CAWG

Campus Assessment Working Group
Beginnings Subgroup

Transfer Student Focus Group Report

Student Perceptions of Transferring to the
University of Maryland

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Authors:
Sean Simone
Kathleen Lis Dean

Chair, Beginnings Subgroup
Joann Prosser

Research Team:
Zaneeta Daver
Sharon La Voy
Jessica Mislevy
Lauren Ruff
Tom Steen

Additional Support:
Eowyn Ellison
Kimberly Keller
Ben Kulp

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Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2005, the Beginnings subgroup of the Campus Assessment Work Group (CAWG) conducted a focus group study of transfer students at the University of Maryland. The project was designed and implemented because of a growing interest on campus in the transfer student experience.

We conducted four focus groups involving 36 self-selected transfer students who were randomly selected from a pool of transfer students invited to participate. The pool of students included both newly admitted and veteran transfer students. We provided an incentive in the form of a gift certificate to encourage student participation. The research team developed focus group discussion topics and a protocol through a pilot study to ensure the study met the rigor of a qualitative assessment project. Students were provided with a questionnaire to ensure that their perspective was included in the event a topic of interest did not come up in discussion. The focus groups were tape recorded and later transcribed, coded, and interpreted by the Beginnings subgroup. A third-party auditor ensured the accuracy of the interpretations in this report. It should be noted that the data provided in this report are perceptions that transfer students have of the transfer process regardless of whether the perceptions are based in fact. Students may make statements that sound incorrect; they may not be aware of the existence of services, for example, or may have misperceptions about policies. Caution should be used not to generalize qualitative data beyond these focus groups, but future studies may make generalization possible.

Eleven themes emerged from the transfer student focus group conversations. They include perceptions about:

- the admissions process,
- Orientation,
- advising,
- academics,
- housing,
- transportation,
- finances,
- social factors,
- personal factors,
- reasons for attending Maryland, and
- information and responsibility.

The most prominent themes that emerged from the data are Orientation, advising, academics, housing, and information and responsibility. Though helpful, less prominent themes presented in this report include comments from only a limited number of focus group participants. The summaries of each of the themes listed below are ordered chronologically as an incoming transfer student may experience them.

The research team utilized specific terms to ensure consistency in the reporting of the number of comments attributed to an interpretation. These terms include *most* (all focus groups/almost all participants per group), *many* (3-4 focus groups/4-6 participants per group), *some* (2-3 focus groups/2-4 participants per group), and *few* (1-2 focus groups/1-2 participants per group).

I. Admissions

Generally, transfer students were dissatisfied with the admissions and credit transfer process. Though online resources were helpful, *some* students cited confusion of transfer credits, lack of individual attention, and the need to repeat classes due to lost credits. A *few* students also noted dissatisfaction with information about Limited Enrollment Programs and feedback about application or admission problems or omissions. Finally, students commented on how late admission to UM impacted them negatively in scheduling Orientation dates and subsequently class selection.

II. Orientation & Advising

Most students were generally dissatisfied with their Orientation and advising experience, though there were a *few* positive comments from students who transferred into small programs. Comments reflected that Orientation was intensive, frustrating, and impersonal. Students also reported that advisors did not have the information needed to assist students. Students felt as if they left Orientation without having the information

they needed for the fall semester. *Some* students expressed dissatisfaction with general (Letters & Sciences) advising and wished to be advised in their prospective major during Orientation.

III. Academics
Students identified a number of transition issues related to academics. One of the more prominent topics was related to Limited Enrollment Programs and dissatisfaction with information related to admission, the number of credits needed, and freedom of choice. *Many* students also reported that the academic environment at Maryland was more difficult than their previous institution because of the size of the University, size of classes, the rigor of the curriculum, and the individualistic expectations.

IV. Housing
Students had negative perceptions of both off-campus and on-campus housing. Students had negative feelings about off-campus housing because of the high cost of housing in the area, the low quality of apartments surrounding the University, and the extent to which living off-campus hindered their college experience. Students also had negative perceptions of on-campus housing not only because of the difficulty in obtaining a housing assignment as a transfer student, but also because they believed this information was either not realistically communicated or was communicated very late in the transfer process. In general, students perceived a lack of University assistance in finding housing, though a *few* students stated that the online Off-Campus Housing Locator was helpful.

V. Transportation & Finances
Generally, these two themes were not as prominent in the focus groups as others. Students focused on what services should be improved on campus. For transportation, students commented positively on the value of the Shuttle Bus, but wished service could be expanded. In regard to finances, students were concerned about the cost of dropped credits, the cost of unexpected student fees, and responsiveness of the Office of Student Financial Aid to their concerns.

VI. Social & Personal Factors
Most students indicated that they had difficulty meeting people after transferring to Maryland. Age differences, distance from campus, and existing cliques made it more difficult to meet people. Students seemed to de-emphasize the social aspects of college life and focused on the goal of attaining a degree. Over time students indicated that they became more acclimated to the social life of campus.

VII. Reasons for Attending Maryland
Students transferred to Maryland for a number of reasons. These include: to be closer to family and friends, the rigor of academics, the bigger size of the campus, diversity, and financial reasons.

VIII. Information & Responsibility
Information exchange and responsibility for finding information were themes that overlapped all other categories within this report. Students routinely identified gaps of information they needed to succeed, and whether or not the University was responsible for providing them this information. Overall students recognized that they had to take significant responsibility for their success on campus; however *most* students believed that the University could have done more to assist them in their transition. In areas such as Orientation, housing, and academic advising, students stated that the University could have done more to provide information. Students perceived they had greater responsibility in areas such as social transition, making friends, and doing academic work when compared to other themes. Students who were aware of where to find information seemed more likely to be satisfied with their transfer experience.

The CAWG Beginnings subgroup will be conducting a follow-up study to survey transfer students to determine whether the findings of this focus group study generalize to the transfer student population at the University of Maryland.

Introduction

During the 2003-2004 academic year, the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) consulted with a number of UM administrators and learned that there was an increasing interest in exploring the experiences of transfer students, about both their transition to the University and about their experience as UM students. In the Spring of 2004, the Beginnings subgroup of CAWG began work on this project. It was determined that focus groups were the most appropriate method of data collection since the committee wanted to determine what issues were most salient to transfer students. Focus groups are used to help obtain background information about a topic, generate themes that can then be later tested using quantitative approaches, and learn how respondents talk about a phenomenon of interest.[1] For this project, focus groups allowed the assessment team to explore the experiences of UM transfer students by providing the opportunity for students to express their thoughts, opinions and experiences in their own words. Focus groups of UM transfer students were conducted in the Spring of 2005. (See Appendix A for this project's methodology, Appendix B for the focus group protocol, and Appendix C for the participant questionnaire.)

It should be noted that the data provided in this report are <u>perceptions</u> that transfer students have of the transfer process regardless of whether the perceptions are based in fact. Students may make statements that sound incorrect; they may not be aware of the existence of services, for example, or may have misperceptions about policies. As always, caution should be used not to generalize qualitative data beyond these focus groups, but future studies may make generalization possible.

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[1] Stewart, D. W., & Shamadasani, P. N. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Demographics

I. University Demographics and Transfer Student Trends

Many factors have contributed to the interest in transfer students at the University, one of which was a reduction in the enrollment of transfer students in the past five years. The following information summarizes institutional data on transfer students and was used as background information for this study:

Transfer Student Profile (1999 – 2004)

- Transfer applications are up 22% from 1999.
- Acceptances of transfer students have decrease five percent, and transfer enrollments were down 16% since 1999.
- The greatest decline of new transfer enrollees has been from non-Maryland 4-year institutions (down seven percent).
- On average, transfer students were four years older than new freshman.
- Transfer students were more likely than new freshman to attend part time.
- The greatest numbers of students transfer to UM as sophomores or juniors, although the number of transfer students in all four classes has declined in the previous five years.
- There has been very little difference between transfer and direct admit students when it comes to total credits earned at degree completion.
- First term GPA was .40 lower for transfer students than new freshman.

Transfer Student Demographics (1999 – 2004)

- The racial composition of transfer students entering UM has not changed for either new freshman or new transfer students from 1999 to 2004. However, the percentage of students not disclosing their race has increased over the five year period.
- White male students formed a smaller part of the new transfer students group compared to new freshman.
- Transfer students were much more likely than direct admit students to be part time (18% versus 1% for both 1999 and 2004).
- Part time transfer students were older, on average, than part time direct admit freshman.
- The average age of new transfer students was 22 years old and has declined slightly over the five year period.

II. Sample Demographics and Transfer Data

Five-hundred transfer students who had been on campus at least one full semester were randomly selected and invited by email to participate in a 90-minute session about their transfer student experience. Sixty-three students showed interest and were able to attend at least one of the six proposed sessions; four of those sessions were conducted based on the availability of the participants. Thirty-six students actually participated in the four groups, which had eight to ten participants each. The following data represent the demographic information provided on the transfer student questionnaire administered to the thirty-six students at the beginning of the focus groups.

Demographics of Sample

- 26 (72%) female students (compared to 51% in the entire transfer campus population)
- 21 (58%) Caucasian (compared to 53% in the entire transfer campus population)
- 12 (33%) sophomores, 11 (31%) juniors, and 9 (25%) seniors.
- 24 (66%) students were between 18 and 21 years old, 6 (17%) students are between 23 and 29 years old, and 3 (8%) are over 30 years old (compared to average transfer student age on campus: 23).

Transfer Data

- 26 (72%) had no previous degree.
- 20 (56%) previously attended a 4-year institution.
- 30 (83%) transferred from a public institution, 6 (17%) transferred from a private institution.
- 10 (28%) transferred from Montgomery College.
- 14 (39%) planned to transfer to UM before starting at their previous institution.

Top Three Transition Issues
Upon their arrival, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire to collect demographic data (see Appendix C). The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to capture background information about the participants (i.e. whether students transferred from public or private, 2-year or 4-year institutions). A secondary purpose was to solicit the three most important issues related to their transition experience prior to beginning the group discussion**.** The questionnaire results were subsequently compared to the focus group data as a type of reliability test. The purpose was to determine how the list of issues from the surveys compared to the list of issues from the focus group discussions. The most cited issues were:

- Housing: 67%
- Social: 28%
- Credit Transfer: 25%
- Advising: 22%
- Academic Transitions: 17%

Student Perceptions of Transferring to the University of Maryland

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- finances,
- social factors,
- personal factors,
- reasons for attending Maryland, and
- information and responsibility.

The most prominent themes that emerged from the data are Orientation, advising, academics, housing, and information and responsibility. Though helpful, less prominent themes presented in this report only include comments from a limited number of the focus group participants. As stated in the methodology section (see Appendix A), we quantified responses and purposefully used words like *most* (all focus groups/almost all participants per group), *many* (3-4 focus groups/4-6 participants per group), *some* (2-3 focus groups/2-4 participants per group), and *few* (1-2 focus groups/1-2 participants per group) to address this issue. The themes are presented in this section chronologically as a transfer student may have encountered them when transferring to the University of Maryland.

I. Admissions

The admissions process was a less prominent theme in the transfer student focus groups. When describing their experiences, these students focused on how admissions processes negatively impacted their experience. Three topics students mentioned when discussing admissions were: credit transfer and articulation, information exchange, and timing.

A. Credit Transfer and Articulation

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with credit transfer and articulation. Comments regarding credit transfer were mostly negative. Less than half of all participants in the groups spoke about the credit transfer process. Students who expressed dissatisfaction over credit transfer cited confusion over transfer credits, lack of individual attention, the time it took for transfer evaluation, and the need to repeat classes or lose credits. The most prevalent reason for dissatisfaction was the loss of transfer credits counted toward a Maryland degree: *"If you're coming from out of state and the confusion about credits occurs, that could be understandable. But with local community colleges, I don't understand why there needs to be this confusion with the credits. I thought they were supposed to gear you up to come to the state university."*

A *few* students mentioned that the website/equivalency catalogue was helpful. *"The actual process was pretty smooth, the transfer process on line. The website was pretty helpful. I already knew pretty much what wasn't going to be accepted and didn't have any problems with this process."* As seen with other themes in this report, students

aware of where to find information seemed more likely to be satisfied with their transfer experience.

B. Information

Students' comments focused on the clarity and sources of information, as well as their satisfaction with information. Overall, a *few* students desired more clarity in the information they were provided and a *few* students were dissatisfied with having to follow-up on erroneous information. Dissatisfaction regarding information related to criteria for admission to Limited Enrollment Programs or the lack of responsiveness to inquiries about their general admissions application status. One student, for example, was dissatisfied because there were problems with her application: *"I applied early but like I said I didn't hear from the college and nobody said that I was missing paperwork. So by the time I called and found out, everything was filled up, and I had to go to one of the last [Orientation] sessions."*

On the other hand, a *few* students expressed satisfaction with the online application and admissions information over the web. For example, another student was satisfied because there were no problems with her application and information was readily available on the web: *"I applied on-line. It had a checklist when Maryland received everything (health records, etc) and it was all on line and you knew your current status of the application process."*

C. Timing

Students who commented on timing spoke about how the timing of admissions processes impacted future opportunities. *Many* students expressed dissatisfaction with the timing of admissions decisions and how it had negative consequences for the scheduling of Orientation and building a class schedule. One student observed this problem: *"I think it should be a shorter period of time for people to apply to be a transfer student. That way we would not have to wait until the first week of the semester to try to arrange their classes, with the D-Regs [or "de-registration" as a result of unpaid student account], what everybody else left over. This was a problem."* A *few* student comments regarding the timing of admission were related to how Spring transfer students do not have the same resources as Fall transfers. Students cited lack of access/priority to athletic events and lack of spring scholarships.

II. Orientation and Advising

Orientation and Advising were two prominent themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts. Though these two themes are distinctly different in many ways, when transfer students talked about their advising experience, *most* students talked about advising during Orientation. For this reason, Orientation and Advising were linked and presented together in this section.

Overall, *most* students expressed dissatisfaction with the Orientation process. Students commented that Orientation was long, too full, frustrating, and impersonal. One student stated:

> *"I have to say I'm not a terribly emotional person but I left Orientation in tears. It was incredibly long and hard to schedule. I mean, it made sense, but I got the brunt of classes, whatever I could fit in my schedule. At this point in my transfer, I am not looking to take junk classes, I am looking to finish what I am doing. It was long and impersonal."*

A *few* students, on the other hand, had positive comments about Orientation, especially those students transferring directly into their major of choice: *"My Orientation was kind of helpful, we got to meet all the people. . . .They took us apart from the group and introduced us to the heads of the departments, and introduced us to the professors, and said, 'Be nice to them, make friends with them now.'"* Unfortunately, student perceptions of Orientation and advising seemed more likely to be negative than positive. This section will explore the student perceptions surrounding the availability/timing of Orientation, the University's responsibilities at Orientation, the information provided at Orientation, and advising.

A. Availability/Timing of Orientation

Some students agreed that the timing of their Orientation had a negative impact on registration for classes and these students expressed intense frustration. One female transfer student noted her frustration in how a late Orientation impacted her ability to register for classes:

> *I got accepted towards the end of June, beginning of July. For some reason there was no room in the earlier Orientation. I could not go until 6 days before school started, so I had to wait a month and a half from when I was accepted and turned in my deposit...to sign up for classes. This was very frustrating for me. I would sign online at home and see courses and they were going away before my eyes and I couldn't sign up for them.*

Other students noted similar difficulty in obtaining early Orientation dates and the negative impact it had on them academically. One student was frustrated that the delay in Orientation actually hindered her academic progress. *"I kind of got screwed over, where I got the very last Orientation,"* the student began, *". . . [W]ith the Journalism track, you have to take certain courses and certain tests to get into the Journalism School, so just having my Orientation at the last part of the summer really kind of held me back even more than what I had been held back from just losing credits."*

Some students expressed frustration because Orientation was the first time they perceived hearing important information. This frustration covers last minute or late information from multiple areas including housing, Limited Enrollment Programs, and registration. Information about Limited Enrollment Programs was one of the more prominent topics in the focus groups under the Orientation theme. Students wishing to enter into Limited Enrollment Programs perceived a lack of information about the application process and the credit limit, or the number of credits that excludes students from applying: *"If your major is Business, I came in with 59 credits and didn't have a shot. But, I didn't find this out until 10 minutes before I was signed up for class."* One student, who transferred from a community college outside of Maryland, did not have the information she needed

to transfer into Education: *"When I transferred here, I didn't know that to get into a certain school you had to have a certain amount of credits. I was going to be an Education major. I found out at my Orientation, after I'd already decided to come here, that the cutoff was 45."* Another student, transferring from a Maryland community college, was confused about why LEP admissions information was not passed to him. *"I even put on the [application] website what I wanted to major in, they didn't say anything. They just said, ' You're accepted, come sign up for classes.' So I came to sign up for classes and they said, 'You have too many credits for this.' What's too many credits mean?"* One student stressed that she wished to have the information earlier to assess whether Maryland was a good match for her academic goals: *"Another girl. . .the same thing happened to her, she wanted to go into the business school, but she had more than 45 credits and she wound up not coming here because of that. This information should have been given to us up front, in the beginning."* Whether a student was an in-state transfer or an out-of-state transfer, students reported being confused or had ambiguous information about LEPs until they came to Orientation.

While not a major theme to emerge, there did appear to be issues unique to a *few* transfer students that would impact their Orientation dates including: the timing of changing majors, the lengthy acceptance of transfer credits, and a drawn out or delayed application process. The data did not support a difference in the Orientation experience due to the semester that the student transferred. However, this may be explored should a future quantitative study be conducted.

B. University Responsibilities

Many students acknowledged that it was both their and the University's responsibility to make the Orientation process productive and efficient. In *some* cases, students expressed frustration with the amount of responsibility they had to assume. One student noted how Orientation actually made registration more problematic: *"I think the Orientation process exacerbates that problem [of scheduling classes]. You are registering for class en masse and it's happening all at once. They don't really have the time to sit down with you, and really go over with you what they need to go over with you one-on-one."* Another student found it frustrating to get informed about an issue not covered in Orientation at all: *"They should have explained this at Orientation and told us that notes would be posted on Web CT etc... instead of me having to call up people to find out what to do. I had to do everything myself to try to figure things out."*

In *some* other cases, students acknowledged that they needed to assume responsibility; however, they would have preferred some assistance with the transition. A student transferring from a Maryland community college noted, *"I got the whole independence thing, but for your first semester you need to talk to someone, not just look at the website."* Another student speculated that the lack of guidance was due to the assumption that transfers already know how to get the information they need: *"A little more guidance and not assuming that we are transfers and we'll figure it out."*

In rare cases, students described the need to take personal responsibility for navigating

their transition. One student stated that, *"I felt I needed it [Orientation] coming in...It is good as a whole, but you need to do some independent study on your own as far as getting oriented to the campus..."* For the most part, students believed that responsibility for transitioning into the University fell both on them and the University, but the University did not meet this obligation during the Transfer Orientation Program.

C. Knowledge and Information

Lack of knowledge and information emerged as a challenge for *many* of the transfer students. The majority of these students were from public institutions, primarily 2-year community colleges. However, a number were from 4-year private colleges. Specifically, students indicated that they lacked the knowledge to function on campus after Orientation, did not have specific knowledge about academic programs or their major, and expressed a lack of knowledge of the Orientation program. For example, one student stated, *"My advisor didn't tell me when I scheduled classes that they should be close to each other because I would be walking a distance."* Another student reported not being taught to use the University computer system: *"I had no idea how to sign up for classes when I came my second semester. During Orientation they just set me up for 2 seconds and he did all the work and I had no idea what was going on. They should have explained this at Orientation. . . ."* One student claimed that she did not have a computer and online information was not accessible to her. As a result, she didn't know what to expect at Orientation on campus: *"I also didn't know that I would be taking a math placement or anything like that."*

D. Advising

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with their advising experience. Students seemed dissatisfied with either the accuracy of information provided by advisors, or the impersonal student/advisor relationship. *Some* students reported that their advisors provided incorrect information, often about math courses, prerequisites, or requirements for entry into majors such as LEPs. One student reported that he took his advisor's advice and then needed to take an additional course to meet the math requirement:
> *"I was told (by advisor) I could take one Math, when actually I needed another Math [course] and had to repeat Math the next semester, instead of some other course...I (had) researched it and we argued and I finally said, 'Ok, fine, you're my advisor and I will take your word for it.' That wasn't the case so ... I wasted plenty of time due to this."*

Some students perceived their advisor(s) as impersonal or not helpful, especially related to assistance choosing classes or managing course loads. A community college transfer stated that, *"...The advisors here don't know my name and what I need. When it comes to things like needing direction, it's very impersonal. When it concerns money, also how long I am going to be at the University, the advisors are really impersonal. That's the hardest thing about transferring here."* As a result of these concerns, a *few* students noted that they needed to take additional responsibility for their academics. When commenting about the perception that her advisor was unreliable, one student stated,

"...you have to find stuff out for yourself, but it's not always in a bad way either because it is your responsibility to find out what you have to do."

Students who had a major declared and were advised in their college seemed less likely to be dissatisfied with their advising experience. Students advised without a declared major seemed more likely to be dissatisfied with their experience. *Some* expressed dissatisfaction with advising in Letters and Sciences. When one student was wondering why he was advised to take courses outside of his two major interests, he stated that the advisor *"...basically told me he didn't know anything about that, and just go look it up online..."*

Some students who were advised in Letters and Sciences expressed a desire to be given the opportunity at Orientation to meet with advisors in their intended major.

> *Maybe it is impossible because there are too many transfer students with too many interests, but it would be nice if we could go to a School or College and major department and talk to someone about the major we are interested in...It would be much more useful than meeting with a general advisor that doesn't really know what you need or what you want to do.*

III. Academics

After students started classes on campus, there were a number of transition issues that the students communicated in the focus groups under the area of academics. Topics such as academic transition, course availability/selection, credit transfer, limited enrollment programs, and math placement all emerged as prominent themes under the topic of academics and are presented in this interpretation.

A. Academic Transitions

Many students stated that they had difficulty in the academic transition from their previous institution. Students, especially those from community colleges, stated that the larger size of classes became a transition issue for them. Other comments focused on how class size inhibits interpersonal interaction with faculty. One student stated that, *"You don't really have that personal interaction, you don't get to know other people too well, you don't get to know your teacher too well and they don't really get to know you that well." Most* transfer students believed that since the classes were larger, faculty were less approachable.

Students also reported that more was being expected of them with less feedback. A community college student stated:

> *You could have a paper due there at a community college and you type it up in ten minutes and could get an A. And then, I came here and you have to start a paper a week or two before it's due. . . .You don't have homework to help you out -- you have a midterm, a paper, and a final. Don't mess up and you need to take your time with what you have to do."*

Though students frequently reflected, *"I went somewhere else too and it's harder here,"* *most* reported being more acclimated to campus after their first semester.

B. Course Availability/Selection

Many students reported having difficulty gaining access to courses the first semester because courses were closed by the time their Orientation session was assigned. One student could not get an orientation session until the end of the summer and reported that that when she signed in to the website, she saw, *". . . them [courses] going away before my eyes and I couldn't sign up for them."* Students were frequently frustrated because they believed that they should have more flexibility or priority in choosing classes than freshman because they have less time to "waste": *"I think I registered for my classes after the incoming freshmen did. It is important we get into classes we need because we are already behind. We need to move up a little in the food chain . . . ."* *Many* students reported wasting time with useless courses.

Students described course selection as a process where they were being signed up by advisors who were more worried about efficiency and speed than interacting with them. They had no time to explore during Orientation. One student from a 4-year institution stated, *"The only issue was that at Orientation they didn't have anybody who knew anything to talk to me about the English requirements and they were basically just pulling stuff and saying, 'This has the word English in it and will probably count for something.' It was the worst class I ever took."*

C. Credit Transfer

The Transfer Credit Center was very helpful to the students who were aware of it, especially for students transferring from a college in Maryland. One student said that the *"...student transfer website [and] equivalency catalogues [are] so helpful."* A *few* students found the credit transfer process very smooth and these were the same students that were aware of the Transfer Credit Center. One student reflected, *"The actual process was pretty smooth, the transfer process on line. The website was pretty helpful. I already knew pretty much what wasn't going to be accepted and didn't have any problems with this process."* Students suggested that all students should know about this service.

Aside from the web resources, *many* students perceived the credit transfer process to be haphazard, lengthy, and frustrating. One student stated, *"I transferred in my senior year and some of my credits are still going through my transfer evaluation."* Another student noted that she *"...had to actually block out time every week to go to the administration building [during her first semester]. . . . It was little things over and over again."*

D. Limited Enrollment Programs

Students also seemed frustrated that they had too *many* credits coming in because of how this affected their perceived eligibility for the Limited Enrollment Programs. *Many*

students were dissatisfied with the Limited Enrollment Program selection process and the lack of flexibility and access they had to the major of their choice. One student lamented, *"I feel like you got to college to decide what you want to do with your life and Maryland kind of decides for you. They tell you what you can and cannot do–kind of defeats the whole purpose."* Most students transferred into the University not aware of the LEP admissions process or how having too many credits which they say precluded them from enrolling in an LEP. One student stated, *"I came here and I cannot comprehend how a school can tell you that you have too many credits to do something that you want to do."* Transfer students perceive that they are singled out as being ineligible for LEP programs. One student's views are reflective of this perspective: *"As a transfer you kind of get screwed with the limited enrollment thing."*

E. Math Placement

Some students mentioned that they were confused about the math placement test or the math placement process. One student stressed that more information needs to be provided on the website regarding the various math scenarios (i.e., placing out of math requirements because of SAT scores, transferring math credits, program requirements). A *few* students also mentioned that they did not know they had to take the math placement exam at Orientation.

IV. Housing

Housing was a prominent theme in the transfer focus groups. Six out of ten transfer students in the focus groups ranked housing as an important issue in the questionnaire administered for this study. Overall, students had negative perceptions of both off-campus and on-campus housing. Students felt negatively about off-campus housing because of the high cost of housing in the area, the low quality of apartments surrounding the University, and the extent living off-campus hindered their college experience. Students had negative perceptions of on-campus housing not only because of the difficulty in obtaining a housing assignment as a transfer student, but also because they believed this information was either not realistically communicated or was communicated very late in the transfer process. In general, students perceived a lack of University assistance in finding housing. This section will explore student perceptions of off-campus housing, on-campus housing, and information exchange.

A. Off-Campus Housing

Many transfer students in the focus groups ended up living off-campus. *Some* students mentioned that off-campus housing is expensive, especially in relation to the poor quality and size of the apartment units. One community college transfer stated, *"For me it's $665 a month and that is steep for a college student. I went to Knox Road and even there it was gross, $1000 for a basement apartment . . . I went there and it looked like a horror movie."* Another student declared, *"It is disgusting all the stuff that is out there."*

One student had better luck with obtaining off-campus housing, but was critical of what was available. *"I think the off campus housing is very hit or miss. . . .I got very lucky and found so much great information from my roommates. Before that, I saw some rentals and could not believe the University would recommend students to stay at these places."*

In general, students perceived a lack of University assistance in finding housing, though a *few* students stated that the online Off-Campus Housing Locator was helpful. A *few* students perceived that the University "recommended" or endorsed off campus apartments, which is not actually the case. These students had negative perceptions of the University's role in locating a place to live.

B. On-Campus Housing

Eight out of ten transfer students in this study lived off campus their first semester at Maryland. *Many* mentioned that the long waitlist is an obstacle to on-campus housing as a transfer. As a result, these students stated that they had to live off-campus when they preferred on-campus housing. One out-of-state transfer student stated, *"I really wanted to live on-campus and when I found out I got in [admitted to UM] around August . . . by the time I signed up for on campus housing I was 800 on the list."* One student mentioned that during Orientation, they were told that *"it would be impossible to get on campus [housing]."* Another student was frustrated that as a transfer, not only did she not have priority for an assignment in the residence halls, but she was entirely ineligible for an assignment in the South Campus Commons, a popular housing option for upper-class students that provides priority to current residents in the residence halls: *"I talked to someone about the Common Apartments for upperclassmen, and transfer students can't even get in those because we cannot get on campus. So it's a catch-22."*

Some students mentioned social/support factors as a reason for seeking housing on-campus. One community college transfer student reflected, *"I was coming in as a junior and experiencing homesickness . . . I still think that something that would have helped me a lot was living on campus with other people my age."* A *few* students recommended housing designated specifically for transfer students.

C. Information

Some students mentioned being aware of and/or using the transfer student website/Off-Campus Housing Locator; however, *some* students noted that they did not hear anything about the reality that most transfers never obtain on-campus housing *until* Orientation. As a result there was a general dissatisfaction with how information about on-campus and off-campus information is communicated to the students and the timeliness of the information. One out-of-state student's situation is illustrative of what other transfer students expressed:

> *One of the things that was a big problem was on-campus housing. Basically, they said that I was number so and so on the waiting list. I asked what that means and they said that chances are that I would not get it. I asked them what I should do.*

> *They told me to look at off-campus housing. I asked them where to start and they said I could go here or there. They directed me to all these different places. I was like "What the hell is going on?" I feel like they made no attempt to help me find even an off-campus location because they have such a housing problem. They just said "Hey you're accepted, if you want to come here, come here, if not, whatever, we'll just get somebody else in here."*

One student noted how the lack of information/support in obtaining housing almost impeded her ability to attend the University: *"My mom was…trying to discourage me from coming because there was no housing."*

V. Transportation

The following patterns were identified under issues related to transportation, but were not prominent in the transcripts when compared to other themes. Caution should be used when generalizing this qualitative data, even when generalizing to all students within the focus groups. Overall, transfer students were more likely to live off-campus and commute in their first semester. As stated earlier, eight out of ten transfer students that participated in a focus group lived off campus their first semester. These students expressed a desire for better transportation options to accommodate their needs. Two topics that emerged from the focus groups were parking and public transportation/Shuttle UM.

A. Parking

Overall, the *few* students that spoke about parking on campus were dissatisfied. A *few* students were dissatisfied with the distance from their assigned parking lots to the main part of campus. A *few* students were dissatisfied with the lack of information about lot locations provided to them when signing up for permits. One student noted both frustrations when purchasing her parking permit:

> *Well basically I am parking just as far away as I live from campus, I mean if I measured it is probably a little closer, but nobody tells you these things, where the parking lots are. And they are like, "Do you want this lot or this lot?" I don't know, can you tell me which one is better? And they are like, "No, I don't know, it's your choice." Well, I've never been on campus before as far as that is concerned so I don't know.*

Other frustrations included how special events close the parking lots they are assigned, the cost of permits, and the perceived lack of priority transfer students have in the parking lot assignment process. A *few* students made the choice to get around the parking permit process by parking illegally or paying for parking daily. One student stated that it was *"… easier to pay the $15 parking ticket and park next to your class than it is to do a two-mile walk."*

B. Shuttle Bus/Public Transportation

The *few* students that mentioned public transportation in the focus groups had positive feedback regarding the UM Shuttle system when discussing cost and quality but negative

feedback for frequency of service and shuttle access to the community. A *few* students appreciated that the shuttle system was cheaper than public transportation, but mentioned that sometimes service was unreliable or infrequent. A *few* students mentioned using the on-campus shuttle routes because it took too long to walk across campus. In addition, students stated that they wanted better information about bus schedules.

VI. Finances

Financial themes were less prominent in the focus groups than other themes. Caution should be used when generalizing this qualitative data, even when generalizing to all students within the focus groups. Students who mentioned finances focused on three basic areas: the cost of credits not transferring into Maryland, college related expenses, and service at the Office of Financial Aid.

A. Cost of Dropping Credits

A *few* students felt that when credits do not transfer into the University of Maryland from their previous institution, it cost them in time and money because they already paid for what they viewed as a comparable course. These students stated that it made Maryland more expensive because they needed to make up for "lost" credits. One student, frustrated that her literature credits did not transfer, stated, *"I am not going to waste my time here taking literature classes, that is too expensive and I don't have the time on top of 16 credits."*

B. Expenses

Overall, *few* students expressed any feelings over college expenses at the University. Of the students that did mention the cost of attending Maryland, most comments were negative. Students felt that out-of-pocket expenses were more considerable than at their previous institution. Students noted that there is a big difference between in-state, and out of state tuition, that fees are more expensive than other institutions, and that fees at Maryland are unknown and unexpected (such as lab fees, supply fees, and printing). *"Fees kick you in the butt here,"* one student stated, *". . . At [the student's previous institution], as far as labs go, we had to buy a little set of goggles and that was it. Here we have to get a 20 buck notebook and which is just note paper with carbon copies on it. I had to buy a separate calculator for my Chem Class... it had to be a specific kind."* Other fees mentioned include Orientation, parking, and print account fees. The actual cost of tuition at Maryland however, was seen as reasonable and of a better value than at other institutions, especially as in-state students. *"[C]oming here would be much cheaper for me . . . compared to the other schools I looked at."*

C. Financial Aid

Some students were dissatisfied with the accessibility of Financial Aid staff at Orientation and the responsiveness of Financial Aid staff to inquiries. One student stated the

University should *". . . get a couple people from the [Financial Aid] Office at the Orientation. . . . I spent a good majority of my first semester in there waiting for someone to talk to me and tell me what was going on."*

VII. Social/Personal Factors

Two themes that also emerged from the focus groups were social factors and personal factors, but were not as prominent as some others. Social factors focused on the student's campus experience, becoming acclimated to the campus, and meeting people. Personal factors focused on the specific needs they had and how the campus did or did not seek to meet those needs. Though each focus was slightly different, the topics in these two themes overlapped and are presented together. Topics from these themes include the ability for students to meet people, non-traditional student issues, work/financial issues, comparisons from their previous institution, and commuting issues.

A. Meeting People

Most students indicated that they had difficulty meeting people after transferring to Maryland. The more time students spent on campus however, the more acclimated they became and the higher social satisfaction they indicated. A *few* students indicated that joining a student group, fraternity or sorority, or participating in a campus activity helped them to meet people. *"The closest friends I have at Maryland are because I joined a certain group. If I had not joined, I wouldn't have met them. If you live off-campus there is no way to meet people."*

Age differences, the distance a student lives from campus, and existing cliques made it more difficult to meet new people or make new friends. *"I don't fit in due to the age factor, but I just came here for a degree and I can get it at any school. It's not a point of belonging. I am just going to do what I have to do."* If a student had a previously established relationship with someone who is currently on campus, homesickness seemed less likely. Students who lived farther from their home-towns seemed more likely to state that they were homesick.

As time passed, transfer students seemed to become better acclimated to the social life on campus. One student commented, *"After my first semester, I thought I was going home, I decided to come back for the full year and I finally settled into it, I met more people [here], gone to sporting events, have adjusted much better,"* and another had a similar experience, *"Actually, I was telling a friend that I like Maryland more and more each semester. You just find your own niche, and you meet more and more people. I'm a lot more comfortable every semester."*

B. Non-Traditional Students Issues

A *few* transfer students indicated challenges as a non-traditional student as they relate to social life and in how they are viewed by the University. A *few* students indicated many

challenges that hindered social involvement on campus including differences in maturity, the age gap, and the young campus culture. The social campus culture was identified as being geared toward traditionally-aged students. One student said, *"The school itself is ok, but dealing with some of the youthful exuberance can be trouble from time to time."* As a result, a *few* students de-emphasized the social or college experience aspects of coming to Maryland and placed more emphasis about attending Maryland only to get a degree:

> *I don't feel I have become very involved, but I think transfer students, more than anyone feels this way. I have already gone to other schools before and already know how it works; this is not that warm of an environment. . . . I am just looking to get out of college and move on at this point.*

Some student comments reflected on how there are odd age dynamics between them and traditionally aged students.

In regard to how they are viewed by the University, a *few* students expressed frustration with the lack of flexibility there was for transfer students given their unique situation (i.e., previous education, work experience, family, financial situation, etc.) Students also speculated that campus services were geared towards traditionally aged students. *"There should be more flexibility if you are transferring in with a degree. Like I said, I am an adult and didn't come here as 19 years old. My advisor is very rigid and doesn't consider my situation."* One student stated that she expected more from services on campus because she was putting more of her own resources into her education.

C. Work/Financial

Some students stated that their work commitments often hindered their college experience and academics. *"You go from class to class and then go home afterwards because there's no need to stay around because my friends are probably in class, plus I work."* At the same time, *some* students also found that attending Maryland has caused some financial hardship, so it was necessary for them to work.

D. Previous Institution

Almost all the comments that referred to another institution came from students transferring from smaller institutions to the University, which was perceived as larger. When comparing Maryland to their previous institution, a *few* students expressed dissatisfaction with class size and the difficulty of meeting new people. Students also expressed that the staff at their previous smaller institution was more personable. One student stated, *"Everyone is more individualized here and at a community college you are more in a 'group' thing, more close-knit. Unless you are in a dormitory, I see people together, but it's an individual thing here. People don't really communicate with each other much."* A *few* students transferring from a community college felt that their previous education prepared them for the rigors of a four-year college while other comments reflect that academics were more difficult at Maryland than their previous institution. Over time, these difficulties seem to ameliorate.

E. Commuting/Connecting with People

A *few* students found it more difficult to meet people when they live off campus and when they transferred into an established community as an upperclass student. Commute time and distance from campus hindered involvement in campus activities/clubs. This student made the following observation regarding others' comments to acclimating to campus life:

> *"I can definitely see why people would say they don't belong. Unless you start living on campus or very close to campus, you can't connect with others. When you're living on campus, I'm in Leonardtown, you're living with 6-7 other people and you are forced to get along with others if you live here. When I moved on campus, it was much easier than commuting on Rte. 495 all the time."*

F. Information/Responsibility

Generally, students found that they are primarily responsible for their social experience at Maryland. Though a *few* students recognize the University provides services to assist in their social/college experience, they felt the University could do more. They found club and group information was helpful but a *few* students questioned whether the information provided about student groups and clubs was up to date. Orientation was not helpful in providing information about getting involved.

> *If you want to make friends, you want to meet people, you have to go do it. I don't feel like that is a major responsibility of the school, to make friends for you. You have to make your own friends. They have a website and they post groups. You just have to look on there -- that's helpful.*

VIII. Reasons for Attending Maryland

Another less prominent theme that emerged from the focus group meetings was reasons why a student attended the University of Maryland. Overall, *most* students indicated that, in retrospect, they would choose to come to Maryland again if they had to do it again. Students attended the University because of proximity to family and friends, academics, issues at their previous institution, school characteristics, or financial reasons. About 40% of the transfer students indicated on the questionnaire that they decided to transfer before attending their previous institution.

A. Family and Personal Relationships

Many students either decided to transfer to Maryland to return from a distant location (to be closer to their families and/or friends), or they indicated they grew up in Maryland and had a desire to stay close to home. A connection to people or familiarity with Maryland seemed to be a prominent reason why students elected to attend Maryland: *"Well, I knew since I was a freshman in high school I wanted to come here. I went to [a local high school in Maryland] which is in [a Maryland suburb], like . . . near that area, and almost every single person I talked to the first college they had in mind was University of*

Maryland." A *few* students indicated that they aspired to attend Maryland due to early exposure to UM when they were growing up in this area. *"I have wanted to come here my whole life,"* one student with this perspective stated, *"I grew up in Virginia and transferred my residency to Maryland so I could come here."*

B. Academics

Some students mentioned that one of the reasons they attended here was because of the availability of their major or the quality of their intended academic program. Comments such as, *"My major was here I didn't have it at my other school and I had to transfer here for that reason,"* and *". . .my major is Criminal Justice and they have a good program here,"* were common. A *few* students expressed frustration after arriving on campus because their intended major was not available to them as a Limited Enrollment Program.

C. University Characteristics

Students also chose to attend Maryland for the University's characteristics. A *few* students identified one of the following categories as reasons why they choose to attend: size of the University (bigger than previous institution), beauty of the campus, campus life, diversity, and campus facilities.

D. Financial

A *few* students indicated that they transferred to Maryland for financial reasons. Several students said that in-state tuition, grants, and financial aid made UM more affordable than some other alternatives. One student stated: *"I also [attended UM] for financial reasons, coming here would be much cheaper for me to come here compared to the other schools I looked at."*

IX. Information and Responsibility

Information exchange and responsibility for finding information were very prominent themes that overlapped with almost all other categories within this report. Students routinely identified gaps of information they needed to succeed, and whether or not the University was responsible for providing them this information. Overall students recognized that they had to take significant responsibility in their success on campus; however *most* students believed that the University could have done more to assist them in their transition. In areas such as Orientation, housing, and academic advising, students stated that the University could have done more to provide information. Students perceived they had greater responsibility in areas such as social transition, making friends, and doing academic work. This section will focus on student perceptions about the availability of information, the University's responsibilities for their transition, as well as their own responsibility.

A. Information

Most students reported that they took their own initiative to get information and felt as though University staff made an assumption that they would know this information. *"People assume you know all these things and I did not know, and that's a problem."* Other transfer students expressed that they are alone in the community: *"Being a transfer requires you to do so much work on your own to get stuff done. No one is going to help you."* And others noted that the transition was difficult: *". . . [E]verywhere I go, I get out my map to find out where I am at and where I am going, and where I need to go next, I know I'm going to have to walk a good long way. It is kind of good knowing you have to do it yourself but it's hard."* These students, however, seemed to accept that this situation was just a part of being a student.

Though *most* students took their own initiative to gather information, these same students also noted that the University could have done more. *Most* students perceived that the University did not provide information at the appropriate time, they were given incorrect or conflicting information, or the University failed to provide any information at all about their transition. Statements such as, *"This information should have been given to us up front, in the beginning,"* and, *". . . It was something that was brought to my attention halfway through last semester, and should have been something that was taken care of my first semester here,"* were fairly common in the focus groups. Students identified the following areas where information was not provided or mis-represented: Limited Enrollment Program admissions procedures, credit transfer, admissions acceptances, on and off-campus housing, math placement exam and exemptions, major requirements, student groups, technology resources, and transportation information. *Most* students saw it as a convoluted process to get the information they needed.

Despite these difficulties, *many* students reported that they were satisfied with the information on the web. However, only a *few* students expressed satisfaction with the information they received from the University through other media, and this overshadowed the positive response to web-related information.

B. Responsibility

Some students indicated that they needed to take responsibility for their transition because if they did not, things would not get done for them. They stated they needed to take care of themselves.

> *Being a transfer requires you to do so much work on your own to get stuff done. No one is going to help you. In all honesty, if you have advisors, that is great, but there are so many times that you are going to get led astray, because they have absolutely no idea.*

Many students indicated that the University of Maryland should have done more for them. Only a *few* students thought that Maryland met its responsibilities toward them and these students spoke of the University more positively. One student expressed she needed to take initiative in knowing the requirements even though the staff should be proficient at knowing major and general education requirements.

This college is a lot more "do it yourself" than my previous college. While there are advisors and things, you really have to go out of your way to get information from your advisors. For example, I was not told that your first year here you had to take English 101, so now I have to take it in the summer because I found this out on my own researching it, was told I would be kicked out of the University if I didn't take it my first year. So I am a little annoyed about that. . . .It would have been nice if my advisor had told me I needed to do that during the school year.

Students saw it as their responsibility to develop social groups, schedule appointments with advisors, locate housing, and follow up on administrative processes. In regard to responsibility for meeting with their advisors, one student stated: *"Coming here, I know a lot of people that are transfers and are my age and don't make advisor appointments or join groups. I do that anyway because I know that is what I should be doing, and I do it. You have to help yourself out sometimes; you have to make your own way."* For these aspects of responsibility, students used terms like, "*do the legwork yourself,"* and, *"it is what I should be doing and I do it,*" to describe their responsibility.

Students perceived that the University's responsibility was to communicate resources on off-campus housing opportunities, offer technology assistance, communicate administrative process decisions, and provide accurate and reliable academic advising. One student reflected on the University's responsibility for informing them that they were admitted to the University: *"I was accepted here but they never called me. I had to call here to find out I had been accepted a few weeks before."* Students used phrases like, *"They should have,"* or *"They made no attempt to . . ."* when describing their perceptions of University responsibility.

Conclusion

Of the eleven themes that emerged, five appear to be prevalent in how transfer students within the focus groups perceived their transition experience. These included Orientation, Advising, Academics, Housing, and Information and Responsibility. In the questionnaires provided to the students prior to the focus groups, Housing was listed as the most prominent issue when students though back on the transfer experience (67%), followed by social experience (28%), credit transfer (25%), advising (22%), and academic transition (17%). Generally, students were dissatisfied with many of the issues mentioned in these themes. Most notably, students were dissatisfied with the lack of information available to them (i.e., in regard to limited enrollment programs, academic information, and on-campus housing availability), course availability, quality of advising (in terms of both academic advise and advising relationship), and larger class size. While the majority of the themes highlighted dissatisfaction among transfer students, it should be noted that *most* students indicated that if they were given the choice to transfer to Maryland again, they stated that they would.

Two limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of the study. First, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire transfer student population. We cannot state that other transfer students at the University of Maryland have the same perceptions as those found in this study. The purpose of the study was not to generalize the data to all transfer students, but to obtain in-depth information about a group of students with this shared characteristic and describe their experience when they transferred to UM. The second limitation is that participants in the study were self-selected. It could be hypothesized that only students that had strong feelings about their transfer experience attended the focus groups. This may have resulted in a higher proportion of students with negative feelings about their experience represented in the focus group than exists across campus. To address these limitations, the Beginnings Subgroup of the Campus Assessment Work Group (CAWG) will be conducting a follow-up study in the form of a survey using the data from this study.

There are a number of additional findings in this report that can be used for future assessment. For example, students complained about being able to pay for school but at the same time stated that Maryland was less expensive than others they were looking at. Students also stated that they attended Maryland because it was a bigger institution but at the same time felt it was difficult to meet people or interact with faculty due to the size. Further inquiry into these apparent contradictions may lead to a greater understanding of the transfer student experience at Maryland. CAWG or other University units may find this a logical next step of inquiry.

The planning for this study began in the Spring of 2004 when interest in the transfer student experience was (and continues to be) high. Concurrent with the implementation and interpretation of this study, the University has taken a number of steps to address issues that are mentioned in this report. For a summary of the University's progress, see Appendix D. The follow-up study the Beginnings Subgroup will be undertaking may take into account new perceptions of incoming transfer students as a result of the University's initiatives.

Appendix A: Methodology

In Fall 2004, the Beginnings subgroup finalized the focus group questions and protocol (see Appendix B). Prior to officially conducting focus groups, two small pilot focus groups were conducted to test the questions and protocol. Participants were asked to share their opinions about the format of the focus group and the questions asked. It was most important to gauge if the questions were clear and understandable.

Official focus groups were held in February 2005. Five hundred transfer students who had been on campus at least one full semester were randomly contacted by email and invited to participate in a 90-minute session about their transfer student experience. Students were offered a $20 gift certificate to Target for their participation. Sixty-three students showed interest and were able to fit into at least one of the six proposed sessions; four of those sessions were chosen to be conducted. Thirty-six students actually participated in the four groups; each had from eight to ten participants.

Upon their arrival, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire to collect demographic data (see Appendix C). Students were allowed to use pseudonyms to protect their identity; however they were also reassured that no names would be used in the reporting of the study's findings.

The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to capture background information about the participants (i.e. whether students transferred from public or private, 2-year or 4-year institutions). A secondary purpose was to solicit the three most important issues related to their transition experience prior to beginning the group discussion. The questionnaire results were subsequently compared to the focus group data as a type of reliability test. The purpose was to determine how the list of issues from the surveys compared to the list of issues from the focus group discussions.

Each focus group was staffed by three trained subgroup members and was audio taped. One served as a discussion facilitator, another as a note taker, and the last was an observer. The protocol was followed to ensure that each focus group was facilitated in the same manner and all topics covered.

After the completion of all focus groups, the audiotapes from each session were professionally transcribed. The transcriptions of each session were also checked by their respective facilitators. Due to technical difficulties, one of the four sessions was not able to be transcribed and therefore handwritten notes were used in place of the transcription.

The data collected were analyzed using qualitative procedures. Members of CAWG's Beginnings subgroup read transcripts and generated a list of common themes. Each theme was assigned a code. The transcripts for each focus group were then coded by pairs of subgroup members. No member coded a transcript for a focus group for which they were the facilitator or note taker. Each member first coded independently and then met with their partner to finalize the coding.

After initial coding of the transcripts, the data were separated by themes and subcoded. Subcoding the major themes was done to describe the characteristics of each theme in greater detail. This was accomplished by different pairings of team members, with pairings consciously made to avoid potential conflicts of interest. For example, the "housing" theme was not subcoded by members who worked for the Department of Resident Life.

The subcodes were summarized both qualitatively and quantitatively, such that the characteristics of each theme were identified and it was possible to determine how representative each characteristic was among the participants. Team members tracked the number of focus groups and the number of participants that had discussed each subcoded topic. Specific terms were used to ensure consistency in reporting. These terms include *most* (all focus groups/almost all participants per group), *many* (3-4 focus groups/4-6 participants per group), *some* (2-3 focus groups/2-4 participants per group), and *few* (1-2 focus groups/1-2 participants per group).

In an attempt to maintain rigorous research standards, the Beginnings subgroup incorporated several measures within the methodology to maximize the reliability and validity of the project and monitor the potential for researcher bias. First, subgroup members recorded and discussed their expectations and biases, especially as they related to potential influences in facilitation of the focus group discussions and in data analyses. Second, a short questionnaire was distributed and collected prior to each focus group. This was completed in an attempt to gather the range of most salient transfer issues that were unique to each participant, as well as to make comparisons to the data generated from the focus group discussion. Third, the focus group protocol was vetted to ensure that questions were broad, non-leading and open-ended, and would capture the range of issues. Fourth, multiple steps were incorporated into the data analysis process to address potential bias. There was a periodic review of researcher biases, and independent coding was checked by a second committee member. Last, data were summarized and then audited by an independent subgroup member to ensure that the themes were truly representative of the transcripts and reported such that readers could easily determine the degree of representation.

Appendix B: Protocol

Focus Group Protocol: Assessing Transfer Student Transition and Experiences

  CAWG Beginnings Subgroup   February 2005

* Collect questionnaire before start.

My name is _____ and I will be facilitating this focus group on transfer student transition and experiences. I will be moderating our discussion today. This is my colleague _____ who will be taking notes. (Either introduce the note taker, or let them introduce themselves.) I'm going to read the following information from a script to ensure that I communicate all of the necessary information about our discussion.

This is a focus group, which is a research method useful for gaining information about a topic in a comfortable environment. As participants we ask you to maintain the confidentiality of today's discussion and not share the content with anyone outside the focus group. We will summarize all of the focus groups' comments, no names included, and present our findings, again no names included, to campus administrators interested in the transfer student experience.

We encourage you to approach this as a conversation with one another; each of you does not need to respond to every question. In order for this to be a productive session, we would ask that you speak clearly and one at a time, and that you think about the questions and answer candidly. While at times you may disagree with the comments made by others, we ask that you respect their right to say what they think. At this point, if you would like to leave and not participate in the focus group, feel free to do so now. [If anyone gets up, thank them for their time.]

05:00   1. Why did you decide to transfer to UM?

10:00   2. What is it like being a transfer student at UM? Please share both positive and negative experiences.
- Especially academic, social, talking to faculty, campus organizations, etc
- Do you feel like you belong at UM?
- Do you feel like you fit at UM?

20:00   3. With regards to the information you received regarding the transfer process, what was helpful and what wasn't?
- Where did you get the majority of your information about transferring?
- What information would have made transferring easier?
- With regards to timing, when did you need specific information?
- What resources did you use?
- Orientation: did you go to an early one, if not, why not?

(over)

30:00   4. What was your academic and social transition to UM like? Please share both positive and negative experiences. (Be sure to cover the italicized items if participants do not mention them.)

- Academic transition issues – were you prepared?
- Social transition issues
- What do you wish you had known then, that you know now?
- How was UM helpful with the process?
- What could UM do better with the process?

50:00   5. What are/were the biggest issues/challenges facing you as transfer student? (Be sure to cover the italicized items if participants do not mention them.)

- *Academic Issues:*
    - Academic preparation (prior to UM)
    - Course availability
    - Course scheduling
    - Limited Enrollment Program (LEP) availability
    - Credit transfer
    - Major selection
    - Academic performance (while at UM)
    - Did anyone expect to get into an LEP that they did not actually get into? What are your feelings about this?
    - Graduation timeline

- *Social/Living Issues:*
    - Social transition
    - Expenses
    - Balancing school and other responsibilities
    - Getting involved (self-initiated v. facilitated by the University)
    - Housing / commuting

- *Administrative*
    - Resources
    - Support

70:00   6. If you could make the decision again, would you still choose to transfer here?

80:00   7. Is there anything else you would like to talk about that has not already been discussed? (Be sure that topics in #4 and #5 have been covered.)

90:00   8. Do you have any suggestions for administrators to improve or change the experience for transfer students?

Appendix C: Transfer Focus Group Questionnaire

In order to prepare for our discussion, please complete this short questionnaire. We will be collecting this form before we begin. Thank you again for your participation with this project.

(1) First Name or Pseudonym (used for tracking purposes): _____

(2) Racial background:　　　　　　　　　　　　**(3) Class Standing:**
　　　(a) American Indian　　　　　　　　　　　　　(a) First-year
　　　(b) African American/Black　　　　　　　　　(b) Sophomore
　　　(c) Asian American/Pacific Islander　　　　　(c) Junior
　　　(d) Latino　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(d) Senior
　　　(e) Caucasian
　　　(f) Other: _____

(4) Gender:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**(5) Age:** _____
　　　(a) Female
　　　(b) Male
　　　(c) Transgendered

(6) Name of previous college/university: _____

(7) Please indicate whether your previous institution was a:
　　　(7a) 2 year or 4 year (circle one)
　　　(7b) Public or Private (circle one)

(8) Did you obtain a degree from your previous institution?
　　　(a) Yes, (please indicate degree) _____
　　　(b) No

**(9) Semester & Year you transferred to University of Maryland College Park (UM)
　　(e.g., Spring 2005):** _____

(10) Your first semester where did you live?
　　　(a) on-campus
　　　(b) off-campus

**(11) When did you make the decision to transfer to University of Maryland College Park
　　(UM)?**
　　　(a) Before I began at previous institution, I always intended to transfer to UM
　　　(b) I made decision to transfer to UM after I began at my previous institution
　　　(c) Other: _____

(12) What three issues stand out to you with regards to your experience transferring and/or being a transfer student at the University of Maryland College Park?

U N I V E R S I T Y   O F
MARYLAND

Office of the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs
and Dean for Undergraduate Studies

Room 2130, Mitchell Building
College Park, Maryland 20742
301.405.9354 TEL 301.314.9896
FAX

August 1, 2005

Dear Associate Vice President Robert Waters,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a brief on the recent work of the Office of Undergraduate Studies (UGST) and the Office of Undergraduate Admissions (UA) towards facilitating smooth transition and academic success for transfer students. The efforts include improvements that will benefit all students and improvements specifically for transfer students.

Perhaps foremost, the **Student Academic Success-Degree Completion Policy** will serve all our students by providing information and templates for students to develop semester-plans to graduation.   Students planning for transfer will be able to plan and map out their coursework before coming to campus. Also, the new Admissions portal website will provide all prospective students information tailored to their individual interests.

Finding information on our programs around campus is a particular challenge for students planning on transferring. UGST and UA have worked together to develop the Limited Enrollment website http://www.lep.umd.edu/ which now contains in one place complete admissions requirements for the LEP programs. UA has also worked to provide on its new website a complete list of majors available http://www.uga.umd.edu/admissions/academics/majors.asp. For information on programs, UGST has also been working to promote campus support of ARTSYS http://artweb.usmd.edu/.   In the recent year the UM pages on ARTSYS received over 350,000 "hits" from Maryland community college students. For many students ARTSYS is the "first place to look." This past spring and summer UGST and UA worked closely with a host of offices on campus to develop the Transfer Student FAQ website http://www.transferfaqs.umd.edu. Transfer students can now in one place have basic questions answered and find out "which office to call" for follow-up. We expect the website to be popular with many students.

UA and UGST are taking a number of steps towards recruiting academically talented transfer students. In the past year the number of Transfer Academic Excellence Scholarships for Maryland community college transfer students was increased from three to twelve. This coming fall UA will organize the first "open house for academically talented transfer students."   The open house will be the counterpart of the program for freshman.   Over the past year UGST and UA have worked together to coordinate with the new Honors Academy at Prince George's Community College, see http://www.pgcc.edu/pgweb/pgdocs/honors/academy_story.htm.

Steps are also being taken related to the transfer process. In the late spring and early summer transfer counselors from local Maryland community colleges visited campus and participated in an Orientation. The transfer counselors learned about our campus and provided feedback on our Orientations. We are now implementing recommendations from the counselors. One recommendation concerns the deadline for transfer application. For summer 2006 the deadline will be June 1st instead of July 1st. The overall plan is to move the transfer timeline "back one month" and to have transfer students register earlier. And finally the Office of Institutional Research and Planning is involved in a cooperative data-project with local community colleges to track academic success in our 300-400 level courses. Course-performance data provides an important step towards understanding and analyzing academic progress.

We are looking forward to successful transfer at Maryland.

Sincerely,
Scott A. Wolpert
Associate Dean, UGST