

Big-Impact Seminar Experience for Small-College Transfer Students
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In the AAC&U's *College Learning for the New Global Century*, first-year seminars are at the top of the list of effective educational practices. And, in fact, over the past several years, most institutions dedicated to undergraduate education have adopted some type of seminar program. However, such programs tend to be targeted at traditional "first-year" students: students just out of high school who have never experienced college life before, who need guidance in making the transition to college living and learning. Lagging behind are seminar programs for transfer students, as institutions often assume that these students, who have already had a "transitional" experience, don't need a seminar. In fact, many transfer students need it *more*, particularly those transferring to small colleges. Because of their range of background, college experience, and living conditions, transfer students find it harder to connect to the traditional, residential community typically found at small colleges.

As stated by the AAC&U report, first-year experiences typically "place strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, [and] collaborative learning." True to form, Westminster's seminar course stresses just such skills, particularly in the transfer seminar. These types of skills need direct and constant attention, particularly for the student transferring from an institution of higher education with different expectations. For example, among our transfer students, we found that critical thinking skills were less often stressed at prior institutions; writing tended to be more "report-based" and less "analysis" or "research-based": and students had experienced limited success with collaborative learning. Although several transfer students move to a second institution well-prepared academically, many do not, and the seminar can provide a safe, comfortable place to hone skills.

Small liberal arts colleges may present even greater challenges to transfer students because of the traditional nature of most small college campuses. As the majority of new students are first-time freshmen who quickly become involved in athletics, Greek life, and/or on-campus events, transfer students may have a hard time finding their place among them. In "Survey Finds Transfer Students Disengaged, but Some Colleges Are Working to Change That," Sara Lipka cites the conclusions of the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement, which found that transfer students are significantly less engaged, and often overlooked, on college campuses. Therefore, some sort of transfer experience is critical. We believe the transfer seminar should be designed to work two ways: it should encourage transfer students to explore activities and leadership opportunities that are right for them so that they are able to mesh with traditional students; through its focus on collaborative learning, it should help transfer students connect to, and support, one another.

Transfer Seminar Design

In our three semesters of studying the transfer seminar, we have arrived at some basic principles that seem to be key to success:

- *Not all transfer students are alike.* One big mistake we made the first time around was putting all transfer students together in one course, which ended up being an odd mix of high-end students dissatisfied with their experience elsewhere; community college transfers; and our Korean exchange students. Needless to say, each group had significantly different needs. We now do our best to separate out students based on background, and our student satisfaction rate has improved greatly.

- *The seminar must provide a safe place to make the transition to the institution.* Faculty often feel that it is their job to give students a “reality check” when they come to college, making it clear that standards are high. While this message is an important one to send, it needs to be delivered carefully in the transfer seminar, which must be a place where students feel free to take risks and ask questions. The focus of the transfer seminar should be on making the transition through positive interaction and support.
- *All students benefit from a review of college-level reading and writing skills.* Even those students who were highly successful at another institution will appreciate understanding the expectations of their new college. Make standards clear, then help students practice them. We do not give letter grades in the seminar, but rather credit/no credit. All students are allowed to continue revising their work until it is “credit” quality.
- *Campus engagement must be built into credit for the seminar.* Small weekly assignments that get students working together to explore such things as campus activities, opportunities for community service, the internship and career services office, various major programs, and/or study abroad go a long way in helping students get involved—and helping them to get to know each other. Building major campus activities into the seminar is important, as well, for setting expectations. Transfer students need to understand that campus engagement at some level is not optional.
- *“Only connect.”* Transfer students, who are often more reserved because they are unsure of their “place” at a small college, need help connecting with each other. But perhaps more important is for them to connect with faculty. We advise lots of one-on-one time with seminar faculty, coupled with encouragement to seek out a major and a major advisor. Helping students connect to a major department should be a goal of the seminar. Helping departmental faculty understand their role in this transition is also important.

Continuing Challenges

Over the three semesters, we have also identified challenges that are difficult for us to overcome:

- *Prior Preparation.* Westminster has very few developmental courses, as we have simply not needed them in the past. Many transfer students are entering without the skills necessary for success, as community colleges vary in academic rigor. If institutions are serious about recruiting transfer students, they must consider adding developmental courses.
- *Balance.* The seminar must be a careful balance between academic challenge and support, and getting this balance right is not easy. At the same time, it must allow students to balance college and life, as many transfer students are non-traditional, meaning they may have family or work obligations that far exceed the typical small-college student. We have to respect their time, while also encouraging engagement as much as possible.
- *Effective Mentors.* With the increase of transfer students from community colleges comes an increase in diversity of the student body. In an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Report Highlights Characteristics of Colleges With High Transfer-Success Rates,” Jennifer Gonzalez discusses a report by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education which found that community colleges with the highest transfer student success rates were committed to hiring “culturally sensitive leaders who understand the backgrounds of their students.” A diverse faculty and staff—in terms of social, economic, racial or ethnic background—is critical to the success of a diverse student body. Many small colleges, particularly those in rural settings, have trouble attracting diverse faculty and staff. This must be a priority if transfer students, as all students, are to find the mentors they need to help them succeed.