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Mutual Adjustments: Learning from and Responding to Transfer Student Writers

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First-year writing courses or programs at many universities are often founded on three related assumptions: a) the first-year composition (FYC) course(s) should be part of general education for all students; b) FYC courses will provide students with a common learning experience to support their academic writing in other courses; and c) FYC provides a foundation on which a program’s upper-level writing courses build. These assumptions are embedded in institutional claims central to many FYC courses, as well as in documents like the *WPA Outcomes Statement*, which argues that “faculty in all...
programs and departments can build on [the] preparation” offered by outcomes of FYC.

Yet the model on which many FYC courses/programs is based—including our own at the University of Michigan—may be problematic in at least three regards. First, some researchers have questioned whether learning from FYC easily “transfers” into upper-division coursework (e.g., Smit). This has inspired a useful debate about transfer itself, with some scholars responding that more capacious, student-centered views of learning transfer might enable researchers to perceive the ways in which students apply knowledge or skills from academic writing courses to other contexts (e.g., Brent; Driscoll & Wells; Jarratt et al.; Nowacek). For us, Rebecca Nowacek’s concept of agents of integration offers a particularly useful lens for understanding how students may be transferring learning in ways that are not always recognized or valued by instructors or researchers. Howard Tinberg’s study of learning transfer among community college writers is likewise important to our thinking. However, as this paper will address, this emerging research and theoretical conversation has, to date, given scant attention to learning transfer across postsecondary institutions, in the post-transfer context—that is, learning transfer among transfer students.

Such an oversight suggests a second problem with the established course/ program model: the reality that students may have taken FYC at a different institution that may well have had different resources, curricula, pedagogical orientations, and valued constructs of writing. UM’s writing program, for example, asserts that “[a]s a broad preparation for the range of writing tasks students will encounter at the University of Michigan and beyond, [FYC] courses emphasize evidenced, academic writing in a variety of genres and rhetorical situations. This course is foundational for students to master the kind of analysis and argumentation found in sophisticated academic writing” (“First-Year Writing Requirement”). While these guidelines articulate the program’s valued construct of writing in fairly specific terms, they make no reference to how transfer students who do not complete FYC at UM might develop these writing capacities.

The specificity of UM’s articulation of the goal for FYC points to a third problem area: the variety of ways FYC requirements can be fulfilled. Take articulation agreements across institutions, for example. We are keenly aware that linkages between community colleges and four-year institutions enable students to transfer as many credits as possible, but we also know that such articulation agreements rarely account for the ways that specific goals, curricular structures, and standards for evaluation differ from campus to campus. Similar problems are presented by AP credits, International Baccalaureate credits, and dual-credit programs in which high schools offer courses for college credit. Each of these programs operates on the convenient fiction that the learning goals of FYC
courses are static and interchangeable; in reality, they vary widely, since each is institutionally created and enacted.

Larger trends in higher education lend further urgency to these issues. Declining state and national economies, ballooning student debt loads, and the growth of high school dual-enrollment programs are all leading more traditional-age students to begin their educations at community colleges before matriculating at four-year institutions. High tuition at private colleges is leading students back to state institutions. Waning job prospects are sending non-traditional students back to school, and increasing numbers of veterans are also returning to the classroom. State and federal policymakers, as well as high-profile philanthropists, are focusing greater attention on postsecondary degree completion, particularly for students from underrepresented populations—and for an increasing number of students, such degree completion includes transferring from one institution to another. In 2013–14, for example, 46 percent of students who completed a four-year degree had attended a community college at some point in the previous decade (Research Center).

Further, a recent study led by Don Hossler shows undergraduate transfer across institutions to be both wide and complex. As many as one-third of postsecondary students transfer at least once before earning a baccalaureate degree, and one-quarter transfer more than once. The five-year enrollment patterns of students entering postsecondary education for the first time in Fall 2006 showed that the greatest proportion of students (37 percent) transferred during their second year, but 22 percent transferred in their fourth or fifth years. More than a quarter of transfer students crossed state lines, thereby moving outside the range of most articulation agreements, and a number “reverse transferred” from a four-year to two-year institution (5). While the classic forward transfer of community college students to the university is certainly an important part of the transfer phenomenon, this is by no means the only path that transfer students take.

At UM’s Sweetland Center for Writing, which is responsible for oversight of the university’s first-year and upper-level writing requirements, we became aware of the challenges that FYC’s current model poses for transfer students when we discovered that UM transfer students perform significantly worse than their continuing peers in courses that fulfill our institution’s upper-level writing requirement (ULWR). We wondered why transfer students’ average ULWR course grade was 3.0 while continuing students averaged 3.4.

Like many public universities, ours has responded to the increased number of transfer students—from both community colleges and four-year institutions—by expanding recruitment and services. The time, we felt, was right to develop programmatic initiatives to support these students as writers. When we turned
to the literature, however, we found remarkably little research specifically on transfer student writing experiences. So we launched our own local investigation to inform program development. In this article, we chart what we have learned.

We want to make it clear from the outset that many transfer student writers manage very well and do not need any special interventions. Nonetheless, we have found that others face distinctive writing challenges we can and should do more to address. The approach we advocate here is not simply a matter of helping students adapt to our university’s various writing contexts. Rather, we call for recursive movement between research and programmatic response as an ongoing process of mutual adjustment. Instead of the one-directional expectation that transfer students adapt to our institutional environment, we recognize that the university also has a responsibility to make research-based adjustments to become more receptive to transfer students. Given the shifting landscape of US postsecondary education, we believe all four-year institutions could benefit from undertaking similar processes of mutual adjustment, facilitating transfer students’ transitions by seeking to understand their situated experiences as writers and developing locally sensitive curricular and programmatic responses.

In order to illustrate how the process of mutual adjustment has unfolded in our context, we present our research and program development chronologically. Rather than conduct a study, institute changes, and conclude, we have moved more slowly, gathering information from and about transfer students, implementing changes, evaluating results, and then making additional modifications. Student voices have been central to our process. Following a brief overview of our main terms and definitions, we begin with the first study we conducted in 2011–12, through which we identified five transitions faced by UM transfer student writers. We then describe our responses to what we learned, focusing on the writing course and directed self-placement (DSP) procedure we designed for our transfer student population. Next we discuss a second study that yielded deeper understandings of transfer student experiences as well as the effects of the interventions we developed. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings and considering next steps, balancing our attention between understanding how transfer student writers adjust to the university environment and considering the kinds of institutional adjustments we might make in turn.

**Transfer Student Research, Composition Studies, and Writing Programs**

While writing studies scholarship relating to transfer students is scant (Mathison), there is a significant and growing body of literature by higher education researchers that examines these students’ academic and social experiences, including their
post-transfer experiences and the factors that influence their success (see Bahr et al.). In reviewing this literature, we found four concepts particularly useful for understanding UM transfer students’ transitions to upper-level writing: transfer shock, stigma, transfer receptivity, and adjustment.

Transfer shock is a well-documented phenomenon in which community college students experience a dip in GPA—generally temporary and more pronounced in some courses and disciplines than others—immediately after transferring to a four-year institution (Hills; Cejda; Cejda et al.; Ishitani; Bahr et al.). Transfer shock may be related to many factors, such as instructional differences at the receiving institution, lack of familiarity with the institution’s resources, and the effects of other personal, social, and academic stressors experienced during the transfer transition process. While research suggests that prior academic preparation is likely a consequential factor in the phenomenon of transfer shock, there has been no specific examination of the role of writing—or of writing-intensive courses like UM’s ULWR—in the phenomenon of transfer shock. As we discuss later, our research reveals that some UM transfer students initially earn lower grades on writing assignments than they typically received at their previous institution, suggesting that writing demands may factor into the academic “shock” many students experience.

In researching and developing responsive programming for transfer student writers, we have endeavored to remain sensitive to the reality and effects of transfer stigma, or the assumption that transfer students are inherently less prepared or deserving of admission (Alexander et al.; Jain et al.; Bahr et al.). To avoid such stigma, we have sought to remain open to the wide range of transfer student views and experiences. In particular, we have tried to respect the desires of students who do not want to be singled out because of their transfer status, even though this has sometimes complicated our efforts to provide support. Institutions and programs like ours need to develop and promote the resources that will help transfer students acclimate to their new writing environment while taking care not to activate or perpetuate existing stigma.

Third, we have found it helpful to frame these efforts in terms of transfer receptivity (Bahr et al. 496), or “institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully” (Jain et al. 253). Like the concept of stigma, transfer receptivity acknowledges that the challenges some transfer students face are a function of the cultures, structures, and resources at the receiving institution, rather than solely a matter of transfer students’ backgrounds, characteristics, or actions. While higher education researchers have examined these issues in terms of transfer students’ overall experiences, we focus on transfer students’ specific transitions as writers. We ask: How can writing programs better understand and support this growing
population of student writers in their midst? How can writing programs do so without reinforcing stereotypes and stigma? How, in other words, might we not only ask students to become more receptive to the kinds of relearning that transfer demands, but also hold ourselves accountable for being receptive to what these students might teach us?

Adjustment, another helpful concept from the higher education literature, has been defined as the “significant social and psychological relearning in the face of new encounters, new teachers, new opportunities, and new academic, personal, and social demands” that transfer students must undertake at four-year institutions (Laanan 332). Many of the findings we report here confirm that, as transfer students transition to UM, they engage in many forms of “relearning,” including adjusting their concepts of writing and their own academic literacy practices. As we have indicated, however, our research has also led us to expand our understanding of adjustment to include more than just the process by which students acclimate to the new “demands” of the university environment. For us, the work of relearning must also be performed by the institution and its various constituencies, together enacting what we term mutual adjustments.

We hope that the programming with which we have responded to our own institutional shortcomings will serve as an example of such mutual adjustments. Our early investigations into transfer student writers revealed a number of our own institutions’ writing-related blind spots that we would not have otherwise discerned. For example, in the letter sent by the admissions office to incoming transfer students outlining unmet institutional requirements, writing was not mentioned. Similarly, incoming transfer students had no opportunity to assess how their writing practices compared with those of continuing students, nor were they apprised of what might be expected of them as writers at UM. The research and program development we discuss represents our effort to improve our university’s transfer receptivity by addressing such institutional oversights. We encourage colleagues at four-year colleges and universities to join us in striving to understand and support the students who have transferred in their own institutional context—not because these students are a “problem,” but because this population represents a growing and heretofore largely invisible constituency in our writing courses and programs.

However, we do not want to advocate merely for investigations that stop at institution-specific understandings of the transfer writers’ experiences as a means of exclusively internal acclimation. The trends in student mobility that we outlined in our introduction mean that many writing programs, like ours, also need to better account for the fact that a portion of their own students may themselves transfer to other receiving institutions. Fortunately, the increased need for writing programs and courses to support both incoming and outgoing
transfer students occurs alongside the recent push within writing studies to better articulate our general disciplinary knowledge in ways that foster learning transfer, whether across genres, disciplines, or institutional contexts. The *WPA Outcomes Statement* is one important effort to articulate common instructional goals that can be embraced and adapted across multiple institutions. Such undertakings are, however, a matter of shared theoretical understandings as much as curricular objectives. In “Pedagogical Memory: Writing, Mapping, Translating,” Susan Jarratt and her coauthors argue that “the profession should agree on a disciplinary language (our candidate would be rhetoric) and stick to it, turning our efforts to consolidating disciplinary definitions and presenting them more forcefully and uniformly across the curriculum and across institutions” (65). More recently, in *Naming What We Know*, editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle collaborate with key figures in the field to outline provisional *threshold concepts* in writing studies: that is, the core transformative disciplinary concepts that we have developed about “the subject of composed knowledge and the questions we ask related to this broad term” (2). These disciplinary movements could help address the needs of transfer student writers.

Although we affirm these moves toward articulation and consensus, we do not present our own endeavors to improve transfer receptivity as one-size-fits-all. Some aspects of the transfer student writer experience we discuss here may be unique to—or heightened within—our particular institutional context: a major research university with selective admissions in a state that has an unusually decentralized system of higher education. Any efforts to support transfer student writers should be grounded in local, ongoing research. The emergence of common understandings in writing studies needs to be balanced by an acknowledgement of institutional variety.

Furthermore, in the same way that institutions vary, our research has also taught us that the designation *transfer student* encompasses a diverse and complex range of writing experiences. Just as their patterns of mobility differ widely, transfer students themselves vary enormously in terms of demographics, previous educational experiences, goals and objectives, and academic success. Our study participants represent considerable heterogeneity in age, ethnicity, number of semesters at UM, gender, race, socio-economic status, GPA, and field of interest, but we decided to identify individuals only by their sending institutions in order to highlight the diversity of their transfer pathways. We hope that further research—ours and that of others—will attend more specifically to the ways that a fuller range of variables affects transfer student writers in their transitions to a new institution. While none of the findings we present here should be taken to represent the experiences and perspectives of all transfer students, at UM or
elsewhere, the recurring patterns we have identified in students’ experiences may aid others in developing specialized supports suited to their own local context.

The First Study: Exploring Transfer Student Writing Experiences

In order to create an initial portrait of transfer students’ academic experiences at UM, we analyzed institutional data on the demographics and course grades of the 1,656 transfer students who entered the university during the regular 2010–11 and 2011–12 academic years. In Fall 2011 and Winter 2012, we sent surveys to all students who had transferred in within the last two years, yielding a total of 523 responses. Drawing on the pool of survey respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in interviews, we recruited 15 transfer students, basing our selection on including a widely diverse population. Nine of those selected had attended community colleges, five came from other four-year colleges/universities, and one started at a four-year school, reverse transferred to a community college and then transferred to UM. Using a protocol informed by our initial survey findings, we conducted individual, semistructured interviews with these students in Winter 2012. The interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed, and then analyzed qualitatively to identify major themes. Here, we discuss the five transfer transitions that emerged from this initial study and that have informed our program development and subsequent research.

Adjusting to workload

For most of the students we interviewed, transitioning to writing at UM meant adjusting to a significant increase in the volume and complexity of the reading and writing they were expected to do outside of class. When asked to describe the most challenging aspect of his first semester, one community college transfer student echoed many others by saying,

I think more than anything it was the workload and what professors expected you to know from what they taught. . . . I mean, I went from spending maybe two hours to finish a homework assignment to twelve hours to finish this homework assignment. I think the hardest thing for me was learning how to budget my time.

Managing time to deal with the length and complexity of writing assignments was especially challenging for many students, as was the experience of simultaneously juggling multiple large writing projects. Further, several students said they were being forced to seek feedback and revise their drafts to an extent that had not previously been necessary.

Reading was also an aspect of our university writing environment with which many transfer students reported specific struggles—particularly instruc-
tors’ emphasis on academic publications rather than textbooks. The difficulty of these readings made it hard for some students to keep up with the reading load and to complete the writing assignments that required them to draw on course texts. For some students, then, a major part of transitioning to UM was adjusting to longer reading and writing assignments than they had been given in the past, learning to better anticipate how long these tasks would take, and developing effective time management strategies.

Navigating instructional differences

For many students in the study, part of transitioning to UM was learning to manage large class sizes and relatively impersonal relationships with faculty teaching lecture courses. Many were confused by the array of instructional roles represented by professors, lecturers, graduate student instructors (GSIs), and course graders. Several expressed particular indignation that the person teaching their course was often not the person providing feedback on or evaluating their written work. These complex instructional roles left some students unsure about whom they should approach for help with their writing assignments and how.

Several students observed that, to a greater extent than at their previous institution, UM faculty seemed to assume that students would work independently and be proactive about seeking help when needed. They also noted that their upper-level faculty generally proceeded as though everyone in the class had been at UM for some time and was familiar with the institution’s resources, instructional roles, and expectations for writing. Faculty and GSIs seemed to have little awareness that there might be students in those courses who were new to the university. A community college transfer student said, “When I was in my first semester, [my instructor] was like, oh yeah, you’re all like in 400-level classes. You’re seniors. This paper shouldn’t be no big deal.” Many transfer students echoed this sentiment, observing that their transition to university writing occurred in learning contexts that seemed oblivious to their presence. As another community college transfer student described it, “I just feel, I don’t know, X’ed out. X’ed out because I didn’t come here my freshman year.” This student’s feeling of invisibility suggests significant shortcomings in UM’s transfer receptivity.

Understanding expectations

Nearly all of the students indicated that transitioning to writing at UM required figuring out faculty expectations for writing, which most perceived to be “higher” (or more “tough,” “rigorous,” or “picky”) than at their previous institution. These expectations related to depth of thinking and reasoning and the length and complexity of assignments, as well as conventions for mechanics and style.
Several described being baffled by prompts that were more verbose or less directive than the assignments they had been given at their previous institution. Some students viewed their instructors’ expectations as idiosyncratic or arbitrary. Others discussed writing expectations in terms of disciplinary differences and genre conventions, but their conceptual vocabulary for doing so varied widely.

As such, many transfer students reported having difficulty understanding exactly what in their writing was falling short. A student who had returned to college after military service described his experiences this way:

At [my community college], I was always praised for my writing while versus here, as I said, my papers have been destroyed. . . . That to me is the most difficult part, ‘cause I thought my writing was at an okay level but then there’s like a reality check when you turn in your first paper.

Like this student, many of the participants in this study had been among the top performers at their previous institutions. In some cases, not meeting the expectations of their initial writing assignments at UM was their first experience with missing the academic mark—a (transfer) shock to their sense of themselves as students and as writers. While students in FYC often have a similar experience, for transfer students the shock was rendered more acute because they were already experienced college students.

**Negotiating peer relationships**

Many of the students described interactions with friends or family members who helped them transition to writing at UM by providing knowledge and feedback. Likewise, informal conversations with classmates through group projects, peer review sessions, and study groups helped some students gain a better understanding of what writing assignments were asking them to do.

For other students, however, forming these kinds of connections with peers was difficult because differences in age, life experience, or perceived class background made it harder to connect. As one community college transfer student described it:

For me it’s more difficult to relate to or to get acquainted with people in new classes. Since . . . I’m older than everyone else, and then secondly, most of the students here, they know a lot of the students ‘cause they came here from high school or they started here the same year so they’ve grown up with each other . . . It’s hard for me to really relate to the younger people and stuff and ask them for help.

This sense that other students already had social networks in place and would not be receptive to newcomers sometimes kept transfer students from initiating the very peer connections that could help them understand and meet new writing expectations.
Identifying resources

UM offers many forms of social and academic support, and transfer students receive information about these resources during their initial orientation sessions. However, several students described orientation as too much, too fast; they received so much information about different aspects of campus and academic life that they often did not understand or remember the full range of resources available to them. The library was one important example. Students learned where the library was during their orientation, but they were often either unaware of or overwhelmed by the resources available there. Furthermore, upper-level faculty often assumed that students were already familiar with the library and its discipline-specific services, so students did not always get much training in how to use its resources for their papers.

Identifying writing-related resources on campus was particularly important for transfer students who were among the first in their families to attend college and therefore did not necessarily have the kinds of family support networks on which other UM students often rely. Many transfer students were acutely aware of this difference in social capital. As one community college transfer student put it,

That’s another thing that’s kind of discouraging. Like I talked to a friend—or just someone I was in a study group with—and they were like “Yeah, I showed my paper to my mom,” and for her to look over her paper . . . I don’t really have anybody who could do that.

For students like this one, finding campus-based sources of writing support, either through institutional resources like the writing center or through informal peer connections, could prove central to their success at UM.

In addition to enabling us to identify these transitions, our interviews also helped us consider the resources we might develop. We asked students directly for their advice about how UM could better support transfer students’ transitions to writing at the university. From these suggestions, two prominent ideas emerged: a writing course designed specifically for transfer students and some mechanism for introducing transfer students to the expectations of upper-level writing in their fields for self-assessing their own preparation for such work prior to the stressful “reality check” of their first graded writing assignment. Accordingly, we developed two initiatives for transfer students, which we describe in the following section.

Institutional Responses

Our first initiative was a course designed for transfer students. In Fall 2012, the Sweetland Center for Writing launched Writing 350: Excelling in Upper-Level
Writing, a one-credit workshop-based support course that students are encouraged to take concurrently with their upper-level writing requirement (ULWR) course. Although Writing 350 is available to all upper-division students regardless of transfer status, it was designed specifically to support writers through the five transitions we identified during our initial transfer student study. Writing 350 foregrounds the discipline-specific nature of upper-level writing expectations by using reading and writing assignments from students’ other courses as the basis of workshops and discussions. This approach also enables students to reflect upon the instructional differences that so many transfer students identified as a significant feature of the new writing environment to which they were adjusting. Further, Writing 350’s small size (capped at 18 students) and flexible, student-centered curriculum allows it to address broader contextual challenges that accompany transfer students’ adjustments. It includes low-stakes writing practice, one-on-one feedback, genre explication, and the work-management skills expected but often left untaught in college courses. Major discussion topics include developing peer relationships, especially in collaborative assignments or writing workshop settings, and handling new demands in workload. Finally, and especially through its close relationship to Sweetland, which houses the course, Writing 350 acts as an introduction and conduit to the variety of writing resources and other support systems available at UM.

Crucial to the course’s success has been the close connections between local research, curriculum design, and faculty input, all located in Sweetland. The instructor, who has taught Writing 350 since its inception, helped shape the course around findings from our first study. This instructor is an award-winning teacher and a long-time Sweetland faculty member, well-positioned to remain sensitive to the support students need and to the ways the Writing Center and its programs could better provide that support. Student responses to Writing 350—both in end-of-semester course evaluations and, as we discuss, in our follow-up studies—have been resoundingly positive. However, enrollment has remained lower than we had hoped, ranging from six to fourteen students per section across the seven semesters it has been offered.

Inspired by students’ praise for Writing 350, we began developing a transfer directed self-placement (DSP) in 2013 in order to increase the course’s visibility to and impact on incoming transfer students. Although UM has had an essay-based first-year DSP process in place since 2009, transfer students had never been required to go through any analogous writing placement process unless they had not already satisfied the FYC requirement. This meant that most transfer students were given no opportunity to refine their understandings of UM’s particular writing environment or to reflect—before choosing their courses—on
how well their previous experiences had prepared them to meet institutional expectations. In designing our Transfer DSP, we stood by a basic tenet of our First-Year DSP: students reflect most thoughtfully on their preparedness when this reflection is based on a specific reading and writing task framed as typical for the work they will be asked to do at UM (see Gere et al. “Assessing”). The Transfer DSP, then, needed to expose students to the kinds of reading and writing practices they could expect to encounter in the specialized courses of their field of interest, and it needed to enable them to reflect in pragmatic terms on their own experience with this kind of work.

Our first version of a Transfer DSP began by asking students to identify the division—humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences—in which they expected to major. Students were next led to a sample writing assignment prompt and student-written response from a ULWR course in their chosen division. Students were then asked to write a rhetorical analysis of both the prompt and the ways the paper responded to this prompt. Following this task, students were asked to complete a short survey, which directed them to compare the prompt and student paper they had just analyzed with the writing they had undertaken in their own previous academic experiences. Finally, students were introduced to the array of writing resources available to them, including Writing 350. Their survey responses were used to generate a recommendation about whether they might benefit from taking Writing 350 alongside the ULWR course—a recommendation students would later discuss with their advisors.

To pilot this DSP process, we invited the 165 transfer students entering UM in Winter 2014 to complete these tasks and then to take a short four-question survey about their experiences. However, the results of this pilot—97 began the process, but only 5 completed it—deepened our understanding of transfer student writers in a few ways. The fact that slightly more than half of those invited began the DSP process indicated their interest in issues surrounding writing. The extremely low completion rate told us that this version of the Transfer DSP required too much time and energy from students who were already feeling overwhelmed. A subsequent focus group conducted with Writing 350 students revealed that the very process of reading an exemplary field-specific upper-level paper was often sufficient to inspire thoughtful self-appraisal about their readiness for ULWR, making the writing of the related rhetorical analysis unnecessary. This finding aligned with our first study’s recognition that the complexity of upper-level reading and writing assignments was often one of the greatest challenges for transfer student writers. As a result, our final version of the Transfer DSP maintained the reading and survey features, but we revised our writing prompt to include three short answer questions: (1) explain in detail what this
assignment is asking the writer to do; (2) explain how the student who wrote this paper addressed this assignment, using specific examples; and (3) reflect on whether you would feel prepared to respond to an assignment of this kind.

We hoped the Transfer DSP would help students feel better positioned to evaluate whether the five transitions identified in our initial study would pose a significant challenge for them—in which case, enrolling in Writing 350 might be an appropriate choice. We also hoped completing the Transfer DSP would enable students to answer questions such as: Would they have trouble navigating discipline-specific assignments like the example provided without close instructional guidance? Did they feel prepared to meet the reading and writing demands of such assignments without additional support or preparatory coursework? After launching the Transfer DSP, the number of students signing up for Writing 350 increased slightly but still remains small. Perhaps more problematic, Transfer DSP completion rates continue to remain only slightly above 50 percent, suggesting that many transfer students are still entering the upper-level writing curriculum without experiencing the kind of situated self-assessment that the DSP facilitates. To deepen our understanding of the experiences of transfer student writers, to learn more about both student and institutional adjustments, and to determine further needs, we conducted a second study.

The second study: deepening understandings, assessing adjustments, and evaluating needs

For the second study, we selected fourteen participants from a pool of students who had attended only one other postsecondary institution in the United States. As with the first study, we focused on interviewing participants who represented the widest range of diverse qualities, selecting seven students transferring from two-year institutions and seven from four-year institutions. As part of our recruitment efforts, the instructor of Writing 350 invited his students to participate, so the percentage of study participants enrolled in Writing 350 is higher than in the university’s broader population of transfer students. We conducted semi-structured interviews with these participants during the 2014–15 academic year. The interview protocol included explicit questions about student experience with the DSP process and about any institutional resources that students used to facilitate their transition to writing at UM. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed qualitatively in order to identify major themes. Using the lens of the five transitions that structured the first study, we were able to confirm those findings while also learning more about students’ experiences.
Adjusting to workload

The second study confirmed that, for many transfer students, transitioning to UM meant adjusting to longer and more complex reading and writing assignments. Students complicated our understanding of “workload”—the time-intensive challenges of navigating new genres and discourses. For example, one student who had transferred from a public university reported that his “reading level doesn’t feel like it is up to par,” so he struggled to “translate” texts to integrate those sources into his writing. This student’s use of the word *translate* helped us understand that “adjusting to workload” could include learning new ways of reading as well as learning an unfamiliar language. The texts this student was now being asked to comprehend and integrate into his own writing required him to comprehend and produce new kinds of writing.

The second study also yielded new insights into how transfer student writers negotiated the challenges of increased workloads. One community college transfer student described his ability to allocate time: “I guess I just try to judge how much can I get away with. Not get away with, but I’m trying to manage it. I try to be efficient with it. Like, why study ten hours for this class if only two hours would get me an A. Then with this class I study ten hours. Maybe it needs 18 hours.” By differentiating the amount of time needed to complete his work in various classes, this student demonstrated an ability to handle work in pragmatic ways. A student who transferred from another university showed a similar kind of facility with planning. When asked how she planned to handle the writing workload in her ULWR course, she said, “I’ll just map it out.” This kind of adjustment shows that transfer student writers bring resources to their new institutions, resources that may not be fully recognized by their instructors or even, at first glance, by researchers.

Yet this study revealed that Writing 350 also helped students manage this increased workload. One student from a two-year college explained, “The whole purpose of this class is analyzing these student papers and figuring out how you can succeed in writing courses at this university . . . [the goal is] to help us succeed, not necessarily to improve.” This student’s distinction between success and improvement—focusing on strategies for classroom achievement rather than on enhancing capacities for learning—points to a dimension of Writing 350 that can be described as “studenting,” a skill many students found valuable on a very practical level. Still, many students used the word “overwhelmed” to describe their first semester at UM, which suggests the need for further institutional adjustments.
Navigating instructional differences

Students’ responses to instructional differences in this study paralleled those in the first study, particularly regarding confusion about the various instructor roles at UM and the challenges of large classes. We came to understand, in addition, that instructional differences also included the issue of instructor accessibility. As a student from a four-year institution said, “Here, the thing that’s hard about that is because you don’t want to go to your professor because they’re professoring.” In this student’s perception, “professoring” among UM faculty did not include welcoming students into their offices for help with writing.

Another dimension of accessibility revealed by the second study concerned norms of interpersonal relationships between students and faculty. As one student explained,

The professors at [my community college] actually were often much more casual, sometimes personable with the students because they tend to have fewer students, and so they can spend more time getting to know individual students. Sometimes they’ll just chat with you for a while, just shoot the breeze, and of course they don’t have time for that here.

This same student went on to say, “But professors [here] know the material . . . so much better, so it’s a tradeoff.” In acknowledging the value of having professors who are premier scholars in their fields, this student shows how she is adjusting her thinking about faculty-student relationships. Another from a four-year school observed, “Dr. B is a leading professor and is doing a lot of awesome, phenomenal work in public health. He’s a member of the CDC—also, I think he’s editor-in-chief for the Public Health Journal.” Testimonies like this remind us that in addition to helping students see faculty as approachable resources and providing explicit strategies for understanding instructor roles, we should also find ways to let students know about the role of research in professors’ working lives and the opportunities for transfer students to participate in it.

Understanding expectations

While the first study revealed that students saw UM professors as expecting “more,” the second study added depth by showing the difficulties students encountered because of their lack of familiarity with the discipline-specific genres required by upper-level writing courses. This finding contributes to the conversation about genre’s role in learning transfer (see Bawarshi; Devitt). One student, for example, found what she called “scientific writing”—“this is what happened. These are the results. . . . very cut and dry”—to be quite different from the more personal, narrative-based genres she was accustomed to writing at her community college.
Other students experienced difficulty finding an appropriate “academic” register and using discipline-specific terminology for their writing. For example, one community college transfer student described the tension that arose when he attempted to write in a register for which he had been praised in community college writing contexts:

If I’m writing a paper here and I’m making a great argument and I think I have supported it with evidence and all that, my professor . . . He’ll say . . . “I liked your argument but I didn’t like your word choice.” That just kind of baffled me because I’m making a good argument but you don’t like the wording that I’m putting it in.

This student understood that he was encountering different expectations for language use, but he remained “baffled” by the disciplinary nature and function of those expectations.

The second study also complicated our understanding of the language used in many upper-level writing assignments. The term essay was especially vexing: as one community college transfer student said,

I had some objections about where I was graded down which was my fault because I didn’t understand what they really meant when they say “essay” here. When they say “essay” they don’t always mean an essay per se, but a vehicle to carry a lot of definitions that you’ve learned in a chapter. That’s not the same as an essay.

This student’s frustration with faculty who assume rather than specify important disciplinary writing expectations is amplified by the finding that, in UM’s ULWR courses, essay is the most commonly used and least clear term in assignment descriptions (Gere et al. “Interrogating” 251).

Transfer students’ struggles with genre and register suggest that upper-level writing courses (and the resources developed to support ULWR faculty and students) could do more to make those expectations explicit. Furthermore, students may need more justification for these expectations—why an instructor might focus on word choice and what specific values underlie different genre norms—in order to experience them as anything other than arbitrary or idiosyncratic preferences. It is noteworthy that students in the second study who took Writing 350 seemed to have more conceptual resources for talking about writing, which suggests that this course may be fostering a kind of rhetorical awareness that helps transfer students articulate the nature of their writing challenges.

Finally, for many of the students in this study, understanding expectations also encompassed writing processes. Several commented on the amount of revision expected at UM, explaining that their first drafts had received praise in their prior institutions, that they did not always know how to revise, and that they sometimes felt humiliated by comments requesting revisions. However, some
of these students also viewed the increased demands for revision at UM as an opportunity to grow as writers. A student from a community college explained that he didn’t feel that he had developed a real understanding of writing at his previous institution, but “Here I am developing my sense as a writer. I do have to go through, edit it, reread it again, edit again—in order to get that A.” Such responses suggest that new and more challenging expectations are not always a barrier for transfer students: they can also be a powerful motivating force. This potential benefit might be better realized by making disciplinary writing expectations more explicit and emphasizing processes of writing in upper-division courses.

**Negotiating peer relationships**

As in our first study, many students’ emergent understandings of UM’s writing expectations—and their ability to meet those expectations—were fostered through the development of productive peer relationships at the university. However, the second study revealed in more detail how relative socioeconomic status and transfer stigma complicated these relationships. Almost half of the students participating in the second study—all of whom had transferred from community colleges—perceived themselves as coming from a social background quite different from their new classmates. For some students, this feeling of difference presented a significant barrier to their adjustment to the writing environment at UM, which often emphasizes peer feedback. One community college transfer student described how a sense of social difference shaped her interactions with peers:

> When they find out I transferred, they’re like, “Oh, where are you from?” . . . Occasionally, I’ll have the person be like, “Did you not get into Michigan the first time?” They’ll try to ask me about money in some side way. I just tell ’em straight out, “Yeah, I’m paying for my own college.” I was like, “I didn’t wanna commit to a university and then have a bunch of debt, but I’m here now. That’s what matters.”

The difference this student described between herself and her peers is borne out by UM data on the widening gap between affluent students whose families pay the full cost of their education and students who come from more modest circumstances. This gap sometimes hindered transfer students from seeing most peers as social resources who could support their writing. As one university transfer student lamented, “There’s no classmates.”

Yet many students also described positive peer interactions, demonstrating that some transfer students can and do build successful peer relationships that provide both academic and emotional support for their writing. For example,
one community college student remarked, “I think I came in assuming that everyone was gonna be smarter than me, and everyone was just a genius, and everyone was gonna be successful on their own.” However, social contact with fellow students ultimately helped ease these worries, as a pivotal moment in a peer review session demonstrated:

I was not very impressed with my first draft. For myself, it wasn’t my best writing . . . This girl sat down next to me and she goes, “Hi, I’m Chris. My paper sucks” . . . I was like, “Wow, that’s exactly what I was thinking.” It was nice to see that everybody else was human, too . . . That was a nice reminder that I’m not alone. I have more support than I thought.

Having opportunities to locate themselves within a community of student-writers at UM had important benefits for transfer students’ sense of belonging and learning—and, at least in this student’s case, for combatting internalized transfer stigma.

Identifying resources

Our first study indicated that some transfer students face challenges identifying resources—both formal and informal, institutional and out-of-school—to support their success as writers at UM. In our second study, then, we sought a better understanding of transfer students’ ability to identify resources and how well the specific writing resources we had since developed were meeting their needs.

The feedback from students who had completed the Transfer DSP, taken Writing 350, and/or visited the Sweetland Center for Writing was encouraging, confirming the preliminary feedback we had received about resources. Almost all of the interviewees who took the Transfer DSP and/or enrolled in Writing 350 reported that this programming helped them better understand UM’s upper-level writing expectations. Discovering that upper-level, discipline-specific writing often involves substantial research was a revelation for some; one community college transfer student reported that this knowledge “freaked me out,” inspiring her to enroll in Writing 350. For other students, the Transfer DSP confirmed that they were well prepared for writing in an upper-level course. “It reassured me,” said one such community college transfer student. Further, a community college transfer student enrolled in Writing 350 described the course as showing “how writing is here at UM,” and another community college transfer student said the course was “really helpful because we looked at different kinds of writing within the different disciplines.” For these two students, Writing 350 provided a space to learn as well as develop social connections with other transfer students.

Yet this study also highlighted for us that, partly because enrollment in Writing 350 and completion of the Transfer DSP are entirely voluntary at
UM, transfer students do not always find out about these resources. Only half of the students in the study took the Transfer DSP, and some had never heard of Writing 350—in fact, several expressed interest in the course once they were informed of its existence during their interview. Our second study revealed some of the factors still impeding students’ abilities to find these writing resources. For example, while every ULWR instructor receives a reminder that the Sweetland Center for Writing offers students weekly thirty-minute one-on-one appointments with writing faculty, as well as walk-in peer tutoring sessions, our study’s transfer students told us that this information is not always announced in their classes, perhaps because many faculty assume that upper-division students already know about these services. What many at our institution fail to realize is that, while transfer student writers have significant prior experience in higher education, they are also first-year students to our campus and need similar help orienting themselves to their new environment.

Students in the second study also reminded us that UM’s three-day orientation offered to all incoming first-year students is reduced to only one day for transfer students. Consequently, while both sets of students receive the same materials, transfer students have much less time to take in all the information coming at them. Even their campus tours are abbreviated. As a community college transfer student told us, “We did get a tour, but it was all outside.” Knowing where the library or the writing center is located does little to help students come “inside” to learn about the myriad ways such a resource can help them with their writing.

Finally, our second study suggested that the Transfer DSP might be further adjusted to be more inviting to students who have not decided on a major. A number of the students interviewed indicated that they were not yet sure of their area of study and were perplexed about how to respond to the DSP directive to choose between humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences as their general field of interest. While the Transfer DSP provides a crucial introduction to UM’s disciplinary writing cultures for some students, it seems to be prohibitively discipline-specific for others.

**Implications, Questions, and Future Directions for Research**

As our first study indicated, and our second study confirmed, transfer students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, both demographic and academic, and their reasons for transferring also vary greatly. The broad category of “transfer student writer” warrants more investigation, and we hope this article generates multiple conversations about the writing experiences of transfer students coming
from and entering into a variety of different institution types across different communities, states, and regions.

As we have noted, many transfer students we interviewed proved remarkably well-adapted to the demands of their new writing environment. Their experiences with writing and studenting across a range of institutions were a valuable asset, not a liability. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that some transfer students do not want to be identified by their receiving institution. This preference may be a function of transfer stigma—something we should all work to dispel—but we must also remain sensitive to students’ resistance to institutional labels that have the potential to marginalize them.

Nonetheless, our studies and programming show that those of us who teach and do research on writing can and should give more systematic attention to the unique challenges some transfer student writers face as they move from one writing environment to another. As we have noted, transfer students are simultaneously experienced college writers and first-year students at their new institutions, and the principle of mutual adjustments suggests that members of our field can support transfer student writers at three levels—as researchers operating on the national scene, as researchers and writing program administrators within our own institutions, and as instructors in our classrooms.

At the broadest level, our field needs to develop a body of research focused on the experiences of transfer student writers, drawing together insights from work carried out within a range of specific institutions. We can learn from one another’s investigations of the effectiveness of placement and advising procedures, curricula and materials, writing support services, and faculty professional development practices. Our field can examine the extent to which the transfer transitions that emerged in the studies described here—transitions responding to different workload, instruction, expectations, peer relations, and resources—characterize the experiences of transfer student writers in multiple contexts. In addition, we may be able to help one another recognize and understand the learning transfer and (currently) invisible adjustments of these students.

The transfer student writers in our study disrupt composition’s traditional narrative about the function of the first-year writing requirement. Courses that fulfill this requirement have historically been conceived as gateways to writing knowledge, initiations into the local writing context, and a means of familiarizing students with institutional support systems that they will draw on throughout their college career. But students who take their first-year writing course at one institution and then transfer to another do not receive the same kind of introduction to their receiving institutions’ writing environment as their four-year peers. Given that the number of transfer students is increasing nationwide, even constituting the majority of upper-division students at some public universities,
our field may need to revisit our assumptions about the purposes and possibilities of first-year writing. Further, recent work in writing studies on learning transfer complements the questions posed by our research. Indeed, learning transfer might be more effectively conceptualized as taking place not only within but also across institutional boundaries and writing environments. How, for example, might we draw on the idea of threshold concepts as a helpful counterbalance to the dominant “learning outcomes” framework (Estrem) in order to prepare FYC students for interinstitutional writing development and learning transfer?

At the institutional level, faculty—both in writing programs and across the disciplines—need to become aware of transfer student writers’ presence and needs in order to further their success. Our own grappling with the challenges of creating and making visible programs like the Transfer DSP and Writing 350 show the importance of coordination among multiple units—such as student orientation, advising, and assessment—to support transfer students. Our continued rethinking of the design and purpose(s) of the Transfer DSP suggests how colleagues elsewhere might consider mechanisms for creating bridges between students’ previous constructs of academic writing and the many discipline-specific writing cultures they will encounter at the new institution. Writing across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) initiatives can play a key role in providing support because WAC/WID courses are often the entry point for transfer students’ writing in the new institution and because WAC/WID programs frequently provide professional development for instructors. Our studies also point to the value of proceeding incrementally, interweaving ongoing research and programming, to assure that transfer students have a voice in the shaping of new programs.

Mutual adjustments can be fostered by individual faculty members, as well. They might consider ways of introducing students to the conventions of upper-division writing, acknowledging and explaining these conventions as embedded in ways of writing, reading, and thinking that may be new to transfer student writers. They might focus on making expectations more explicit and emphasizing processes of writing, with particular attention to revision and the time management it requires. They might increase opportunities for peer review, collaborative projects, and other practices and programming that provide transfer students opportunities to connect with fellow student writers. They might draw upon their own or colleagues’ experiences of being transfer students in order to become effective mentors, and they might provide opportunities for students to explain the terminology and expectations that shaped their previous writing experiences.

We hope that decisions and actions at all levels of the profession and in all contexts will be based on the principle of mutual adjustments, with the goal of creating a more even balance between the adjustments of transfer student writers...
and those of their institutions and instructors. We also hope that new programs, courses, and resources will be launched with an understanding of their interconnections and need for continued evaluation and reshaping. As we proceed with our own processes of mutual adjustment, our hope is that we—and colleagues at many other colleges and universities—will soon be able to report that transfer students do as well in upper-division writing as their continuing peers.

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Notes

1. Historically, UM has not aggressively recruited transfer students, nor, for the most part, has it sought to develop extensive articulation agreements with area community colleges, as is common in many other state postsecondary systems.

2. Some of the participants were multilingual, but their primary academic language was English. We did not select international students or those whose primary academic language is not English, but we hope to do so in future research.

3. Our Transfer DSP process gives students the option to complete either the Transfer or First-Year DSP, depending on whether their first-year writing credits can transfer to UM. For Spring, Summer, and Fall 2014 transfers, 68% (431 of 637) took one of the two DSPs: 62% (266) took the Transfer and 38% (165) took the FY DSP. In Winter 2015, 58% (95 of 163) took a DSP, with 71% (67) taking the Transfer and 29% (28) the FY DSP. By comparison, 92% of incoming freshman in Fall 2015 took the FY DSP (3,957 of 4,312).

4. To simplify the data set, international students and students who had attended two or more postsecondary institutions prior to transferring were excluded from the study. We hope to look more at those groups in future research.

Works Cited


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