

# Race and Gender Differences in the Transfer Student Experience

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*The expectations, self-perceptions, past academic behaviors, and attitudes of transfer students were examined in this study. Participants were 2,492 incoming transfer students (53% female, 14% African American, 14% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic/Latino/a, and 65% White, and had a mean age of 21.8) at a mid-Atlantic doctoral extensive public university. During their university orientation, students completed the Transfer Student Survey (Wawrzynski, Kish, Balón, & Sedlacek, 1999). Multivariate statistical analysis revealed differences by race and gender for expectations, academic behaviors, and learning outcomes. The use of noncognitive variables was discussed in the context of the various findings and implications.*

Recent information on college enrollment trends indicated that higher education experienced a rapid growth of students in the last decade (United States Department of Education, 2001). Paralleling this rapid growth was the number of students who transferred from one institution to another (Beckenstein, 1992). Although numbers of transfer students increased over the past decade, research on transfer students has not kept pace with this growing trend. The research on transfer students has been devoted to comparing transfer students to their first-year student counterparts (Miville & Sedlacek, 1995) or to students who originated and continued enrollment at the

same institution (Keeley & House, 1993; Townsend, 1994), or grouped students into minority and nonminority transfer students (Keeley & House; Laanan, 1999). Additionally, in their meta-analysis, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) devoted a few pages to discussing transfer students, with the point that two-year colleges may not adequately prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions.

Research on transfer students has often not taken full advantage of multiple levels of analyses. For example, researchers have been simplistic in their analyses, with many only providing demographic data and frequencies (Eimers & Mullen, 1997); had small sample sizes (Davies & Casey, 1999; Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Miville & Sedlacek, 1995), or have examined GPA and retention as a means of determining a successful transition (Cejda, 1997; Cejda, Kaylon, & Rewey, 1998; Laanan, 1999). Although the literature on transfer students provided a general basis for better understanding these students, transfer students are often defined as a group by the one thing they share—a transition experience from one school to another—even if they have little else in common with their transfer peers. When researchers and practitioners view transfer students with a singular perspective, the consequent stereotyping and myths influence the way we understand and serve this growing student population. Transfer students are often labeled as not wanting to

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engage in the campus life of their new institution (Astin, 1982) concerned only with their academic course requirements, being academically unprepared for the demands of four-year institutions (Keeley & House, 1993; Laanan, 1999; Townsend, 1994), and not needing assistance in their transition because they have already experienced college life on at least one other campus (Beckenstein, 1992).

These stereotypes often are perpetuated because institutions rarely collect the sorts of information from students entering their institution, namely intentions, which would permit researchers to better understand student expectations and successful transitions. Bean and Metzner (1985) suggested that administrators and faculty need to better understand students on their respective college campuses. Part of this understanding consists of better understanding the expectations that students bring with them (Tinto, 1993). King (1999) posited that identifying and researching student subgroups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) provides information on experiences that affect student educational success. Studying transfer students upon their entry into their new institution provides an opportunity for researchers to study a group of students who are still committed to completing a college degree (Tinto).

Students entering higher education are a complex and diverse student population, encompassing students from a wide range of educational, economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. If students entering higher education are more diverse than in previous years, one could speculate that the numbers of students who are transferring are equally diverse. Studying student subgroups such as those identified above will allow us to better understand the increasing populations of

transfer students (King, 1999). Previous research studies have found differences with many of these diverse student populations (Allen, 1988; Rendón, 1994; Sedlacek, 1998; Tinto, 1993), but none have studied transfer students in relation to race, ethnicity, or gender.

A number of variables may be involved when studying student retention. Astin (1993) noted that an essential problem in understanding retention is choosing the correct input, environmental, and outcome variables. Other researchers (Sedlacek, 1996; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985) have agreed and shown that cognitive variables are not the only variables to play a factor in student inputs and outcomes. Sedlacek (1998) found that noncognitive variables can predict retention and persistence better than other measures for all students. The term *non-cognitive* is used here to refer to variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, rather than the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas, typically measured by standardized tests (Sedlacek, in press). Noncognitive variables are equally, if not more, important in shaping academic performance in college persistence decisions among students of color, and among women (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997; Sedlacek, 2003). In the current study, item content concerned both interests and expectations of students and all perceptions were focused on their matriculation to a new university. For this reason, student interests served as a proxy for the transfer students' perceptions and expectations concerning their transfer institution.

Assessing the goals, attitudes, academic behaviors, and intentions of transfer students allows for a better understanding of the college retention process for transfer students.

Additionally, assessing transfer students yields valuable information for four-year institutions in their efforts to address the needs of these incoming students (Laanan, 1996).

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to fill a void in the transfer student literature by investigating the expectations, self-perceptions, past academic behaviors, and attitudes of students who transferred to a doctoral extensive university on the East Coast.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants in this study were 2,492 incoming undergraduate transfer students at a mid-Atlantic public doctoral extensive university (Spring 2000,  $N = 484$ ; Fall 2000,  $N = 563$ ; Spring 2001,  $N = 408$ ; and Fall 2001,  $N = 1037$ ) who completed the Transfer Student Survey (TSS) (Wawrzynski, Kish, Balón, & Sedlacek, 1999) as part of their student orientation program. The TSS was administered either online ( $N = 1,775$ , 71%) or as a paper instrument ( $N = 717$ , 29%) at a transfer orientation program. The participants in the current study represent approximately 66% of the incoming transfer students attending orientation programs. Statistical comparisons were made of the samples and no differences were found. Thus, the samples appeared to represent a single population and they were combined.

The sample was 53% female and 47% male. Three hundred eighty (16%) of the participants self-identified as African American; 326 (14%) as Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander; 1,562 (65%) as White; 136 (6%) as Hispanic, Latino, or Latina; and 88 (0.7%) as other. The average age of participants was 21.8 ( $SD = 4.4$ ).

### Instrument

A team of researchers from the New Student

Programs and Research office at the university developed the TSS as a paper instrument in 1999 and added an online version in the Spring of 2000. Content validity of the TSS was achieved by a four-step process. The first step involved reviewing the literature on transfer students. Themes were then developed from the literature with questions derived for each of the themes by the research team. Five judges independently reviewed the survey items and determined which theme was best represented by each item. When three fifths of the judges agreed upon the items, the items were said to have content validity (Sedlacek, in press).

The TSS is a 68-item questionnaire containing self-report items on academic perceptions, academic behaviors, social connections, diversity, support systems, goals/outcomes of college, institutional commitment, work, finances, and attitudes and concerns about the University. Controversy surrounds the validity of self-report data (Pace, 1985; Pike, 1995). However, self-reports are valid when requested information is known to the respondents, questions are phrased clearly and unambiguously, refer to recent activities, the questions merit a serious response by the respondents, and answering the questions do not embarrass or threaten the respondents (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988; Converse & Presser, 1989; DeNisi & Shaw, 1977; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Laing, Swayer, & Noble, 1988; Pace; Pike). The TSS meets all of these criteria.

### Procedure

Transfer students were asked to complete either a Web-based or paper version of the TSS as part of their daylong new transfer student orientation experience. Students were told that the survey data would be used to help plan and provide better services to

students and that their responses would remain confidential.

Students completing the TSS were asked to provide their student identification number so that results from the survey could be linked with institutional data.

## Analyses

We conducted a general linear model multivariate analysis of variance and a general linear model univariate analysis of variance ( $p < .01$ ) to determine whether past academic behaviors, expectations, and desired learning outcomes would vary according to certain demographic factors such as gender and racial or ethnic identity. When appropriate, LSD post hoc tests ( $p < .01$ ) were computed to determine where the significance among the groups existed.

## RESULTS

### Race Differences

The results demonstrated a statistically significant multivariate effect associated with racial and ethnic identity (Wilks's Lambda = .718,  $F = 5.60$ ). Table 1 shows the questions, means, and standard deviations of the analyses by race that were statistically significant and for which racial groups. Only those questions that were statistically significant are reported in Table 1.

*Expectations.* As shown in Table 1, students of color (i.e., African American, Asian American, and Hispanic/Latino/a) are generally expected to become part of their new university community by interacting with faculty and students outside of class. Involvement in various aspects of the institution has particular implications for becoming successful students, particularly for students of color (Sedlacek, 1999).

*Learning outcomes.* On the whole,

students of color were more interested in establishing goals for educational experiences that would provide them with lifelong skills. For example, students of color were more interested in developing effective written and oral communication skills, acquiring technology skills, learning to think and reason, gaining an appreciation of attitudes and cultures different from theirs, and developing leadership skills. As Sedlacek (2003) and others (Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1994; Fuertes, Sedlacek, & Liu, 1994; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985) have shown, the importance of developing long-term goals or seeing how some of the above skills and educational experiences fit into their goals are important for the success of students of color. Findings from the current study corroborate other research that identified the role of community, particularly for students of color (Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1992), as these students were interested in engaging in community service and identified this as an important part of a college education.

*Academic behaviors.* Sense of community was also a theme that emerged with academic behaviors for students of color, as they were more likely to study with other students than were their White counterparts. Additionally, students of color reported positive academic behaviors more often than White students did. For example, reviewing, revising, and updating class notes; preparing for class by reading ahead; and attending class were more indicative of students of color. On the other hand, White students were more likely to report negative academic behaviors such as putting off studying. Despite reporting positive academic behaviors, Asian American students also indicated that they had difficulty deciding what to study and speaking up in class than did their counterparts.

## Gender Differences

We conducted a general linear model univariate analysis of variance with all dependent variables that were suitable to be analyzed by this statistical method. Twelve questions shared significant differences by gender. The results demonstrated a statistically significant multivariate effect associated with gender (Wilks's Lambda = .820,  $F = 10.668$ ). Table 2 shows the questions, means, and standard deviations of the analyses by gender that were statistically significant.

*Expectations.* Male students were more interested in the academic aspects of a college education than the social aspects. Female students had a more holistic expectation for their education. They were more interested in obtaining a well-rounded education and interested in joining campus organizations. Male students were more interested in working with faculty on a research project.

*Learning outcomes.* Learning to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, as part of their college education was more important for female students than it was for male students. In addition to females wanting to acquire knowledge and skills in their academic interest area, they also wanted to acquire knowledge that would complement and enhance their academic interests. Females also reported gaining an appreciation of attitudes and cultures that were different than their own and participating in community service as important outcomes. Males, however, had learning to think and reason and developing leadership skills as important parts of their college education.

*Academic behaviors.* Only one academic behavior question was significant when compared by gender. Females were more

likely to report positive academic behaviors such as reviewing, revising, and updating class notes.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research indicate that transfer students do not all share the same experiences and expectations when transferring into a new institution. A model for further interpreting the results can be derived from noncognitive variable research (Sedlacek, 1999). These measures have shown validity in predicting success for a number of students including African Americans (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992), Asian Americans (Fuentes et al., 1994), Latinos and Latinas (Fuentes & Sedlacek, 1994), low-income first-generation students (Ting & Robinson, 1998), and specially admitted Whites (Ting, 1997). Ossana, Helms, and Leonard (1992) have studied "womanist" identity as an important part of self-esteem; and Jones (1997) found that race varied in its importance in the identity development of women in college, depending on their race. Also, Frankenburg (1993) discussed the relevance of exploring the concept of "Whiteness" in the identity development of White women. The current study on transfer students seemed to indicate that females were concerned with these same issues.

Three thematic areas emerged from the results of the current study: expectations, learning outcomes, and academic behaviors of transfer students. Considering noncognitive variables when interpreting the results of the current study will help to gauge transfer students' talents and potential to succeed in college. Better understanding how this theme relates to success by using noncognitive variables will also reveal areas that may need to be emphasized to assist

TABLE 1.  
Means and Standard Deviations of Transfer Student Expectations, Desired Learning Outcomes, and Academic Behaviors by Race \*

Question	African American n = 380		Asian American n = 326		White n = 1,562		Hispanic/Latino/a n = 136		Sig. Dif. p ≤ .01
	M**	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
<i>Expectations</i>									
I expect to have a hard time adjusting to the academic work at the University of Maryland.	3.64	0.91	3.14	1.04	3.45	0.94	3.32	0.92	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W, AfA v. H, AsA v. W, AsA v. H
I am looking forward to meeting people different from myself.	1.58	0.72	1.66	0.65	1.79	0.72	1.66	0.64	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
I am interested in working with a faculty member on a research project.	2.15	0.96	2.19	0.89	2.38	0.96	2.28	0.87	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
I am interested in getting a broad and well-rounded education.	1.29	0.58	1.34	0.56	1.47	0.67	1.26	0.53	AfA v. W, AsA v. W, H v. W
I am interested in joining campus organizations.	1.94	0.91	1.99	0.82	2.22	0.91	2.13	0.89	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
I am interested in interacting with faculty outside of class.	2.05	0.90	2.11	0.79	2.28	0.82	2.22	0.87	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
<i>Desired Learning Outcomes/Experiences</i>									
Learning to communicate effectively in writing	1.29	0.61	1.43	0.62	1.44	0.63	1.34	0.67	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W
Learning to communicate orally	1.21	0.55	1.30	0.51	1.35	0.59	1.21	0.47	AfA v. W, H v. W
Acquiring technology skills for work and life	1.38	0.62	1.41	0.59	1.53	0.68	1.40	0.65	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
Gaining an appreciation of attitudes and cultures that are different than mine	1.56	0.70	1.70	0.69	1.82	0.78	1.70	0.82	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W
Participating in community service	2.03	0.90	2.23	0.84	2.36	0.94	2.28	0.94	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W, AfA v. H
Learning to think and reason	1.28	0.63	1.43	0.67	1.38	0.57	1.36	0.62	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W
Developing leadership skills	1.39	0.70	1.61	0.73	1.61	0.74	1.54	0.69	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W

table continues



TABLE 1. *continued*  
 Means and Standard Deviations of Transfer Student Expectations, Desired Learning Outcomes, and Academic Behaviors by Race \*

Question	African American n = 380		Asian American n = 326		White n = 1,562		Hispanic/Latino/a n = 136		Sig. Dif. p ≤ .01
	M**	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
<i>Academic Behaviors</i>									
How often do you review/revise/update class notes?	2.25	0.99	2.36	0.95	2.45	0.93	2.34	0.93	AfA v. W
How often do you prepare for class by reading ahead?	2.32	0.93	2.66	0.90	2.56	0.92	2.39	0.92	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W, AsA v. H
How often do you put off studying?	3.25	0.86	3.07	0.88	3.02	0.84	3.23	0.93	AfA v. AsA, AfA v. W, H v. W
How often do you have trouble deciding what to study?	3.40	0.93	3.21	0.89	3.36	0.88	3.44	0.91	AfA v. AsA, AsA v. W, AsA v. H
How often do you speak up in class?	2.52	1.02	2.91	0.89	2.59	0.98	2.59	1.10	AfA v. AsA, AsA v. W, AsA v. H
How often do you study with other students?	2.97	0.95	2.97	0.93	3.17	0.88	3.10	0.97	AfA v. W, AsA v. W
How often do you attend class?	1.26	0.64	1.36	0.58	1.35	0.55	1.34	0.72	AfA v. W

\* Wilks's Lambda = .718, F = 5.6, p ≤ .01.

\*\* 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree.

TABLE 2.  
Means and Standard Deviations of Transfer Student Expectations, Desired Learning Outcomes, and Academic Behaviors by Gender\*

Question	Female <i>n</i> = 1325		Male <i>n</i> = 1154	
	<i>M</i> **	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Expectations</i>				
I am interested in working with a faculty member on a research project.	2.36	0.96	2.25	0.93
I am interested in getting a broad and well-rounded education.	1.36	0.60	1.47	0.68
I am interested in joining campus organizations.	2.06	0.89	2.24	0.91
Desired learning outcomes/experiences				
Learning to communicate effectively in writing.	1.36	0.59	1.45	0.65
Learning to communicate orally.	1.28	0.54	1.35	0.60
Gaining an appreciation of attitudes/cultures that are different than mine	1.66	0.71	1.86	0.83
Acquiring knowledge and skills in my academic interest area	1.19	0.47	1.26	0.71
Acquiring knowledge in areas that complement/enhance my academic interest area	1.40	0.59	1.47	0.60
Participating in community service	2.16	0.89	2.43	0.95
Learning to think and reason	1.38	0.61	1.36	0.60
Developing leadership skills	1.62	0.77	1.53	0.72
Academic behaviors				
How often do you review/revise/update class notes?	2.33	0.92	2.47	0.96

\* Wilks's Lambda = .820,  $F = 10.668$ ,  $p \leq .01$ .

\*\* 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*.

transfer students in being successful. The noncognitive variables used in this study included: a positive self-concept, availability of a strong support person, importance of community, long-range goals, leadership skills, and understanding how to negotiate a diverse environment.

### Expectations

The first thematic finding of the current

study showed expectation differences by race and gender. The academic self-concept of Asian American students was an issue, as Asian American students may have more pressure on them to be model students than those from other racial groups (Liang & Sedlacek, in press). Forcing the model expectation myth on Asian Americans can be detrimental to their success, as having a positive self-concept and being able to



handle racism are shown to be predictors of success for these students (Fuentes et al., 1994).

Also, African American and Asian American transfer students expressed greater interest in working with faculty on a research project or interacting outside of class than did White students. Research has shown that having a strong support person is critical for the success of students of color (Fries-Britt, 2000; Sedlacek, 1999). Because students of color are less likely than some of their White counterparts to have immediate family members or friends who have attended college or who have attended the particular college they are enrolled in, it is positive to see that students of color are interested in pursuing interactions with faculty who can serve as potential support persons.

Although having a strong support person is important to student success, being able to negotiate a diverse environment is another important predictor of success for students of color. African American and Asian American students were more interested in meeting people from other cultures than were White students. Recent research on universal diverse orientation indicates that students who show an interest in diversity adjust to their institution better and have better academic self-concepts (Fuentes, Sedlacek, Roger, & Mohr, 2000).

Part of negotiating the environment is becoming immersed in what the campus has to offer. African Americans and Asian Americans were more interested in joining campus organizations than were other students. This supports the research suggesting that both of these groups develop support systems through community involvement (Fuentes et al., 1994; Sedlacek, 1998). This result from the current study challenges the myth that transfer students are interested

only in the academic offerings of an institution, and supports the evidence that campus climate can have an important impact on the success or failure of transfer students. Astin (1993), Kuh (1991), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have identified the important role that involvement on campus has for students in the persistence process. This also extends the finding of Sedlacek (1996) who reported the importance of developing a sense of community for students of color to transfer students of color.

The current study also showed similar results for female transfer students. Ancis and Phillips (1996) found that women who are actively part of their campus communities had better self-efficacy and were better able to develop positive career behaviors than women students who did not develop what they called "behavioral agency." This supports work by Betz (1994) and Betz and Hackett (1987) on the importance of campus community involvement (agentic behaviors) for learning, obtaining employment, and enrolling in graduate school. Results of past studies have yielded significant differential interests in joining campus organizations for women than for men (Liu, 1995).

It is important for colleges and universities to help students meet expectations that students have set for their college experiences. The fact that students have set expectations suggests that they have started to develop long-range goals, which is another noncognitive variable found to be important in student success. Astin (1975) found that students with lower aspirations and vague goals were more likely than other students to leave school. Tracey and Sedlacek (1985, 1989) further found evidence that having long-term goals predicted college grades, retention, and graduation for students,

particularly for African American students.

### Learning Outcomes

The second thematic area to be explored is that of learning outcomes. The learning outcomes studied in this research also correspond to potential measures of success with noncognitive variables. Preferences for long-term goals have been shown to predict college success for students of color. This predictor of success has promising potential for the students of color in this study, particularly the African American transfer students. African American transfer students, more so than any other group, viewed their college education as necessary for acquiring skills for work and life, including: technology skills, learning to communicate effectively in writing, learning to communicate effectively orally, and learning to think and reason. Hispanic transfer students were also more likely than White students to report learning to communicate effectively orally as an important outcome of college.

African American and Asian American transfer students viewed gaining an appreciation for attitudes and cultures that were different from theirs was more important for them than for White students. This result could suggest that these students of color understand the importance of learning to navigate an environment that is different from their own. When students have been able to adopt this philosophy and understanding they were more likely to be successful (Sedlacek, 1998).

As noted earlier, the idea of developing a sense of community for students of color and women cannot be understated. African American and Asian American transfer students were more interested in participating in community service as part of their college education.

Regarding the development of leadership skills as an important learning outcome of college, which corresponds to the non-cognitive variable of successful leadership experience, several points can be made. African Americans were more interested than any other racial or ethnic group to identify this as an important learning outcome.

### Academic Behaviors

Finally, the noted academic behaviors for transfer students suggest that students of color in general noted that they were more likely to engage in certain academic behaviors than were their White counterparts. When students are able to engage in realistic self-appraisal, especially academic in nature, they are more likely to remain in school and be successful (Sedlacek, 1998). When students are able to recognize and work hard to overcome academic deficiencies they are more likely to be successful (Sedlacek, 1998). The fact that Asian American students identified that they had trouble deciding what to study suggests that they have recognized this as a concern. Now, if they are able to seek support or assistance to help them in their decision making regarding what to study, they will likely be successful. Speaking up in class is likely to occur more for African American, Hispanic, or White students than for Asian American students. These students may view this as a leadership opportunity by providing advice or taking action where called for (Sedlacek, 1998), and this is also indicative of success. African American and Asian American students were more likely to study with other students than were White students. The development of peer study groups is important to student success (Astin, 1993; Sedlacek, 1998). Sedlacek (1998) suggested that when students can establish a support mechanism

where they receive encouragement and use other resources to help solve problems they are more likely to be successful.

## CONCLUSION

Although individual institutions need to continue to study the transitions of transfer students, more systemic research is needed to better understand the transfer experience across institutions. Finally, to better facilitate transfer students' transitions to a new environment, administrators and those responsible for orienting transfer students to the university must be made aware of the experiences and expectations of transfer students. This knowledge will enable administrators and others to develop programs to meet the needs that are specific to the transfer student experience. Tinto (1993)

posited that pre-entry expectations generally become the standard against which individuals evaluate their early experiences within the institution. Therefore, knowing the concerns that students generally have before students arrive, permits institutions to be proactive in addressing these concerns. When students' expectations are met, they are more likely to succeed and when students succeed, they are more likely to persist. If one of the goals of an institution is to help students be successful, than understanding students' experiences is paramount.

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