into campus culture?

In the early stages, my initial research supported the idea that transfer students, despite their fairly large population in universities, are largely overlooked. According to an article by Stephen Handle (2010), “four-year institutions are not hostile to transfer students – those students are simply not on their radar.” Handle argues his point largely in defense of transfers from community or two year colleges, and while he does make a good case for the support of these kinds of transfer students, he himself openly dismisses another transfer student population saying, “Many selective institutions rarely admit more than a handful of transfer students (and even when they do, most are – maddeningly—transfers from other four-year institutions)” (Handle, 2010). Describing four year to four year transfers as a cause of irritation in him just proves to me that the subjects at the focus of my research, four year to four year college transfer students, could possibly be the most overlooked segment of the transfer student population.

### **Methodology**

Conducting this research proved to be a challenge because things like experiences and feelings can't be easily measured on a quantitative scale. An accurate picture of the transfer experience could not be as accurately produced through objective ratings and surveys as it could be through accounts of personal experiences and self reflection. In this regard, my own experiences as a transfer student played a large role in defining my research question because of

the methodological approach I knew I would have to take. Already having experience as a transfer student gave me a head start in gathering further information because I had a basis of comparison from the very beginning. Without having my own personal account to compare further interviews to, I would have had a much more difficult time trying to decipher the implications of the qualitative data I collected.

The first assignment for class that interested me in doing my research on transfer students was the narrative inquiry assignment, where I wrote on the prompt: *what is your story of coming to Marquette?*

In this assignment, I wrote a fairly detailed account beginning with my senior year in high school, running all the way through to the present day. This was the first time I had actually written with such an introspective approach, and the assignment really allowed me to explore issues I experienced, and look at those issues from a second point of view. This time I was not the one being directly affected by everything going on in my life, but rather an outside observer of my own past, which allowed me to really dissect the subsequent events that lead me to Marquette, and also formulated some of the ideas and opinions I hold to this day.

Upon completing the narrative inquiry assignment, I found myself curious as to my own experiences, and how they would compare to other transfer students. From this both my research question, and the way I would approach that question came about. The simple reality of how I was going to answer my questions was that I would need to talk to other transfer students. While I would consider my overall project to be a mixed-method research project, it was the personal interviews I conducted that made up the bulk of my information gathering. Interviews, particularly the ones with other transfer students, were the best way to get a truly comprehensive description of what other transfer students experience during their transition to Marquette.

I came into contact with the transfer students I interviewed through personal acquaintances, and for the most part, the two interviews followed a set script, with some deviation to explore additional areas I found interesting at the time. Due to scheduling constraints, I was not able to get the sample size I would've liked to have, but the two students I did manage to interview represented the two distinct groups of transfer students my research came to focus around. Students who transfer in for the fall semester, and students who transfer in for the spring semester. It was extremely important that I was able to interview at least one student from each of these groups for two reasons. The first being that since I was a spring transfer myself, I wanted to see if the negative feelings I had toward my orientation experience were limited to myself. The second reason was that once I was able to compare my experience to that of another winter transfer, I wanted to be able to compare the winter transfer experience to the fall transfer experience. Obviously, my research based off of these interviews relied heavily on cross comparison between personal experience, which I believe is how I was able to ensure accuracy in my research.

Comparison became somewhat of a method in itself as my research progressed. After completing the interviews with students, I moved on to do program comparisons, which I accomplished by looking at programming schedules from both Marquette and the programming office at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I was able to do an interview with the Assistant Director of the Center for the First Year Experience at Madison, Annette McDaniel, as well as have an email exchange with the Coordinator for New Student Programs in the Office of Student Development at Marquette, Julie Murphy. This part of my research played a support role to the initial interviews, as it served to establish a concrete distinction between how transfer students are handled both locally and at another institution.

In addition to the rest of my research, my literature reviews provided another supporting set of data to the primary sets I gathered in the form of personal interviews and the program comparison. Much of the information I came up with out of this aspect of my research I used to build a context around the data I was gathering myself. It served not necessarily to answer my research questions by itself, but rather to create a broader frame of understanding the larger issue I was trying to pick apart. To do this, I relied mostly on library databases, of which I looked through academic journals, trade articles, and other education resources related to my overall topic.

All of these methods combined led me to the data sets and conclusions in the following pages.

### **Data - Coding**

Through the data collection process, I pulled out several key ideas and themes that have an effect on the transfer student experience. I am beginning this section on data with my coding assessment because I feel that these themes are the most accurate representation of some of the issues faced by transfer students. Most of these coding themes were originally taken from the narrative inquiry paper I wrote, after which I used the interviews with two students: Claire, a fall transfer and senior at Marquette, and Ciara, a winter transfer and junior at Marquette, to substantiate my ideas. More than anything, however, these codes were helpful in establishing a context from which I could try and answer the question, what is the transfer experience really like?

### **Motivation to Transfer**

In the interviews I conducted with students, several questions focused on why that student transferred in the first place. The responses to my questions led me to develop two

distinct motivations students have for transferring. On the one hand, there is a sense of *escape*, leaving the university because of a negative situation or environment. The other end of the spectrum is *expansion*, where students leave as a result of extended planning, their first school serving more or less as a stepping stone to what the student perceives to be a more prestigious second school.

I would classify both Ciara and myself as escape transfers because we did not originally intend to leave our first schools, but did so out of unsatisfactory circumstances. Claire could be classified as an expansion transfer, because she said in her interview that she always knew she would transfer at some point. Instead of leaving primarily because she felt uncomfortable or dissatisfied with her first school, Claire left because the first school she attended was really just an additional step in the process of ending up at the school she ultimately wanted to attend.

The ideas of both escape and expansion transfers are supported by Victor Borden (2004) in his article describing the “swirl” phenomena of transfer students. In the article, Borden (2004) explains that students are no longer following the “traditional” linear path in getting a college education, defined as attending one school continuously for four years and then graduating. Instead, students are more and more often taking different approaches to education, by changing schools once or several times, part time education, and other means of receiving a higher education. Both the escape and expansion models of a transfer student represent the nonlinear approach to education, that is sure to become one of the more prevalent issues facing universities in the coming years.

### **Social Development**

A common theme in both interviews was the importance of early social development. Both Claire and Ciara indicated the importance of making friends immediately or soon after

arriving on campus for the first time, and of participating in extracurricular clubs and activities. Both participate in multiple student organizations and activities, something Claire described as not only helpful in making friends, but necessary.

“I knew that I needed to join a club. I needed an outlet, somewhere to meet people that I hadn’t met in my first week at Marquette or who were in my classes,” she said.

Graham and Cockreil (1996) show in their research that college does, in fact, play a significant role in the social development in young adults, with participation in activities that fit the “student role” contributing the most to this development. With that in mind, I feel that my research affirms the notion that early social development, meaning the first two or three weeks on campus beginning with orientation, are incredibly crucial in developing social connections with other students.

However, getting students involved in activities is a two part process. Students have to feel comfortable enough on campus to actually join a club or organization in the first place, and this level of comfort can only come from basic social interaction, and the building of foundation level social circles. This places equal importance on both clubs and organizations, and also on the sort of ice breaker, initial social activities both Ciara and myself agreed were missing from our winter orientation.

### **Campus Identity**

As much as I tried to find some kind of link between campus identification and transfer students, the data I collected really boils down to levels of comfort in a particular environment. The more comfortable a student is, especially socially, the more that student seems to be able to identify with the school they are attending.

For instance, Ciara said that when asked to do the interview for my project, “I almost forgot I was a transfer student.” She said that it took until the end of her sophomore year, but after that her feeling of being “different” as a transfer student had gone away.

Claire had a similar story, saying it took her about a year to build up what she called, “a solid group of people around [her].”

I don’t believe being a transfer student is an unshakable stigma that follows a student throughout their college career. Instead, it is more of a temporary feeling that goes away as a student makes the difficult transition from school to school, social group to social group. In this way, the school itself does hold some power over boosting the feeling of identity among transfer students, simply by encouraging involvement and social development.

### **Data – Personal Reflection**

Now stepping back to the beginning of my research, I first took an analytical approach to my narrative inquiry paper, which detailed my experiences coming to Marquette. The paper itself set the foundation for the rest of my research, and in it, I describe my transfer experience as follows:

Receiving my acceptance letter from Marquette was somehow so much more gratifying than when I got into Point. This time I had a purpose; it felt like I was in high school all over again, starting over. I was excited in the way I think most kids are the first time they get into a college, even if this was my second time around.

After moving out of my room at Point and saying goodbye to that campus for good (I haven’t been back since), I spent the winter break imagining what life would be like at a new school. I had been on the Marquette campus before, but again, never taken an official campus visit. At this point I figured I knew what I was getting into and could handle myself. I’m actually really glad I had this attitude going into the spring semester of 2010 otherwise I would’ve found myself in the same boat I was in only a few months prior.

It started with transfer orientation, which was held the day before classes started at the end of January. Granted the experience I received at Stevens Point wasn’t exactly the most comprehensive orientation experience ever, it sure beat the hell out of what I got at Marquette. My parents, unwilling to sit through

another orientation after one with my older brother and my first one, with two to follow in my younger sister and brother, dropped me off on campus and said goodbye, making the now only 20 minute drive back to our home in Oak Creek. I moved in to my new dorm room, not yet having met my new roommates, who later turned out to be pretty exceptional guys, and then headed off to transfer orientation.

One of the major issues I had with my orientation experience at Marquette is that I was told all of the things a nervous parent needed to know, and nothing I needed to know. The speakers at the orientation breakfast spent the entire time going over student safety, health services and counseling down to fine detail, but nothing really relevant as far as just surviving on campus. I left after that first event, not planning on attending anything else that day because I just wanted to get my stuff moved in and then go back home. I really don't know if leaving when I did caused me to miss out on things I would have found helpful, but I really didn't have much incentive to stay. There was a basketball game later in the afternoon scheduled as one of the orientation events, but to that point I didn't know anyone who was going, and I didn't want to be there alone.

Either way, my orientation experience ended there and I still didn't know the basic things like, how to swipe for a meal in the dining halls, or how to get around campus. Those aspects of student life I was left to figure out on my own, which I did eventually, largely thanks to my roommates.

I did not include my the section of my narrative inquiry paper which described my motivation to transfer because it is briefly summed up in the first of my coding themes, the motivation to transfer. I did not anticipate transferring when I first arrived at college, and the fact that circumstantial forces motivated me to transfer classifies me as what I would call an "escape" transfer student.

Overall, a major issue that came out of my personal reflection was the lack of community integration, or social interaction during orientation and my first few weeks on campus, which follows with both of my coding themes of social development and campus identity. Orientation for me was unsuccessful because I had no incentive to be there. I had no incentive because the information being given did not apply to me in a directly important way, and because I was there by myself without any chance to really meet new people. Those two factors alone caused me to essentially abandon orientation early and try to fend for myself.

### **Data – Student Interviews**

Using my personal dissatisfaction with my transfer experience, I set out to talk to students about their own experiences to see if they matched my own. My first interview was with a student who chose to be called Claire for anonymity purposes. Claire is a Senior at Marquette who transferred from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee after her freshman year there.

In the interview, Claire noted the difficulty of the transition transfer students face saying, “It’s a hard transition even if you weren’t completely happy where you were your freshman year.” Obviously Claire understood how difficult the transfer process was, but I was somewhat surprised to discover that she was generally satisfied with her orientation at Marquette. Claire said she made several friends during her orientation week, which occurred in fall before other students moved into her dorm.

“[Orientation] went really well. We moved in before the sophomores moved in, the same day as freshmen. So we had a chance to get to know the other transfers in the dorm. Schroeder [Hall] did its own sort of transfer activities with all the [resident assistants]. They handed us a pamphlet and there were two or three things aimed specifically at transfer students,” Claire said.

Marquette’s fall orientation for new students features events that are mandatory for both freshmen and transfers, with several other events specifically designed for one group or the other. In this regard, and with no negative testimony to counter it, it appears that new student orientation for the fall semester is working just as it should, by adequately preparing students for life at Marquette in an academic, social and practical sense.

On the other hand, I was not a fall transfer. In order to confirm or disprove my negative attitude toward my winter orientation, I would have to talk to a student who also transferred to

Marquette during the winter for the spring semester. Luckily, I was able to interview Ciara, a junior who actually transferred the same time I did, although I didn't know this until I met her for the interview.

When speaking about her orientation experience at Marquette, Ciara made comparisons to her freshman orientation at her first school.

“It was less intense, less structured. I only remember one event, and it was optional,” Ciara said. “I do remember that it wasn't very substantive. There wasn't much to it really. So I was a little disappointed.”

It was during my interview with Ciara when I realized that my experience was not necessarily atypical, but rather a shared sentiment. As I noted in the narrative inquiry assignment, I didn't feel I had an incentive to stay at the orientation because I was by myself without any social interaction. In part, Ciara confirmed this when describing what she felt was lacking from her orientation experience.

“I think there wasn't any, getting to meet new people stuff. The icebreakers and structure, and structure in a way that you're socializing and meeting people,” Ciara said.

Comparing orientation schedules from both fall and winter, the difference is clear. In the fall, orientation events specifically for transfer students are scheduled over a five day period, including specific social events such as scavenger hunts, cookouts, and dances. Winter orientation, on the other hand, lasts one day, with a lunch panel and basketball game as the only transfer-specific activities. Claire said she took advantage of several events along with other transfer students at her orientation, at my winter orientation, I only attended the lunch panel, and Ciara said she attended the panel and went to the basketball game with her mom.

### **Data – Program Comparison**

At this point I wanted to compare Marquette's programs to another school, which brought me into contact with Annette, the Assistant Director in the Center for the First Year Experience at UW- Madison. Madison is a much larger school than Marquette, with some 30,000 undergraduates. However, 22% of these undergraduates, according to Annette, are transfer students, making Madison a good case study in how a school handles a significantly sized transfer student population. Annette explained Madison's new student programs, which feature roughly the same programming schedule for both fall and spring sessions. Before students arrive on campus for the start of the semester, they attend the Student Orientation Advising Registration (SOAR) program, which focuses on the academic needs of transfer students. During the day long SOAR program, transfer students are divided by academic field of study, after which they meet with advisors to learn about transfer credits and enrollment. Annette said the program is set up this way, providing academic support long before students arrive on campus at the beginning of the semester because, "we've learned at that point of time, that's what the population is really focused on."

When students finally do come on to campus, an entirely separate orientation experience takes place which focuses more on adjusting transfers to their new environmental and social surroundings. While there are some events in the fall that transfers attend with new freshmen, both spring and fall transfers have the opportunity to attend a variety of events scheduled specifically for transfer students including an 'Welcome Weekend' program, organizational fair, and transfer student dinner..

"One thing that's really helpful for transfers is just being with and seeing that there are other people in their shoes, because [transfers] have a tendency to think they're the only ones doing this or feeling like they're kind of an imposter in a new place. So we have a welcome

dinner, where we feed them, they're en masse, together, sort of forced socialization. It's been a really popular event we do with transfers," Annette said.

Overall, I was impressed by what Annette told me about Madison. Both the SOAR and transfer orientation programs seemed to be working well after being fine tuned by numerous focus group meetings and departmental evaluations. Knowing what a school like Madison was doing for transfers, I was lead to the final stage of my research, back to Marquette.

I was able to get in contact with Julie, the Coordinator for New Student Programs in the Office of Student Development. I wanted to compare how Marquette's orientation programs were run in comparison to Madison's, so I started with the academic orientation offered by Madison's SOAR program. At Marquette, there is no formal equivalent to the SOAR program, students are informed of their advisor and must meet with them on their own time. Support services related to academic advising vary from college to college at Marquette.

As far as orientation itself, "much of the schedule stays the same from year to year. We do make changes each year to improve the program, based on feedback from students, parents, administrators, etc.," said Julie. She said the planning of New Student Programs is the primary responsibility she has as coordinator for New Student Programs, receiving help from an orientation graduate intern and four undergraduates on the orientation planning team.

The one statistic Julie provided that I found interesting was that only 60% of incoming transfer students attend fall orientation, and only 40% attend winter orientation. I would imagine that orientation would be an event with a high rate of attendance, but these percentages seem to indicate otherwise. I did not have enough time with this project to further investigate this statistic, but I believe that asking more questions about why or why not students attend orientation events could lead to possible ways to improve either program. In addition to this, other questions such

as why UW-Madison seems to have a much more developed transfer program, and why winter orientation for Ciara and myself wasn't more like fall orientation for Claire were all questions my data raised as my research came to a conclusion.

### **Proposal for Change**

Keeping in consideration the data I collected, framed by the coding themes I set forth earlier, my proposal for change is one that would restructure the new student orientation programs at Marquette. In short, there needs to be more of an emphasis on social interaction among students, a more comprehensive instruction on the basics of campus life, and a greater emphasis on involvement on campus. I do not limit this proposal only to winter transfers or transfer students in general, because I feel that the issues of social development and campus identity are important to transfer students, new adult students, and freshmen alike. I believe all of Marquette's orientation programs are put together by a knowledgeable and dedicated staff with the absolute best of intentions for new students, but that does not mean there cannot be room for improvement. As it stands, my research indicates that the fall orientation for new students seems to be working well in terms of events and programming covering all aspects of a student's transition to life at Marquette through both social and academic development, but winter orientation is not quite up to that mark. I believe this problem can be solved by creating a consistence between the fall and winter orientation programs, which does not necessarily mean matching both schedules event for event, but rather institute a higher quality of programming for winter orientation for what time is available. Winter orientation does not need to be five days long like fall, especially if other scheduling constraints prohibit this. However, there is no reason why winter orientation should not have the same genre of programming as fall orientation.

Comparing Marquette to Madison gave me hope as a researcher that there could be a balance between academic and social programs in new student orientation without losing effectiveness. Madison employs a distinct separation between academic and social development through their new student programs, but at the same time does not sacrifice any measure of importance from one to another. I believe such a system would greatly benefit students at Marquette as well, and could be funded in much of the same way by taking from the existing programming fee already charged to students.

This research and subsequent proposal for changes is not about reinventing the wheel. There are aspects of Marquette's new student orientation programs that are working well, but there is always room for improvement. Especially with more and more students following what is considered the nontraditional path to college graduation, now more than ever is the perfect time to give substantial consideration as to how Marquette can accommodate this growing segment of the student population.

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