

Belonging Matters Final Report

Belonging Matters Project is a cross-unit collaboration between the College of Business and Public Management and the Office of New Student Programs that address the needs of transfer students in the School of Business. The goals of the project are to help transfer students make a successful transition to WCU and to help faculty and staff better understand their needs. To achieve these goals, we proposed and completed the following activities as part of our University Forum grant:

- **Transfer Student Orientation** - The pre-business counselors, the Director of Business Programs and the Assistant Chair of the Management Department all participated in a one-day Transfer Student Orientation held in August 2017. The counselors noted that the number and quality of questions from transfers students was significantly higher than from first-years students. They attributed this to the fact that transfer students already have experience in college and thus know what they don't know.
- **Intake questionnaires** - The pre-business counselors decided one key question to new transfers students—what did you find most frustrating during the transfer process? An analysis of the responses indicates that the top reasons were: transfer credit issues; not enough online and evening classes; confusion about who to contact to set up an advising appointment; and the math placement exam. This information is consistent with similar information collected during transfer orientation.
- **Fall Fair** - The College of Business and Public Management hosted a fall fair for all pre-business transfer students on September 13, 2017. All but two student organizations from the College of Business and Public Management set up information tables and representatives from Admissions, Registrar, Office of New Student Programs and Counseling Center were present to answer questions. Faculty and business counselors also participated.

Approximately 30 new transfer students attended the fair. We had an opportunity to speak to some of the participants about their transfer experiences and how other aspects of their identity intersected with transfer status to complicate or help their transition to WCU. One example stands out. We met a student who is gay, Muslim and first-generation, and found it difficult to fit in socially on campus. He tried a number of student organizations and didn't feel welcome, but said that he made a close friend in one of his business classes. We encouraged him to get involved in a CPBM student organization.

Although the fair was successful, if we were to do it again we would not limit participation to new transfer students and instead open it up to all transfer students. By doing so, we could reach a larger group of students and give new transfer students an opportunity to interact with students who have attended WCU for a longer period of time.

- **Business Tutor** - The Management Department hired a student worker to serve as a

dedicated business tutor for pre-business management transfer students during AY2017-2018. While we are happy that approximately 40 students utilized the tutoring service and received assistance with math, economics and accounting classes, we did not spend all the funds that we allocated for this portion of the project. We publicized the tutor through multiple channels, including sending direct emails to students, posting flyers throughout our building and asking faculty and the business counselors to announce it. We also experimented with two formats for tutoring—appointments and weekly regularly scheduled drop-in hours. Despite these efforts, reaching students remained a challenge. In addition, we know of some instances where students did not take advantage of tutoring even though they were encouraged to do so by their instructors. For example, one student asked to withdraw from his accounting class during the last two weeks of the semester because he was failing. The instructor told us that she repeatedly suggested the student see the tutor. This example indicates that there are additional barriers preventing students from seeking the help they need.

The underutilization of the tutor can also be attributed to the extended period of time it took to do the hiring due to the need to publicize, screen and process the paperwork for applicants. Also, we had expected to have the same tutor all year, but the first semester tutor got a full-time paid internship during spring semester and we had to start the hiring process all over again in spring.

- **Focus groups** – We scheduled two focus groups during the last week of the semester at two different times and invited all new transfer students. Only three students signed up and just one showed up! However, the student who participated provided great feedback about what programs and services helped him most. In particular, he cited the new transfer student orientation as particularly helpful.
- **Information Sharing** – One of the project goals was to start a conversation on campus and beyond about the needs of transfer students. To this end Jared Brown, Kathy Koval and Lisa Calvano presented at the 2017 PASSHE Social Equity Conference at WCU, the 2018 SoTLA Conference at WCU and the 2017 and 2018 Transfer and Advising Consortium Conferences at Cabrini and Widener Colleges. The discussions with colleagues from the region were interesting and insightful.

Reflecting back on the year, the main lessons learned are:

- Some transfer students struggle with finding a place to fit in because of transfer status and other aspects of identity complicate or help belonging.
- The Belonging Matters project addresses mostly academic needs. In the process of interacting with students we could identify and understand other needs.
- Academic success and belonging go hand in hand.
- Transfer initiatives should be a partnership between Academic and Students Affairs.
- Transfer success is multifaceted and requires touch points at the university, college and department levels.
- Communicating with students is a challenge and may lead to underutilization of

services.

- Personal connections with faculty and staff matter, but sometimes that is not enough to engage students.

In terms of sustainability, we are please to report that WCU created a cross-unit Transfer Task Force that met monthly during the academic year and will continue to do so going forward. The Belonging Matters Project team, as well as representatives from Admissions, Registrar, Student Affairs, the Transfer Concierge and staff and faculty from Philadelphia serve on the committee. Belonging Matters was also one of the catalysts for creating a faculty development project related to a subset of transfer students—adult learners, in particular those at the Philadelphia campus.

Lessons learned (from slides)

- communicating with students remains a challenge
- transfer status is helped or hindered by other aspects of identity
- partnership between academic and student affairs