

# Transfer Student Belonging and Success

## An Ongoing Assessment Project

**W**e, Kim Larsen, undergraduate engagement librarian and Jonas Zabriskie, assistant director of New Student and Family Programs, are currently part of a two-person research team at the University of Arkansas that is conducting and analyzing research related to transfer student success and belonging at our institution. By understanding transfer students' unique perspectives on student life, the departments that work with special populations, transition initiatives, and any other stakeholders in the transfer student experience can ensure that their programs and resources fit the actual rather than assumed needs of this population. Early research consists of a survey first released in spring 2023 that we plan to repeat annually. The purpose of this survey is to analyze how transfer students engage with the University of Arkansas' campus, departments, and resources.

### **The Need (From a Librarian's Perspective)**

As the undergraduate engagement librarian, I am tasked with providing introductory information literacy instruction as well as providing outreach through a variety of methods to engage with a variety of undergraduate populations. One population on our campus that traditionally very little has been done for are transfer students. Literature tells us that transfer students have different needs, behaviors, and strengths than students that enroll in universities as first-year freshman, including more independence and a greater willingness to navigate spaces and try new things on their own.<sup>1</sup>

A large portion of my one-shot instruction occurs in University Perspectives, our first-year experience program that all incoming freshmen are required to take in their first semester at the University of Arkansas. Additionally, many of the outreach initiatives I run are programs like PickOne—an initiative where incoming freshman “pick one” organization on campus to get more involved in during the first few weeks of fall semester at their new student orientation in the summer.<sup>2</sup> I realized that while I got to interact with and assess the needs of those students during instruction time and freshman-focused programming, I was not getting to interact much with transfer students and identify what their needs were on our particular campus, or in our library.

Transfer students have made up approximately 20% of the incoming University of Arkansas class every academic year since 2018.<sup>3</sup> Although there is a Transfer Central Office at the University of Arkansas, their focus is prospective rather than currently enrolled transfer students. After enrollment, there is no existing office that strictly supports transfer students

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to ensure they succeed at the University of Arkansas. It became clear to me that this was a big portion of the total population of students that I serve that I had little to no information about or connection with, and there were not many touch points on our campus that I could connect with to find out more information. In speaking with my research partner Jonas, we identified similar concerns out of his office, New Student and Family Programs, and devised a plan to learn more about this specific population.

## Survey Features

For our survey's purposes, transfer students are defined as high school graduates with at least 24 transferable college credit hours earned after high school graduation. The framework we developed, and themes analyzed in our study, consist of five categories, each based on different ways university faculty and staff can work with transfer students:

- Transition Period
- Academic Success
- Social Belonging
- University Department and Resources
- Final Questions

Our first survey iteration assessed students that transferred for the Fall 2022–Spring 2023 academic year, which included 1,818 students. We obtained a list of students that met this criteria via a data analyst at the university and the survey was distributed via email on April 27, 2023, with additional reminders provided before the survey closed on May 8, 2023.

Of the 1,818 students that the survey was available to, 157 transfer students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 8.6%. Because this is the inaugural year of the Transfer Student Experience Survey, there are currently no existing response rates to compare this to. We recognize that the survey results cannot represent the entire transfer student population, however, these students' perspectives are meaningful and will be used to inform future planning of transfer programs and resources at the University of Arkansas.

## Library Specific Questions and Findings

Students were asked five library specific questions in addition to questions that listed the library as an option among other campus buildings and departments:

- In the last full semester that you've been at the University of Arkansas, how many times did you visit the library on campus?
- Have you ever had library instruction in any of your classes?
- If you have had library instruction in a class at the University of Arkansas, please write which class(es) you received instruction in.
- Have you ever gone to the library to seek assistance from a librarian since transferring to the University of Arkansas?
- Would you be interested in attending any workshops on the following topics at the library?

Our results revealed that most respondents visited at least one of our five physical library locations on campus, with 34 students indicating they have been to the library more than 16 times. Multiple choice options for this question were "I have not been a student at the

University of Arkansas for a full semester yet,” “never,” “1–2 times,” “3–5 times,” “6–10 times,” “11–15 times,” and “16+ times.” Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents indicated that they have never received library instruction. Of the students that did indicate they received some form of library instruction at the University of Arkansas, they listed general education classes such as Composition 1, Composition 2, and Public Speaking. This indicates that we might be missing a large percentage of our transfer students for library instruction because they are more likely to transfer in with those credits rather than take those courses at our institution. There was statistical significance between students who have had library instruction at the University of Arkansas and how likely they are to have visited the library. Most (82%) of our respondents also indicated that they have never sought out a librarian to ask for help. Finally, when asked if they would be interested in attending any library workshops, most respondents (73) indicated that they would not be interested in workshops at all. The next highest answers were ranked as follows:

- presenting your research (26)
- scholarly research (24)
- database searching (21)
- introduction to library resources and services (20)
- citation formatting (15)
- research integrity (15)
- research posters (11)
- using primary sources (11)
- citation management (Zotero, EndNote, etc.) (8)

## Next Steps

Through our analysis, we realized there were questions we wish we asked and others that should have been worded differently. For example, our question “Have you ever had library instruction in any of your classes?” assumed that the students answering this survey had a baseline knowledge for what library instruction is. Many students that answered were unsure if what they might have encountered in their classes truly counted as library instruction or not. Some notable responses for our follow-up question that indicated the original question had been misunderstood were:

- “I do not know what library instruction is referring to, so I have probably never received any.”
- “I use the online library instruction materials in my nursing courses for research papers.”
- “Only during orientation” (we do not have a library instruction component to our current orientation)

To better get at the heart of what we are really asking—has the student ever received a one-shot instruction presented by a librarian to accompany an assignment—we changed the language to “Have you ever had a librarian visit your class to give a presentation while attending the University of Arkansas?” in our second iteration of the survey that was distributed April 2024.

When thinking of how to address some of our findings within our library, it would be beneficial to work on improving our marketing for asynchronous information literacy tutorial offerings with this population. Because our findings indicate that students are missing

library instruction that typically occurs in general education classes that they are more likely to transfer in with credit for, these offerings might help to bridge that knowledge gap. As mentioned previously, transfer students are more likely to pursue independent methods of information finding when trying to figure out how to conduct research than they are to ask a librarian for help. A more robust offering of asynchronous tutorials that are easily findable on our website, including on our Transfer Student Resources LibGuide,<sup>4</sup> could help connect students with the information they are not receiving in our general education classes. Because a key finding of our initial survey was that feelings of belonging and connection were heavily impacted by the first few weeks in which a student transfers, partnering with offices that work on transfer student orientation to provide access to these tutorials is another avenue I am interested in pursuing.

In addition to increasing virtual, self-paced learning opportunities for transfer students, we are also taking a closer look at our respondent's workshop interests for future programming. Per our findings, transfer students seem to be more interested in higher-level research skills, like presenting their research, working on scholarly research, and specific database searching. They are less interested in things like citation formatting and management. Because of the interest identified in the survey, Jonas has gotten approval to start a transfer student specific group. Our hope is to be able to market workshops on these topics that occur within our university's Razorback Researcher library workshop series<sup>5</sup> to this group to increase awareness and participation.

When this survey was initially proposed, there was little to no information regarding enrolled transfer students at the University of Arkansas and their experience through graduation. Through our continued assessment and action plan, we hope to address the concerns that transfer students expressed and in following years hope a version of this survey can assess if the suggested actions have positively affected transfer students at the University of Arkansas. ⁂

## Notes

1. Chelsea Heinbach, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, Rosan Mitola, and Emily Pattni, "Dismantling Deficit Thinking: A Strengths-Based Inquiry into the Experiences of Transfer Students In and Out of Academic Libraries," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, February 6, 2019, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/dismantling-deficit-thinking/>.

2. "About Pick One | Pick One," accessed April 18, 2024, <https://pickone.uark.edu/info/>.

3. "Transfer Central | Transfer Central | University of Arkansas," accessed April 18, 2024, <https://transfer.uark.edu/>.

4. Kim Larsen, "Research Guides: Transfer Student Resources: Home," accessed April 18, 2024, <https://uark.libguides.com/c.php?g=1312967&p=9652227>.

5. "Razorback Researcher | University of Arkansas Libraries," accessed April 18, 2024, <https://libraries.uark.edu/research-instruction/razorback-researcher.php>.