

TIGER Way Task Force Subcommittee Report - Transfer

Preface

Approximately 55% of the students who enter Towson University (TU) are transferring from other institutions of higher education. Since 2011, there has been a 13% increase in the number of transfer students enrolling at TU. Year-to-year retention rates and degree completion rates for transfer students are comparable to native students starting as first-time freshmen (Office of Institutional Research Report, 1/3/17). Clearly, Towson University is starting the process of improving the enrollment model for transfer students from a position of relative strength; however, there are both significant challenges to and opportunities for increasing the transfer student population while improving the success of those students in completing their degree programs.

A Key Challenge: Time to Degree for Transfer Students

We believe that Towson University should aspire to become “**the university-of-choice for transfer students in the University System of Maryland.**” To accomplish this, the TU community must recognize, understand, and address gaps in preparation as well as the social and economic challenges that many of these students face and which impact their attitude and approach to their education. Transfer students come to TU from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances. We need to transform the way in which we work with transfer students to facilitate their transition and success. In this section, the TIGER Way Task Force recommends steps to improve both transfer student access to and transfer student success at TU.

Surveys conducted by the Admissions Office and the New Student Programs Office indicate that transfer students choose TU because of its proximity to their communities, reasonable cost, and availability of quality academic programs. While some transfer students are seeking a college experience as well as a bachelor’s degree, virtually all transfer students have important academic questions, the answers to which have a major impact on their decision to choose TU. These questions include

- Will my credits transfer?
- Will they count toward my major?
- How many more Core courses will I need to complete?
- How many more semesters will it take to complete my degree program?

Reports from students and parents is that TU is gaining a reputation in the community for being an institution where it is very hard for transfer students to get the courses that they need to stay on track for graduation. The University cannot grow and reduce the average time to degree without the necessary courses for students. In this report, we make a number of recommendations for **improving both transfer student access to and transfer student success at Towson University**. However, the adoption and implementation of any of the recommendations could be unsuccessful unless we systematically **address the lack of course availability that new transfer students in some majors encounter and that can obstruct their pathways to degrees.**

Recommendations - Improving Transfer Student Access to Towson University

Transfer students move through all of the same stages in their relationship with Towson University as first-year students do (i.e., prospect, applicant, admitted, matriculated, and enrolled). However, these stages work differently for transfer students compared to first-time students. TU has the ability to have an ongoing educational conversation over a fairly long period of time with prospective freshmen about the University because high-school contact usually begins in the junior year. That is not the case with transfer students, many of whom first contact us the semester before they want to transfer. And the lack of dialogue over time could impact the preparation of the student for the transition to TU.

The Committee wrestled with the question of how to have more frequent, better quality, and earlier educational conversations with transfer students about TU. The following are recommendations which address this need and which would positively impact transfer student enrollment.

1. Create a **Transfer Student Center** staffed by people with expertise in admissions, transfer credit evaluation, academic advising, student onboarding, and financial aid/management. This would include but exceed the Pre-Transfer Advising services that institutions such as UMCP and George Mason provide (<http://www.transferadvising.umd.edu/> and <http://masonec.gmu.edu/>). While the Transfer Student Center could serve students from the prospect through the enrollment and transition phases, the most important feature in terms of access is providing high-quality pre-transfer advising. Helping students understand that the decision of when to transfer optimally can vary significantly from student to student and program to program is very important. Effective pre-transfer advising helps students to connect with the University, fosters an emerging sense of belonging to a new institution, enables students to check for “fit” with the institution, sets a standard for quality student services, and provides an integrated approach to the onboarding process.
2. **Create an online Transfer Credit Center** (could be part of the Transfer Student Center above) to make it easier for students – not only Maryland community college students (who can also use ARTSYS) but transfer students from four-year and out-of-state colleges – to see how their coursework will transfer (See UMCP’s Transfer Credit Services webpage: <http://www.tce.umd.edu/>).
3. Increase financial support to the Admissions Office for the addition of new staff for the purpose of making the **transfer credit evaluation process** more efficient and transparent as well as more timely in relation to the student decision-making process.
4. Create a dedicated landing webpage as a comprehensive resource for **Transfer Student Information** to serve prospects, applicants, admits, and matriculated transfer students. Towson University has the information available, but it is important that TU determine how to bring the information together in a way that is appealing and easy to understand (See UMBC’s Undergraduate Admissions resources for transfer students as an example that highlights partnerships with community colleges in Maryland: <http://undergraduate.umbc.edu/resources/for-transfer-students.php>).
5. Conduct **digital marketing** campaign(s) to identify prospective candidates earlier and push information to them in a variety of modes and times (e.g., digital, email, social media, web site, one to one, group meetings, workshops, fairs, etc.). Communications, already targeted

to students at the various stages of engagement, decision making, and enrollment, would be further refined.

6. Host **transfer specific open house events** at which a preliminary and unofficial credit evaluation could be done for students.

While the average number of credits a student transfers to TU is around 50, advising students by major needs to be more granular in order to communicate how a student's intended major impacts their decision as to when to transfer.

7. **Create or update major-specific recommendations** to help students in their preparation and planning for transfer (See UMBC's STEM page for example: <http://cnmsadvising.umbc.edu/prospective-students/pre-transfer-recommendations/>).
8. Increase staff resources in the Admissions Office so that TU can focus on **creating or updating transfer articulation agreements** in a strategic way.
9. **Identify and promote true "2+2" programs** while also addressing and correcting the perception that earning an AA degree automatically means a student will be able to complete any program at TU in two more years of full time study. It is usually possible as long as students receive good academic advising at the community college and plan prerequisites appropriately.

Towson University in Northeastern Maryland (TUNE) has 8 degree programs serving nearly 600 students, with a nearly equal split between full- and part-time students. Now that TUNE is established and is growing, there are important questions to address about the need and capacity for additional growth.

10. Increase the number of undergraduate programs to 12-15. Considering the challenges of delivering full upper-level programs at TUNE, Academic Affairs may need to consider incentives to departments.
11. Increase resources allocated to existing programs to enroll more students.
12. Increase elective choices in each program so that students in other programs have a wider selection of courses to choose from.

Some students transferring into Towson University report that it is a confusing process to navigate. (Focus groups)

13. Create a **Transfer Student Information dedicated webpage** to serve prospective, matriculated, and enrolled transfer students (See UMBC for example: <http://undergraduate.umbc.edu/resources/for-transfer-students.php>).

14. Create an **online orientation**, continuously available to students to supplement and complement the face-to-face Orientation currently required for all new transfer students. Online orientation is currently used by the International Student and Scholars Office (ISSO) for a portion of that office's process with students and might also be a valuable addition to the on-boarding process for graduate students.
15. Make the regular and continuous **updating of the course information in ARTSYS** a high priority to ensure the reliability of that information for the vital process of program planning.

First-semester registration can be very difficult and discouraging for transfer students in particular majors. Class scheduling has become more department-centric and students in certain areas can find it very hard to make a class schedule without irreconcilable conflicts. Availability of key classes in certain majors is limited causing some transfer students to fall behind from their inception at TU.

16. Class schedules should be examined and, wherever possible, made within the standard matrix. When a transfer student is left with few choices to begin with, off-matrix courses complicate the scheduling process.
17. Matriculation of transfer students by major needs to be carefully monitored and resources need to be available to adjust to changes in the enrollments. This can be done at transfer registration by overloading sections, but it would be better for departments to monitor the number of new students coming into their majors and add sections where appropriate so that most transfer student can receive a full load of courses that go toward their major and degree.

Almost 60% of students transferring to Towson University come from a Maryland Community College. While TU has good working relationships with those sending institutions, there can be distrust or anxiety expressed by community colleges that universities are "taking" their students prematurely.

18. Expand **reverse transfer options** for students to complete an Associate's Degree at the community college while taking courses at TU. UMBC talks with students about "Credit when it is due." This would help community colleges with their degree completion rates while having students transfer to universities at the most advantageous time in their career.
19. Work closely with our primary sending community colleges to **understand their "pathways"** and identify the best points of interface with prospective students. TU must continue to build upon existing community college partnerships and develop new partnerships that capitalize on common interests in seeing students succeed and sharing expertise.

Recommendations - Supporting Transfer Student Success at Towson University

While year-to-year retention rates and degree completion rates for transfer students are comparable to native students starting as first-time freshmen, time to degree measured at two, three, and four

years from transfer into TU seems to be lagging. We know that 80 – 85% of the 900 students on academic warning in any academic year started as transfer students at TU. We also know that about 70% of the students who participate in the Academic Renewal Program, a program for students who are academically suspended, are former transfer students. **Our goal should be to help transfer students find a home at Towson University.** The operative question that we worked with is how we can avoid setting up transfer students for failure or, put more positively, how we can increase the academic success rate and lower the time to degree of our transfer students?

Life Balance Challenges: Surveys of transfer students and anecdotal information from faculty and advisor conversations with students suggest the impact of employment (too many hours, poor fit between academic and job requirements, long commutes from class to job or vice versa, pressure to earn more money to support the higher cost of attendance, etc.) on student transition and success. Many students are accustomed to and may need to continue working while going to college. Making appropriate adjustments in work hours – number, time of day, schedule – is challenging. Some transfer students have a shift work mentality with respect to classes – “I’ll go and put in my time in class and then go to my job.”

The following are recommendations to help students balance work and academics in healthier ways.

20. Increase the amount of on-campus housing available to transfer students.
21. Increase the on-campus employment opportunities for transfer students.
22. Introduce and connect transfer students to the services and opportunities of the Career Center in their first semester on campus.
23. Identify and make known the location of spaces for commuting students to study, socialize, and relax on campus.
24. Increase daytime student life programming particularly targeting commuting students.
25. Develop a financial management educational component as an optional but recommended part of the on-boarding process for transfer students.
26. Develop a **Transfer Student Network** of peer advisors who are current students who have transferred to TU. Students in the Network, which would be modeled on existing peer advising and mentoring programs on campus, could assist with community college outreach, open houses, and on-campus support. This Network would collaborate with the Transfer Student Organization, Tau Sigma (transfer student honor society), and the Orientation Assistants who work in New Student Programs.

Challenges to Academic Success: Community colleges do not consistently prepare students for what they will encounter in upper-level courses at TU. Particularly different at TU is: the type and increased amount of writing; the fact that TU classes typically have fewer tests and quizzes, giving more weight to a fewer number of assessments; limited use of homework or small assignments in

the grading scheme; and a greater emphasis on major tests. In general, community colleges do a terrific job of connecting students to sources of academic support. In general, there is less emphasis on and not as easy access to academic support services such as tutoring for upper-level courses, academic coaching, and study group formation and support at TU.

The following are recommendations for addressing the issues of academic transition of transfer students.

27. **Create transfer student academic courses** that are customized to academic majors or clusters of majors and that serve as a portal for new transfer students into their academic department. Some existing courses that might serve this purpose or as a model include: BIOL 204 (BIOL), KNES 280 (SPMT), KNES 297 (EXSC), or BUSX 301 (BUAD/ACCT/EBUS). The Office of Academic Innovation and/or the new Faculty Development Center could be great resources for these initiatives.
28. Promote and support models for providing **additional instruction or academic support in targeted gateway, upper-level, and/or bottleneck courses** identified by high D/F/W rates or inadequate resources (availability) to meet student need/demand. Increase communication about academic coaching and study group options through the Academic Achievement Center.
29. **Develop and implement a Transfer Student Advising Program** that pairs each new transfer student with a faculty or professional advisor in his/her major department for their first semester at TU. What distinguishes this from the current practice of assigning advisors is that the Transfer Student Advisor would be expected to offer and provide assistance, including but not limited to academic advice, to help students with their transition to TU and their academic department. Transfer Student Advisors would receive pre-service training and in-service support from the Academic Advising Center along with a stipend for this role. This would be a one-semester program similar to the First Year Experience for freshmen.
30. Upgrade academic support **resources and services available to students at TUNE.**
31. Establish **Freshman Transfer Cohort** for those students entering TTU with 16 or fewer transferrable credits. This cohort program would recognize that students in this category are not first time college students but also are not at the place developmentally as other transfer students with 30 or more transferred credits. This cohort program would provide support similar to the FYE Academic Advising Program.
32. Streamline the process for new transfer students entering for fall semester to start their TU education by **taking a course in the summer session.**
33. Expand the President's Leadership Initiative Mentoring Program to increase significantly the number of mentors and students served.

Towson University has a solid foundation upon which to build a strong enrollment, retention, and graduation model for students who transfer to the University. But for TU to move from being very good at serving and educating transfer students to being **“the university-of-choice for transfer**

students in the University System of Maryland” will require resources, institutional resolve, and commitment to this mission.