

## Education on the Move: The E-Expectations of Transfer Students

Nearly every college and university has some experience with transfer students. According to the last national study of transfer student enrollment, 35 percent of students who began college for the first time in 1989-90 had transferred to at least one other institution by 1994.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, among today's students who earn bachelor's degrees, more than 50 percent enroll at two or more institutions, and nearly 20 percent enroll at three.<sup>2</sup> Students transfer for a variety of reasons to complete a bachelor's degree after starting at community college, to leave for a campus with a stronger reputation in the student's chosen field, or to save money by choosing a less-costly campus.

But what do we know about these students? Do transfer students differ from traditional students in how they search for information? And, given the easy access to information on the Internet, what do these students want to find when they arrive at the site of a potential transfer candidate?

This study, conducted by Noel-Levitz, James Tower, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA), surveyed 500 students nationwide who indicated an intention to transfer from one college campus to another. The following report details the results and also captures direct comments from students on these issues.

<sup>1</sup> James C. Palmer, "What Do We Know About Student Transfer?" in *General Education in an Age of Student Mobility* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2001) [http://aacu.org/transfer/student\\_mobility/whatdoweknow.cfm](http://aacu.org/transfer/student_mobility/whatdoweknow.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> Peter T. Ewell, Paula R. Schild, and Karen Paulson, *Following the Mobile Student: Can We Develop the Capacity for a Comprehensive Database to Assess Student Progression?* (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education, 2003), p. 2 <http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/researchreports/NCHEMS.pdf>



## Why are they transferring?

To better understand the responses of students, here are the schools they are transferring from, the type of school they plan to transfer to, and why they planned to transfer.

What type of school are you transferring from?	Percentage
Community College	60%
Four-year Public/State School	25%
Four-year Private School	10%
Two-year Private College	3%
Vocational/Technical School	2%

What type of school are you most likely to transfer to?	Total Sample	From Community College	From 4-year Public	From 4-year Private
Four-year Public/State School	72%	78%	70%	39%
Four-year Private School	19%	13%	22%	53%
Community College	5%	6%	3%	2%
Two-year Private College	4%	2%	6%	4%
Vocational/Technical School	1%	2%	0%	2%



Why Transferring?	Total Sample	From Community College	From 4-year Public	From 4-year Private
I am attending a two-year school now and need to transfer to complete my degree	44%	66%	N/A	N/A
My current school doesn't offer the program or quality I want	22%	13%	42%	27%
I attended my current school to save money and now I am going to a more expensive school	9%	11%	10%	2%
To find a school where I am more comfortable	6%	1%	9%	29%
To save money	5%	2%	9%	14%
To be closer to home	4%	2%	6%	12%
To be further from home	1%	1%	2%	2%

With these statistics in mind, following are five key strategies for attracting transfer students.

### 1) Know how transfer students are making their decisions.

When asked how transfer students developed their list of schools, they said:

How transfer students develop schools to consider	Percentage
I did a search online based on my career/major goals	67%
I talked with family and friends	44%
I talked to faculty members at my current institution	39%
I used printed guides or other materials to find schools that offer the programs I seek	31%
There is a school that I have always planned to transfer to, so I haven't really looked at other schools	25%
I looked for schools that would take the highest number of my accumulated credits through calculators or guides on their Web sites	15%
I looked at printed guides to determine which schools would take the highest number of my accumulated credits	11%
I used Facebook or MySpace to connect with people at other schools or in the profession/program I seek	8%

Like traditional students, transfer students are shopping for their higher education destinations.



While career and major goals were the leading factor, close to half of the respondents consulted family and friends before transferring. Campuses communicating with potential transfer students should consider trying to reach these decision makers as well.

Notice that 25 percent of transfer students said they only had one school in mind. This means that three-quarters of the remaining respondents were not locked in on one school. Like traditional students, transfer students are shopping for their higher education destinations.

In that shopping process, a number of students said they were using external resources to help with those searches. Students mentioned Web sites such as fastweb.com, assist.org, and collegeboard.com, as well as print resources such as the *Princeton Review* and *U.S. News and World Report*. Twenty-eight percent of students also said they had used a Course Applicability Service (CAS), a Web site that allows students to view program requirements, review course equivalencies, and see how courses can transfer from one college to another. As one student said, CAS did “the hard work of figuring out what credits are transferable and what classes are available based on the desired program.”

These resources help students calculate costs, learn how course credits earned at one school can transfer to another, or find which schools best match the academic criteria students are seeking. They provide key information that can differentiate one campus from another and aid students in their final decisions.

## 2) Provide transfer students with the information they need as quickly as possible.

When transfer students come to a school’s Web site, the single most important piece of information is whether the school offers a program that fits the student’s career goals. Students ranked their top three content items; here are how many times each of these appeared in the top three:

Most important content on a Web site (percentage of times item appeared in the top three)	Percentage
Does the school offer a program that fits with my career goals?	82%
Can I afford to attend this school?	64%
Will enough of my credits transfer to allow me to graduate in a timely manner?	54%
Do I like the location of the school?	35%
How successful are graduates from the program I’m considering?	24%
How qualified/experienced are the faculty?	18%
Does this school offer the right extra-curricular programs and activities for me?	12%
Will I fit in with the other students at this school?	9%



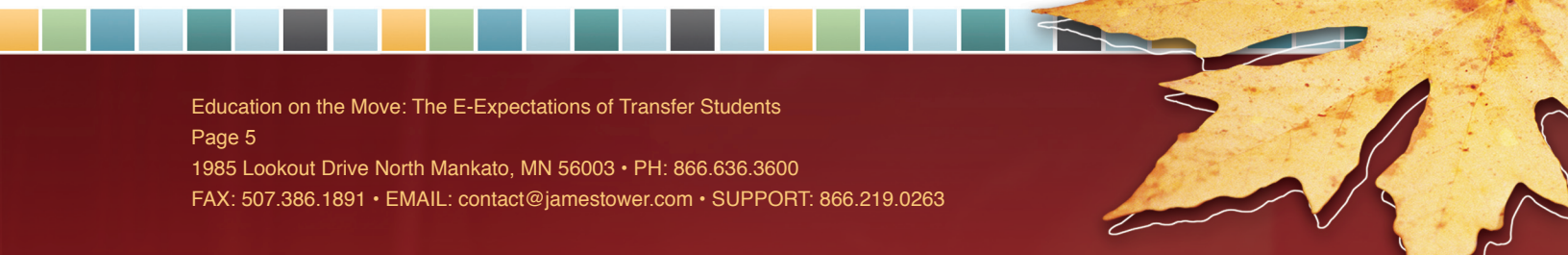
Sixty-three percent selected the career goals item as their number one requirement, far more often than the credit transfer item (31 percent) and affordability (25 percent). As one respondent put it, "It wouldn't make any sense to transfer to a school that doesn't offer the program I am pursuing. I look to see if it is accredited, how long it has been around, and at the education level of the professors and how long they have been teaching. I use those criteria because I want to make sure that I am getting the best education I can."

With career goals ranked so highly, it's not surprising that many respondents expressed interest in job and graduate school placement rates of previously graduated students. One respondent expressed what would appear to be an ideal setup: "The school I will be attending laid it all out on their Web site. It had testimonies of recent graduates and even opportunities in the field listed once I graduated." Respondents expressed frustration with sites that make it hard to find this valuable information. "Sometimes you have to dig so much that it is irritating," said one. Another said, "I prefer that Web sites have information about their programs in an easy format that is easy to retrieve. Some have too many links to find what you need."

Two-thirds of students also preferred to have Web site content presented in a professional, straightforward manner:

Preferred Website Tone	Percentage
Web site copy should be written in serious and formal tone	66%
Web site copy should be written in fun and informal tone	34%

Majors, rankings, outcomes, and faculty—provide details on these subjects while making it easy to find these details and you will go a long way toward satisfying prospective transfer students.



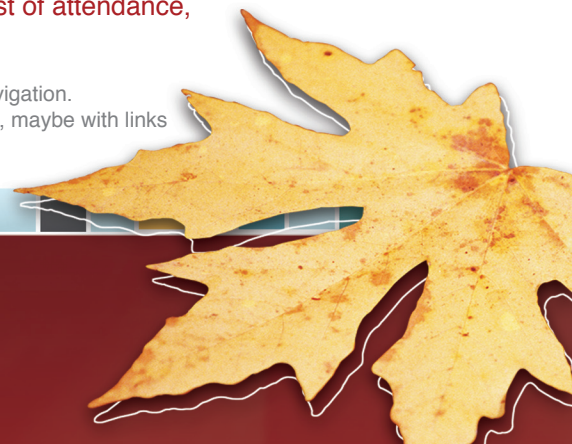
### 3) Add functionality to your site that adds value to the transfer student.

Respondents rated a series of interactive tools found on college Web sites for their value:

Interactive Tools	Percentage who found tool valuable
A tool to help you estimate your total cost to attend the school	62%
A calculator to help you estimate scholarships that you might receive	48%
A separate section for admitted students with tools and resources to help you complete your enrollment	47%
A calculator or tool to help you estimate the credits you may be able to transfer to the school so that you can quickly complete your degree	42%
A self-guided online orientation program to help you acclimate to the school	30%
Videos or podcasts focused on information about your major	29%
Opt-in text message service to remind you of deadlines and events	26%
A virtual tour	22%
Videos or podcasts depicting enrollment information and procedures	17%
A social networking site to help you connect with other prospective or current students at the school	16%
Blogs written by current students	10%
Blogs written by faculty	10%
Videos or podcasts featuring different aspects of student life	12%

**Students want easy-to-use online tools that will help them determine cost of attendance, and complete the transfer process.**

One student expressed the desire for the most valuable of these tools along with easy navigation. "Have a page for each college with specific steps on how to apply/transfer to each college, maybe with links that would take you to a page where you could complete said steps."



#### 4) Maintain a blend of communications mediums.

Not surprisingly, the Web is a powerful information tool for transfer students. However, it is but one of several ways that students seek information.

Information Sources	Percentage
The Web is my primary research tool	50%
I am using the Web but have also made contact with schools through the phone or e-mail	43%
I don't use the Web much at all to help me find a school	8%

The majority of students use a combination of Web visits, e-mails, phone calls, and print materials to make their decisions. Maintain a combination of communications with transfer students, and consider offering instant messaging or chats for the smaller but significant group of students who want them.

Students supported this blended approach when listing their communication preferences:

Communication Preferences	Percentage
E-mailed messages from the school with information about programs and admissions deadlines or requirements	82%
Telephone call from an admissions counselor to review your transcript	58%
E-mail messages from a faculty member in your program	56%
Printed materials sent in the postal mail regarding admissions steps and program details	52%
Telephone call from a faculty member in your major or program	36%
Instant message or live chat dialogues with admissions representatives	19%
Instant message or live chat dialogues with a faculty member in your program	15%
Other	1%

Students use a combination of Web visits, e-mails, phone calls, and print materials to make their decisions.



## 5) Connect transfer students with your faculty, staff, students, and campus.

While the “nuts and bolts” items of transferring ranked the highest—including academic opportunities, transfer requirements, and financial aid—students expressed a desire to connect with the people and culture of a campus.

“It would be nice to talk to students who graduated from the program and ask them about teachers, jobs they applied for, and any advice,” said one student.

Another wanted “contact numbers of faculty, employers who have hired from that school, and a few numbers of former students who went to that school.” The student explained that he wanted this information because, “if I don’t get along with the faculty, or if employers aren’t happy with their employees from a school, then I can avoid it.”

Others expressed interest in images of the campus, extra curricular activities, and a virtual tour. “I may not be able to get to the campus in person,” said one female student. “I’d like to know where I’m going.”

Another female student summarized the ideal content of a school’s Web site. “It would need to offer first-hand accounts from students concerning academics, on-campus living, the off-campus area, and the overall social dynamic of the school. Breakdowns of the financial aspects of attending would be incredibly useful as well. However, detail about the school’s inner workings is the most overlooked and beneficial thing a Web site could offer. I am sure that a Web site with such comprehensive information would instantly become the go-to resource for students who are thinking of transferring.”



## Conclusions

Like traditional students, most transfer students are choosing between two or more schools to attend. They appear to be very focused in their searches, perhaps because they have already been through the enrollment experience before. The following strategies could help you attract transfer students and convince them to enroll at your campus:

- Make sure your Web site provides details on majors available, as well as distinguishing factors for each field of study (notable faculty, graduate outcomes, etc.).
- Provide as much information about transfer credits as possible, and make it easy for transfer students to contact your admissions office about credits.
- Use a variety of communication forms—Web, e-mail, phone, and print—and consider contacting friends and family members of transfer students.
- Give students a chance to experience the culture of campus by contacting faculty, reading student experiences, seeing a virtual tour, and other peeks into the “inner workings” of campus.
- Make finding important information easy, without requiring students to wander through “links within links” as one student said.

Additional demographics of respondents	Percentage
Female	51%
Male	49%
Highest Degree Sought	
Bachelor's	36%
Graduate	36%
Professional/Doctorate	25%
Associate's	3%
Parent Education Level	
College Graduate	30%
Some College	27%
High School Graduate	20%
Graduate School	13%
Some High School	5%
Technical School	4%
Grade School	2%
Income Level	
\$35,000-59,999	2%
\$60,000-\$99,999	25%
\$20,000-\$34,999	22%
Less than \$20,000	19%
\$125,000 or more	7%
\$100,000-\$124,999	6%
School Location	
In State	71%
Another U.S. State	27%
Another Country	1%

Give students a chance to experience the culture of campus.



## About the Research Sponsors

### James Tower

James Tower is a full-service Internet marketing company specializing in recruitment communication services for higher education. Our solutions create human connections with your prospective students. We offer AdmissionsGenie (our Internet recruitment solution); CDs and DVDs; virtual tours; e-mail marketing campaigns; Web site design; content management solutions; and publications.

### Noel-Levitz

Noel-Levitz has consulted with nearly 2,000 public and private institutions, helping these campuses and systems reach their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success at the undergraduate and graduate/professional levels.

### NRCCUA

The National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA) conducts the largest in-school college and career planning survey among high school students. Services include student search lists, recruitment publications, and related communications resources.

## Noel-Levitz®

Iowa City, Iowa  
Denver, Colorado  
Connecticut

**800.876.1117**

[info@noellevitz.com](mailto:info@noellevitz.com)

[www.noellevitz.com](http://www.noellevitz.com)

## JAMES TOWER®

North Mankato, Minnesota

**866.636.3600**

[contact@jamestower.com](mailto:contact@jamestower.com)

[www.jamestower.com](http://www.jamestower.com)

## Questions about this paper ...

If you have any questions or comments about the E-Expectations of Transfer Students study, please contact:

Cathy Willette  
Vice President  
James Tower, Inc.  
1.507.344.5429  
[chwillette@jamestower.com](mailto:chwillette@jamestower.com)

