

## Supporting Transfer Opportunities for Dually Enrolled Students with Intellectual Disability and Autism

By Ty Hanson and Lyndsey Nunes

Transfer rates among U.S. college students are at a high, with a recent report showing that more than one third of students choose to transfer universities at least once during their academic careers (Shapiro, 2015). Given the increased opportunities for students with intellectual disability and autism (ID/A) to enroll in college (Think College, 2018), it's promising to see students with disabilities following the trend of their college peers by exploring their transfer options.

This brief provides dual enrollment staff, specifically college coordinators and transition specialists, an overview of effective transfer practices and policies between sending and receiving institutions to support students with ID/A. These practices include advising, orienting, and support services, as well as providing opportunities for academic and social integration. Building ongoing relationships with transfer destination partners will be key to developing successful transfer programs.

### CREATING TRANSFER OPTIONS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS

Although inclusive dual-enrollment college opportunities are relatively new, there are already instances of students with ID/A, like their peers without disabilities, exploring transfer options.

For example, Holyoke Community College and Westfield State University both host Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI) partnerships, serving high school students with ID/A on their campuses. These college partners in western

Massachusetts have a long-standing relationship and work with many of the same sending school districts. These institutions joined together to develop policies and procedures to support seamless transfers between their two MAICEI sites, resulting in expanded course and program offerings to students with ID/A across both campuses.

MAICEI program coordinators at both colleges include discussions about transfer opportunities as part of the academic advising process. They also connect prospective students with transfer students who can share their experiences. This helps to inform students of transfer choices, and to better understand reasons for transfer.

Since 2007, the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative has offered grants to institutes of higher education, along with their partnering local education agencies, to provide inclusive dual-enrollment opportunities to transition-aged students with intellectual disability and autism.

### REASONS FOR TRANSFER

For many students, with and without disabilities, the idea of transferring doesn't occur to them until a year or two into their journey. Some students switch schools to access a program or major they are interested in. These students can benefit by accessing courses that better align with their career and personal interests.



If campus life is important, then transferring to a college with an emphasis on campus culture can really make a difference. Since the college experience is more than purely academics, choosing a college known for its school spirit or peer mentor program can expand opportunities for students to engage in college life, build confidence, and expand their social networks.

Some students think they want a small college atmosphere, but after a semester or so find themselves ready to explore the offerings of a larger university, including an expanded program of studies, college clubs, athletics, and service learning and internship opportunities.

Wanting more independence and the opportunity to move away from home can be another reason to transfer. The opportunity to explore residential life on campus can be a powerful draw, especially if improved employment and transportation options go hand in hand.

Sometimes, a college's vibe just doesn't feel right. For students feeling out-of-place, transfer can be a good option to get connected on a new campus and continue their postsecondary goals instead of writing college off.

## ADVISING PROSPECTIVE TRANSFER STUDENTS

**Advisors encourage students to tour prospective campuses, sit in on a class, and attend a campus activity before they apply for a transfer to promote a positive and successful transfer experience.**

Successful sending institutions provide potential transfer students with tailored advice about how to identify potential and appropriate transfer colleges. This involves choosing applicable coursework aligned with their academic and career goals and their field of study. Advisors also encourage students to tour prospective campuses, sit in on a class, and attend a campus activity before they apply for a transfer to promote a positive and successful transfer experience.

Advisors can play an important role in the student's application process by encouraging students to request an admissions packet or to check online for the application. Advisors can also support students in gathering the documents needed for their application, including college and high school transcripts. Sharing supplemental documents such as a copy of the student's Summary of Performance, current Individualized Education Program (IEP), person-centered plan, résumé, and any other materials documenting the student's strengths, talents, interests, and needs may provide important data to the receiving institution's academic advisor.

## ORIENTATION

**Creating orientation programs that give incoming transfer students information on campus resources, including disability services, academic learning centers, and career services, will greatly benefit this new cohort of students.**

While transfer students bring some higher education experience with them, it is important to recognize that these students are new to the receiving institution. Creating orientation programs that give incoming transfer students information on campus resources, including disability services, academic learning centers, and career services, will greatly benefit this new cohort of students.

Some transfer students may need additional supports during their initial weeks, particularly those accustomed to small campuses, where it is easier to find out what to do and how to do it. These students may need orientation to the existing support options on their new campus. Connecting students with the disability services office before the semester begins is essential to ensure that each student receives the accommodations they need.

Transfer students face a number of challenges when switching to a new institution. They often have

to adjust to differences in class and campus size, campus culture, policies and procedures, and advising structures, as well as experiencing different faculty and academic expectations. Strengthening orientation programs to address these areas will best serve the needs of transfer students. For example, consider developing workshops on the course registration process and how to receive accommodations.

## ACADEMIC ADVISING

**A large part of advising is connecting students with resources and developing a plan on how to use them, explaining policies that may be different from their previous school, and reassuring students that they are capable of succeeding.**

Conversations with advisors are especially important to transfer students. This provides students with an opportunity to share why they have come to this new school, what they would like to accomplish, and how they plan to reach those goals. These conversations also allow advisors to assist students to customize their education plan. To be most effective, advisors need to get to know the transfer students and their individual needs.

The differences between two-year and four-year colleges can create a challenging transition for some transfer students, but this transition can be eased by effective academic advising. Most transfer students already have specific academic and career goals, but need to understand the differences between their previous school and the institution they are transferring to.

Academic advisors aid students by reviewing their previous college transcript and can make recommendations on potential courses and majors. A large part of advising is connecting students with resources and developing a plan on how to use them, explaining policies that may be different from their previous school, and reassuring students that they are capable of succeeding.

Trained academic advisors can also advocate for the maximum transfer of credits, and can connect students with career services regarding internships and employment opportunities in their field of study.

## BUILDING SOCIAL NETWORKS

**Connecting with peer mentors and getting involved in campus activities may help students become more active members of the campus community.**

Supporting transfer students in developing their social networks and connecting with other members of the new institution are other important issues to address. Connecting with peer mentors and getting involved in campus activities may help students become more active members of the campus community.

Peer mentors can provide valuable information regarding what they do to connect socially and academically on campus, and these tips can help new transfer students get engaged with campus life. Making introductions to peer mentors during orientation and exploring clubs and social activities from the start of the semester will help transfer students make a positive social connection to their new campus.

## CONCLUSION

Successful transfer depends on the efforts of both the sending and receiving institutions. Meaningful partnerships between both institutions will result in better-prepared students who are able to make informed decisions, set academic and career goals, and transition to their new institution smoothly. Enhanced support services focused on transfer students will result in improved outcomes.

## Transfer Students Share Their Stories

### SHANNON ROBITAILLE

**Q: When did you decide you wanted to go to college?**

**A:** Going to college has always been a dream of mine, either Mount Holyoke or Westfield State. I was in 7th grade when I first started thinking about going to college. Going to Holyoke Community College was the first step to go to Westfield State one day.

**Q: Why Westfield State University?**

**A:** Because both of my cousins went there, and I had visited it before.

**Q: When did you decide that you wanted to transfer?**

**A:** When I moved high schools. Agawam [Public Schools] was involved in the MAICEI Program at both HCC and Westfield State. I chose to transfer to Westfield because it has been my dream school.

**Q: What have been your favorite aspects of Westfield State University?**

**A:** I love the atmosphere here. Also, I feel accepted and included by other students. I enjoy hanging out with the peer mentors, going to lunch and parties.

**Q: Was it a smooth transition from HCC to WSU?**

**A:** Yes. HCC prepared me for coming to Westfield State. I learned how to set up rides on PVRTA [Pioneer Valley Transit Authority] and organize my own schedule. The art classes at HCC were hard because I had a hard time with the critiques I got from my professors. I always wanted my artwork to be neat and precise, but my professors wanted me to be freer. I am learning to accept feedback and I don't struggle with it as much anymore. Taking different classes, like business and marketing, helped me to prepare for Westfield State too.

**Q: What advice do you have for other dual enrollment students?**

**A:** You should follow your dreams. To be honest, at first, I didn't want to transfer, but it has been my dream college since middle school, so I decided to give it a shot. I felt like I might have reached my limit on academic stuff and wasn't sure if I wanted to continue college. I was thinking I wanted more free time to myself. But then I realized I didn't want to turn down an opportunity to go to my dream college.



## Transfer Students Share Their Stories

### STEVE RABTOR

**Q: When did you decide you wanted to go to college?**

**A:** My mom was talking to me about it in high school. During the spring before I graduated, I met with Sherry Elander [a transition specialist] and an advisor from Holyoke Community College. It was at my PCP [person-centered plan] meeting that got me motivated to go to college by talking about it.

**Q: What was your first semester like at HCC?**

**A:** I was really shy and nervous about going to college--it felt weird. But the more that I kept going, the more stuff I knew about college, and the more I knew how to get around the place, I started to feel comfortable. It took about a month. Working out at the athletic center was my favorite place to be.

**Q: When did you decide that you wanted to transfer to Westfield State University?**

**A:** I had been hearing about it from other students and some of the coaches at EMR [East Mountain Road Transition Program]. I got a summer job at Westfield State cleaning dorms and it got me thinking about going there.

**Q: What was your first day like at Westfield State?**

**A:** I was more confident going to Westfield because I pretty much knew a lot of stuff about college and I knew where the cafeteria was. I was still nervous about going to class the first day.

**Q: Was it a smooth transition from HCC to WSU?**

**A:** Yes, it went smoothly going to the second college because I kind of knew what to expect. I had the opportunity to meet Lyndsey [MAICEI Program Coordinator] before I started going to Westfield State.

**Q: What have been your favorite aspects of Westfield State University?**

**A:** The gym and cafeteria are so much bigger than at HCC! I really like working out at the gym and there are so many choices for lunch.

**Q: What advice do you have for other dual enrollment students?**

**A:** Try HCC [a community college] first and then WSU [a university] just to get the feel for both colleges. Do it while you still can, while you still have time [before turning 22]. I got to go for free because my school paid for it.



## REFERENCES

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Think College National Coordinating Center. (2018). Higher education access for students with intellectual disability in the United States. Think College Snapshot, May 2018. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.



The Think College Transition Model Project, in collaboration with three Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment partnerships developed and implemented a college-based inclusive dual enrollment transition model for students with intellectual disability and autism between the ages of 18-21.

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### **To learn more about the TCT Project:**

[www.thinkcollege.net/TCT](http://www.thinkcollege.net/TCT)

### **Think College:**

[www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net)

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