

**Integration and UIUC Transfer Student Programming:  
Analysis of Staff and Transfer Cluster Resident Views**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an ethnographic study of students and staff at the University of Illinois, engaging the issue of whether or not transfer student programs help transfer students integrate into the university. The study focuses specifically on the transfer student orientation programs, the Transfer Student Organization and the Transfer Cluster special living option in University Housing. One-on-one interviews about the programs and the needs of transfers were conducted with Transfer Cluster residents and staff from December 2006 to February 2007, and then the programs were analyzed using literature about student programs. Student integration is an important issue in universities today because it can determine whether or not a student stays at the school, does well in classes, or completes a degree. Student integration can be broken down into two parts: social integration and academic integration. Social integration involves making friends and having many interactions with other students on campus. Academic integration can be defined as participating fully in the academic environment, including using resources available, interacting with faculty, and understanding their path of study. Academic integration has been found to be especially important for transfer students since they have such a limited timeframe in which to meet their course requirements and prepare for a career. This study finds that University programs do help transfer students integrate socially, but there are no programs in place to help transfer students integrate academically. These results and the existing literature show that universities should be careful to provide adequate academic support to transfer students to ensure their successful integration into the university.

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign the primary programming for transfer students reveals that the University imagines adjusting socially is the largest issue that faces

transfer students. This socially-oriented programming is based on assumptions about the particular challenges that often older or later arriving students face, such as assuming they have trouble meeting people or relating to others on campus. The programming reflects the 1999 transfer student focus group study conducted by the University that placed the most emphasis on the social needs of transfer students. My interviews with University personnel largely mirrored this perspective as most emphasized social integration, which involves fitting in and finding friends on campus, as a key part of transfer student transition. Academic integration is not an integral part of the University ideology surrounding transition because only one staff member mentioned a need for expanded academic assistance for transfers. This is very interesting because the existing research on student integration emphasizes the importance of academic integration. My ethnography of transfer students, however, reveals quite a different understanding of transfer student integration. The largest hurdles that transfer students feel they face are those concerning course articulation and academic integration. This is not to say that some students did not also mention the social aspect as being difficult or important.

Interestingly, even though transfer students tended to consider social integration as not much of an issue, I observed that the students went out of their way to create a social community for those participating in the Transfer Cluster special living option in University Housing. Nonetheless, they did not seem convinced that their effort indicated a challenge, and instead chose to focus on other failings of the University in regards to transfer student integration.

### **Ease of Misconstruing Transfer Student Needs**

Going into this research I had a number of assumptions about transfer students, and I found that the University shared many of these assumptions with me. I was sure that transfer students would be most concerned with the social aspects of University life, namely with “fitting

in.” These assumptions, not surprisingly, are born in part in my own college biography: in high school I had very few friends and was not very social, so I saw coming to the U of I as my opportunity to change all of that. I threw myself into the social activities of my dorm and pushed myself to meet others in the hall. Being a good student in high school, I was not too concerned with adjusting to college-level courses, so during my freshman year, academics took a back seat for a while. Going into this project, I thus assumed that meeting people and making friends would be a major concern for the transfer students as well. Since I understood that the University’s primary task is to teach students, I assumed that they would be most concerned about the academic success and graduation rates of transfer students. I did not think the University would be very concerned with the social life of students at all and that all programs designed for transfer students would stem from their aim to have them succeed academically. I ended up being very surprised because my research results stood all of my assumptions on their head. I also assumed that transfer students would have a much harder time transitioning into the U of I than freshmen, although as I reflect, I realize that I did not have a clear sense of why I thought that would be the case. After completing the study, I realize that this assumption is not founded. As mentioned, I have found that while the University provides adequate services for the social aspects of the student life of transfers, many of them are frustrated with the lack of academic assistance. These assumptions should be kept in mind because they show how easy it is for anyone to misunderstand and distort the needs of transfer students.

### **What Exactly Is Integration?**

Determining whether or not the Transfer Cluster or other programs help students integrate into the U of I depends on how integration is defined. Integration could be defined as simply feeling like a part of the University or feeling like it is a good fit. This definition is the

most basic and general concept of student integration, and there are many aspects that must be working together to create this feeling. Integration could be defined as providing a place for students to feel at home and have a strong social network within the University. If this were the case, then any program that promoted social inclusion and building close networks of students would be seen as integrating students. This is what is commonly thought of as social integration. Beil et. al. described social integration as “formal and informal social interactions that students experience at the university.”<sup>1</sup> Well socially integrated students would then have more formal and informal social interactions than other students. From a different perspective, integration could be defined as having a good understanding of course articulation, the best ways to complete major requirements, as well as the knowledge and use of academic assistance and advising. This would mean that providing services to help students acquaint themselves with the academic setting would be very valuable for integration. This would go beyond simply doing well in their courses to include things like interacting more closely with faculty and having a clear understanding of their academic path and requirements at the University. Biel et. al. describe “academic integration as the full range of individual experiences which occur in the formal and informal domains of...the academic systems of the university.”<sup>2</sup> This would mean that the well academically integrated students would participate fully in formal and informal academic systems. Generally, those who are better integrated feel comfortable in the system, know and use the resources available, and make connections within their department or interest groups. Throughout this paper these definitions of social and academic integration will be used, and for ease and clarity of writing, saying that a student is “integrated” will actually mean that they are “well integrated.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Biel et al., “A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Academic and Social Integration and Commitment on Retention,” *NASPA Journal* 37.1 (1999): 377.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

## Well-Known Transfer Student Academic Integration Needs

Existing research on student integration places a large emphasis on the academic integration of transfer students. It is well established that student integration in all areas is important for student retention and success. The institution's need for student integration can perhaps best be described by Erving Goffman's total institution theory which explains that integration of all the members of an institution is necessary to carry out the goals of the institution.<sup>3</sup> Fitz Gibbon, Canterbury and Litten firmly established that universities are total institutions, and students need to feel like they "fit in" or they will not stay at the university or succeed there.<sup>4</sup> These ideas of "fit" and success can be easily measured using the indicators of student retention and degree completion. As Linda Lau points out, retention is particularly important because the "loss of students returning to campus for another year usually results in greater financial loss and a lower graduation rate for the institution, and might also affect the way that stakeholders, legislators, parents and students view the institution."<sup>5</sup> She also mentions that it increases the expenses required to recruit new students. Retention of all students is therefore a serious matter for universities to address. Scholars have looked at all aspects of student life from the use of recreational facilities<sup>6</sup> to student-faculty interactions<sup>7</sup> to figure out what makes some students stay at an institution and persist to graduation and what causes dropping out or transferring. Since the mid 1970s it has been known that with college students "the higher the level of academic and social integration, the greater the likelihood the student

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<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions," in *Asylums*, 1-124.

<sup>4</sup> Heather M. Fitz Gibbon, Richard M. Canterbury and Larry Litten, "Colleges as Total Institutions: Implications for Admission, Orientation, and Student Life." *College and University* 74.2 (1999): 21-7.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Lau, "Institutional Factors Affecting Student Retention," *Education* 124.1 (2003): 126.

<sup>6</sup> Serge Herzog, "Measuring Determinants of Student Return vs. Dropout/Stop out vs. Transfer: A First-to-Second Year Analysis of New Freshmen," *Research in Higher Institutions* 46.8 (2005): 883-928.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, "Student-Faculty Informal Contact and College Persistence: A Further Investigation." *The Journal of Educational Research* 72.4 (1979): 214-18.

will remain enrolled.”<sup>8</sup> Many programs have been created across the nation to assist with academic and social integration. Freshmen experience courses, designed to facilitate a full integration into the university environment over the course of a semester, were also correlated with improved rates of persistence.<sup>9</sup> However, these findings may be skewed because those who chose to participate were likely to be more highly motivated to succeed than those who chose not to. The U of I does not offer many of these freshman experience courses, and the limited time to complete a degree would prevent many transfer students from partaking in such a course. Orientation programs were found to help students integrate socially, but again, the ones who attended most often were those students who would probably need less assistance during the transition such as those of the student body majority and those with higher “initial commitment to the university”.<sup>10</sup> The University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign has many orientation-type programs for transfer students, so this indicates that the transfer students who have a greater chance of integrating fully by themselves receive additional assistance with social integration.

Despite the widespread use of these programs, social integration is only marginally related to student retention and success, and in one study it had no impact on community college student persistence after transferring.<sup>11</sup> Since many transfer students come from community colleges, this shows that social integration is probably not a top priority for transfer students.

The study by Beil et al. also notes that social integration is the main concern of freshmen, but by

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick T. Terenzini, Christos Theophildes and Wendel G. Lorang, “Influences on Students’ Perceptions of Their Academic Skill Development during College,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 55.5 (1984): 624-5.

<sup>9</sup> Meg Wright Sidle and Janet McReynolds, “The Freshman Year Experience: Student Retention and Student Success,” *NASPA Journal*. 36.4 (1999): 288-300.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella, Patrick T. Terenzini and Lee M. Wolfle, “Orientation to College and Freshman Year Persistence/Withdrawal Decisions,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 57.2 (1986): 155-75.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Biel et al., “A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Academic and Social Integration and Commitment on Retention,” *NASPA Journal* 37.1 (1999): 376-85.



senior year the concern has shifted over toward academic issues.<sup>12</sup> Basically, focusing solely on social integration for transfer students is ignoring the students' shift in concern over the years and does not help with transfer student retention. This means that academic integration is even more important for transfer student retention and success. Linda Lau found that academic advising and assistance are vital to the integration and growth of transfer students, and it should be treated as an ongoing process with follow-up meetings scheduled throughout the semester. She also mentions that this is even more important for "newly arrived students [who] tend to need more guidance and support from the academic community."<sup>13</sup> Lau mentions specifically that freshmen need additional services, but transfer students also need extra advising assistance because they are new to campus later in their college career, need to fit courses in just right to graduate on time, and are already planning ahead for careers. The literature shows that student integration is important for student retention and success, and academic integration specifically is very significant for transfer students.

### **The Importance of Transfer Students**

During recent years, transfer students seem to be at the bottom of everyone's priority list at the University of Illinois. The University focuses more on freshmen according to Karen Roberts, the Associate Dean of Students who also oversees some of the transfer student programs. The unusual background and needs of transfer students as compared to typical freshmen students makes it difficult for the Urbana-Champaign campus to cater to them directly. The Urbana-Champaign campus has the smallest number of transfer students of all the University of Illinois campuses. In 2004 the percentage of transfer students out of all incoming students at the Urbana-Champaign campus was 11.63%, at the Chicago campus was 33.79%, and

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<sup>12</sup> Cheryl Biel et al., "A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Academic and Social Integration and Commitment on Retention," *NASPA Journal* 37.1 (1999): 376-85.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Lau, "Institutional Factors Affecting Student Retention," *Education* 124.1 (2003): 126-36.

at the Springfield campus was 86.05%.<sup>14</sup> The small 11.63% is very small in comparison to the other campuses, so the Urbana-Champaign campus is clearly more attractive to freshmen. Roberts thinks the distance from Chicago and other major cities as well as the young age of most undergraduates discourages many transfer students from choosing the U of I in Urbana-Champaign. According to her observations, transfer students are often older and have family or other responsibilities to take care of, so they need to attend a school that is closer to home and provides more flexible course options. Older students are a minority at the U of I, so some transfers or individuals returning to school will probably not feel as comfortable here as they may somewhere else. Roberts says there is not enough support for transfers on campus to ensure that they come to the U of I and stay to degree completion. Because transfer students are a minority at the U of I, there has been little emphasis on creating a strong support program among the administration. Some administrators argue that there is no need for transfer programs given these numbers. The 1999 transfer student focus group study initiated by members of the University administration, and discussed more extensively later in this paper, showed that transfer students were not happy with the U of I transfer services. Despite these findings, making sure the programs for transfers persist is an issue at the U of I. The 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years saw a dramatic reduction in the size of the Transfer Cluster. Due to two extraordinarily large freshmen classes, the University Housing was forced to cut back on upperclassmen residents, including those on the transfer floor, so that they would have enough room to house all of the freshmen. This is evidence that the Transfer Cluster is one of those programs that has a lower priority than others, and this will be discussed more fully later on.

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<sup>14</sup> University Office for Planning and Budgeting, "Data and Research: Student Databook," University of Illinois, <http://www.pb.uillinois.edu/dr/databook.asp> (Accessed March 25, 2007).

The minority status of transfer students has allowed the transfer student population to be ignored for quite some time. The Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and the Director of Admissions and Records finally determined that it was time to reevaluate the quality of the programs that were available to transfer students in 1999, so they initiated a transfer student focus group study. The study was conducted using five focus groups of transfer students who volunteered in response to an email advertisement. One group was recruited from the Transfer Cluster, two consisted of first-year transfers, and two of second-year transfers. Seventy students participated in the end out of the 1,954 that were initially emailed about the study. The students came from community colleges and other four-year colleges, and they commonly stated that they transferred because of the University of Illinois's strong ranking, reputation, wide range of options due to the large size, and the value for the money. The study revealed that the University had a long way to go in making transfer students comfortable and integrated, and the resulting report suggested a number of things to make the school more transfer friendly. The biggest complaints related to frustration with courses not transferring, insufficient academic advising, lack of course availability, the small size of the Transfer Cluster, and limited activities and programs to assist in the transition. Their study provides some important insight into the thoughts of transfer students in the recent past as well as the thoughts of the University administration regarding the needs of transfer students. This paper will determine if the needs of transfer students have dramatically changed according to the suggestions given in the 1999 study and to see if any of the changes have been effective and successful.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the University neglects transfer student services, they are a very important aspect of student services on campus. It is easy for a student to get lost in a university as large as the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. The large number of undergraduates, the focus

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<sup>15</sup> Transfer Team, "Transfer Team Historical Document and Supporting Information."

on research often taking top priority over teaching, and the difficulty locating the right student services among the masses of programs available make it difficult for anyone to adjust. This is even more the case for transfer students. With such a limited time at the University it is difficult for transfer students to find the resources needed to succeed before they have to enter the job market. As I struggled with these tasks at the university, I came to think about the even greater challenge transfer students face which brought me to research the programs and experiences of transfer students at the University of Illinois. If I felt lost and only managed to discover some things after attending the school for three and a half years, I could only imagine the even bigger mess transfer students might confront. I was interested in finding out what transfer students had to say about programs targeted to serve them and about the University as a whole, partially out of my own dissatisfaction with the realities college life at a huge state school. On a larger scale, transfer student issues are also interesting because they are tied up very closely with issues of poverty and race. For years community colleges were seen as the stepping stone to higher education for lower income and minority students.<sup>16</sup> Ensuring that transfer services are adequate at the community college and university levels could help more minority students get a bachelors degree and facilitate diversity on university campuses. Beyond the individual benefits, ensuring the retention and success of transfer students is beneficial to universities because it brings in more tuition money and helps to maintain the reputation of the institution.

## **METHOD**

In the fall of 2006, I began researching literature on transfer students and interviewing a number of staff at the U of I to determine what programs are available for transfer students here and what the criteria are by which the university defines success for transfer students. In the

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<sup>16</sup> William Velez and Rajshekhar G. Javalgi, 1987. "Two-Year College to Four-Year College: The Likelihood of Transfer," *American Journal of Education* 96 (1987): 81-94.

spring of 2007 I began interviewing transfer students from the Transfer Cluster, a special housing option in the Hopkins Hall dormitory. I focused on this group because it was a population of students who are all utilizing a transfer student program; also I bargained that they would be easy to reach since they reside together in one spot. I began by interviewing the Resident Director from Hopkins Hall, and I located additional staff through referrals given by other staff members I interviewed. I recruited students through emails, posters, and word of mouth referrals. I met with each student individually for an average of about an hour in Hopkins Hall or in one of the coffee shops on campus. All interviews took place from December 2006 through February 2007. My study finds good company at the U of I because there is renewed interest in this student population as other researchers through the Ethnography of the University Initiative, such as Anne Maloney, have also recently explored the topic.

### **Demography of UIUC Transfers Today**

Transfer students are a small portion of the total student population at the U of I, but they are still an important addition to the University. Their numbers have been getting increasingly smaller over the last few years, with the 2004 transfer enrollment of 952 students being almost 30 percent lower than the 1994 enrollment. The incoming GPA of transfer students has risen slightly from 1994 to 2004. In 2004 the GPA of transfer students from community colleges was an average of .11 higher than their counterparts from four-year schools. However, the community college transfer students' GPA average drops .54 points in the first semester at the U of I while the four-year transfer students' average only drops .29 points. The community college transfer students' GPA average rises to 2.97 in their fourth semester and the four-year school transfer students rises to 3.08 in their fourth semester at the U of I. This could be an indication of the former community college students having a hard time adjusting to the new environment

such as living on their own for the first time, having less one on one instruction than they are used to, or simply adjusting to a larger institution in general. Even though the average GPA of transfer students has risen slightly, the retention rates of transfer students is less than that of incoming freshmen. Many of the four-year transfer students come from the University of Illinois at Chicago which has been the largest contributor of four-year transfers since 1997 except for the year 2001. Illinois public community college students made up just over 60 percent of the fall 2004 transfer students. Parkland College students consist of 21.7 percent of the total with the runner up, College of DuPage students, making up 4.7 percent of the total. The large number of students from Parkland means that many transfers know the area, probably know their way around the U of I campus a little bit, and have friends in the area which makes their adjustment much easier. Despite the large numbers of transfers from community colleges, the total number of minority students who transfer is proportionately smaller than the number of minority students who come in as freshmen. The retention and graduation rates of transfer students after two years are not good either, as these rates fell from 76.3 percent to 69.9 percent between 1989 and 1994. The freshman retention rates after two years of attending was 91.3 in 1992 and 91.6 in 2002, so transfers have a surprisingly lower chance of persisting to graduation. Overall, the statistics do not look very good for transfer students coming into the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These statistics prove that some action is necessary at the UIUC campus to improve the experiences and success rates of the important transfer student minority.<sup>17</sup>

Transfer students living in the Transfer Cluster come from varied backgrounds, but judging from the interview sample they seem to be roughly representative of the campus transfer

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<sup>17</sup> All statistics in this paragraph come from: University Office for Planning and Budgeting, "Data and Research: Student Databook," University of Illinois, <http://www.pb.uillinois.edu/dr/databook.asp> (Accessed March 25, 2007).

students, at least demographically. It is important to note that the students I interviewed seem to be doing fairly well academically which is different from about one quarter of the transfer student population. All four students interviewed who transferred from another four-year school listed financial reasons and disliking their previous institution among the reasons for transferring. One woman had received a scholarship to attend Ball State in Indiana, but after attending for short time really disliked the school and applied to transfer. After her acceptance to the U of I she had a hard time deciding to follow through with the transfer because of her campus involvement and the friends she made at Ball State. She decided to transfer to the U of I because she appreciates the diversity of students and activities, the opportunities available, and the proximity to her family's home. Another student did not discover she had been awarded a full ride scholarship to any Illinois institution until after she had already accepted the University of Michigan. To ensure that she did not waste more than one semester's worth of the scholarship she applied for special permission to transfer to the U of I without the number of credits required for transfers. Attending a small, unique, two-year women's college in Missouri meant that one student was required to transfer into a four-year school to complete her degree. If she had been able to stay for four years she probably would have, but she is grateful for the opportunity to try something very different from her previous experience. Many of the students living in the Transfer Cluster came from community colleges, and cost is often the driving factor in choosing to take that route. The low-income status of one student's family required that he first attend a community college. He got a full scholarship that enabled him to attend school, chose to attend the local community college before transferring somewhere else, and ended up choosing to transfer to the U of I. For another transfer student, cost was only a small factor in going to community college. His mother passed away when he was in eighth grade and it took a long

time for him to cope and deal with the depression that resulted. His grades suffered throughout most of high school as a consequence, so he knew he would have to attend a community college for a while to get good enough grades to attend a school with the level of prestige he was aiming for. He also says that it was good for him to live at home for a couple more years to gain confidence and stability, but once it came time to transfer he was extremely ready for change and a chance to have the “college experience” he had always hoped for. The current resident advisor of the Transfer Cluster, Brad, has heard students who came from a four-year school say they transferred “to be closer to family, because they didn’t like their previous school very much, and because the U of I had a better program for their major.” Despite the diversity in personal stories, the Transfer Cluster residents interviewed chose to take the transfer route as a result of being unhappy at their previous institution or for financial reasons.

## **FINDINGS**

The transfer student programs investigated reveal that the University places a large emphasis on the social integration of transfer students. These include the Transfer Student Orientation, the Transfer Student Welcome and the Transfer Cluster. Additional services are provided by the Transfer Student Organization, but it has some of the same problems as the university-run programs. Throughout the years some other programs were tried as well, but they were ended due to limited success. For example, the Office of the Dean of Students hired a graduate student to plan a number of special programs for transfer students designed to teach them more about how to adjust and figure out how everything works on campus. Unfortunately the programs were not very popular and the most that ever came to one program was about fifteen transfer students out of the 1,500 or so that were on campus at that time. The preexisting social ties of the transfer students may have reduced their interest in this sort of informational



and social program. Roberts thinks the transfers were not interested because many of them have connections on campus that helped them find resources, get adjusted and figure things out on campus. Many students come from the Chicago area which means there is a good chance they will have a number of acquaintances or friends from their high schools who can help orient them. Also, students who transferred to the U of I from Parkland Community College are likely to know some U of I students just from having lived in the Urbana-Champaign area for two years. Another factor that affects those programs is timing. Most individuals, including transfer students, adjust fully or sufficiently to the University setting in a month or so, and some just in a week or two, so special programs are not necessary after that point in time. The existing array of social integration-oriented programs has fully saturated the social needs of the transfer students, but there has been no assistance with the even more important academic integration that students also face.

### **Transfer Orientation**

The summer orientation program is a good chance for students to meet other transfer students and begin a social network, and it also offers a time to meet with an academic advisor to arrange the first class schedules, albeit a very short meeting. The first program that a transfer student attends after acceptance to the University is the Transfer Student Summer Registration Program which takes place the summer before the student begins attending classes. About 150 transfer students, or roughly eight percent, choose not to attend this orientation each year according to the 1999 focus group study.<sup>18</sup> This program is organized by the Office of the Dean of Students and overseen by Karen Roberts. From the start of the orientation program through 2004 the freshmen came for a two day orientation and registration, and the transfers only came for one day. Due to expenses and limited time and space, everyone now comes for just a one day

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<sup>18</sup> Transfer Team, "Transfer Team Historical Document and Supporting Information."

orientation before starting at the University of Illinois. Also, many of the issues that used to be discussed at orientation are issues that really need to be raised once students are in the environment experiencing it, which was another reason to cut some information out and make the orientation shorter. Karen Roberts mentioned that almost all colleges within the University now have a “university 101” class similar to ACES 100 or LAS 100 to assist students in adjusting once they get to campus. These courses are better than trying to understand everything during the orientation because they allow adjustment issues to be discussed as the issues arise instead of throwing tons of advice at students all at once. Ideally transfer students would take these and then get the same experience and assistance as the freshmen, but unfortunately many colleges do not require or even offer these adjustment courses to transfer students. Some transfer students are never getting the information that is important for a smooth transition.

The orientation just covers the most basic information required for a student to attend the U of I, like how to register for courses. During orientation students meet with advisors, learn how to use the UI2 Self-Service registration system, register for courses, get their I-Card and learn about other services the university offers.<sup>19</sup> Parents are able to attend as well and participate in a number of information sessions. Transfer students also get information about which credits they earned at their previous institution will transfer and where they are on their progress towards a degree. The transfer students also receive a Transfer Student Handbook which is a comprehensive booklet containing information about the services provided for students on campus as well as information about the different colleges and housing options.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear whether the freshmen get the same information somewhere else, but Karen Roberts

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<sup>19</sup> New Student Programs, “Summer Registration Program Overview,” Office of the Dean of Students, <http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/newstudent/sumReg/> (Accessed December 1, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Dean of Students. “Useful Information for Transfer Students.” <http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/resource/transfers/> (Accessed December 1, 2006).

made it sound like they compiled this information specifically for transfers to ease their transition. Prior to attending the program students are required to complete IStart which consists of online tutorials and other information which answers basic questions about the university. There is a program fee for freshmen of \$96, for transfer students of \$53, and for each parent accompanying their student of \$36, which may indicate that the transfer orientation is less involved or broad in some way. Other than the listed prices there was no indication of any major differences. The transfer student registration takes place before the registration for other new students so that transfer students have a slight advantage over other incoming students when choosing classes. However, all of the current students register before all incoming students, which means that the current sophomores register before the incoming junior transfer students. This is very inconvenient for junior transfers because, according to Karen Roberts, it is much more urgent for them to get the classes they need. Also, they are supposed to have all of their general education requirements taken care of before they transfer, so they don't have anything to fill in the gaps of their schedule. It makes sense to let transfer students attend orientation and registration first because many do summer school sessions at the U of I or their previous institution. This past year and again in 2007 the transfer registration is held from May 29 through June 1. They do have a transfer program in August for those who can not come in May.

One of the big problems faced by the University is how to approach transfer students during these informational programs. The Office of the Dean of Students was criticized by transfer students for talking down to them, so the Office altered their approach to accommodate those students. Unfortunately the Office then risks not giving some students, especially community college transfers who have never lived away from home, the information they need to navigate the university and make appropriate decisions. Despite all of this, the orientation is

fairly similar for both freshmen and transfers. It appears that transfers might get a little less information about how to adjust and how to navigate the university since the administration is afraid of making the transfer students feel like they are being talked down to. A balance needs to be struck between providing enough information for the transfer students to properly transition while at the same time treating them like intelligent adults.

The Transfer Student Summer Registration Program does provide a chance to meet others as well as meeting with an academic advisor. The information sessions were not seen as very important to the students, and could be improved if the University provided the full breadth of information offered to new freshmen as well. From the study by Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle it is clear that the primary benefit of orientation programs is assisting students in the social integration process.<sup>21</sup> Being with others who are in a similar position of transitioning allows for the beginning of social networks and feeling comfortable socially on campus. The orientation provides little in the way of getting comfortable academically. There is such a limited time for each student to meet with their advisor that usually nothing beyond getting registered for courses occurs. Plus without having been to class yet it is difficult to provide much useful advice to incoming students, as Karen Roberts mentioned. The orientation program allows for the process of social integration to occur, but does not assist with academic integration very much at all.

### **Transfer Student Welcome**

The Transfer Student Welcome is meant to get students excited about the university and to bring new students together; there is no academic integration aspect at all. Before the semester begins the university provides a welcome for the incoming students called New Student Convocation. According to the Karen Roberts of the Office of the Dean of Students, the

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<sup>21</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella, Patrick T. Terenzini and Lee M. Wolfle, "Orientation to College and Freshman Year Persistence/Withdrawal Decisions," *The Journal of Higher Education* 57.2 (1986): 155-75.

Convocation started in the mid-1990s as a way to welcome and unify the incoming class. The entire event still has that feel as everything from the speeches to the t-shirts are tailored for that year's freshman class. Due to this focus the incoming transfer students are not invited to the Convocation. Many transfer students had complained about that, so a couple of years after the creation of Convocation the Office of the Dean of Students created a Transfer Student Welcome. The program consists of welcome speeches, information booths for different campus units and services, refreshments, t-shirts and an a cappella group to perform and teach the fight song and cheers. Transfer students find out about the Welcome via mailed invitation, which is the same method of advertising used for the Convocation ceremony. The Welcome currently takes place during the Convocation. In the past they determined that the welcome and information booths would be more helpful to students after they had been on campus for a week, so they held the Welcome the weekend following the first week of classes. Having it at that time allowed for the deans of colleges and other people to speak at the Welcome who were usually unable to make it because they were participating in the Convocation ceremony. Someone in the planning committee complained that if it was the counterpart to Convocation then it should take place at the same time, so the Office was forced to change the event back to the same day as Convocation. This event is helpful for transfer students because it provides additional information about how to navigate the university, but it hinders the integration of transfer students into the rest of the university since they are singled out. This segregation was interpreted as discrimination by some of the students in the 1998 study, and they were very upset about the arrangements. One of the students interviewed also commented that she did not think the two programs should be separate at all. The Office of the Dean of Students recognized this

and is now reconsidering its position regarding transfer student attendance at Convocation, and a decision is likely to be made sometime this semester.

The Transfer Student Welcome has some flaws according to the 1999 focus group study. The event usually has a very low attendance with between 100 and 200 students attending. At the time of the study the Transfer Student Organization held a pizza party afterward to plan a camping outing for the students. There is no evidence that the Transfer Student Organization does this anymore even though that seems like the ideal time to advertise the organization. The study also notes that the students complained that the event was not well advertised.<sup>22</sup> Patrick, the only student interviewed who attended the whole Welcome program, said that it left much to be desired. He thought the advice consisted of “try to meet people if you can and good luck.” However he likes that the University treats transfers like adults, and most things were not that hard to figure out. These conflicting opinions on the same event are proof of how difficult it is for the University to balance the conflicting needs and desires of transfer students. According to the students in the Transfer Cluster, the Transfer Student Welcome was not very well advertised or described. There was a big mix-up that prevented a lot of the Transfer Cluster residents from attending the Transfer Student Welcome. Evidently the Cluster RA was confused because the RD told him all new students were required to go to the Convocation ceremony. He then told the residents that they could go to the Transfer Student Welcome after the Convocation when all of the freshmen were going into the stadium for the second half of the program. According to campus policy, only freshmen were supposed to go to the Convocation ceremony, but this information was not passed on to the RA. Most of the students from the Transfer Cluster went to the Convocation ceremony and only a few of them left and made it to the Transfer Student

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<sup>22</sup> Transfer Team, “Transfer Team Historical Document and Supporting Information.”

Welcome. They got there just in time for the end of the program, which consisted of information booths about the area and campus. One student said that she decided to stay at the stadium because they heard there was no food at the Transfer Welcome, but she was sad to have missed the special transfer student t-shirts they were handing out. Also, the Transfer Student Welcome in the Union was very far away from the Assembly Hall and Stadium where the Convocation was and they didn't want to walk that far. The subject matter and advertising of the Transfer Student Welcome are two things that need to be improved to make the program a success.

The Transfer Student Welcome provides a time for new transfer students to come together and learn a bit more about the logistics of the campus. It allows for students to get more information about the services available to them on campus. It functions as a tool of social integration in that it promotes excitement about and commitment to the institution, which has been found to be the key to facilitating social integration and feeling comfortable on campus.<sup>23</sup> The Welcome program does not include any aspects of academic integration at all.

### **Transfer Student Organization**

The Transfer Student Organization, although it is not run by the University, is another good tool for social integration on campus. The campus also has a transfer student-run organization called Tao Sigma to assist in creating community and providing assistance during adjustment. This club consists of four parts. The first is the Tao Sigma National Honors Society which is an honorary fraternity for transfer students who receive a 3.5 GPA or higher at the school they transfer to. It is a division of a national organization. There is also the Association of Transfer Students in Business which provides a support network and information for transfer students in business. According to their website their motto is to provide "an equal opportunity

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<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Biel et al., "A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Academic and Social Integration and Commitment on Retention," *NASPA Journal* 37.1 (1999): 384.

of knowledge of the new academic and social environment.”<sup>24</sup> The organization also provides mentoring for all interested incoming transfer students, which makes up the third part of the organization. Each participating transfer is paired with another transfer student who has been at the U of I for a while and can show them around and provide advice about navigating the University. This portion of the club hints that the members were unsatisfied with the lack of University assistance provided for transfer students, so they decided to do something about it themselves. The fourth part of the organization is called Transfers United which is the division that partakes in social and service opportunities. According to Karen Roberts, in 2002 the transfer student organization decided to become part of the national Tau Sigma organization to jumpstart their floundering club. They found that transfer students were on campus for such a short time that it was difficult to keep a socially-based club afloat. They were also unsure how to balance academics and social activities within the club meetings, so switching to Tao Sigma made everything more structured. The website is very organized and professional, but it does not provide any information about upcoming events or how to get involved, even though there is a calendar feature. There is also a discussion board that has gone unused by everyone except for two of the club officers. The email addresses of the officers are listed for those who are interested in finding out more information. From viewing the website it appears that they have great goals and provide good services but have not found an effective way to reach out to the transfer student population.

The 1999 study found that the Transfer Student Organization needs to be much better organized and better advertised. Many students in the study did not know about the organization or any of the events they held. This appears to still be a major problem for the organization.

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<sup>24</sup> Transfer Students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. <https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/TauSigmaNationalHonorSociety/index.html> (Accessed on December 1, 2006).



Only one student I interviewed had ever heard of the organization and that was through a brief discussion with a coffee shop employee. Their website gives the impression that they are more organized than they used to be. Even though they provide a great opportunity to meet people and mentors to help ease the transition, their lack of advertising is preventing them from reaching the transfer students, and especially those in need of assistance during transition. The study says the University should help the organization become more “visible, organized and interesting” by sending out eye-catching postcards to transfer students prior to the beginning of the year. This has also not happened and the organization still lacks the visibility it needs to really flourish. The organization also provides mentoring opportunities listed by the study as being very helpful, but the lack of advertising prevents this service from having much of an impact as well. The Transfer Student Organization’s largest problem is a lack of advertising, and it probably needs the help of the University to reach the transfer students. A partnership with the University administration would be very helpful because it would fill in the gaps between the transfer student events provided by the University.

The Transfer Student Organization has the potential to be very helpful for the social integration of transfer students. This would be especially useful to connect transfer students who are not living in an environment with other transfers or friends. The one major downfall of the Transfer Student Organization is that they do not adequately advertise to students so the number of students they reach is limited. Despite the problems, the Transfer Student Organization is a very good way for transfer students to get socially integrated into the university by providing a network and social activities for the students.

### **The Transfer Cluster**

The purpose of the Transfer Cluster is to create community, facilitate the creation of a support network and provide special programming for transfer students, which means that it functions to socially integrate the students living there. The idea came about as a result of a phone survey conducted among transfer students asking if they would be interested in the program.<sup>25</sup> According to Denis Johnson, Senior Assistant Director of Residential Life, the Transfer Cluster was started for the 1998-1999 school year. It was created so that there would be an easy way to do programming targeted toward transfer students. The first year it was created they had special programs like “Career Center and Tenant Union presentations, floor naming, and a resume writing course.”<sup>26</sup> Denis Johnson said the housing department realized that the needs of transfer students are different and they wanted to be able to take that into account. He also mentioned that the primary goal of the Cluster was to create “community.” In the words of Denis Johnson, this community is especially important for transfers to help them “adjust to the size, bureaucracy, and the range of choices” available to them at the U of I, but it was by no means based on the idea that transfer students have “deficits.” This is an important clarification keeping transfer student Derek’s complaints in mind, because University Housing wants to make it clear that they aren’t trying to discriminate against transfer students in any way by creating the Transfer Cluster. It is a program created solely for the benefit of the transfer students instead of excluding them from the rest of the university, like the segregated Transfer Student Welcome does. Anne Maloney’s 2004 Ethnography of the University Initiative research indicates the Cluster was designed to assist students in the transition while still encouraging them to be part of the rest of the University.<sup>27</sup> The Transfer Cluster is designed for the new incoming transfer

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<sup>25</sup> Transfer Team, “Transfer Team Historical Document and Supporting Information.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Maloney, “Anth\_199AK\_FA03 Transfer Students and the University: Narratives of One Another,” Inquiry Units, January 17, 2004, Online at

students and after one year they are required to move on to another housing option. In the words of Maloney, the Cluster “provides support for transfer students when they need it, and the appropriate push into the University community when their initial transition is complete.”<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of the resident director for Hopkins, the Transfer Cluster is about being a new student and being part of the Hopkins community as opposed to being singled out as a transfer student. The Cluster is an extremely important part of the University because it gives older students an opportunity to interact with the younger students as well as gaining support from other transfers. The hall has meetings in the beginning of the year that used to be divided up with transfer students in one and freshmen in another. Now they combine the meetings because it is less about what class you are in college and more about whether or not you are new to the environment. The resident director pointed out that the Cluster also provides the transfers with a space in which they can bond with each other and talk about their experiences as transfers. A community of older students can be hard to find in the dorms because the residents are predominantly made up of freshmen and sophomores. The Housing Department created the Transfer Cluster as a way to integrate the older students into dorm life by creating a community for them. It would be easy to feel isolated in the dorms if all the other residents are very different from yourself. This was the experience of transfer student Patrick who is not a resident of the Transfer Cluster. He had a very hard time fitting in and finding friends in the dorm until he met a group of seniors who happened to still be living in the dorm. He wished he had a community of other students his age to interact with and was very disappointed that he was not placed in the transfer cluster. Now he is dreading the end of the school year because all of his friends are graduating and he will have to make new friends all over again. This hit or miss

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[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update\\_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12810.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12810.xml) (Accessed December 1, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

approach to finding friends as a new, older student in the dorm can be stressful and create feelings of isolation. The Transfer Cluster effectively removes those barriers and helps transfer students find their niche in this large university.

Despite the importance of the program, the Transfer Cluster was dramatically reduced for a couple of years due to the large freshman classes. In 2005 Housing was faced with a very large freshmen class and at least 300 new students that it didn't know what to do with. The University has a residency requirement which states that all freshmen must live in university housing or in university approved dorms. This meant that Housing ended up telling a lot of transfers and returning students that they were not able to live in the dorms. Housing ended up opening the graduate dorm Sherman Hall to upperclassmen in an attempt to find somewhere to put everyone. Unfortunately that was not enough so programs like the Transfer Cluster also took a major hit in 2005 and 2006. According to Eric Taylor, Assistant Director for Housing, in 2005 they had a total of 50 transfer students requesting University Housing by the middle of May when they realized they would have to make room to allow for the freshmen, so they stopped accepting all contracts for transfer students at that point. Former RD, Scott Thompson, explained that during the 2005-2006 school year there were not many transfers in the Cluster at all as a result of the housing decision. The RA that year was a transfer student himself and was very excited to be the RA of the Cluster. He was good at helping transfers adjust and did a lot of programs for them, but he quickly realized that he had to start doing a lot more for freshmen as well since there were so few transfers on the floor. The transfer students on the floor were not happy about the arrangement because they were expecting to live with other transfers or at the least have a transfer student roommate. It was very hard for the RA to get them to all spend time together. A couple members of the Housing staff mentioned that they are not necessarily calling the floor the

Transfer Cluster anymore since now there is a higher likelihood that there will be freshmen on the floor. The specialized programming for transfer students also seems to have met its end during the Cluster reduction, as the current Transfer Cluster RD said there were no special programs for transfers this year even though there were some in the past. Many transfer students complained to the Office of the Dean of Students about the lack of University Housing opportunities for transfers during the Cluster reduction, and they ended up sending a lot of annoyed students to the Tenant Union to find apartments. Denis Johnson pointed out that a change in the general residence hall demographics would allow for the reinstatement of some special programs for transfer students, but new freshmen and international students are the top priority for the residence halls right now. He says the freshman class would have to be below 7,000 for programs like the Transfer Cluster to be safe from more cuts. Even though Housing recognizes the need for a special housing arrangement for transfer students, the small numbers of transfers are not as high a priority for them as ensuring that all freshmen have University housing.

### *The Cluster Logistics*

The Cluster is on the first floor of the hall which happens to be segregated from the rest of the building by open walkways leading into the center courtyard. The men and women in the Cluster are also separated from each other by a walkway. The males are in the southwest corner and the females are in the southeast corner. The offices and hall lounge take up the whole north side on the first floor which is also separated from the residential rooms by walkways. Not all of the rooms on the first floor belong to the Cluster as there are some freshmen there too. The Cluster can house 39 residents which includes 19 men and 20 women.<sup>29</sup> I was actually surprised

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<sup>29</sup> Anne Maloney, "Anth\_199AK\_FA03 Transfer Students and the University: Narratives of One Another," Inquiry Units, January 17, 2004, Online at

how small the Transfer Cluster is. Even though it looks like it would be about a third of the size of the other floors in reality it is about a quarter of the size. Eric Taylor explained the Housing advertising and placement process for the Transfer Cluster. Transfer students learn about the special living option from the normal Housing flyers which are mailed out by the Office of Admissions and Records after students are admitted. The transfer students are given all of the same information about Housing as the incoming freshmen. All housing placements are made based on which housing contracts are received first. Housing has a computer program that puts the contracts in order and places everyone in rooms. It begins by placing the person who sent in their contract first in their top choice for location, and continues through the list in order until everyone is placed. The system starts with placing the returning students who want the same room, then those who want the same floor, then in the same hall, and finally those wanting a different hall. The incoming freshmen and transfer students do not get placed until May after all the returning students have been placed. As far as which room a student is placed in they first take into account gender, then roommate requests and finally their housing location preferences. Qualifiers like race do not play any role in where a person is placed. Sometimes they use college and curriculum to place students with roommates they may have something in common with. The Transfer Cluster is special because they reserve the entire area for incoming transfer students. If they run out of transfer students who want to live on the floor then they may end up placing transfers there who did not request it to make sure the area stays specific to its assigned purpose. When pulling those who didn't request it, they try to start with those who requested the Six Pac dorms and then go from there if they still don't have enough. They try to keep it just transfer students in the Cluster as much as possible, but sometimes they end up having to fill

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[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update\\_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12810.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12810.xml) (Accessed December 1, 2006).

empty spaces with other upperclassmen who wanted to live in the dorms and did not have a location or roommate preference. Housing recognizes the difficulty in finding any older students in the dorms and understand how age is an important aspect of social interactions. This relates to Patrick's experience of only being able to relate to the seniors in his dorm. For this year's placement there were not 39 transfers assigned to the Cluster by July, so there ended up being a couple non-transfers on the women's side of the floor. Inadequate advertising may be the reason why Housing has difficulty filling the available spots in the Cluster despite the positive reviews given by those living there.

### **Cluster Succeeds in Social Integration for the Most Part**

The Transfer Cluster does help many students become socially integrated, but students also crave something more from their experience. According to most of the transfer students interviewed, the Transfer Cluster is a vital part of their University experience and they are very glad that they participated in it. However, their perceptions of what its function is were a bit different from those laid out by the University. Also, some said that the Cluster did not follow through with its intended function. Some said that the University does a very poor job providing services for transfer students and the Transfer Cluster was pretty much the best and only program available for transfer students. According to one student, it was better to live in the dorm because she was able to meet more people, especially while eating in the dining hall. She also said that from her perspective the Transfer Cluster was created to help students support each other and experience freshman year again, and this is "110% or maybe even 200% true" for her. Another student stated that from his perspective the goal of the Transfer Cluster was, "not much; they basically put us all in one spot and that was about it." He personally did not have trouble adapting, but if someone did, then they would be in trouble because there is no assistance for the

transition process. The programs available were another source of contention because, like the campus wide programs, the students wanted more but did not indicate that they would utilize them if they were there. Transfer students do not feel that the campus does much for them besides providing the Transfer Cluster, and some think even that is lacking. Overall, the students think the best part of the Transfer Cluster is the opportunity to build a social network, but they all had varying opinions about its level of effectiveness and how important that function is to student success.

### *Sometimes Exclusive*

Most of the students living in the Transfer Cluster this year did a good job of creating their own community and integrating themselves into the floor socially. This work was largely done by the students themselves because the layout of the floor itself and the original RA on the floor did not help them very much. Hopkins Hall currently does not have a very good reputation for programs, so the RD pushes the RAs in the hall to create good programs, a stronger community and a generally more social hall. The current RD pointed out that since the floor is physically divided it is important that a charismatic and devoted RA gets placed there to help foster a community among the men and women on the floor. According to over half of the students interviewed, the original RA on the floor did not succeed in doing that. Some students said he was “busy doing his own thing” and was “nonexistent” on the floor. One student explained how this was a great disappointment for her because the RA at her former school, Ball State, was very interactive and made an effort to get to know each of his residents at a personal level. Most of the students seem to be pleased with the new RA for the floor, Brad, who assumed the position at the beginning of the spring semester. According to the students Brad does a much better job fulfilling the duties of an RA. Brad pointed out that there was no need to



create a community on the floor because he felt that one existed when he got there, so his job has been easy so far. According to the residents, they had worked to create a community on the floor from the very beginning. A number of the women had gathered during the first week of school and determined that they wanted to get to know everyone on the floor. They decided to make flyers and invite the men and the rest of the women on the floor to dinner. It turned out to be a big success and many of the Cluster residents continued to spend time together. Now there is a very close knit group on the floor. Even though the RA at the beginning of the year did not succeed in promoting community, the residents themselves stepped up and created one themselves.

Unfortunately for some, the community students created in the Transfer Cluster turned out to be more exclusive than some students initially suggested. Although in the beginning all students on the floor were invited to participate in the group activities, some students did not feel entirely welcomed by the group of transfer students who initiated these activities. Only one student was unhappy, and did not feel that she fit in very well because she lacked a strong relationship with the other Cluster residents, the faculty in her department, and the others in her courses who were all much younger. One other student does not always feel like she fits in because she did not transfer until the spring semester, and she has had a hard time getting to know the main social group. She can be a little quiet as well, but mainly she feels that the group is so firmly and tightly established that it was very difficult for her to join it mid-year. The main social group, from what I could gather in the interviews, consisted of a close group of outgoing individuals who enjoyed being loud, having fun and being very social. The students who were a little quieter, enjoyed more time to themselves, or moved to the floor later in the year did not feel welcome in activities that focused around this main group. The main social group calls

themselves “‘Ohana,” which is the Hawaiian word for “family.” They came up with that name when one student quoted the *Lilo and Stitch* film which included the word and its meaning. They determined that this was a great name for their close group, and the name quickly caught on. That student’s family invited the group to a tailgate party and the group was very excited to discover that the student’s mom had purchased ‘Ohana juice completely by coincidence without any knowledge of the story. That truly cemented the term in their daily usage, and now that empty bottle hangs from the ceiling on the women’s side. Those who are part of the ‘Ohana social group dine together, visit in others’ rooms often, and spend free time together. RA Brad was very surprised by how close the group is, but he also mentioned that he was unsure if such a close community would be replicated again with another groups of students. Many of the students who are in the group claim that everyone was brought together because they were all starting new and had the same problems at the beginning of the year. One student explained that this partially had to do with everyone being together in a vulnerable time. This made a number of them end up like family because they all know what everyone is doing and they support each other all of the time. Another student thinks that their bond has more to do with common interests and personality since she was able to make friends in the group even though the transfer aspect was not really discussed anymore by January when she moved in. Just living in the Transfer Cluster does not guarantee that students will feel like they fit in and are part of the University. Due to the feelings of exclusion experienced by some on the floor who were also transfer students, it seems that personality and activity preferences probably had a lot to do with who became part of the ‘Ohana group.

Evidence from a Transfer Cluster expansion experiment confirms that the success of the Cluster probably has a lot to do with the individuals who live there. According to Anne

Maloney's research, Housing tried expanding the Cluster to the Taft – Van Doren halls after the success of the Hopkins branch. The new Cluster did not do very well and they ended up discontinuing it after a very short time. The staff members Maloney interviewed thought that this failure had to do with the larger number of freshmen – almost 90% - who live in Taft – Van Doren as compared to Hopkins which generally has more sophomores.<sup>30</sup> This relates back to the idea previously mentioned by Housing that older students need to be with other older students. After talking with the residents of the Transfer Cluster, this does not seem like a logical reason for the Cluster expansion to fail. The students living in the Cluster generally stick with others in the Cluster and there is very little interaction with those living in the rest of the hall. Perhaps the failure of the Cluster extension was due to the types of students living in the extension. If they were shy students or even just slightly less outgoing then the extension would not fare as well as the original. What got the Cluster going this year was the initiative of the students and their determination to form a close social group. This would be something to keep in mind if an expansion were to be tried again. Perhaps Housing would be better off giving the Cluster a larger space on a larger floor in Hopkins instead of trying to start another one somewhere else. The failure of the Transfer Cluster expansion probably had to do with the type of students living there which suggests that the community created is also related to the type of residents.

### *But Does Facilitate Social Integration*

Even though not all of the students felt a part of the central social group in the Cluster, all of the students who looked for friends on the floor found some. This shows that perhaps putting similar students, such as transfer students, together in one spot is all it takes to begin the process of social integration. The concern about meeting people came up repeatedly throughout the student interviews, so it is clear that students were concerned about integrating socially and

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<sup>30</sup> Transfer Team, "Transfer Team Historical Document and Supporting Information."

finding where they fit into the University. Even though not all of the students said it was their top reason for living on the floor and not all were extremely concerned about it when coming into the University, every student mentioned it as the highlight of living in the Transfer Cluster. One student explained that there is this need for the Cluster to meet people because it is difficult to go into a place where everyone already has friends, and the Cluster removes all chance of that happening. Even the students who felt like they were not really a part of the main social group and who said they didn't feel like they fit into the University completely still said they had made some good friends on the floor. These appear to be quality relationships because many of them are going on to live with people from the Cluster next year. Getting involved in floor activities is not a requirement for meeting people either since the close living space also promotes a social atmosphere. A couple of the transfer students interviewed said they knew people on campus before they moved here, and these tended to be friends or acquaintances from hometowns and high schools. One woman interviewed said that she still spends some time with one of her old friends from her hometown, but that is just because they grew up together. She says that her best friends now that she spends most of her time with are all from the Transfer Cluster. This student said that "the most important part about coming [to the U of I] is finding your community," and she found hers in the Transfer Cluster. It is the best part of her experience here so far. Another student says that he likes how their group is really closely knit and that he fits in there. He thinks the connection has more to do with the individuals than the shared transfer experience because some of the freshmen girls on the floor are also an important part of the main social group. From his perspective it has more to do with everyone being new to the University at the same. Another student thinks they are friends because they all live in the Cluster together. He says that everyone in the Cluster "[has] some idea of what they are doing, but they don't really *know* and

that common feeling made them bond.” He means that the bond has to do with a shared feeling of not knowing how to navigate the University as well as not knowing what to do as a career and how to best prepare for that. The RA Brad also thinks the Transfer Cluster is helpful due to the ease of meeting people there. Being spread out throughout the dorms would “be bad for [transfer students] since freshmen and sophomores have more cliques. It is better to have...all [the residents on a floor] in the same boat.” He is really surprised about the close friendships of the people in the Cluster especially with the physical divide between the men and the women. It is the most tight knit floor in all of Hopkins Hall. Part of his job as an RA is to “facilitate friendship and community” but that was already done before he got there. The most important part of the Transfer Cluster is definitely the facilitation of social integration that it provides, and students are very grateful for it.

### **Transfer Cluster Problems**

The Transfer Cluster does help transfer students integrate socially, but the lack of advertising and programming limits the breadth of its impact. Scott Thompson’s experiences working with at-risk students draw concern about making sure all transfer students are socially integrated. The research also shows that students who seek out special programs are usually not the ones who need the most help.<sup>31</sup> By increasing the advertising more students would be aware of the housing option and would have a chance to reap its benefits. Also, the programming created for the Cluster focuses solely on social programming which is not always interesting for the students. Creating more programs to facilitate academic integration or to prepare students for

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<sup>31</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella, Patrick T. Terenzini and Lee M. Wolfle, “Orientation to College and Freshman Year Persistence/Withdrawal Decisions,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 57.2 (1986): 155-75.; Meg Wright Sidle and Janet McReynolds, “The Freshman Year Experience: Student Retention and Student Success,” *NASPA Journal*. 36.4 (1999): 288-300.

careers would make the Cluster program much more well rounded. If this practice were started, the benefits of the Cluster would be doubled and a rise in program attendance may result.

### *Advertising is Inadequate*

Even though the Transfer Cluster is advertised in the University Housing pamphlet mailed out to all incoming students, many students seemed to have had a hard time finding information about it. In an online search of the University Housing website, the only thing that could be found on the Cluster was, “Transfer Student Cluster: A community has been developed specifically for transfer students. The RA staff in this community focus on the interests and needs of transfer students to assist their transition to Illinois.”<sup>32</sup> Hours of searching only brought up these two sentences which don’t even include the name of the hall in which it is located. It is unknown how much more information is given in the Housing pamphlet, but this brief description is unlikely to attract many people to the Cluster or to even be noticed by some students. Most of the individuals living in the Cluster knew about it from friends who had lived there. Students heard about it through siblings, coworkers from internships, and friends of siblings. The people who chose to live there sought it out because they wanted to meet people and make friends, and their connections reassured them that the Cluster was a great place to do that. Only one student said he lives in the Cluster because it was an easy option since he was unsure about what were good deals for apartments in the area. Meeting people has turned out to be one perk of living on the floor for this student, but he was clear that it was not his main reason for choosing to live in the Cluster. This same student also said that he read about the program in the Housing flyer, so perhaps his careful reading of the flyer was due to his tendency to carefully shop around for housing options. It is possible that some students don’t look very carefully at

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<sup>32</sup> University Housing, “Housing Options,” <http://www.housing.uiuc.edu/options/under/> (Accessed December 1, 2006).

the forms and unless they know the option exists then they are not likely to notice it in the flyer. It is understandable that housing would limit advertising for the program since the space available is limited, but the problem of not being able to fill the whole floor with transfer students is probably partially due to the lack of advertising. The 1999 focus group study also mentioned how the Transfer Cluster needs to increase its marketing. The study suggested sending out a flyer just about the Cluster to all incoming transfer students. This would be immensely beneficial because the one student interviewed who is not living in the Cluster, Patrick, only found out about the program after he sent in his contract because he didn't see it on the Housing packet, and he wished he would have known about it sooner. A woman who did get placed in the Cluster did not even know it existed until she moved in on the first day and started talking to some of her neighbors about their experiences. With so few transfer students aware of the Transfer Cluster, the benefits of the social integration it facilitates are severely limited.

### *Programs*

The programs created for the Transfer Cluster do not assist with academic integration and career planning like they did when the Cluster began. Instead, they focus mostly on social activities which just further assists with social integration. The students in the Transfer Cluster have mixed opinions of the programs available for them, and the students mentioned many social activities that were planned for the floor such as movie nights and a barbecue. Generally they seemed satisfied with the form and content of these programs. Current RA Brad said that he conducted a survey of what programs students were interested in having for the floor. He said many of them are interested in creating some sort of book club or a movie club, but from his perspective it would be difficult to organize and maintain. Many of them are interested in having a bar crawl, but that would have to be an independently organized event that he could not

participate in since the dorms do not sponsor drinking events even for students of legal drinking age. There was some interest in a campus tour or events involving food. He already hosted a sports night for the whole dorm where they showed an important game and had pizza in the main lounge. From his perspective the transfer students are very involved because they made up 40% of the attendance for the sports night. This is interesting because from the perspectives of the students interviewed they are not very active in hall programs at all. Many said they would rather hang out with their friends on the floor or do activities focused on their floor instead of programs created for the whole hall. Many of them mentioned things that the students are doing on their own without the help of the RA such as making their own ping pong table, petitioning the Hall financial board to get a television for their floor lounge, movie nights, and organizing Frisbee and football games. Some are disappointed that the Cluster does not provide more services tailored for transfer students and the issues they face, but no one was sure what sort of programs they would rather see or would prefer to have in addition to the existing programs. One student suggested an event to help the people on different floors get to know each other, but in the process of explaining it to me he seemed to talk himself out of the idea because the other floors are less united and have more freshmen. At this point in time, programs relating to transitioning are not necessary since that process was over months ago for these students. Denis Johnson did mention how it was sometimes difficult to create programs about transitioning and transfer student issues since the attendance would drop off so quickly due to a relatively short transition time. Anne Maloney concluded that the programs offered for Cluster residents while she was conducting her research in 2003 like resume workshops and career planning were very helpful and go a long way toward aiding students in their transition and future success. Perhaps if these programs still existed then the Cluster would be a lot more effective in assisting transfers



with their transition. Even though there is some dissatisfaction about what programs are available now, it is unclear whether students would attend any additional programs if they were offered. Perhaps the dissatisfaction with the programs is because they do not offer anything that simply residing in the Cluster does not. The students living there are already socially integrated and do not need extra programs to facilitate that. Programs focused more on academic integration and career development would speak more to the needs of the transfer students, and would create more well rounded – and well attended – programming.

### **ACADEMIC SUPPORT: THE REAL PROBLEM**

There are no programs to assist with transfer student academic integration, even though this area deserves as much, or more, attention than social integration. The main reason why the transfer students interviewed came to the University of Illinois was to get a good university education. Remember, research shows that the junior and senior students are much more concerned with the academic aspect than the social aspect of integration.<sup>33</sup> Getting proper advising and academic assistance is even more important for transfer students because they have less time than other students to complete their degree. The Hopkins RD and Karen Roberts mentioned how the number one priority for students should be their studies. It was clear that the 1999 focus group study students took their education seriously as many of their requests had to do with better academic advising, expanded course articulation, and a wider variety of courses available. Many of the students interviewed echoed the students of 1999 in their complaints about how the University deals with transfer students academically. Education is very important to transfer students. Due to their time spent at other schools, they are very aware of how to take advantage of their education and make the most of the money and time they spend. Their

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<sup>33</sup> Cheryl Biel et al., “A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Academic and Social Integration and Commitment on Retention,” *NASPA Journal* 37.1 (1999): 377

scholarship may also have to do with the fact that transfer students are often more mature and focused on career goals. Many of the students interviewed commented on the studiousness of their fellow Transfer Cluster residents. One student described a scene of Hopkins Hall during finals week in which half of the students studying in public areas of the hall were transfer students, even though they make up a much smaller portion of the hall residents. This same student discussed how there is an academically focused atmosphere most of the time and there is “a sort of peer pressure to do well.” He is glad that he chose to live in the Transfer Cluster because it allows him to focus all of his attention on academics instead of on taking care of an apartment and making his own food. Another student agrees that the floor is academically focused even though they know how to have fun sometimes too. She thinks this is because everyone living there “made a conscious decision to be [at the U of I] so they do their best to not screw up.” In her description of academic success she also placed an emphasis on retaining information and getting something out of what you are learning so it can be applied to other courses. From my personal experience, this is not the attitude of the majority of students at the U of I, especially those who have been here for all four years, and may be evidence of how academically motivated these transfer students are. A few students mentioned how they appreciated being able to go to neighbors in the Transfer Cluster for help with coursework which they cited as evidence of an academically focused floor. The academic integration of students is very important because of the serious academic focus of the students and the previous research that proves its significance for student success.

Transfer students want more guidance with their academic integration process because it is such an important issue for them. When asked about whether or not the university helps transfer students succeed, all answered with a very firm “no.” The students were very frustrated

with the lack of academic advising they receive. One student thinks the University does not know what a poor job it is doing or just does not care. The quality and quantity of advising and academic assistance available is different in each department, so some students suffer more than others. Another student said that her academic advisor in International Studies has helped her a lot because he seems interested in the students as people and she never feels rushed during her visits. Despite this she is still confused about which credits transferred and which classes she still needs. She is also very frustrated about having to retake courses because course articulation revealed that the previous course was not a good match to the U of I course. “The worst part about coming here is getting all of your credits to transfer,” said one Cluster resident. This student also explained how annoying it is to make sure your courses count for something once you get here because you have to maintain contacts back and forth between the two schools. Students have to know who to ask and what questions to ask. The student’s two older brothers were able to help a lot because they both transferred as well, so he was able to start meeting professors and advisors before he had even been accepted. This student was the only one who was able to get help before he transferred, and he still had issues getting everything to work out with his credits and courses. In general, all of the students complained about issues with credits, course articulation, and the lack of advising assistance. Unfortunately, at this point the University does not do much to make sure that the transfer students are on academically integrated, and the problem is magnified because the advising quality between departments is very inconsistent.

There are many things the University could do to facilitate the academic integration of students, and a couple programs are in the conceptualizing and planning stages right now. The Office of the Dean of Students has gotten a number of complaints about the way academic

advising is done and courses are transferred, so Karen Roberts also placed a lot of emphasis on creating programs to facilitate academic integration. The first thing she would change would be to let the transfer students come in for orientation and registration during April when all of the other juniors are registering. That would give the students much better odds of getting the courses they need for graduation. Ohio State has a very successful program like that, but unfortunately the different U of I colleges and departments would be unable to handle the extra advising load at this point in time. Another goal for the Office of the Dean of Students is to cultivate better relationships with various community colleges that transfer students often come from. Starting the U of I academic advising before the student is ready to transfer would help immensely in cleaning up any potential confusion. Fortunately the University has already met with representatives from Parkland and they hope to set up a U of I advising program there, even if it is just a part-time U of I academic advisor, so that students there will have an easier time transferring. This is very important since almost a quarter of students who transfer to the U of I come from Parkland College. In the long term, such advising placements in various community colleges could also help the University increase the numbers of minority students because at community colleges they could more easily focus on recruiting and assisting minorities in transferring. This is very important for UIUC because the number of transfer students who are minorities is proportionately much smaller than the number of minorities who come in as freshmen. These ideas and plans are evidence that the University is just beginning to take academic integration into account.

Ultimately, the bureaucratic system of the University prevents more changes from taking place to improve transfer student academic integration because there is only so much that the Office of the Dean of Students can do. The 1999 focus group study states this as one area where

*each individual* college and department will have to improve, which makes the issue very difficult to solve. The Office of the Dean of Students who recognizes that there is a problem can not organize anything like that directly due to the way the system is set up. The deans for each individual college would have to organize some sort of transfer student advising initiative to ensure that the transfers get the assistance they need. From my personal experiences, poor academic advising is something that many U of I students suffer from, not just transfers, so improvement of the advising services is an important concern. Perhaps some form of monetary assistance to the departments who just have graduate students acting as undergraduate advisors would be helpful, or a monetary bonus to the department who provides the best advising according to the students. This could be funded by an advising fee of a dollar or two paid by each student. The quality of academic advising at the University is poor, and any change in this arena will probably have to be made at the individual department or college level.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study show that academic integration is an important part of transfer student life, and there are requests, and a need, for services relating to this area of student life. Previous studies have shown that academic retention and success are highly dependent on academic and social integration. The programs that exist for transfer students are good evidence that the University sees social integration as the main issue transfers face. The 1999 focus group transfer student study and the interviews with University personnel support this ideology as well. The University has largely gotten caught up on facilitating social integration for the students and has a number of programs that provide opportunities for student to cultivate social relationships. The academic integration issues, although extremely important, have not been a focus of the University. These issues should be a focus because of the close ties between academic

integration and student retention and success. The students themselves are unhappy with this arrangement because they have a great need for assistance with academic issues. It is possible that the Transfer Cluster students don't see the need for social integration assistance because they are already well integrated socially in the Cluster. The one student interviewed who does not reside in the Cluster had many problems with finding friends and navigating the social scene. This suggests that without a service like the Cluster that facilitates social integration, a student may encounter many barriers to their integration. More research on other transfer students outside the Cluster resident population will have to be completed before the necessity of social integration programs can be fully assessed. From this study it can be determined that there is a need for programs revolving around academic integration. A number of suggestions can be made for the University programming. First, the University should not be afraid to be informative during their Orientation and Welcome programs because too little information is worse than too much. Second, the Transfer Student Organization services and opportunities should really be better advertised, perhaps by enlisting the assistance of the University. Third, the Transfer Cluster would reach a wider number of people and would expand beyond simply assisting with social integration if it were more widely advertised and the programs revolved more around academic and career topics. Finally, expanding on Karen Roberts's idea, arranging some sort of academic advising for transfer students that would begin as soon as a student decided to transfer would help with academic integration before the student enters the University. The transfer student population is an important minority on the University of Illinois campus, and expanding programs to include academic integration facilitation would greatly benefit the transfer students as well as the rest of the campus.

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