

Benchmark Study on Institutional Approaches Toward Students in Transition and Financial Aid

S. Nicole Jones, Transition Coach

Jason M. Mastrogiovanni, Director

August 2018



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

FIRST-YEAR STUDIES

First-Year Studies

The Office of First-Year Studies is a unit in the Division of Academic Success and Transitions at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The mission of First-Year Studies is to work in partnership with students, staff and faculty to accomplish more successful transitions for all students.

821 Volunteer Blvd., Greve Hall Room 217
Knoxville, TN 37996-3392
fys.utk.edu (865) 974-3523

Author Biographies

Nicole Jones joined the FYS office in September 2016 as a Transition Coach. In this position, she provides academic coaching to students participating in the Volunteer Bridge program and those who have been academically dismissed, academic advising to potential transfers and students transitioning between majors, and also teaches FYS 101 and TRNS 201. Nicole received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Georgia and is currently a PhD student in Educational Psychology at the University of Tennessee. She spent five years working for the federal government in investigative and analytical roles, and has worked in higher education, specifically in advising related positions, for 10 years and counting.

Jason Mastrogiovanni came to UT as the founding director of the First-Year Studies Department in 2013 from Stony Brook University in New York. He enjoys having an impact on college students through discussion and inquiry. He enjoys helping students break down walls of what they know and co-build their understanding of how they learn and develop into successful, productive, well-educated adults.

His research interests include design thinking, collaboration, and appreciative inquiry in the higher education environment.

Suggested Citation

Jones, S.N. & Mastrogiovanni, J. M. (2018). Benchmark study on institutional approaches toward students in transition and financial aid. Knoxville, TN: First-Year Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Context

Students in transition as defined in this study are, in general, students who find themselves without an immediate academic home. At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT), students in transition fall under two broad categories: involuntary or voluntary. **Involuntary** students in transition are those who have been dismissed from their current major and now must find a new major. **Voluntary** students in transition are those who have identified a new major but don't currently meet the entrance requirements, typically pre-requisite or GPA, and need an academic home while they work on gaining admission into the new major. It has been found that the majority of students in transition at UT are involuntary, as outlined below. In either case, students who are in transition are referred to the First-Year Studies (FYS) Department to meet with transition coaches (senior level academic advisors) to develop an academic plan.

Involuntary

The most common group of involuntary students in transition at UT are those who started in a competitive major program at some point in the past, but have been academically unable to continue in that program due to missing academic benchmarks. In other words, they are considered “off-track” and have been dismissed from the major. Another variant of this group, are students who are academically dismissed from the institution due to academic standing but seek and are granted an appeal for reinstatement. As a condition of their appeal, they may be advised by the Academic Appeals Committee that in order to return to UT, a new major must be chosen. Alternatively, their academic standing status may make them no longer eligible for their original major. For example, if students majoring in Nursing, Engineering, or Business have been dismissed from the university, they have also been dismissed from their major and must choose a new major upon return. Students in this group may have begun enrollment at the institution as a first-time, full-time student or entered the university as a transfer student.

When this occurs, some students have anticipated a likely transition and have actively sought out a parallel plan; others have not and become, in effect, undecided on their next action. These are often students who have no idea which major to choose and are often in denial they can't return to previous majors. In some cases, even students who have sought out a parallel plan, may not be able to gain access to the new major without additional coursework.

The second most common group of students in transition at UT are transfer students who fail to gain admission to a competitive major program, but do succeed in gaining admission to the university. Often students in this category have a deep desire to graduate from UT and may be operating on the possibility of future admission to the originally denied program. In some cases, it may be possible to be admitted to their intended program upon completion of prerequisites and academic progress. In other cases, the intended major program may have a cohort model that is limited or full in its student capacity so an alternative major (or institution) must be chosen.

Another way students become in transition is through the readmission process. Students may “stop out” of the institution for a number of reasons including financial, personal, or academic. When a student seeks to return to the institution, he or she may be ineligible to return to a previous major because of academics (GPA or milestone) or program capacity. Students approaching transition from this perspective may be intending to regain admission to the original program or may be looking to explore pathways to complete a different degree at the institution.

Voluntary

Voluntary students in transition are those who choose to leave their current major but don't yet meet the requirements to transition into their new major of choice. In some cases, these students just need to take a few pre-requisite courses or need at least one semester to pull up their GPA to meet the minimum requirements. At UT, this occurs most often for students seeking admission into the Haslam College of Business but do not meet the minimum 2.5 GPA requirement.

Students also become voluntary students in transition when they realize that their current major is not a good fit for them, but have yet to identify an alternate major area to pursue. In practice, we have received these students as referrals from other advising units and the Center for Career Development. This population has been small, possibly due in part to our relatively new status as transition advisors and the lack of a campus-wide campaign to raise awareness of these specialized advising services.

Problem and Methodology

Historically, UT has defaulted students in these categories to University Exploratory, an exploratory major that is designed for students entering the university for the first-time, in their first-semester. University Exploratory students are able to maintain this major designation for four consecutive terms from their first term at the university. When a University Exploratory student reached their second year they could have amassed 24-48 credits, potentially making them indistinguishable from students in transition. In an effort to provide specialized advising to this population, a new unit of transition advisors was established on campus in the summer of 2016. A year later when the academic policy calendar allowed, a new major entitled University Transition Program was created to rectify the disambiguation of the students in the transition population from the University Exploratory population.

However, an unforeseen consequence of this action were new financial aid policies that may have implications for students in transition receiving aid. In an effort to find out the potential financial aid impact on transitional majors, a benchmarking study of 27 institutions was conducted.

Advising representatives from each institution were asked the following questions:

1. What happens when students voluntarily or due to poor academic performance leave an academic college at your institution?
 - a. Are students required to move directly to a new degree-granting major?
 - b. Do they move to an exploratory or transitional major? If so, what is it called?
 - c. Is your exploratory/transition major degree-granting, such as a Liberal Studies/General Studies major?
2. Are there any limits on when this transition can happen in a student's academic career?
 - a. If so, what are they?
3. What, if any, impacts does this academic movement out of a college have on financial aid?
 - a. Does it vary depending on earned student credit?
4. Has your school implemented a method for financial aid Course Program of Study?
 - a. If so, what student information system and degree audit system do you use?
5. Does your school offer financial aid for preparatory coursework?

Problem and Methodology continued...

Responses to the above questions were received from 18 of the 27 institutions. For the remaining institutions, an online review of their academic policies provided some insight into whether or not students are required to directly switch to a new major, are allowed a transitional period, or have the option of declaring a general/liberal studies major.

Findings

Transition Programs/Offices

Twenty-two of the institutions have stated advising policies and practices for students in transition, but all have varying limitations on how students enter and how long students can remain in transition (see Appendix A). For some institutions, students in transition were by default referred back to the university's exploratory/ undecided advising units. This is similar to the historical practice at UT, prior to the hiring of our transition advisors.

There were some notable transition programs and policies that might be used as analogs for our program moving forward.

At the University of Maryland, College Park if a student is intending to switch to a major program where they have not completed all the necessary prerequisites, students are allowed to enter the Transition Advising Program. This program is only available to students with more than 60 credits earned. This program is a non-degree granting major that students can be a part of for one semester. The program staff also indicated that at no time during a student's status in TAP do they certify financial aid eligibility.

North Carolina State University (NC State) created the Inter-College Transfer program to aid students attempting to gain acceptance to majors in other competitive colleges within the institution. Students meet with cross-curricular advisors to explore majors and work toward meeting the requirements for a new major. The program is also exclusively designated for students in transition because they cannot enter the program until they have completed 12 credit hours at NC State.

Auburn University created a major called "Exploratory-Internal Transfer". The purpose of this major designation is to alleviate differential tuition assessed to students who have no intention of graduating from the college assessing fees. In their case, students actually switched from their intended college into this non-degree exploratory major. Students could remain in this exploratory status for two active semesters.

Auburn University
Clemson University
Indiana University
Iowa State University
Michigan State University
North Carolina State University
The Ohio State University
Pennsylvania State University
Purdue University
Texas A&M University
University of California, Davis
University of California, Los Angeles
University of Florida
University of Georgia
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
University of Maryland, College Park
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Pittsburgh
University of Texas at Austin
University of Washington
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Transitions Programs/Offices continued...

The Ohio State University referred to students in transition as “redeciding”. Procedurally, “redeciding” students are advised by exploratory advisors. If the students are eligible for their new major, the exploratory advising staff will directly refer them to the appropriate new advisors. If the student is unsure of a new major, he or she is placed into a meta-major designation.

Aside from these schools, most programs are designed for incoming students who are still in their lower division coursework (under 60 credits). However, the terming of this limitation varies from “before the first semester of junior year” to “no more than four semesters”. Some outliers include higher credit limits, such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison (under 80 credits), Purdue University (under 83 credits), University of California, Los Angeles (under 90 credits), and the University of Washington (under 105 credit hours). At these institutions, students have a longer lead time to move in and out of transition.

Direct Switch to New Major

Five institutions require students to change directly into degree granting majors and do not have a transition program in place for students considering another major. Notable among them were the following: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and University of California, Berkley. The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, as a described liberal

Rutgers University
University of California, Berkley
University of California, Santa Barbara
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
University of Virginia

arts institution, does not require students to declare a major until their fourth semester at the institution. Following that term, students must switch from major to major. The University of California, Berkeley requires students to be in a degree-granting major, but what is unique about their institution’s approach may be the high level of academic standard. Their advising office reported a greater ability to recommend students take time off (in the event of poor academic performance) or figure out an alternative major (if newly exploratory) that will accept them.

An additional 10 institutions require students in a declared major to directly switch to a new major but these schools also have transition programs in place (see Appendix A). It appears the transition programs are in place for students who enter the university as exploratory/undecided or if they do not meet the entrance the requirements for their desired major. However, if a student enters the university with a declared major, he or she cannot change the major to exploratory. Instead, the student must change to a new major if he or she no longer wants the current major or are dismissed from the declared major due to academic performance.

Liberal/General Studies Major

In general, the majority of the institutions in this study do not offer a degree option in liberal/general studies. A few institutions (Texas A&M and Purdue) offer temporary general studies majors as a placeholder major for students transitioning between majors. The University of Michigan offers a degree in General Studies but it is more in line with an Interdisciplinary Studies degree in that it must be designed around a theme.

Financial Aid

In regards to financial aid implications of a transition major, the majority of institutions in this study were not aware of any negative impact to students' financial aid eligibility. This may suggest a limitation in this study regarding advisor knowledge of financial aid implications for students in transition. At Michigan State, financial aid is available for preparatory coursework but the student's advisor must sign off on the following:

- 1) the coursework is required for admission to a specified graduate/professional degree program,
- 2) a list of specific courses required for admission, and
- 3) a statement that the student will be admitted to the degree program if the courses are completed with the required grade.

At UNC Chapel Hill, students are only eligible for eight semesters of financial aid and at UCLA, students may receive financial aid for up to 270 attempted quarter credits. Finally, the University of Maryland, College Park, reported that as long as a course is credit bearing, it counts as part of the registration status and is eligible for financial aid.

Conclusion and Implications

In many ways the study confirmed that the population of "students in transition" are not unique to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Additionally, many institutions seem to have created some form of transitional home for these students, whether it be a designated group of advisors or folded into a more traditional first-time, full-time exploratory unit. Major declaration and degree-seeking status also varied widely at each institution. Some included transition majors, but the vast majority used an existing exploratory major, and others took a more hard-lined approach that required students to "figure out" a new major.

One important question is how do we continually identify and/or track students in transition at UT? The University Transition program is a step in the right direction in addressing this issue but due to a vague change of major process at UT, there have been some issues. Should voluntary students in transition be required to complete a change of major form? Who is responsible for changing the major of involuntary students in transition? Currently, there is no standard change of major form in place at UT; each academic college, and even some majors within a college handle the process differently. The majority, if not all, institutions in this study have a change of major process that is easily found on their website. It is impossible to find this information on the UT website. A written change of major policy is recommended to help streamline the transition process for students and allow all UT staff and faculty to be on the same page.

Of most importance are the financial aid implications for students in the University Transition Program at UT. This major is now listed in the 2018-19 catalog but will financial aid be available to students in this program like it is for students in University Exploratory? The catalog description makes no mention of any financial aid implications. However, recently, an incoming University Transition Program student for fall 2018 was told by OneStop that his loans were canceled for fall because he is in a non-degree seeking major. This is a major problem for student retention and persistence for students in transition at UT. If students are not allowed to use financial aid for the University Transition Program, there is no reason to expect that students would choose this as a temporary academic home. And for those who are involuntary placed in the University Transition Program, are they aware of potentially losing financial aid?

Review of Institutions

Peer Institution	Requires Direct Switch to New Major?	Liberal/General Studies Major?	Transition Program?	Transition Program Limitations
Auburn University	No	No	Yes (Exploratory)	2 semesters; transfers ineligible
Clemson University	Yes	No	Yes (Undeclared)	Option for incoming freshmen and transfers only
Indiana University	Yes	No	Yes (Pre-Major/Exploratory)	One semester
Iowa State University	Yes	No	Yes (Undecided)	Restricted to incoming students only
Michigan State University	Yes	No	Yes (No-Preference)	Only an option for students with fewer than 56 earned credits
North Carolina State University	No	No	Yes (Inter-College Transfer Program)	Unknown
The Ohio State University	No	No	Yes (Re-deciding/University Exploratory)	Two semesters max
Pennsylvania State University	No	No	Yes (Division of Undergraduate Studies)	2 semesters after 1st year
Purdue University	No	No	Yes (Exploratory Studies)	Limited to students with less than 83 earned credits
Rutgers University	Yes	No	No	N/A
Texas A&M University	No	No	Yes (General Studies)	1-2 semesters
University of California, Berkeley	Yes	No	No	N/A
University of California, Davis	Yes- students must earn a degree in 12 quarters/4 years	No	Yes (Undeclared)	Restricted to 1st and 2nd year students
University of California, Los Angeles	No, but must be able to complete a degree in 4 years	No	Yes (Undeclared)	Restricted to students with less than 90 earned hours.

Peer Institution	Requires Direct Switch to New Major?	Liberal/General Studies Major?	Transition Program?	Transition Program Limitations
University of California, Santa Barbara	Yes – switching majors is not allowed after end of junior year.	No	No	N/A
University of Florida	Yes	No	Yes (Exploratory)	Limited to 1st year students
University of Georgia	No	No	Yes (Unspecified)	Must have a declared major by 1st semester of junior year
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	No	Yes, but non-degree granting	Yes (Undeclared)	Limited to 4 total semesters
University of Maryland, College Park	Yes	Yes, but non-degree granting	Yes (Transition Advising Program)	Limited to 1 semester; only an option for students with 60+ credits earned
University of Michigan	Yes	Yes, but must be designed around a theme	Yes (Undecided)	Must declare a major by end of sophomore year
University of Minnesota	No	No	Yes (Undecided)	Unknown
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Yes – must complete degree by end of 8th semester	No	No	N/A
University of Pittsburgh	No	No	Yes (Undeclared)	Unknown
University of Texas at Austin	No	No	Yes (Undeclared)	Can only change major during 1st 4 semesters
University of Virginia	Yes – must graduate by end of 8th semester	No	No	N/A
University of Washington	No	No	Yes (Pre-Major/undecided)	Must have a major declared upon completion of 105 quarter hours
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Yes	No	Yes (Undecided)	Incoming students only; must declare a major upon earning 80 credits