

# The Transfer Student Transition: Factors Impacting the Experiences of Undergraduate Students Upon Transfer

## A.S. Leaflet R3345

Cori Siberski, Graduate Research Assistant,  
 Department of Animal Science  
 Jennifer Bundy, Assistant Professor, Undergraduate  
 Advising and Learning Community Coordinator,  
 Department of Animal Science

### Overview

Previous research has shown that the experiences of students that transfer from other two-year or four-year institutions are different from students coming directly from high school. With the difference in experiences comes a demand for a variety of resources and availability of tools specific to transfer students. At Iowa State University (ISU) nearly a quarter of the undergraduate students are transfer students, making the transfer student experience especially important. Furthermore, transfer student retention rate at ISU was 3.79% lower than for direct-from-high-school students in 2017. Lower retention rate was the driving factor for the development of a survey instrument that would help us better understand the transfer experience. Themes collected from focus groups in 2017 provided the topics for this survey instrument. As a result of the survey instrument, factors that affect the transition of transfer students in the Animal Science Department, were identified. Data collected from this study and future related studies will be used to inform policy and procedures related to the transfer student transition at the departmental, college, and university level.

### The Transfer Experience

Transfer shock can be characterized by “a severe drop in performance upon transfer” (Hills, 1965). Transfer shock is often a focus of research and the discussion of the transfer student transition. More recently, it has been observed that multiple factors impact the transition of a student and thus cause transfer shock. These factors appear to be contained within four categories: 1) social, 2) psychological, 3) academic, and 4) environmental (Laanan, 2000; 2007). These previous findings will help to guide the identification of which, if any, barriers are most prevalent at ISU.

### Focus Groups

In order to begin identifying factors that impact transfer students in the animal science department, transfer student focus groups (n = 6) were formed in the fall of 2017. The first objective of these focus group discussions was to identify broad barrier categories and the resources that students felt helped them get past these barriers. The second objective was to utilize the factors that were uncovered to develop a survey instrument that can be used across various departments and colleges at ISU. The third and final objective was to identify malleable departmental policies, such as course structure and resource availability, that could be addressed within the Animal Science Department.

Each focus group contained roughly ten students that consisted of first-semester transfer students. Students were placed in a group based on their backgrounds and interests. The questions that were developed for the focus group sessions addressed the barrier categories that were previously published by Lanaan (2001, 2007), and current Animal Science programs and policies. All questions were open ended in order to allow for group discussion. Each session was facilitated and recorded by a session leader and later transcribed. These discussions were conducted with the assistance of the Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE). Focus group themes and factors within each theme can be found in Table 1. The participants discussed positive and negative aspects of each factor.

**Table 1. Themes and categories impacting transfer students, identified through focus groups**

| Theme  | Focus group factors                                   |
|--|---|
| Psychological/Social                                   | Social integration                                    |
|  | Financial difficulty                                  |
| Academic   | Resources provided by ISU                             |
|  | Information on transferring courses                   |
| Environmental  | Navigating campus                                     |
|  | Lack of interaction with professors                   |
| First semester Orientation in Animal Science (ANS 110) | Class assignments                                     |
|  | Dislike of freshman and transfers in a single section |

### Development of Survey Instrument

Based on the factors identified in the focus group discussions, scale and yes/no questions were developed for a survey instrument. The survey was piloted by deploying it to all current transfer students in the Department of Animal Science in the spring of 2018. The response rate for the pilot was 32% (n=48).

Using a statistical analysis known as principle axis factoring, questions were clustered into groups. These groups were then named based on the topic of their content. In order to determine the reliability of the question groupings, an alpha value ( $\alpha$ ) was calculated for each group. The alpha value indicates whether questions within each group are likely to yield consistent responses from a respondent. Alpha values above 0.7 are acceptable, while values between 0.8 and 0.9 are desired. The topics and alpha values are in Table 2. The observed alpha values indicate that the structure of the newly developed survey is sound.

**Table 2. Question clusters and alpha values**

| Topic                              | Alpha Value ( $\alpha$ ) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Risk of attrition                  | 0.82                     |
| Social interaction                 | 0.80                     |
| Involvement                        | 0.76                     |
| Balancing commitments              | 0.80                     |
| Academic struggle                  | 0.74                     |
| Transfer process                   | 0.81                     |
| Animal Science transfer experience | 0.82                     |
| Instructor satisfaction            | 0.80                     |
| Overall satisfaction at ISU        | 0.74                     |

### Pilot Survey Results

Preliminary factors that impact the transfer transition were identified from the topics in Table 2. These factors include:

- Attrition
- Academic performance
- Academic struggle
- Transfer process
- Balancing commitments
- Animal Science transfer experience
- Peer mentor group
- Satisfaction with interactions on campus
- Satisfaction with instructor availability and responsiveness

Correlations calculated between these factors showed that students who indicated a higher amount of academic struggle also felt less satisfied with their instructors and overall interactions on campus. Furthermore, students who indicated a decreased

ability to balance commitments felt they were less likely to be academically successful at ISU. Lastly, individuals who felt they struggled more academically also indicated higher chances of attrition.

Differences in responses between demographic groups were examined. Differences were considered significant if  $P < 0.05$ . Differences between  $P = 0.05$  and  $P = 0.10$  were also noted. The following differences were found:

- Females indicated more academic struggle than males ( $P = 0.004$ )
- Males tended to indicate less difficulty balancing commitments ( $P = 0.058$ )
- Students who transferred from a two-year institution indicated better experiences with the transfer process ( $P = 0.005$ ) than students who transferred from a four-year institution
- In-state students had a significantly better transfer experience than out-of-state students ( $P = 0.05$ ) and exhibit a lower risk of attrition ( $P = 0.02$ ).
- First-generation college students tended to indicate higher levels of academic struggle ( $P = 0.099$ )

### Conclusion

Through the use of focus groups and a pilot study, factors impacting transfer students were identified. These factors include academic challenges, but also include psychological and environmental adjustments to ISU. Furthermore, demographic elements should be taken into account when assessing the transfer experience. From these initial findings, it is the opinion of the research group that additional data is needed in order to establish a broader transfer student perspective (across colleges and majors) and to pinpoint areas needing improvement within the transfer process.

### Future Work

The research team plans to use the existing survey instrument to collect data from students across all six undergraduate colleges within the university. Additional instruments will be developed to poll students at community colleges statewide in order to understand their expectations related to the transfer process. This ongoing research help to further determine how to best improve the experiences and success of transfer students.