PATHWAYS AND BARRIERS TO ART AND DESIGN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH PREVIOUS COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Prepared for: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer

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November 2012

ABSTRACT

OCAD University undertook an investigation of the transition needs and experiences of current OCAD U students from two distinct types of educational backgrounds: those with previous undergraduate coursework and those with prior college experience. The study used a mixed method approach, both qualitative (analysis of semi-structured interviews with students from both cohorts) and quantitative (analysis of National Survey of Student Engagement data comparing college transfer students, university transfer students and students who came directly from high school). The study pointed to some significant differences in the expectations, experiences and needs of students from different educational backgrounds leading to a series of recommendations to better facilitate student mobility and enhance the quality of experience. While focused in one institutional environment, many of the findings can be generalized to fine and applied art and student mobility within studio-based programs.

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I. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Student Preparation for Choosing a College or University: a Review of the Literature

Choosing a college or university is an important and often stressful life decision. For many students this is the first major educational, vocational, or financial decision they will have had to make. This decision has the potential to influence many immediate aspects of their lives, including whether they will move away from home, need financial assistance, and need to modify existing friendships. Furthermore, the choice of university can determine future success, including career opportunities, probability of admission to graduate school or professional programs, and social status (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Galotti, 1995; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; Rae, 2004).

For many students, the process of choosing a post-secondary institution begins many years prior to the final year of high school, when aspirations for post-secondary education are first crystallized (DesJardins, et al., 1999; Johnson, et al., 1991). As post-secondary institutions strive to attract the best students to their schools, the variables that influence this process become increasingly important. Determining the factors that influence the students' decision-making process will have important implications for university administrators, especially those who are responsible for student recruitment. This process can become highly competitive, with several universities competing for the same students (Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996; Jones & Skolnik, 2009; Lennon, Zhao, Wang & Gluszynski, 2011). Students also have the ability to move between types of post-secondary institutions (i.e., college versus university)—although the bureaucracy involved in making this move varies considerably across the provinces. Nevertheless, as noted by Jones and Skolnik (2009), students in Ontario have been "way ahead of educators and planners in discovering the value of combining the strengths of the colleges in hands-on learning with the strengths of the universities in academic education" (p. 22).

To develop effective recruitment strategies it is also important to know where students obtain information to base their decision (Galotti, 1995). Universities allocate substantial resources to advertise their institutions; however, little research is available regarding the relative use of different information sources. In one of the few empirical studies on the use of various sources of information, Galotti and Mark (1994) reported that students (in order of importance) read college brochures available at their school, talked with guidance counsellors, wrote for college brochures, arranged for interviews with college admission officers, and attended college fairs. During the time that has elapsed since this preliminary research was conducted there have been far reaching developments in modes of communication and information gathering (e.g., the internet). Recent research on post-secondary students in the Ontario system (Decock, McCloy, Liu & Hu, 2011) suggests that websites are now the primary source of information for students heading to either college or university.

Identifying the 'best' student for a particular post-secondary institution involves a consideration of program "fit", not just high school grade-point-average or transfer credits. Student retention is enhanced when students' goals are consistent with what the university is capable of meeting. Retention is a critical issue in most post-secondary institutions (Rae, 2004). Research has shown that of students who start a specific program, more of these students will withdraw than graduate (McLaughlin, Brozovsky, & McLaughlin, 1998; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). Furthermore, 75 percent of those who drop out will do so in the first two years of the program (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Prior research on the decision process suggests that there is some consistency in the types of variables

that influence students. For example, Galotti (1995) asked prospective students what variables they were considering while choosing a university. Four broad categories of variables emerged: academic (e.g., admission requirements, faculty quality), institutional (e.g., campus atmosphere, class size), financial (e.g., cost, financial aid), and personal/social (e.g., distance from home, peers/friends at school). Similarly, DesJardins, et al. (1999) identified a set of dimensions after conducting a review of existing studies on college choice behaviour. The categorical labels differed (e.g., characteristics of students, institutional characteristics, and contextual factors), however the dimensions were relatively consistent between studies. While these studies are not specific to Ontario, the majority of contextual data is directly related.

Although there is some consistency in the type of variables that influence student choice, the relative importance of these variables appears to have changed in recent decades. Long (2004) analyzed the college choice decisions of high school graduates in 1972, 1982, and 1992. In 1972, the 'cost of the college' was a significant variable in the decision making process; two decades later, however, the influence of this variable had declined. Long (2004) suggests that this decline may be partially the result of greater student access to financial assistance, although there continues to be evidence that specific subgroups of students are differentially affected by the costs of post-secondary education (Palameta & Voyer, 2010). Long (2004) also reported that the importance of the "proximity to the institution" has decreased over the past few decades. This is likely due to advances in transportation, communication, and increased availability of information about colleges during this time. An opposite trend has been reported for perceived "college quality". In 1972 and 1982 college students did not consider college quality to be a major factor in their decisions. The perceived quality of the institution has now become one of the most important variables to post-secondary students and their families (Rae, 2004).

Given the importance post-secondary students now place on perceived quality, it is critical that individual post-secondary institutions take stock of student perceptions-- particularly in critical subgroups (e.g., transfer students, first-generation students, etc.) who may be particularly vulnerable to lower persistence rates (Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011). This current project represents a rare opportunity to study, in depth, the experience of mobility within a particular discipline at an institution with very high proportions of students coming with previous postsecondary experience. As noted by Decock, McCloy, Liu and Hu (2011) "there is a very limited amount of data on the full picture of transfer in the province of Ontario. Hard data on the movement of students in all directions – college-to-college, college-to-university, university-to-college, and university-to university – is minimal. The lack of information relates to the number of students, their characteristics, and their overall transfer experience" (p. 9).

OCAD University

OCAD University, Canada's oldest and largest art and design university, is located in the heart of Toronto. OCAD U offers specialized degree programs that combine studio-based learning with critical inquiry. Programs offered at OCAD U lead to a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) or a Bachelor of Design (BDes) and, most recently, graduate degrees (MA, MFA, MDes). Undergraduate programs include industrial design, environmental design, material art and design, graphic design, advertising, illustration, drawing and painting, photography, integrated media, sculpture and installation, printmaking, criticism and curatorial practice, and more innovative interdisciplinary new programs in digital technology and aboriginal visual culture.

Students in OCAD U's undergraduate art and design degree programs share a number of diverse courses in English, writing and literature; art, design and new media history and theory; the social sciences; science, technology and math; and the humanities. These Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences courses explore the theories and ideas informing art and design practice, providing an historical and critical dimension to studio work in art and design. Collectively, Liberal Arts & Sciences courses help develop written communication abilities and capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Individually, these courses challenge students to inform their art and design practices with new theoretical perspectives and diverse methodologies.

Students come to OCAD University often for very specific reasons and seek out its specialized programs, such as the selective and small studios and to experience an academic atmosphere that is centered on art and design as a way of thinking and locus for creative inquiry. OCAD U's entrance requirements are purposefully designed to include a full assessment of a student's creative potential that includes a mandatory portfolio assessment and interview. All offers of admission to OCAD University are based on the strength of the applicant's portfolio, but are conditional upon meeting the minimum academic requirements as well.

OCAD University's specialized degrees share commonalities such as a fairly standard first year curriculum across Faculties and programs, as well as a range of choices for how students may choose to fulfill their Liberal Arts & Sciences (LAS) requirements. This internal standardization does not always fit well with courses and programs outside of the institution that are very different from OCAD University's art and design focused curriculum in form, intent, as well as outcomes.

This internally-oriented focus, as well as the wide range of programs and institutions students are transferring *from*, affect student mobility and transfer of credit outcomes. This study attempted to capture not just where, but why students were coming to OCAD U and seeking transferred credit, to compare the general experiences of transfer students against their direct entry peers, and to learn about the admission and transition process for transfer students within this unique context. While OCAD University is the only specific art and design-focused institution in Ontario, there are several other institutions which offer art and design programs and have similar features to OCAD U (eg. admission by portfolio; a mix of studio and general education requirements). It is assumed, then, that the findings of this study would be, at least in part, transferable to other art and design programs.

OCAD University Transfer of Credit Policy & Practice

Among OCAD University's more than 4,000 undergraduate students, a significant proportion come with previous post-secondary education at either the college or university level. The institution receives almost 200 applications for Advanced Standing (admission to year two or higher) each year. Among fourth year respondents to the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), almost half reported having already attended another university or college prior to enrolling at OCAD U.

OCAD University's transfer of credit policy states that students who have attended a recognized, approved, accredited or otherwise approved post-secondary institution may apply for transfer of credit. Some of the substantive issues in assigning credit are quality-based such as:

- Only those credits earned with a grade of 65% or higher will be considered for transfer of credit.
- Contact hours must be equivalent to the 40 contact hours for 0.5 credit OCAD U courses with a minimum of three weeks' instruction.
- The minimum credit granted for transfer is equivalent to 0.5.

- All post-secondary transcript/ documentation must be presented to Admissions & Recruitment at the time of admission for possible transfer consideration. Decisions are made in consultation with the appropriate Dean or designate.
- A maximum of 1.5 studio credits may be awarded to newly admitted first-year students.

The policy as practiced holds that college courses <u>not</u> belonging to an undergraduate degree program will be counted as two-for-one in exchange for OCAD University courses. This policy does not recognize systems where college and university courses share codes, expectations and even syllabi. Further recent modifications to the policy, following appeals by students, now allow for a second review if done before twelve months of attendance have passed since students sometimes are not aware of what Liberal Arts & Sciences courses could have been transferred from their previous experience to their OCAD U program. Transfer of credit possibilities in LAS allow for everything from sociology and English to languages to transfer.

Matching studio work and course objectives from similar studio courses requires the assessment of art and design work, not just by looking at marks and syllabi. Studio work may be looked at in totality by expert faculty in their field to assess where a student should be placed rather than which specific courses will transfer as an objective. This is very much the norm in art and design universities, and is required to maintain a level of quality control and guarantee that a student will be able to proceed through his or her program with the necessary skills and experiences that need to have been mastered for each year in studio progress. Like so much in art and design, this is exacting and time-consuming. The process relies on subjective expertise that is often not understood by students, college instructors or high school art teachers, but is discernible by specialized professors such as those who conduct portfolio reviews at OCAD U.

Purpose

This study explored the experiences of transfer students currently attending OCAD University as a means to isolate the institutional policies, procedures and educational delivery methods most likely to have positive effects on student mobility, transition, progression and success. This project represents an opportunity to study, in depth, the experience of transfer students within a particular discipline at an institution with very high proportions of students coming with previous postsecondary experience. The results of this study are expected to influence not only OCAD University policy and practice but to have applicability to other art and design programs throughout the province.

This study followed invited proposals by the College University Consortium Council in December 2011 for research into aspects of postsecondary student mobility including student success after transfer compared to direct entry students, strategies to support transfer student success, and student experience of transfer.

Research Team

This study was conducted by a collaborative team including researchers, academics, administrators, students and others from the OCAD U community and included significant input from researchers from Trent University who conducted the literature review and qualitative raw data analysis. An administrator and principal investigator, project coordinator and faculty member at various stages in the project led major components of the research that was spread over the period of January – July 2012. OCAD U also included graduate students in this project as interviewers.

Methodology

This research project was focused on investigating the transition needs, experiences and expectations of current OCAD U students from two distinctly different backgrounds:

a. Students with previous **university** coursework. This cohort was made up of students with either complete or partial degrees from any university program prior to entering OCAD U. Note that participants in this cohort did not necessarily have art or design-related educational experience.
b. Students with previous art and design-related **college** coursework. This cohort was made up of students with college experience, regardless of whether a credential was received at the previous institution. Participants in this cohort were limited to those with art or design-related educational experience in the college sector as this met an institutional need to design better pathways for those with related experience.

The study used a mixed methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis, with an emphasis on the qualitative through interviews.

Quantitative:
OCAD University's results of the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement allowed the research team to identify respondents who self-reported previous post-secondary attendance, prior to enrolling at OCAD University. Using the NSSE data and institutional sources, the study explored levels of

engagement and satisfaction, as well as average grades and time-to-completion for students with previous university and college experience relative to students with only high school backgrounds.

Analysis of the quantitative data (NSSE) was conducted internally by OCAD University's Institutional Analysis department.

Qualitative:

Using institutional data, the research team invited a random sample of 155 current OCAD University students with previous university education and 170 with previous Ontario college art and design-related education to participate in interviews that explored their experiences just prior to entering OCAD University and during the transition process. Students were offered an incentive ($25 gift card) to participate in a structured interview that took approximately 45 minutes to complete (the complete set of interview questions are presented in Appendix A).

The final sample of participants in the qualitative section of this study consisted of 39 students enrolled at OCAD University at the time of their participation. Approximately half of the participants (n = 21) had previously completed university undergraduate coursework (cohort A); 18 participants had previously completed coursework at a college (cohort B).

The mean age of participants in cohort A was 27 years. The sample consisted of 45% males, 85% taking a full course load and 75% from the Faculty of Design/25% from the Faculty of Art. Students in cohort A received between .5 and 6.5 transfer credits.

The mean age of participants in cohort B was 23 years. The sample consisted of 22% males, 89% taking a full-time course load and 56% from the Faculty of Design/44% from the Faculty of Art. Students in cohort B received between 1 and 7.5 transfer credits.

The study regularly compares the two cohorts in terms of responses to questions. In general, each cohort is unique and the two groups had very different expectations of credit transfers when switching to OCAD University. Because of the wide gap in expectations, previous experience and motivations for coming to OCAD U, at times responses may be easily separable by cohort and other times both cohorts are presented together. When possible and not repetitive, data will be separated into university experience students and college experience students (for the purposes of this study labeled "university entrants" and "college entrants").

Before coding the qualitative data, the research team at Trent University conducted a review of relevant information in the peer-reviewed and grey literature. Peer-reviewed studies published since 2000 in relevant databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Medline, and the Web of Knowledge) were examined using combinations of key terms (e.g., "college transfer credit", "persistence", "student engagement", "fine arts programs"). Of particular interest were studies using samples of Canadian undergraduates. The grey literature was explored using several search engines (e.g., Google) using a similar set of key terms. As with the peer-review literature, work using samples of Canadian undergraduates were of particular interest (particularly work connected to the Ontario post-secondary system).

Although not a formal grounded theory study, the data analysis of the interview transcripts followed core recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998). This systematic and structured qualitative approach requires that the data to be coded and organized into emerging themes. Themes were discussed by the research team (i.e., multiple coders were used) and considered according to the two cohorts (cohort A. students with previous undergraduate coursework; and cohort B. students who had

completed coursework at a college). The research team also consulted a number of recent studies exploring student experiences and perceptions with transferring between Ontario post-secondary institutions (Decock, et al., 2011), as well as recent trends in student persistence for the Ontario post-secondary system (Finnie, Childs, & Qiu, 2012). Several studies in the general student retention and engagement literature were also helpful in framing core trends and themes in the data (Suhre, Jansen & Harskamp, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), particularly those studies that looked at the role student services and resources play in post-secondary persistence (Long, 2004; Serenko, 2011). Reliability in the coding process was achieved using a peer debriefing procedure (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This procedure involves regularized reviewing of the coding progress by several individuals familiar with the project. During these peer-debriefing sessions, coding and interpretation of the data were continually reviewed and evaluated by the group.

This report provides a summary of the key findings of both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The full analyses of each component are available upon request to the research team.

III. RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Among the first year OCAD U students who completed NSSE in 2011, 268 reported that they came to OCAD U with only high school in terms of educational background ("high school entrants), 54 reported previous college experience ("college entrants") and 74 reported previous university experience ("university entrants".) Among the senior year OCAD U students who completed the NSSE in 2011, 128 reported only high school educational backgrounds, 34 reported previous college experience and 78 reported previous university experience.

First year students

In comparing high school entrants to college and university entrants on the NSSE instrument, several items were significant among first year students. Due to significant age differences between the three groups (18.6 years for high school entrants, 22.5 for college entrants, and 25.4 for university entrants), age was used as a covariate in the comparisons. Only those variables that remained significant after controlling for age are discussed.

Time Usage
High school entrants spent more time than university entrants relaxing or socializing and more time than college and university entrants commuting to campus.

Educational and Personal Growth
High school entrants and university entrants were less likely than college entrants to believe that OCAD U contributed to their ability to write clearly and effectively and their ability to analyze quantitative problems.

Barriers to Success
University entrants were more likely than high school entrants to report that difficulties due to a disability or health problem were an obstacle to their academic progress.

Areas for Institutional Improvement
High school entrants were more likely than college or university entrants to indicate that reducing class sizes most needs to be addressed by the institution while high school and university entrants were more likely than college entrants to indicate that shifting the mix of lectures, seminars, and tutorials most needs to be addressed by the institution.

Sense of Community
High school entrants and college entrants were more likely to experience a sense of community in study groups than university entrants.

Academic Performance & Retention
In addition to scores on specific NSSE items, some examination of academic performance and retention was conducted on the respondents. High school entrants and college entrants had lower first year averages than those with prior university experience (70.7% for high school, 69.7% for college and 72.8% for university).

There was no significant difference between the three groups on retention to second year: 91% of high school entrants, 89% of college entrants and 87% of university entrants returned for second year at OCAD U.

Senior year students

Again, in comparing high school, college and university entrants on the NSSE instrument, several items were significant among senior year students. Due to significant age differences between the three groups (22.3 years for high school entrants, 31.2 for college entrants, and 30.3 for university entrants), age was used as a covariate in the comparisons. Only those variables that remained significant after controlling for age are discussed.

> *Time Usage*
> High school entrants spent more time than college and university entrants relaxing or socializing.

> *Academic Experiences*
> College and university entrants were more likely than high school entrants to participate in class discussions.

> *Academic Performance*
> There was no significant difference between the three groups in their 2011-12 academic average (74.5% for high school entrants, 75.1% for college entrants, and 75.9% for university entrants).

Summary

The examination of the NSSE results comparing transfer and non-transfer students reveals significant differences between the three cohorts in terms of engagement and satisfaction with OCAD University. Transfer students are less likely to spend time relaxing or socializing than high school entrants, while transfer students were more likely to participate in class discussions than high school entrants. Differences between college and university entrants include university entrants (and high school entrants) being less likely to believe that OCAD U contributed to their ability to write clearly and effectively and their ability to analyze quantitative problems than college entrants; university entrants (and high school entrants) were more likely than college entrants to indicate that shifting the mix of lectures, seminars, and tutorials most needs to be addressed by the institution; university entrants were less likely to experience a sense of community in study groups than college entrants (and high school entrants). The results suggest little difference on academic performance or retention, with the exception of higher first year averages for the university entrant cohort.

This analysis suggests there is some validity to the commonly held perspective of many of OCAD U faculty members: OCAD U's higher than average intake of students with previous post-secondary experiences appears to add to the rich and unique atmosphere of academics, practitioners and researchers on the campus.

IV. RESULTS: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

1. Factors Influencing Decisions to Transfer to OCAD U

The majority of university entrants in the study came to OCAD U with experience from the sciences, the social sciences or humanities focused programs. Many students simply went into general BA programs directly from high school without a clear direction other than knowing that they must or were expected to go from high school to university. Most university entrants reported choosing their original program based on physical location as well as uncertainty about what educational direction they should pursue. Students chose schools close to home or even in some cases based on where a parent or family member had gone to school. Some students chose to come to Toronto as a goal but the actual choice of school (Ryerson, York, U of Toronto, OCAD U) was secondary. Only two university entrants came from other Fine Arts programs.

Like the university entrants, those with college post-secondary experience chose their previous institution based on location. Unlike many in the university experience category these college entrants did not choose a program to facilitate a move to Toronto, but rather the opposite, choosing a program where they could stay at home for their first couple of years. However, unlike their university experience colleagues, many of these college entrants chose their college degree program purposefully to prepare them for entry into OCAD U including gaining studio experience that they had not received in their high schools to buttress their application package and portfolio to meet what was perceived as a very demanding and challenging entry requirement.

Students with university experience cited the following reasons for transferring to OCAD University:

- Personal/ financial/ medical reasons
- Desire to be part of a program with greater focus on art and "creativity" as well as a "rigorous" study of fine art
- Unhappiness with their previous program

Additionally these university entrants mentioned greater employment prospects after graduation. OCAD U's "applied degrees" were appealing as well as a general disappointment in the lack or rigour and quality of teaching they perceived at their previous institutions. There are several places in this study where students verbalize a desire for OCAD U's practicing faculty members and their applied and rigorous teaching methods.

Students entering OCAD U with previous college experience reported they left their previous programs often out of a desire to leave home and move away. The college entrants had more specific complaints about their previous programs that included restrictiveness of curriculum, lack of challenge and a lack of sophistication and chances for personal self-expression.

Participants in the study reported a number of motivations for selecting OCAD University specifically, including:

- The nature of the university and its programs offered
- Location of the university (downtown Toronto core)
- Reputation of the university
- Art and design specialization

- Specialization of the faculty
- Chances to study other specific aspects of art and design (e.g. furniture)
- The opportunity to study with like-minded peers (community of artists and designers)
- Preference of a studio-based environment over traditional university experience

Some students were strongly influenced by the location of the university not just for the immediate experience of going to OCAD U, but in the long term as a means to locate themselves where they want to live when they complete their degrees or as they are completing their degrees. OCAD U's location in the downtown core offered opportunities, arts friendliness and a progressive community.

OCAD U's reputation was also a factor, specifically because of its exclusive focus on art and design, reputation as being a leading institution for art and design, and OCAD U's cultural value as an important institution in the downtown and arts communities

2. Admissions and Transfer Process

The portfolio entry requirement shows up several times in this study as something that is both feared and anxiety producing, as well as a threshold that students recognize as a potential barrier to admission. Participants in the study who had attended college programs with the intent of entering OCAD U focused on clear goals such as gaining studio experience and producing a professional portfolio of art and design work.

In general students transferring to OCAD University had different expectations about how long their degrees would take to complete, how many credits they were awarded versus what they expected as well as how difficult the transfer of credit process was for them. In this key category, the students with university experience were very different than their college experience counterparts.

University entrants expected to spend longer completing their degrees than college entrants, and had more realistic expectations in general about transferred credits as well as time to degree completion. Most university entrants expected to spend four years completing their OCAD U degrees while half of the college entrants expected to complete their degrees in four years.

Among the university entrants, half of the participants in the study had transferred only Liberal Arts & Sciences (LAS) credits and half had transferred both LAS credits as well as Art or Design studio credits. Among the college entrants, 13% had transferred only LAS credits, while the vast majority (87%) had transferred both LAS as well as Art or Design studio credits.

These numbers reflect that many of the students transferring to OCAD U with university experience are coming from a program that did not have an art and design or studio focus and have lower expectations about direct transfers of course for course. The college entrants often have come from programs that were assumed to be transferrable to OCAD U because of the art and design focus.

Access to information
The interviews revealed the following general patterns in terms of how students found the information they needed to complete the transfer process:

- Both university and college experience students relied strongly on the OCAD U website for information.
- The Ontario University Application Centre's website was used as well.

- When experiencing difficulties with OCAD U's website, both university and college entrants utilized guesswork, talking to friends, or phone calls to university administration and staff; 25% received information about transfer of credit from OCAD U administration and staff and were generally happy with the assistance they received.
- A small number of students had participated in information sessions or other presentations sponsored by OCAD U recruiting that provided a source of information about transfer of credit options.

Student perceptions of the application process

The majority of participants did not think the application process was difficult. However, a small number of students – all college entrants – found the process "overwhelming."

The portion of the transfer of credit process that caused the highest levels of ambiguity and anxiety (as well as "intimidation") was the portfolio portion. In the end, students found the actual portfolio review process straightforward with the only solid misgivings afterwards located in the time artwork was kept and the length of time spent in limbo waiting for an answer.

About one-third of the study participants had previous transfer of credit experience with other institutions, and OCAD U was reported to be more "generous" than other institutions identified.

The majority of university entrants found the process "easy," but there were key recurring problems that are consistent with other university transfer of credit practices. Difficulties were:

1. Locating transfer of credit information and communicating with the university about transfers of credits.
2. Time consuming nature of the transfer of credit process. OCAD University's process has a single dedicated officer, but the very specialized nature of OCAD U's course often require multiple reviews to assess transferability which may include reviews by Associate Deans in multiple Faculties, portfolio reviews by disciplinary teams including Chairs and Associate Deans which is further complicated when the peak season for assessment is in the summer when reviewers may be on staggered vacations.
3. Difficulties associated with acquiring information such as course descriptions, syllabi and other requested information. Courses change from year to year, course catalogs have been replaced by digitized content, transcripts often have fees attached.

Student satisfaction with process results

Just under half of the university entrants in the study expressed that they were not surprised with the results of the transfer credit process. Of the others who did not get the credits they expected, these students were disappointed in the number of credits they did not get as related to their previous education. Among university transfer students, the courses that were perceived as being unnecessarily repeated included: first year writing, intro to earth sciences, design processes, research methods, English, and art history.

College entrants expressed the same concerns with closer to 60 percent of students being disappointed and surprised and some discussion of a lack of correlation between their expectations for direct course transferability.

The greatest disappointment came in student reports that they were required to repeat courses in which the content and outcomes were considered to be a repetition of past course work without cause. Among

college transfer students the courses given by students in interviews that were perceived as being unnecessarily repeated included: life drawing, art history, sculpture, painting studio, liberal studies (non specified).

Transfer of credits and impact on time to graduation
Perceptions about the effect of transfer of credit process on time to graduation were not remarkable. For both university and college entrants, the choice to attend OCAD U was made without much attachment to transfer of credits, which correlates with other responses that indicate that students had chosen OCAD U because of its specialized programs and mission and were not dependent upon transfer of credits to allow them to make their decisions.

Student suggestions for improving the process
Participants in the process provided their own recommendations to the institution to improve student mobility and transfer of credit. These recommendations included:

- Accept more credits
- Improve communication and information about transfer of credit process
- Improve application process via more standardized course descriptions, etc.
- Improve methods to inform students that they may be eligible for transfer of credits or advanced standing as well as clarify the transfer of credit process and fees
- Make the process more expedient to decrease anxiety and frustration.

These suggestions and others are explored in the Implications & Recommendations section that follows.

3. Academic & Social Transition

More than half of the students transferring from other universities reported that OCAD U was equal to or easier than their former universities, with some qualification that the work required at OCAD U was less formulaic work, more emotionally intense and work that was characteristically different than what they had experienced before with more hands-on experiences.

Additionally, once enrolled at OCAD U students transferring from colleges almost universally reported that OCAD U was more difficult than their previous experiences, particularly with "abstract" course content creating impediments to their success.

When University entrants asked what would have helped them in their academic transition, three themes emerged. Firstly, many of the students indicated that there is nothing specific that would have helped them with the academic transition to OCAD University. These individuals indicated that the transition just required adjustment. A second theme that emerged was the view that a reduced course load would have assisted them in their academic transition. Among the suggestions made by these participants were fewer courses, and fewer course projects. The final theme that emerged among university entrants was the belief that more supports and resources provided by the university would have helped. Among the suggestions made by these participants were more social space, more studio/work space, more academic advising, and more information about the academic expectations at OCAD University.

When college entrants were asked what would have helped them in their academic transition to the University only one theme emerged. These individuals indicated that they believed that increased support and resources would have helped them in their academic transition. More specifically,

participants discussed the need for resources such as studio space and student residences. They also mentioned academic supports such as increased guidance from professors, preparatory classes the summer before they start at the University, and peer mentorship.

When asked whether they were made to feel welcome at OCAD University, virtually all of the students in both cohorts indicated that they were made to feel welcome. Orientation (and other events for new students), email updates, friendly staff and faculty, and small class sizes were all listed as contributors to the welcoming environment at OCAD University. Among suggestions for improving the social transition of new students were the need for social and studio space, better ways to connect with other mature students, and improved social activities.

Familiarity with academic supports
Among the university entrants, 16 individuals reported being familiar with the academic supports available at the University. When asked how the participants learned about these supports and services, the majority talked about the promotional materials displayed throughout campus (posters, pamphlets, and advertisements) as well as online communications via email notifications and website announcements. Participants in this cohort also reported learning about the available academic supports from faculty, instructors, academic advisors, as well as peers.

Among college entrants, 12 individuals reported that they were familiar with the available academic supports and services; four individuals were somewhat familiar, and only one participant was not familiar (but acknowledged a lack of diligence to pay attention to this type of information). Individuals in cohort B reported that they learned about these supports and services through the same sources reported by cohort A.

The final overall theme that emerged from the interviews was the need for increased supports for new students. Several students suggested one on one meeting with individuals knowledgeable about the transfer and transition process.

V. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The investigation was unique in that it looked towards qualitative as well as quantitative data to seek to understand not only the perceived problems associated with student mobility and transfer of credit, but also student expectations, backgrounds and motivations for transferring to OCAD University. In general the students interviewed expressed that the complexities of transferring schools was a larger problem nuanced by the following realizations:

1. Many students had problems choosing an institution and program of study, without enough critical background to understand the implications or abilities to navigate the many choices and options available to them, even if limited to Ontario colleges and universities.
2. There is a large body of research addressing how students today make such life decisions that is still not conclusive and is shaped by the glut of additional information electronically available.
3. Issues of program "fit" are rising in importance as institutions seek to address challenges in retention as well as time-to-degree completion.

This study's results confirm almost every finding of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario's 2011 publication, *The Transfer Experience of Ontario Colleges who Further their Education – an Analysis of Ontario's College Graduate Satisfaction Survey* (Decock, et al., 2011). This study called for more knowledge of the process, showed fairly high satisfaction rates and showed a general lack of correlation between transfer of credits and choices to attend a specific college or university. OCAD U's specialization was the most stated impetus for transfer and this needs to shape any broad scale or across-the-board transfer agreements, either through blocks or though program affinity.

The study also drew attention to areas for institutional improvement, particularly the need for OCAD U to be more flexible and focus on learning outcomes and pedagogical objectives rather than rely on course descriptions and very specific studio experiences in its transfer of credit practices and policies.

Faculty have observed that the university transfer students are often somewhat surprised that credits can even transfer at all in many cases, and this becomes a little perk offered by the university that was never expected. Appeals of transfer of credit decisions are quite rare, and usually are handled with ease because students catch on that a French course can be transferred as a humanity credit or that their first year communication class at York uses the same textbook as OCAD U's first year critical theory course. Seeing such transfer opportunities does not appear easily and OCAD U's art and design nuanced naming of courses further obfuscates parity in course descriptions, objectives and teaching methodologies. This is a negative effect of our specialization. It is also not unusual for a student with an engineering degree to have not had a recognizable English course, but upon investigation first year writing requirements can and are waived when it is clear that university level writing experiences are included in their former program.

OCAD U's reliance on portfolio assessments and its non-traditional curriculum preclude many of the wisest suggestions from other more comprehensive institutions and these localized problems make OCAD U an extremely difficult test case. As Phillippe Constantineau states in his July 2009 COU Academic Colleagues Paper:

> *The toughest choice facing Ontario universities appears to be making the leap from bloc transfer credits for the completion of a community college program of study to the assessment of individual courses that have been successfully completed. These two approaches to the assessment of community college learning for university credit are not*

necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are bound to lead to divergent results. This problem can be resolved by the application of the principle that, when there are divergent results obtained from the employment of both approaches to prior learning assessments, the one that gives the student the most advanced standing should be retained. (7)

Constantineu's (2009) suggestion does not bode well with OCAD U's current approach. But were a stronger level of quality control maintained, key students coming from sympathetic programs at colleges who would reach a threshold such as obtaining an associate's degree in graphic design with a minimum GPA could be assumed to have achieved the same educational goals and objects as would have been done at OCAD U with similar portfolio evidence. If the minimum grade average is on par with marks given at OCAD U and instructors and curriculum were close enough in outcomes then a direct transfer could work for select sympathetic programs.

However, this research project suggests that students entering with college experience find OCAD U difficult and "abstract", leading to a belief that the intellectual and conceptual threshold has not been reached. Art and design must be taught as more than just a vocational skill. This is why OCAD U retains its desire to see work, meet students and subject them to anxiety creating, yet essentially rigorous screening.

One approach would be to create program affinitive blocks with some flexibility, as is seen in the University of Toronto, Woodsworth College - Seneca College model. If OCAD U faculty do not feel that the studio experiences that college transfer students are coming to OCAD U with warrant such large transfers then a reduced cap and retaking a few key core studios is reasonable and standard in studio-based education. However, the general Liberal Arts & Sciences courses as well as the more generic first year studios that are skills-based may be much more easily transferred with more forgiving criteria such as learning outcomes like writing an analytical essay regardless of content or some kind of two-dimensional representation course, be it drawing or digital design, etc.

The results of this study suggest that OCAD University should reconsider what it considers to be a core requirement, particularly at the first year level. For example, students coming out of a college or university program will, more than likely, have reached the same standards as the required Essay and the Argument first year writing class. Some programs at other institutions allow students to test out of such a class and opt instead for a more content-based upper year alternative or a complete waiver. Many experienced students deserve the same opportunity.

Recommendations

Finding: Many students lack a basic understanding about their own programs and the relationship of their programs to the required, but flexible, Liberal Arts & Sciences courses that they must take, as well as the other Liberal Arts & Sciences courses that are part of their specific program requirements. Students are often unable to see their degree programs in totality and therefore cannot see where previously taken courses may fulfill these various types of requirements.

Recommendations:

- OCAD U should attempt to re-assess its many different programs with facilitating transfers of credit in mind as one of its criteria for clarity and consistency. OCAD U should endeavour to use course titles and descriptions that are simple, clear and similar to other institutions when possible. Many of the most highly specialized courses are not only similar to standard courses

elsewhere, but even use the same standard texts. Clarity would help identify similar courses and lessen the burden of obtaining syllabi, course descriptions, etc.

- If a student has at least two years of full time college experience or at least one full year of university experience with a major that is in the social sciences, OCAD U should consider waiving any required introductory research methods classes.
- The Essay and the Argument is the most often complained about course in relationship to redundancy. Granting credit for this course if at least one year of university credit has been completed or two years of college has been completed or some similar measure would be advised as well.

Finding: OCAD University suffers from communication gaps for transfer of credit options from a practical student perspective. Information is embedded in layers of university policy as the default organizational structure, rather than being based on student experience. Students do not understand transfer of credit rules, policies or opportunities as a result.

Recommendation:

- Make the website user-based, graphic and less reliant on written policies and more on student and faculty experiences with carefully prioritized data that may have policies embedded for further information, but is designed around helping students choose the right classes, understand programs, and other practical applications. Furthermore, use specific student cases to demonstrate how transfer credits may fit into real life student scenarios through case studies. Various programs may be modeled using fictional or even real student personas.

Finding: The transfer of credit process is labour intensive, requires too much information gathering on administration and student ends and remains very subjective in many cases. Student comments about ambiguities and mixed expectations are consistent with the subjectivity and interpretation that remain a key component of the transfer of credit process. Those participating in the process make mistakes and staff change, particularly at the Associate Dean level where the highly subjective decisions occur and continuity is rare from year to year.

Recommendation:

- Standard block agreements need to be forged between copasetic programs (at the college level and potentially university level), core courses, such as basic research methods and introductory English, need to be more often automatically granted credits, and learning outcomes and experiences rather than course outlines, descriptions and titles need to form the backbone of these pre-arranged transfers. The current system is too reliant on dated criteria. Transfers may be seen as cumulative experiences and pairings of courses at OCAD U may be seen to be the equivalent of other pairings of course with entirely different titles and course descriptions, but with similar learning outcomes and standards. The current exchange focus on course-to-course transfers denies the assessment of experiences such as achieving competency in writing a university level critical essay.

Finding: Communication of transfer of credit results takes too much time. OCAD U is a small institution where key decisions in the transfer of credit process rely on only one key person in various steps of the assessment process. As such, long delays can occur and transfer of credit bundles of student

cases are often passed on in batches. Nearly finished applications must wait until a critical mass builds up and vacations and other work duties can impede progress.

Recommendation:

- The key solution is to digitize the entire process with workflow mapping, status reports and progress tracking to help those in the process to manage their time and efficiency. Increasing participation in transfer of credit assessment of all courses, not just studio courses to include Chairs or even senior faculty would also spread the workload and decrease dependency on just one or two key people. A by-product of sharing this task would be a greater understanding of transfer of credit policies, practices and rules by others, which would lead to more informed advising.

Finding: One of the more significant findings in this study was that the needs, expectations and knowledge level of university experience students and college experience students was very different, yet both cohorts are treated the same.

Recommendation:

- Orientation, messaging and even the transfer of credit assessment process itself may need to be redesigned into two separate processes to fit the very different needs of these two very different groups of students. Block transfers for college entrants may be paired with grouping of types of courses as core block transfers for university entrants. The study confirms that the experiences each cohort brings to the table is different, and current practices to transfer an English class for a university student as an English class at OCAD U or two Writing classes at the college level as the same OCAD U English class does not take into account what either student may have actually experienced as a learning outcome. There needs to be more than one standard of measurement, and that standard needs not to be the course for course university transfer as the standard.

CONCLUSION

Looking at such transfer of credit expectations and outcomes by focusing on one particular art and design university has led to an optimistic but cautious call for entering into trial agreements and helping build realistic and useful student expectations and preparation for transfers within Ontario into OCAD University from a variety of origins. OCAD U occupies a unique place in the post-secondary landscape in Ontario and, as we have seen, OCAD U's students come here for very specific reasons. Many come with prior post-secondary experience that deserves credit, but perhaps credit for learning outcomes more than specific courses should be the focus. It would be wise to help increase transfers, but alongside OCAD U's selective admissions process. Facilitating transfer pathways along with a recognition that our university and college transfer students have different needs, intentions and expectations will help enrich OCAD U's learning environment and not devalue its mission if done with our student profile in mind. This broadening of transfer of credit beyond a one-size-fits-all mentality would serve students, faculty and staff and hopefully open up new venues for transfers in the future to further enrich OCAD U's diverse student body.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

OCAD University - College University Consortium Council Research Project

Pathways and Barriers to Art and Design Undergraduate Education for Students with Previous College and University Experience

QUESTIONS REGARDING PRIOR EXPERIENCE

1. *Can you tell me about the colleges or universities you attended prior to OCAD U? What program(s) were you in? How much of your diploma or degree did you complete?*
   - Name of previous institution(s
   - Location
   - Name of previous program
   - Semester(s) or year(s) of study at previous institution
   - [If not clear] Was your previous program art or design related?
   - Was your previous program studio-based?
   - Did you complete your previous program?
     If yes, credential awarded:
2. *Can you tell me what influenced you to enroll in that/those particular program(s)?*
3. *If you did not complete your diploma/degree, why did you choose to leave that/those particular program(s)?*
4. *At what point in your previous program did you decide that you wanted to continue your studies at OCAD University?*
5. *Why did you decide to enrol at OCAD U?*

QUESTIONS REGARDING ADMISSION AND TRANSFER PROCESS

1. *Before applying to OCAD U, what did you anticipate in terms of how long it would take you to complete your chosen degree here? Please elaborate.*
   a. *Thinking back on this process, how did you find the information you needed to begin the application process?*
   b. *How difficult did you find it to complete the required steps in the OCAD U application process? Please elaborate on aspects of the process that were easy or difficult.*
2. *This next series of questions focuses on the process of applying for transfer credit when you came to OCAD University.*
   a. *Did you apply for any transfer of credit when you came to OCAD University? (If no, skip to Q. 3)*
   b. *If so, did you apply for studio credits, liberal studies credits or both?*
   c. *How difficult or easy was it to complete the required steps in the request for credit transfer portion of the OCAD U application process? Please elaborate on aspects of the process that were easy or difficult.*
   d. *Did you seek assistance during the process? If so, what information did you need, from whom did you request assistance, and how often did you seek assistance? Was the assistance provided inadequate or satisfactory? If no assistance was sought, what was your experience of navigating the steps on your own?*
   e. *Were the necessary steps in the process and forms clear and intuitive or difficult to understand and complete?*
   f. *What was your experience in obtaining and supplying the required records?*
   g. *Were the costs associated with the process prohibitive or reasonable?*
   h. *How did you feel about the length of time that the transfer credit and application process took?*

3. *Have you gone through the process of applying for acceptance and transfer of credit to institutions other than OCAD University? If so, can you compare your experiences noting both positive and negative aspects?*
4. *Did the credit transfer process yield expected outcomes for you?*
5. *Were you surprised by the transfer credits accepted or rejected by OCAD University?*
6. *Did the results of the transfer credit process have an effect on your plans and/or expectations about the time it would take to complete your degree here?*
7. *If you had had the opportunity to take OCAD U courses online **while you were still enrolled in your previous institution**, would you have done so?*
8. *To what degree did OCAD University's decision regarding your application for transfer credit positively or negatively influence your decision to attend OCAD U?*

QUESTIONS REGARDING TRANSITION TO OCAD UNIVERSITY
1. *What impressions of OCAD University did you make during your application process?*
2. *Did you receive informative, clear and frequent communications from OCAD U?*
3. *What were impressions following your acceptance to OCAD University, but prior to your enrollment?*
4. *What were your impressions during your first semester of enrollment?*
5. *How would you describe your transition in terms of the level of academic difficulty of your courses at OCAD University compared to your previous experience?*
6. *What would have helped you in your academic transition to OCAD University?*
7. *How familiar are you with the structure and requirements for your degree program? For example: required and elective courses, credit weight system, different majors/minors/specializations?*
   a. *How and when did you learn about these?*
8. *How familiar are you with the various academic supports available at OCAD University? For example, academic advisors, writing and learning services, library and the Learning Zone.*
   a. *How and when did you learn about those?*
9. *What would have helped you in your social transition to OCAD University? Were you made to feel welcome as a member of the OCAD University community? Can you give examples of what made you feel welcome/unwelcome?*
10. *How and when did you gain an orientation to the physical campus – locations and purposes of buildings; transit and parking; hours of operation?*
11. *How familiar are you with the student life and involvement opportunities at OCAD U such as clubs and associations, student union, career services, mentorship program.*
    a. *How and when did you learn about those?*
12. *Can you identify any procedures, policies or practices at OCAD University that have presented barriers for you?*
13. *Since starting at OCAD U, do you feel you have repeated any coursework unnecessarily?*
14. *Are you pleased that you transferred to OCAD U?*

SUGGESTIONS
1. *Do you have any suggestions for how to modify the transfer of credit guidelines and practices for dealing with these issues to improve the process?*
2. *Do you have any suggestions for how to ease the transition process to OCAD University for students with previous post-secondary experience?*