

# Transfer Students Apply to College, Too. How Come We Don't Help Them?

By STEPHEN J. HANDEL

I spent most of 2006 doing research for a book about transfer-student admission. It was going to be a list of books, Web sites, and other transfer-related resources to help busy academic counselors at community colleges better advise their students.

Trouble was, I couldn't find any resources.

The book eventually got written, but only after my community-college counseling colleagues shared with me their tips and best practices for helping students make the transition from a community college to a four-year college and university. Still, the fact that I found so little, either on the Web or in print, that focused on the needs of community-college transfer students surprised me. Given the large number of students enrolled in community colleges (nearly half of all undergraduates), it seemed odd that there was so little for so many.

High-school students applying for freshman admission have at their disposal dozens of Web-based and print resources to help them sort through the process. Every major educational organization has an array of books, brochures, and manuals describing the freshman-application process. In minute detail, prospective applicants are told what classes and tests they need to take, the grade-point average they need to earn, the kind of essay they need to write, and the letters of recommendation they should secure. Information on the Web is especially impressive.

Electronic search engines allow applicants to pinpoint possible college destinations based on a variety of criteria (size, location, admissions selectivity, religious affiliation, academic programs, tuition and fees, and financial aid). It is like drinking from a fire hose. For students attending a community college, however, the hydrant is dry. There is virtually nothing in virtual space to help them identify four-year institutions that admit transfer students. Few educational organizations have developed Web-based search engines that allow community-college students to seek out four-year institutions based on any criteria specifically related to transfer admissions, such as whether an institution admits transfers at the sophomore or junior level, provides special admissions consideration to community-college (as opposed to four-year-college) transfer applicants, or recommends specific academic preparation. Although *U.S. News & World Report* has compiled information on its Web site about colleges and universities that admit transfer

students, you need to purchase the "premium version" of the database (\$14.95) to access the information, and students cannot search the database using any transfer-specific criteria.

As I continued my search for transfer information, I comforted myself with the thought that the Web simply needed to catch up to this unique but growing student constituency. Surely, I thought, there are print resources available to help transfer students from community colleges sort through the process. I did discover a bit more useful data, but it was sketchy and incomplete. For example, the mammoth "college selection" books put out by Barron's, the College Board, Peterson's, the Princeton Review, *U.S. News*, and others are a treasure trove of college-going information, providing profiles on thousands of two- and four-year colleges and universities. Extensive guidance about freshman-admissions criteria are presented (such as GPA and test-score minimums) along with information about academic program offerings, financial aid, and student activities. But specific information about being admitted as a transfer student is vague or nonexistent.

Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges* and U.S. News & World Report's *Ultimate College Guide* supply information not found in other publications, such as four-year-college application deadlines and the number of transfer students who were admitted the previous year. Yet both have drawbacks. While Barron's *Profiles* contains the most transfer-related information, it is maddeningly inconsistent. For example, in its description of a large public university in California, we are told that transfer applicants must complete a "seven-course pattern" to be eligible to attend, but none of the courses are listed. U.S. News's *Ultimate College Guide* consistently reports whether an institution requires transfer applicants to complete a minimum number of credits before enrolling, but it just as consistently never specifies the actual number of credits that need to be completed (you'll need to pay for the premium Web-based version to get that).

Hope fading, I hypothesized that publications focusing on transfer admissions was a cottage industry operating under the radar of the big education publishers. Thus, I conducted a search on Amazon focusing on books catering specifically to transfer students. When I entered "transfer admissions," I got two hits for books written for community-college students (neither book is specifically focused on transfer). I tried other keywords like "community-college students" and "two-year-college applicants" with similar results. When I plugged in "freshman admission," however, I got 37 hits (actually, that's just when I stopped counting).

To be fair, some publications mention transfer. There is usually a section addressing "the transfer student" with advice that is earnest, but perfunctory. It almost always sounds as if it were added just before the book went to press.

Part of the reason for this lack of information is that few higher-education writers distinguish between students transferring from a community college to a four-year institution and those going from one four-year institution to another. The distinction is important. Besides the fact that the pool of community-college transfers is vastly larger, those students must transfer to earn the baccalaureate degree, whereas students

transferring from one four-year institution to another — regardless of their personally compelling reasons — at least have the possibility of earning a B.A. at their original institution.

Of course, information pitched to freshman applicants is also useful to transfer students, but without specific guidance about admissions requirements, students are saddled with too much information with no organizing principle. It makes no sense for a student to get excited about applying to Very Prestigious University, if there's nothing telling them that VPU even admits transfer students.

Some people have argued that transfer-admission information is largely absent because it is more complicated to summarize. For freshman applicants, knowing what college-prep courses to complete, standardized tests to take, and GPA to earn gives at least a rough gauge of their admissibility to any college. But for transfer students, admissions requirements may vary significantly depending on the majors they choose. Community-college students majoring in engineering will prepare differently for transfer than students majoring in English literature. That is true, but beside the point. Concerns about adding more information about transfer admissions to guidebooks seem misplaced, given their already considerable size (weighing in at just over six pounds, Peterson's 2007 guide takes the trophy for greatest girth). Even if lack of space were a true barrier, the problem could be solved by posting information online.

There is also a misperception that most community-college students are generally older, with family and work commitments. As a result, they prefer to "stay local" and have little need to know about their transfer-college options around the country. But the largest segment of the community-college population is traditional college age (18 to 24), and the average age of community-college students has been dropping in recent years. So it is not necessarily true that they are tied to families and jobs. Moreover, one community-college counselor with whom I spoke said that the adage about community-college students being "rooted to their communities" (and hence less likely to transfer to a four-year college or university) is at least partially the result of students not knowing what's available outside their immediate regions.

Still, one could say that freshman applicants are more committed to a traditional college experience, and therefore Web sites and books are pitched to a younger, more traditional crowd. The subtext, I'm afraid, is that freshman applicants are more affluent and therefore a better market. But the transfer-student market is huge and growing. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, more than six million students are enrolled in for-credit courses at community colleges nationally. Data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement reveal that 71 percent of community-college students surveyed identify transfer as their primary or secondary academic goal. Moreover, as the number of people wanting to earn a college degree continues to climb, especially in the South, Southwest, and West, community colleges are viewed as the main avenue to accommodate these new college-going students.

In addition to making up a rapidly expanding market, community-college students are hungry for information and have the greatest need for it. These students are more likely to come from families that have little college-going history. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that about 45 percent of all students attending community colleges are first-generation college-goers. Without family or peers to turn to, their need for accessible and inexpensive admissions information is urgent.

Here's what I recommend to solve the problem. Transfer students would be well served if college guidebooks and Web sites answered just four questions about the institutions they profile:

- Do you admit transfer students and, if so, how many in any given term?
- What grade-point average should students earn to have a good shot of being admitted?
- Should students apply as sophomores or juniors?
- Are community-college applicants given special admissions consideration?

And, not to leave four-year institutions off the hook, I recommend that admissions and outreach directors ask themselves the following questions about the content of their print and Web-based communications:

- Do you admit transfer students? (Don't be afraid to say you don't. It saves time, money, and grief for everyone involved.) If you do admit transfers, is preference given to community-college applicants?
- How many transfers are admitted in any given year relative to the number that apply?
- Do you admit transfer students as sophomores or juniors?
- How can a student become minimally eligible to transfer to your institution?
- How can students become competitively eligible for your most popular programs?

The degree to which prospective students have access to the information they need to make rational college choices has not gone unnoticed. The Spellings commission's report notes "a remarkable shortage of clear, accessible information about crucial aspects of American colleges and universities." Of course, the commission's lament that students and families need better information to assess their higher-education options is only marginally applicable to transfer applicants from community colleges. Wanting something better assumes you have something to start with.

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