

# Research Results

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## TRANSFER STUDENTS: WHAT UNIVERSITIES NEED TO KNOW

*UBC undergraduate student survey on student satisfaction & engagement;  
transfer student experience vs. direct entry student experience*

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British Columbia has a rich and diverse public post-secondary education system which includes six universities, three university colleges, twelve colleges and five institutes. Students who wish to pursue an undergraduate degree program have the option of entering a university or a university college directly from high school ("direct entrant"), or they can complete equivalent post-secondary courses before transferring to another institution to complete their degree ("transfer student").

While a great deal of research has been undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the transfer system in BC, evaluate overall student experience and to assess graduate outcomes, there has been no research to compare levels of student engagement between students who entered a BC university directly from high school and those who began their post-secondary education elsewhere.

"The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)<sup>1</sup> is the pre-eminent survey tool in undergraduate university education... The educational assumption...is that student engagement in... "educationally purposeful activities" has been shown by research to enhance and promote learning. For example, significant academic interactions between student and teacher, whether it be asking questions in class, or working on research together, are known determinants of student learning and lasting academic outcomes. Many such engagement behaviours can be reliably measured by straightforward survey questions."<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, the Dean of Arts and the Dean of Science at UBC partnered with the Arts Undergraduate Society and the Science Undergraduate Society to gain a better understanding of undergraduate student experiences and outcomes. The Undergraduate Student Survey on Student Satisfaction and Engagement (USS) was administered to all Arts and Science students at UBC in April, 2005. As with NSSE, the survey instrument is divided into six key areas: students' academic experience

and the level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; campus environment and student demographics; student-faculty interaction as well as interactions with teaching assistants and peers; enriching the educational experience; and overall experience/satisfaction.

Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)<sup>3</sup> suggest that transfer students in the United States are less engaged than direct entrants and the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) sought to explore if students in the BC Transfer System had similar experiences to those of their counterparts in the U.S.

What follows is a brief overview of some of the key findings from the study. The full report is available at [bccat.bc.ca/pubs/ubcengagement05.pdf](http://bccat.bc.ca/pubs/ubcengagement05.pdf).

### Respondent Profile

There were 17,145 students from the BA and BSc programs who were invited to participate in the USS survey. 3,206 students responded to the survey, an overall response rate of 19%.

3,043 students provided a response when asked if they began their studies at UBC directly from high school or from another institution. Twenty-four percent indicated that they transferred to UBC from another institution.

**Table 1: Basis of Admission by Year Level**

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	TOTAL
Began post-secondary studies at UBC	688	520	537	570	2315
Began elsewhere	33	162	281	252	728
Total	721	682	818	822	3043
% who began elsewhere	4.6%	23.8%	34.4%	30.7%	23.9%

<sup>1</sup> <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> Sudmant, Walter. <http://www.pair.ubc.ca/studies/nsse.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/NSSE2005\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/NSSE2005_annual_report.pdf) and [http://nsse.iub.edu/nsse\\_2003/overview\\_2003.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/nsse_2003/overview_2003.cfm)

Transfer students in Arts represent 70% of the total “transfer” respondents while those in Science represent 30% of the total “transfer” respondents.

As seen in table 2, the majority of students who began post-secondary studies elsewhere did so at a community college (for university transfer credit) prior to attending UBC (391 of 728 respondents or 54%). A further 204 began their studies at a university college, most likely in BC, bringing the total of students who likely began at a traditional UBC “feeder” institution to 595 or 82%.

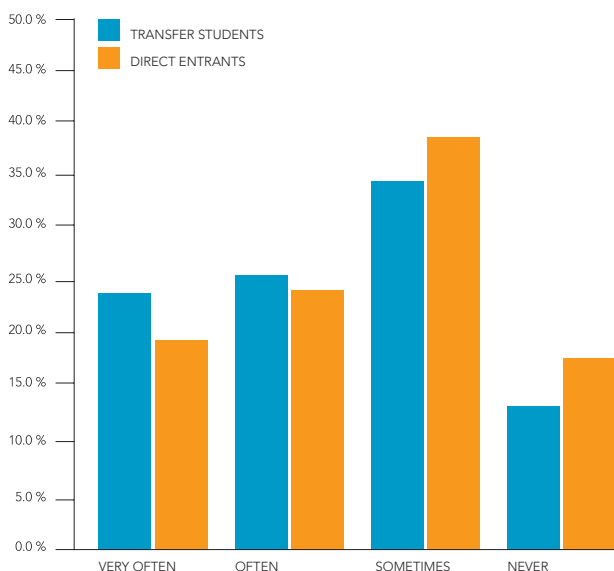
Most of the transfer student respondents transferred from an institution within Canada (90.4%), with the majority of these (87%) from British Columbia.

**Table 2: Sending Institution Type**

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	TOTAL
Community college (vocational or technical courses only)	3	8	24	18	53
Community college (university credit/transfer courses)	11	70	156	154	391
University college	3	49	86	66	204
Institute	3	6	14	7	30
University other than this one	15	55	81	66	217
CEGEP (general or pre-university program)	3	5	1	1	10
CEGEP (professional or technical program)	1	1	0	2	4
Private training institution	2	11	15	13	41
None	3	2	0	1	6
Other	0	0	2	0	2

Note: this was a multiple response question, as students may have attended more than one type of institution. Because of this, the totals do not add to 728.

**Figure 1: Average Level of Engagement across 9 Indica-**



## Summary of Findings

### Academic Experience and Level of Academic Challenge

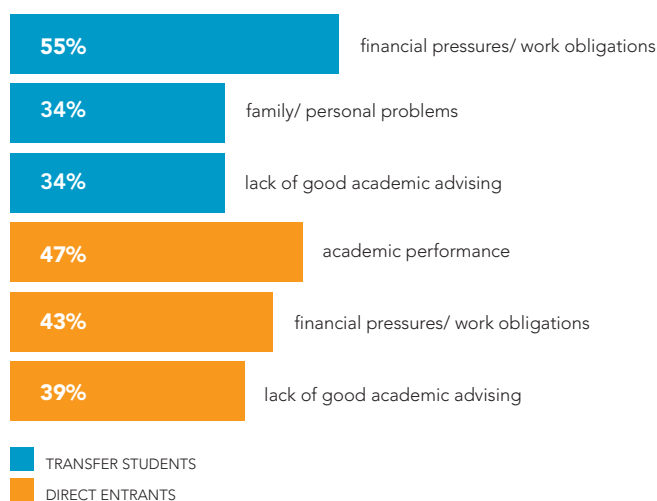
The most significant finding in the study is that in all key questions which emphasize the academic experience, transfer students appear to be more engaged in their learning than direct entrants (see figure 1). This finding is evident even in fourth year where we would expect to see minimal differences in the academic engagement of transfer students compared to direct entrants. The results of this study contradict NSSE survey results which demonstrated that “overall, transfer students are less engaged in effective educational activities than their non-transfer peers”. (NSSE 2003 Overview<sup>4</sup>)

Looking at the percentage of students who replied “very often or often”, transfer students are more likely to ask questions or contribute to discussion (50% vs. 40%); more likely to find a course so interesting that they did more work than was required (22% vs. 16%); more likely to write a paper longer than five pages (71% vs. 62%); more likely to put together ideas or concepts from different courses (58% vs. 49%); and more likely to work harder than they thought they could (43% vs. 36%).

A detailed analysis of the data suggests that the overall differences are not the result of transfer students being more likely to be in Arts and that for nearly all of the engagement questions, the higher levels of engagement of transfer students is statistically significant. Additional analysis of the data shows that age does explain a significant amount of the differences in engagement, but not all. On the engagement behaviour of “asking questions in class”, age differences between the groups explain about one-half of the difference in engagement. The difference between direct entry and transfer still remains statistically significant, but the effect is not as large.

Students often cite financial pressures or work obstacles as one of the biggest obstacles to their academic progress. For transfer students, this was the biggest obstacle compared to “academic performance” for direct entrants.

**Figure 2: Obstacles to Academic Prog-**

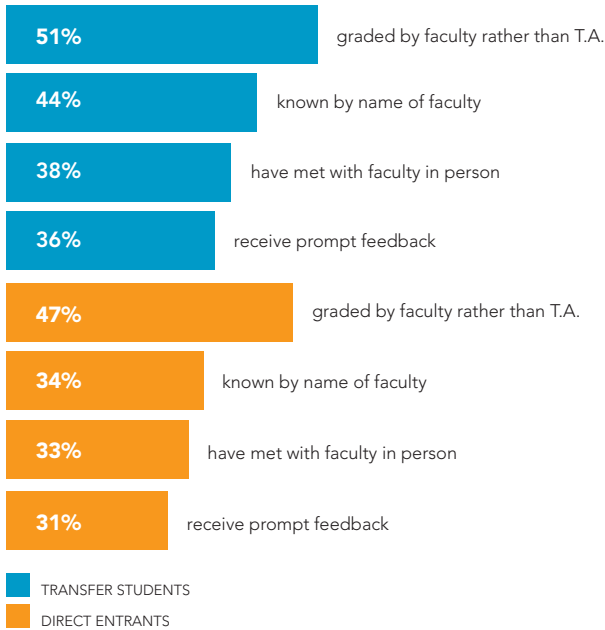


<sup>4</sup> [http://nsse.iub.edu/nsse\\_2003/overview\\_2003.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/nsse_2003/overview_2003.cfm)

### Interaction with Faculty

In a 1987 study supported by the American Association of Higher Education (AAU) titled “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” Chickering and Gamson state that “frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement”.<sup>5</sup> In this study, transfer students at UBC have more student-faculty interaction than direct entrants; the differences between cohorts on other interactions are minor.

**Figure 3: Interaction with Faculty**



At least some of the differences between the two groups can be attributed to differences in course and program choices. Differences in grading by faculty vs. teaching assistants, and differences in quantity of reading assignments suggest that college transfer students select a different type of course and program.

It is also possible that direct entrants whose initial university classes may have had very large enrolments are thus less habituated to initiating interaction with faculty, whereas transfer students from a community college are more likely to have had smaller classes which emphasized faculty/student interaction, and are inclined to continue that interaction.

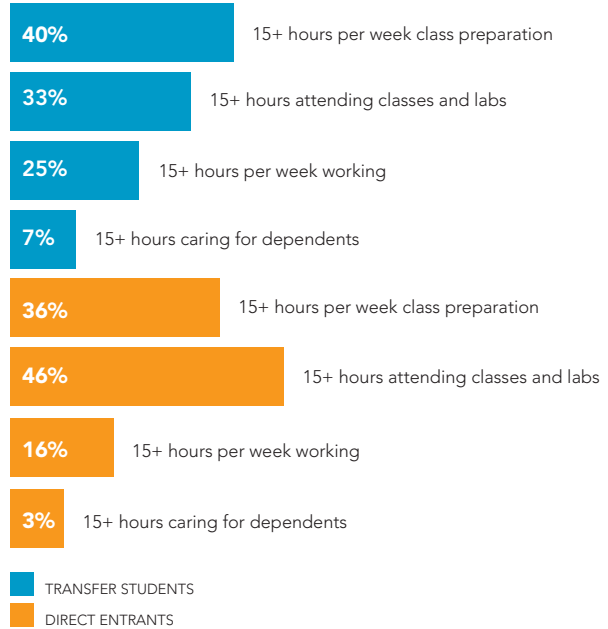
### Active and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning, study groups, discussing assignments with other students and working in groups enhance the learning experience and lead to increased student involvement and engagement in learning. Transfer students are only a little less likely to collaborate with other students on projects, and of course may be less likely to enroll in courses which require such collaboration. Transfer students are, however, considerably less likely to use electronic media when discussing or completing assignments (34% vs. 43% for direct entrants).

### Time Usage and Co-curricular Activities

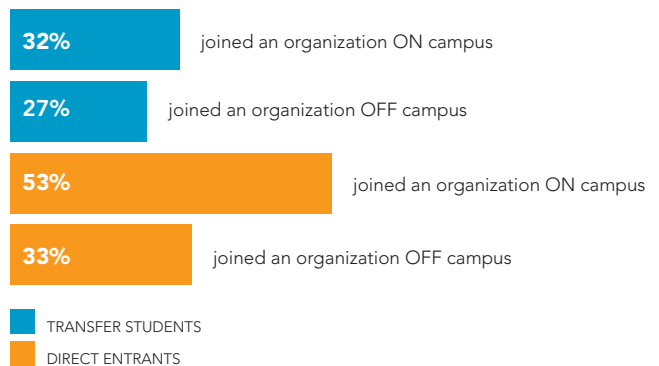
Since transfer students tend to be older (25.8 years of age vs. 21.8 for direct entrants) and more likely to live away from home, it is not surprising that in a typical week transfer students have more external responsibilities such as working for pay off campus.

**Figure 4: Time Usage**



Transfer students are less likely to participate in co-curricular activities than are direct entrants, in every category, whether academic, social, political, or athletic. The largest difference between the co-curricular activities of transfer students and direct entrants is in the likelihood that they have joined a club or other organization.

**Figure 5: Co-Curricular Activities**



<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson (1987) “Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education” American Association of Higher Education Bulletin pp.3-7

**Table 3: Overall Satisfaction with Educational Experience**

	VERY DISSATISFIED	SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED	SOMEWHAT SATISFIED	VERY SATISFIED	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE SOMEWHAT VERY SATISFIED
<b>Your overall GPA</b>						
Began post-secondary studies at UBC	270	487	669	190	1616	53.2%
%	16.7%	30.1%	41.4%	11.8%	100.0%	
Began elsewhere	59	217	326	90	692	60.1%
%	8.5%	31.4%	47.1%	13.0%	100.0%	
<b>Overall academic/ educational experience</b>						
Began post-secondary studies at UBC	105	361	903	245	1614	71.1%
%	6.5%	22.4%	55.9%	15.2%	100.0%	
Began elsewhere	46	124	391	132	693	75.5%
%	6.6%	17.9%	56.4%	19.0%	100.0%	
<b>Overall social experience</b>						
Began post-secondary studies at UBC	144	360	745	365	1614	68.8%
%	8.9%	22.3%	46.2%	22.6%	100.0%	
Began elsewhere	72	199	306	116	693	60.9%
%	10.4%	28.7%	44.2%	16.7%	100.0%	
<b>Overall UBC experience</b>						
Began post-secondary studies at UBC	94	338	889	294	1615	73.3%
%	5.8%	20.9%	55.0%	18.2%	100.0%	
Began elsewhere	56	129	375	134	694	73.3%
%	8.1%	18.6%	54.0%	19.3%	100.0%	

### Overall Satisfaction

Students were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction with their educational experience at UBC. Overall, 73% of both respondents said that they were “somewhat / very satisfied” with their overall UBC experience. Transfer students were more likely to be satisfied with their overall academic and educational experience, consistent with research findings that satisfaction is correlated with student engagement. Transfer students are less likely to be satisfied with their overall social experience at UBC, suggesting competition for their time from external forces.

When asked if they would attend UBC again, 81% of transfer students and 78% of direct entrants replied “probably yes / definitely yes” with more transfer students saying “definitely yes” (32% vs. 28%).

### Conclusion

BC colleges, university colleges, and universities sending students to UBC can be assured that those students choosing the transfer route seem to be well prepared to meet the academic challenges facing them at UBC. For transfer students, levels of engagement and satisfaction seem to be higher than those of direct entrants, although these can always be improved. What is not known is specifically what characteristics of these transfer students lead to

more engagement, and what courses and programs lead to more engagement. Therefore, in addition to simply encouraging the increased use of techniques for enhancing student engagement, institutions should also focus on identifying characteristics and behaviour of students and courses already existing which promote engagement to a much higher level than shown by the aggregate statistics.

This research showing higher levels of some engagement for transfer students at UBC suggests we look at differing levels of maturity, differing levels of motivation and commitment, differing behaviors in diverse population groups, as well as participatory culture of college and university college communities as opposed to the more passive learning behaviors of direct entrants. Further research should be undertaken to understand and improve student engagement for both direct entrants and transfer students.

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