National Survey of Student Engagement
Transfer and Direct-Entry Seniors

As PSU increases its efforts to understand and support student success, it is important to consider how learning experiences may differ due to the various ways student enter the institution. Slightly more than a third (36%) of PSU undergraduates began as freshman, known as “direct-entry” students. This distinctive feature of the PSU student population is magnified at the senior level: almost 80% of seniors began as transfer students. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) offers one opportunity to explore the question of how direct-entry and transfer seniors’ experiences differ.

The average response rate across institutions participating in the NSSE during Winter/Spring 2009 was 36%. At PSU, 745 of the 4,987 students included in the sample responded to the survey, for an overall response rate of 15%. Of the 395 seniors who responded to the NSSE, 79 (20%) entered PSU as freshmen and 316 (80%) entered as transfer students. This reflects the proportion of transfers in the senior class. In Fall 2009, transfers were 79% of the PSU senior population.

This report presents differences between transfer and direct-entry seniors in their responses to the NSSE. While transfer and direct-entry seniors were largely similar, two areas of difference emerged. The differences reported here are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Student Time Commitments

- Direct-entry seniors spent more hours working on campus, whereas transfer students spent more hours working off-campus.
- Direct-entry seniors reported more hours spent in co-curricular activities than transfer seniors.
- Transfer seniors spent more time caring for dependents than direct-entry seniors.

Although all senior respondents reported spending more time working off-campus than on-campus, direct-entry seniors spent more time than transfer seniors working on campus. Because transfer students reported spending more time caring for dependents and working off campus than their direct-entry peers, they may have less time available for co-curricular activities or on-campus work. Another possible explanation for the difference in campus engagement is that direct-entry seniors have spent more time on the PSU campus than transfer seniors giving them more time to learn about on-campus employment and co-curricular opportunities.
PSU Contribution to Student Educational Outcomes

Students rated the extent to which Portland State contributed to their educational outcomes in a number of areas. Direct-entry and transfer seniors were similar in their high ratings of PSU’s influence on their ability to think critically and analytically, work effectively with others, and learn to use information technology. Where there were differences between direct-entry and transfer seniors, direct-entry students reported that PSU had a greater impact on their acquisition of a broad general education, ability to learn on their own, understand themselves, and on their voting behavior. Most direct-entry seniors would have completed freshman (FRINQ) and sophomore inquiry (SINQ) courses during their years at Portland State. These courses emphasize broad general education, reflection on the learning process, and on learning how to learn. Most transfer students do not complete FRINQ and SINQ. Also, transfer students have had educational experiences at multiple institutions, so the influences on their educational outcomes may be more varied.

Concluding Thoughts

Transfer students’ responses to the NSSE differ from direct-entry students in predictable ways. Transfer students who have had less exposure to PSU attribute less influence to PSU on their learning experience and they spend less time engaged in on-campus activity. To the extent that such campus-based activities are important experiences for students, additional efforts are needed to facilitate transfer student participation in co-curricular activities and on-campus employment.

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