

MEETING THE ACADEMIC/SOCIAL NEEDS OF TRANSFER STUDENTS AT
FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITIES BY BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

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Kelly Curtiss

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Abstract

MEETING THE ACADEMIC/SOCIAL NEEDS OF TRANSFER STUDENTS AT FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITIES BY BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Kelly Curtiss

Under the Supervision of Dr. Richard Rogers
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In years past, transfer students were only a small portion of a campus population. However, in the first decade of the 2000s in rough economic times, students were taking the route of two-year community colleges to cope with the financial burden of higher education hoping to obtain a four-year bachelors degree. Transfer student needs were slightly different from traditional students warranting a closer look at what could be done to assist this body of students. This study took a brief look at the history and impact of two-year colleges, the curriculum and articulation agreement needs between institutions of high education, the academic and social programs to consider, along with the resources, tools, and opportunities to help students become familiar with a student's new campus.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Thinking back to earlier days in elementary or middle school, faint memories might include the start of a new academic year with one or two new faces in the classroom. Assuming a small town school where everyone knew everyone else in the particular grade, this could leave the new student(s) feeling like the outsider; leaving the new student(s) to be stared at or ignored against the best efforts of the teacher to make them feel welcomed. Perhaps even snickered at when they get lost in what might be perceived by most as a rather small building.

Moving forward ten years, the same situation could still be found for the new transfer student(s) at a four-year university. The transfer student, showing the same characteristics of his/her fellow students, yet different in enough ways to make him or her feel like the outsider, be stared at or ignored when lost on what many might consider a rather small campus.

What had just been described is the issue of transfer shock for many students. Students transferring from one institution to another, only bringing with them previously earned college credits. What was missing was their knowledge of campus buildings and locations, social “happenings” and opportunities, and the names and faces that allowed them to feel welcomed, even if it was only within a small circle of acquaintances.

The obligation to revamp, improve, and expand services to meet the needs of transfer students had been long overdue. Transfer students are not seen as first-time students to an institution. Many times the transfer student might have the attitude of “I know what I am doing.” These issues and more needed to be addressed so that a transfer student could be recognized for his/her knowledge and ability, yet provided the guidance to be a successful student.

Statement of the Problem

What are effective means (programs, tools, curricula, methods, techniques, processes, systems) that contribute to the academic success of transfer student at four year universities?

Definition of Terms

Transfer Shock. Transfer shock occurs when a dip occurs in the transfer students' grades during the first semester after they transfer to an institution (Hills, 1965).

Transfer Student. Transfer students are students who begin a higher education at one institution and transfer to a different institution (Hughey, Nelson, Damminger, & McCalla-Wriggens, 2009).

Articulation Agreements. Formal collaborative agreement between educational institutions that enables a student to complete a program at one institution and using accumulated credits, attain a degree at another institution in a shorter period of time (O'Meara, Hall, Carmichael, 2007).

Non-traditional Student. An adult student who pursues an education on either a full- or part-time basis while maintaining his/her responsibilities of family, employment along with other life roles one may have (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010).

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 120 days using the resources of the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. The several search engines provided by EBSCOHOST were also used. The key search terms were "transfer student needs" and "transfer rate."

Method of Approach

A brief review began with the history and background of what introduced transfer students into the higher educational system was conducted. An examination of literature related to admissions and articulations agreements along with academic and social programs for transfer

students exposed limited research on the needs and differences of transfer students and traditional campus students. Further exploration also revealed the lacking resources and tools used to communicate the transitional experience with current and future transfer students from two-year institutions to four-year institutions. The conclusions were summarized with the recommendation of a carefully planned out effort from staff, faculty and administrators to aid in the successful move and graduation of transfer students.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

History/Background of Transfer Students

Junior colleges (later called community colleges) were introduced in the early 1900s. These institutions were an extension of curriculum from what was offered in local high schools. President Harry Truman's commission report, "Higher Education for American Democracy," recognized that community colleges provided an educational opportunity to lower class citizens enabling them to finish their first and second years of college at reasonable costs (O'Meara, Hall, & Carmichael, 2007).

Although community colleges based their mission on helping students make the transition to four-year institutions, the introduction of the open-door policy allowed institutions to service those who were academically underprepared (History, 2010). This change in academic policy brought a new wave of students into higher education in the 1960s. Historically this was a time of the civil rights movement with the addition of the baby boom of the 1940s-50s (Zimmer, 2006).

The impact and change to an open door policy by two-year or community colleges are bringing forth issues and concerns with transfer students. With the rate of students entering two-year institutions of higher education increasing faster than students entering four-year institutions of higher education, the likelihood for students to transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution are significant (Cuseo, 2001). The open-door policy also allowed for the admission of more at-risk students and increased the need for resources to help students (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010).

The Admissions Process/Articulation Agreements/Curriculum

Success of an educational institution was usually measured by the number of students who graduated with a degree through the completion of degree and graduation requirements. To transfer students, understanding new rules, policies and curriculum requirements could prove to be fatal to their academic careers. To minimize such fatal consequences of transferring, articulation agreements had been widely developed. The development of articulation agreements was to provide for a smoother transition for the transferring student from one institution to another – generally from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. It also fulfilled the obligation of a community college by “providing great access to education in addition to their already established open-door admission policies, lower costs per credit, ability to live at home while working a degree” (O’Meara et al., 2007). Articulation agreements could even be regarded as pre-orientation programs (Pierceall & Lewis, 2000). The first opportunity a student has to make an informed decision about their long-term academic career.

Academic Programs

Articulation agreements are formal declarations of communication between two-institutions. Sharon Robertson, Northern Virginia Community College’s (NOVA) Associate Vice President for academic services, acknowledged that the communication needed to come from both institutions at multiple levels within the organization. Each higher-education institution had to explore the possibilities of building a relationship with another institution. Each institution had to bear in mind the needs of the student, the goal of articulation agreements, and the institution’s mission.

Tarrant County College (TCC) in Texas made the vision of transfer a student’s next step in his/her academic plan. TCC introduced a course called transition-to-college that “aims to help students move higher up the academic ladder” (Ullman, 2011). This course was an opportunity

for TCC to introduce to the student the transfer process, how to make a plan, and how to utilize the resources. TCC did caution that students could still be diverted from career goals by life events.

Some colleges like Lansing Community College (LCC) in Michigan, where no statewide higher education system existed, and NOVA, where articulation agreements had increased from three to 50 over the last 14 years, showed the challenges articulation agreements could have on the resource controlling them (Ullman, 2011). The information was obviously very pertinent to a student's ability to understand his/her road map of academic achievement. If the information provided was inaccurate, the student could be taking the bumpy road from a two-year institution to a four-year institution without even knowing it. Another cautious area was trying to understand *how* credits transfer. The "difference between saying a course transfers and actually having your credits applied to the degree" can have a major impact on a student's decision (Ullman, 2011).

Social Programs

The determination of success in the transfer process might be measured by the number of articulation agreements offered between one institution and other surrounding institutions. The need for social and cultural integration was just as much a part of the equation for successful transition as was the academic transition (Pierceall & Lewis, 2000). The change from the smaller, intimate and lower student-to-teacher ratio would impact the student as they adjusted. A four-year institution could have been seen as more intimidating, impersonal, and over-whelming coupled with the lack of knowledge of where to find resources. "They [transfer students] are starting over socially and culturally without starting over academically" (Pierceall & Lewis,

2000). Some main concerns would focus on what services were available; for example, availability of academic advising and information concerning how financial aid worked.

Students from a community college were more commonly found to be older, non-traditional students and would commute to the institution from home (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). Many established scholars in student development, such as Vincent Tinto, Ernest Pascarella, and Patrick Terenzini, suggested a look at social and psychological development. At the time of this study, a significant lack of current research provided limited understanding to the needs of students transferring from two-year institutions to four-year institutions (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010).

Resources to Consider/Tools

Because transfer students might be part-time, commuter, distance learning, or adult students, accessing the resources offered to traditional campus students (tutoring, academic advising, and career planning) could often be out of reach due to limited office hours in the early morning, into the evening, or perhaps even on the weekend. The option of offering online student support services could be a solution. With online student support services, the flexibility was there to allow students to log-in from remote locations (home, library, etc.) and at any hour (Smith, 2005). Allowing the use of such electronic services and tools can provide benefits not only to the student, but to the institution as well. When a system like this was set up requiring a student to log-in, better data collection could occur to determine student interest and needs (Smith, 2005).

Although such home grown systems could be viewed as financially beneficial, the additional costs of maintaining, training, and up-keep needed to be considered. Further consideration to a college-provided program was cost and expense of it being staffed by peers

versus one staffed by professional tutors and/or advisors. The necessity to market and perhaps train for the use of such resources for instructors had been taken into consideration as well. If professors were not aware of the tools and services an institution could offer its students, the likelihood of student usage was dwindled. Finally, if the scheduling and services of such resources was minimal and not convenient to the students (the users); then the entire program could be at risk for failure - although the idea and needs were there (Smith, 2005).

Organization/Processes

For a new incoming freshman class directly from high school, some type of orientation opportunity was typically provided at a college or university. Some sessions were scheduled in the middle of the summer while fall class registration was taking place. Other institutions may have scheduled orientation the weekend before classes started in the fall. Either way, institutions had an opportunity to introduce new students to the campus environment they would be calling home over the next four years. According to the Council for Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS) (1986), student orientation was to help students transition to that institution, introduce them to the education opportunities, and assimilate them into the new environment.

Since students would increasingly likely to start at a two-year institution and transfer to a four-year institution, the same need was there on a growing scale to introduce transfer students to the new campus environment, campus policy, and campus buildings. Such organized orientation sessions had been easily overlooked by institutions for a perceived group of “second-class citizens” (Jacobs, Busby & Leath, 1992). Four-year institutions already knew that transfer students tended to experience transfer shock in the first semester of school after transfer. Four-year institutions also knew that if transfer shock was reduced, the transfer student was less likely

to drop-out. With retention rate of transfer students lower than that of their counterparts who originally started at the institution, they became at-risk students (Jacobs et al., 1992; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010). According to a study by Jacobs, Busby and Leath, the assumptions that transfer student and freshman needs were the same from institution to institution did not hold true. (Jacobs et al., 1992). Consequently, orientation sessions would need to be designed around who the transfer students were as they began each semester from their unique prior institution.

Summary

Transfer students were becoming a larger portion of on-campus populations. The retention and success for this unique group of students was a challenge. Because they had started their higher academic careers at other higher educational institutions, it seemed to be assumed by many that transfer students were capable of making an easy transition from institution to institution. However, although they had taken college courses, they were a new student. Transfer students were also in need of similar services, guidance, and help to make the higher education years meaningful to potential career paths.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

The best decision a student can make for themselves is an informed decision. If the two-year or four-year institution places the responsibility of decision making on the student, the institution must take the responsibility of informing the student of academic and social opportunities while a student is enrolled at the institution. Each institution needs to utilize diverse resources and tools to provide effective communication and variety of programs to aid transfer students in a successful transition. The goal needs to be a win-win situation: for the educational institution, increased retention and for the student, an earned degree.

Based on these conclusions and research, a model transfer orientation program was designed (see Appendix A) to utilize a mixture of resources and tools on and off campus to improve students' transition from one institution to the next. This needs to be a coordinated effort across various departments and requires support from administration as well as faculty. Shifting times in higher educational institutions requires the acknowledgement and accommodation of an increased population of transfer students.

A successful transfer orientation program needs to have support between both the two-year and four-year institutions. Open communication about the needs, goals, and desired outcomes from each institution will also be a must. To help facilitate such a monumental task between two institutions, the recommendation is that a Transfer Coordinator position be developed at each institution to facilitate the desires from both sides and to keep the lines of communication flowing (see Appendix A). As noted earlier, if transfer students are given incorrect information to complete degree requirements, he/she are only being set-up for academic failure.

It is assumed through the following steps, that a Transfer Coordinator is part of the process.

Build an Early Relationship

A professional relationship between a two-year and a four-year higher educational institution has barely begun with the establishment of articulation agreements. Articulation agreements are only the beginning. Articulation agreements do not eliminate transfer shock. They begin the academic relationship by establishing commonalities in curriculum needs and design. Professional relationships among partnering administrations, student services, and academic departments are where true differences can be made. A collaboration of support between partnering institutions with transfer students is what can make a difference to the experience a student has.

The Transfer Coordinator will be responsible for facilitating and developing effective communication between institutions as well as with potential and current transfer students. This position will serve as liaison and coordinator in all other aspects of the Transfer Program. Regular visits from the four-year institution to the two-year institution (as well as vice versa) will be expected to supply a face-to-face interaction as determined from the partnership. Although much of this time might be spent in group sessions with students and staff, interaction with various levels of staff and administrators will also be a necessity. It is the expectation that through face-to-face meetings between the Transfer Coordinator and potential transfer students, a reduction of anxiety over the entire transfer process will occur. This before-Transfer Orientation Program step provides a *go-to* person transfer students can feel comfortable approaching when they have questions about transfer credits, academic policies, and where to look for answers.

Establish Curriculum Protocols

As noted previously, articulation agreements are only the beginning of creating a partnership and easing the transition from one higher educational institution to another for transfer students. With curriculum naturally evolving over time at each institution, the Transfer Orientation Program will also recommend the development of an Articulation Coordinator position (see Appendix A). Articulation agreements need to be managed, monitored, and adjusted through times of evolution. An Articulation Coordinator will need to help build the professional relationships between academic departments at each partnering institution. The needs and changes in an institution's curriculum will require constant communication among internal stakeholders for a Transfer Program to be successful.

Additionally, two-year institutions can be seen as valuable feeder-schools to four-year institutions. With students wanting to earn bachelor's degrees in the shortest time possible, the creation of academic path programs (i.e., pre-business, pre-teaching, or pre-engineering) at two-year institutions in collaboration with degree requirements at four-year institutions (through articulation agreements) can help streamline the process for transfer students.

Persons involved with the transfer process must be mindful of the following:

- The purposes of two-year institutions (certificates, technical diplomas and associate degrees) are different than those of four-year institutions (bachelors, masters, research, etc)
- Not all programs may have the opportunity to be developed or create pre-program academic paths with articulation agreements that end in a baccalaureate degree
- Maintaining the integrity, mission, and goal of each institution must not be forgotten

Connect With Student and Faculty

Offering potential transfer students a way to connect with faculty and (mentor) students at a four-year institution can also help pave the way for a successful transition, minimizing transfer shock (See Appendix A). Just as if offered to high school juniors and seniors, provide campus tours and seminars focused on transfer student questions and concerns. Allow them also the opportunity to get acquainted with the layout, the facilities, and the people. Encourage faculty from the four-year institution to guest lecture at the two-year institution – either in the classroom or at a special event.

Cohort group. Once students have transferred to the four-year institution, contact and connection will require continued nurturing from faculty and academic staff. It might be determined (by each academic department or college) that transfer students who enter in the fall will be considered a cohort group. Thus events, group discussions, or advising may be planned based upon date of entry or initial registration. This process can also help foster student connection and communication with each other. Creating cohorts and inviting feedback can help to assess and evaluate the Transfer Orientation Program in order to produce future changes and modifications that further support transfer students.

Mentor program. Students who have previously transferred to the four-year institution should be sought out first to serve as mentors to incoming transfer students (see Appendix A). Characteristics to consider when placing or organizing student/mentor relationships will depend on the following:

- Technical colleges, community college (two-year institutions) or other four-year institutions from where the student has transferred
- Location from where the student came (in-state/out-of-state; north, south, east or west part of state).

Provide Ways of Getting Transfer Students Involved on Campus

The primary purpose of a student entering college is academic in nature. A few student development scholars have also suggested a social and psychological development occurs during a student's college years. Providing other ways for transfer (and perhaps non-traditional) students to becoming involved on campus can and will build support and confidence within the students. Being able to identify with other students can be very comforting to a transfer student. Transfer students are not always the traditional-aged student. Transfer students are increasingly students who are returning to higher education after years of absence seeking to earn their bachelor's degrees. Other life priorities and challenges of being a non-traditional student allow little time to find and acquire that natural support system developed with friends for traditional-aged students. Getting students involved will provide distinctive support structures for academic achievement and ultimately from the institution's viewpoint, increased retention.

Follow-up Once on Campus

Although students will have been assigned an advisor based upon his/her academic program, routine follow-up from the Transfer Coordinator will prove invaluable (see Appendix A). The initial relationship between the four-year institution and the student was often because of one individual. That individual may have also continued to be a main point of contact once the student transferred. Although the Transfer Coordinator may not have been the resolving party, the assistance offered is crucial to forming a new relationship with the new institution.

Additional follow-up with transfer students during their time as students at the four-year institution will help to nurture the continuing relationship being built between institution and student. Various methods of follow-up (informal communication, focus-groups, surveys, etc.) will also provide valuable insight about student expectations, satisfactions, and feedback on their

experience. Evaluation and tracking of student attitudes when they first transfer as well as at the point of graduation produce data to improve outcomes.

Questions that can be asked and potentially answered are as follows:

- What percentage of students apply and matriculate to a four-year institution?
- What percentage of students are transfer students at a four-year institution?
- From where do most of the transfer students come when they transfer to a four-year institution?
- Where do most students transfer to when leaving a two-year institution?
- What is the retention rate at the two-year mark for transfer students at the partnering four-year institution?
- What is the grade point average (GPA) for transfer students two years following their transfer?

From the additional proposed questions, further research about transfer students and potential transfer students is needed to better understand their needs and academic decision making to identify areas of desirable support.

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Appendix A – The Complete Transfer Process

Transfer Orientation Program – Before and After

Build an early relationship

Identify an Articulation Coordinator

The Articulation Coordinator, at each institution, will be the central point of communication for articulation agreements and academic questions between academic programs and curriculum. This individual may not necessarily make final decisions about curriculum equivalency, but rather is a facilitator in the process. The responsibilities of an Articulation Coordinator may be held by a Transfer Admission Advisor, Director of Admission or other identified individual.

Identify a Transfer Coordinator

The Transfer Coordinator, at each institution, will be the central point of communication between institutions for everything outside of articulation agreements and academic equivalency questions. On campus, this individual would be involved with supervision of various programs serving (potential) transfer students, a main point of contact on campus once a student has transferred to a four-year institution (though may not technically be his/her academic advisor), and will help build relationships with identified key feeder institutions to meet future enrollment goals.

Identify partnering institutions(s)

The Articulation Coordinator and the Transfer Coordinator, with the guidance from the administration and faculty, will need to create, build, and establish new and existing partnerships to promote a win-win relationship between institutions involved.

Establish curriculum protocols

For purpose of communication between institutions

Review established, pending, and potential articulation agreements. A consistent method and model of review will ensure current information is recorded and available for institutional purposes.

Review current and future curriculum development. A consistent method and model of review for curriculum development will allow the Articulation and Transfer Coordinators to be aware of potential changes to come in curriculum and work with other institutions on the potential impact. These changes can positively or negatively impact potential students toward the needs of meeting academic and graduation goals. Effective management of potential changes can influence the relationship between institutions.

Review and understand institutions purpose and goal. Although change is good, the purpose of two-year institutions and four-year institutions needs to be recognized by students. Not all change is feasible as some desired modifications may require reaching beyond the scope of the institution's mission.

For purpose of communication with students

Publish established articulation agreements. Articulation agreements are commonly published within institutions undergraduate catalogs as well as on institution's website. The establishment of a consistent method and model of review for articulation agreements can bring reassurance to the end user of transfer course information. Users, like Articulation and Transfer Coordinators at either institution, can feel confident that the posted information is accurate and current.

Discussion with students about academic plans. When the Articulation and Transfer Coordinators are knowledgeable of current discussions involving potential curriculum change, the coordinators can support student academic decision making that benefit the student. Transfer and potential transfer students can make better informed decisions knowing the information is current and the individuals they are working with are knowledgeable.

Review and understand institutions purpose and goal. The student needs to understand the important differences between two-year institution and four-year institution. The pro's and con's of each institution depends on the needs of a student. The goals and purpose of an institution may need to be part of the discussion with a student and his/her understanding of higher education to help the student with his/her academic decision and career path.

Connect with student and faculty

Develop campus tours, seminars and other resources specific to transfer student needs

The Transfer Coordinator at each institution will be the primary agents of development and responsibility on a campus for each of these areas.

Campus Tours. An invitation from four-year institutions should be extended to students expressing an interest in transferring to a four-year institution. The development of articulation agreements was to provide for a smoother transition for the transfer student from one institution to another. This only provided an academic transition. The introduction of social transition can aid the student with familiarity and comfort prior to the actual transfer; something very similarly provided to high school students touring a campus. The difference would be in the information provided based upon the interests and needs of transfer students – typically non-traditional, adult students. The benefit also extends to knowledge and understanding of the new campus layout,

familiarity of instructor in the student's area of interest, and resources available in comparison to what the student is already familiar with at the previous institution.

Seminars. Guest lecturers from four-year institutions would be invited to speak at two-year institutions in similar subject to introduce potential transfer students to faculty members and topics of broadened discussion at the four-year institution. Discussion topics/meetings at four-year institutions would be held for newly transfer students on topics and needs of interest. The development and introduction to Mentor Programs would provide additional social transition.

Other Resources. Social events would be arranged to discuss the needs and interests of transfer students to include the attendance of faculty, administration, as well as a range of resource offices and organizations available on campus. The showing of support from various groups on campus will provide the additional support to succeed to the student on the new campus.

Establish a Mentor program

Identify student mentors. Previous transfer students should be identified, inquired upon, trained, and used to mentor new transfer students at a four-year institution. New student groups guided by student transfer mentors may be sorted by where the veteran transfer student came from; for example: two-year school, four-year school, technical school, previously military background, and/or state of institution. Having a mentor who identifies with a new transfer student and understands a new transfer student's previous academic history can go far in lessening transfer shock.

Identify faculty mentors. Faculty mentors are to serve the faculty and their needs of understanding, supporting and working with transfer students. Faculty who advise incoming transfer students may need additional assistance in understanding challenges and obstacles a

transfer student may have faced through the entire transfer process – including questions from newly transfer students about why something did or did not transfer. Having another faculty member on campus to provide guidance can relieve the burden on a new faculty in this unique area of advising. Additionally faculty who are working on articulation agreements might find inspiring insight by partnering with the two-year institution in providing unique guidance to future students and planting seeds of excitement in a field of interest.

Provide ways of getting transfer students involved on campus

Campus clubs and organizations

A four-year institution needs to review current clubs and organizations on campus available to transfer students and the means of communicating resources to transfer students. At the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, transfer or non-traditional students are currently served through The Women’s Center. While the opportunity of supporting transfer students is needed and welcomed, transfer students would most likely not associate the connection of resources and needs with this organization. An identifiable office, individual, and resources needs to be clearly communicated and present on campus based upon the assessed needs of its transfer students.

A supportive campus environment

As previously stated, a coordinated effort is needed across various departments and requires support from administration as well as faculty. The creation of a day care facility, like at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, provides for a unique resource most likely desired by transfer, non-traditional, adult students. Recognized “Family Days” on campus for student, his/her spouse and children to come and enjoy events on campus can benefit the student morale. Again, the University of Wisconsin-Platteville has an excellent opportunity of accomplishing such events both athletically as well as with the performing arts. The campus has year-round

male and female athletic events for students of all ages. The Center for The Arts provides year-round performing arts events of plays and musical performances for all ages to enjoy.

Follow-up once on campus

Assessment

With transfer students categorized into cohort groups, based upon the semester and year of transfer, an assessment of change, progress and movement a student experiences after transfer can be documented. Measuring potential student transformation would include surveying all transfer students, organizing focus groups discussions within a cohort or a mix of transfer students, along with examining academic progress before and after transfer (which would include grade point averages, academic load, etc.). The assessment tools would be conducted each semester.

Applying results

After the completion of each assessment, the results would be applied to improve the transfer program as needed at the institution. A waiting period of two semesters may be necessary in order to have information for comparison purposes.