

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

Creating a Strategic Plan for the Transfer Student Experience

By Kim Morton and Kelly C. McCallister

A transfer student experience strategic plan provides direction to transfer professionals, advisory teams, and a university's strategic plan. This article describes how one university used surveys, SWOT analysis, and direct experience to create a plan that identified gaps in services and new initiatives to ensure transfer students' persistence and success.

Often in one's everyday work, enrollment professionals get so mired down in the to-dos and putting out fires that there is no time left to look and plan for the big picture. Those immediate problems tend to become the focus. However, once enrollment professionals can get through those obvious to fix—the low hanging fruit challenges—they need a plan that guides their next steps. That is where Appalachian State University's transfer services team found itself in the fall of 2019.

Appalachian State University (App State) is one of the sixteen state universities in North Carolina. App State is a mid-sized university with a current enrollment of 20,641 located on a mountain campus in Boone, North Carolina (Appalachian State University 2021a). Transfer students represent one-quarter of the undergraduate population with the majority (72%) transferring from a community college.

Contributing to the Academic Success of Transfer Students

At App State, serving the needs of transfer students is a community effort. From its inception as a recommendation from a university 2014 task force, the current office of Transfer Admissions & Engagement not only handles the day to day responsibilities of serving transfer students with various needs but also collaborates with departments across campus to ensure their academic success. One example of a successful campus collaboration is the transfer services team.

Transfer Services Team at App State

The transfer services team at App State was formed in 2015 under the direction of the enrollment planning council, which is an executive group that coordinates the strategic plan for enrollment management. The charge of the transfer services team was to: use cur-

rent available data to identify transfer student needs—both academically and socially—and where App State is meeting or not meeting those needs; identify units across campus that can provide transfer student-specific programs or integrate transfer students into existing programs; and assist in executing these programs and to raise awareness of transfer student issues among faculty and staff (Appalachian State University 2021b). The team consists of transfer advocates from across campus with membership that includes faculty representation from each degree-granting college or school and University Libraries; student representation from the Student Government Association, Tau Sigma National Honor Society, or transfer student mentors; and staff representation from many offices that support student success. The director of transfer recruitment and retention from Transfer Admissions & Engagement serves as the chair.

The team has addressed many issues including: proposing and creating an office dedicated to transfer students (Transfer Admissions & Engagement); creating a “transfer champion award” to recognize faculty or staff who demonstrated exceptional advocacy and leadership in the development and implementation of transfer-focused activities; enhancing the support of early college students through the creation of a residential learning community and a student organization; including transfer students in the common reading program; allowing transfer students to be advised by colleges rather than undergraduate college advising during orientation/transition; and conducting research and developing additional proposals on topics such as a transfer student center, transfer seminar, transfer scholarships, the off-campus housing market, and a “new student” notation on teaching and advising rosters.

Over the past seven years, the transfer services team has identified and addressed many obstacles and concerns for the transfer student population and found themselves asking what is next. That is when the team took on the task of creating a strategic plan for the transfer student experience that would not only guide their work over the next five years but provide guidance on working with transfer students for the university’s larger strategic plan that was being updated.

Literature Review

A thorough review of the academic literature revealed that there is little to no research concerning the value of strategic planning for transfer students. It is common practice for academic departments and most support services to create strategic plans that align with the goals and objectives of their college or university. Unfortunately, many of these plans focus on the academic success of traditional students rather than those of nontraditional students, such as transfer. Within the University of North Carolina (UNC) System, transfer students are the fastest growing population and have some of the highest graduation rates (University of North Carolina System 2021). Interestingly, the UNC system’s most recent plan (2017) sets a goal to provide pathways for transfer students into one of the sixteen universities in the system, and yet, many of those universities do not include the academic success of transfer students as a goal within their own plan (University of North Carolina System 2021).

In “Values Drive the Plan,” Cook (2010) states that strategic planning may occur at any time within a department. Most often, strategic planning is the result of great change, and there is a distinct driving force behind the efforts. Examples include new leadership, changes in enrollment practices, and economic pressures (Cook 2010). At App State, the driving force was higher enrollment of transfer students and the need for the transfer services team to identify new collaborative projects to ensure their academic success. As Cook informs, the history, mission, and vision of student affairs should make it clear that it is a “values-laden profession” (2010, 28). It is the values of the department that should drive the plan, and they should also reflect those of the university’s existing strategic plans. Understanding and adopting the values is the first step in creating a plan. As transfer students are a relatively recognized, fast-growing population, there are not many examples of plans to work from (Appalachian State University 2021b). At App State, using the values, mission, and vision of the Transfer Admissions & Engagement office, the transfer services team established a foundation for which to plan and then relied on advice from Institu-

tional Research, Assessment, and Planning (IRAP) and several department plans for examples on the structure, wording, metrics, and assessment.

Another approach to strategic planning is in “Building a Better Transfer Community: Improving Engagement and Advising of Prospective Transfer Students” (Roberts, *et al.* 2015), which suggests providing transfer student enrollment projections and working with existing departments who already serve the needs of transfer student success. In this example, the College of Engineering at North Carolina State University (NC State) noted that 50 percent of engineering students were transferring from various community colleges in the North Carolina Community College System. The department gathered statistics and demographics from the UNC systems dashboard and found that many of the transfer students spent their first two academic years at community colleges due to high tuition costs and lack of a chosen major. In addition, most of the students were of diverse classification. Roberts, *et al.* (2015) described the classifications as rural, applicants with socioeconomic circumstances, ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. Additionally, many of the transfer students were not prepared academically for the engineering upper-class courses due to the fact that community colleges focus on the general education required courses and often do not have any engineering programs of their own.

In 2010, North Carolina was encouraged by the Department of Defense (DoD) to produce a “local and diverse” workforce. In order to meet their needs, NC State developed “The Pathway to the Future: NC State’s 2011 Strategic Plan” (Goodwin Roberts, *et al.* 2015, 27). The purpose of the plan was to develop an effective process for transfer students to meet the needs to academically succeed and to qualify for DoD jobs. This pathway was in the form of articulation agreements with various NC community colleges with input from faculty and support systems. App State, as part of the UNC System, participates in the articulation agreement process, but in its current university strategic plan does not specify the unique needs of transfer students and how to support them. This was noted by the transfer services

team at App State, and it became a talking point for the creation of their own strategic plan.

Glenn (2009) in “Shared Enrollment Services as a Potential SEM Strategy” stresses the collaboration and participation of many support services departments in their shared responsibilities, such as the academic success of transfer students. He states that this idea stems from societal factors in the 21st century that have changed organizations’ effectiveness. The societal factors he noted include: globalization, outsourcing, the internet, economic uncertainty, budgets, and enrollment (Glenn 2009, 79-80). He cites a shared services model in which multiple departments work together to improve a student’s experience and to help alleviate bureaucratic practices, which vary from department to department. For years, the transfer services team with members from all aspects of the university’s support and academic departments have used this strategy, and as a result created a multi-department strategic plan to share in the academic success of transfer students.

Wilkinson’s, *et al.* (2007) “A Practical Guide to Strategic Enrollment Management Planning” serves as a guidebook for how strategic enrollment management (SEM) departments can “focus on what is best for students and how to ensure their success while addressing all aspects of the institution’s mission” (Wilkinson, *et al.* 2007, 6). The guidebook contains directives for creating, implementing, gaining buy-in, assessment, and future planning within a strategic plan. Like Cook (2010), the emphasis is on a shared mission and vision, goals and objectives, and alignment with the existing university’s strategic plan. What makes this document unique is that it states that there are many different types of plans and processes to develop the strategic plan. They state the plan is not a static document, rather it is ever changing and evolving as goals and objectives are either completed or changed due to unforeseen circumstances. It also provides useful templates and worksheets for departments to use.

Despite transfer students becoming one of the fastest growing populations in institutions of higher learning, many colleges and universities still rely on traditional students to support enrollment and bud-

get. As traditional student enrollment decreases due to lower birth rates, attracting transfer students becomes even more important (Schroeder 2021). Although academic literature does not have many examples of transfer student-based strategic plans, there are examples of how to create them. By using these examples and those of existing academic and support service departments at App State, the transfer services team felt confident they could move forward.

Process of Forming the Strategic Plan

The transfer services team has made an impact throughout campus and directly with the transfer student population over the years as they introduced new programs, services, and proposals. However, each year as the team met for the first time in the fall semester, it was getting harder and harder to identify impactful projects to focus their attention. The team recognized it was time to be more intentional in their goals moving forward. In fall 2019, they decided to undertake creating a strategic plan for the transfer student experience at App State that would identify gaps in services that could guide them in their work. It is important to note that this plan would be a broad view of the transfer student experience and would not focus on the specific work of the office of Transfer Admissions & Engagement. In addition, the team was well aware that the plan was going to identify gaps where they did not necessarily have control (*e.g.* scholarships or parking). The aim was to bring to light issues impacting transfer students, and the team would work together with campus partners to research and propose solutions.

Strategic Plan Primer from IRAP

The first step in creating the strategic plan was for the team to understand what a strategic plan was and how to successfully create one. Cook states that, “Strategic planning and values identification can provide the conduit through which collaboration can occur” (2010, 29). Cook also outlines three main questions an organization must ask when developing the plan: “who are we, what do we want to be in the future, and how are we going

to get there” (2010, 31). A few of the transfer services team members have participated and developed strategic plans within their departments. A representative from IRAP worked with the team to review what was necessary to create a successful strategic plan. Providing a primer is key to ensuring the creation of a relevant and data-driven strategic plan. The team also reviewed other campus departments’ strategic plans, such as University Libraries, to use as a template and example.

Data Collection

Data is essential to understanding the needs of the student population and receiving input from the faculty and staff who work with this population. The team wanted to complete a SWOT analysis in March 2020, but just as they were about to begin scheduling input sessions, COVID-19 sent everyone home. Like most everything else in 2020, the team shifted to an online SWOT analysis creating a Qualtrics survey (Transfer Student Team 2020) that asked respondents to consider the following:

- *Strengths* are defined as things we are doing well, qualities that distinguish us from other institutions, or dedicated resources. What are some of the strengths of App State’s transfer student experience?
- *Weaknesses* are defined as things we are lacking, qualities that other institutions have that we do not, or resource limitations. What are some of the weaknesses of App State’s transfer student experience?
- *Opportunities* are defined as external emerging issues that could positively impact App State’s transfer student experience. What are some emerging opportunities facing App State’s transfer student experience?
- *Threats* are defined as external emerging issues that could negatively impact App State’s transfer student experience. What are some emerging threats facing App State’s transfer student experience?

The team discovered that an unexpected benefit in completing a virtual SWOT analysis was more participa-

tion. They encouraged those who were sent the SWOT survey to share it with their colleagues, and in addition to getting feedback directly from the transfer services team and faculty transfer mentors at the university, they received feedback from a broader audience as it was shared with others.

Additionally, the team reviewed three years of student answers from an annual transfer student survey and New Mountaineer Form. The transfer student surveys are sent to all transfer students who began at App State within the past year asking them to provide feedback on everything from their transition, satisfaction with their credit evaluations, to their engagement in campus life. Additionally, the Office of Student Success asks all new students (transfers and first-years) to complete the New Mountaineer Form between week four and six of their first semester. This allows the university to identify students who are struggling academically or personally and provide outreach to them. Both of these surveys provided myriad qualitative data and reflections of how App State has welcomed and treated transfer students.

Identify Themes and Group Into Larger Goals

Once all the data was collected, the transfer services team split into two sub groups (SWOT analysis and student surveys) to identify themes from the data. After identifying the themes from both data points and looking for patterns from the two groups and overlap from the students and faculty/staff data, the team focused on six common goals: advocacy, engagement, communication, infrastructure, outreach, and diversity and inclusion.

Identify Initiatives From the Data

After the larger goals were identified the team again split into sub groups to review the data to identify initiatives or subgoals of the larger themes, making sure that the initiatives were achievable but impactful. Again, the sub groups realized that not all initiatives could be achieved by the transfer services team or Transfer Admissions & Engagement. Some initiatives, like “increasing the number and dollar amount of scholarships and identifying potential donors for transfer-specific schol-

arships” would be recommendations for the University Advancement Office (Transfer Services Team 2021). This could be accomplished by outreach and education to the advancement officers so they are more aware of the needs of transfer students when talking to potential donors. So while the initiative directs the university to grow scholarship opportunities, the sub groups did not write this expecting that the transfer services team was out asking for money but that they were identifying ways, and campus partners that could collaborate together, to achieve this goal. It was also prioritizing where the university should focus to better meet the needs of this population and address gaps in service.

Team Gave Feedback and Edits to Other Groups

Although it would have been overwhelming and time consuming for all 20 members to work on each goal and create all the initiatives together, the team felt that it was important that everyone review and have input on each goal and initiative. Each team member was asked to review the goals and initiatives written by the other members and ask clarifying questions, wordsmith, and offer feedback. The sub groups then took that feedback and adjusted their goals and initiatives until everyone was satisfied with the final plan.

Conclusion

By the end, a plan was created (Transfer Services Team 2021) to guide the future work of the transfer services team. One of the strengths of the plan was that it was an active collaboration across the university, with representation from faculty in most of the academic colleges and staff in departments that directly interact with transfer students based, in part, on surveys and experiences of the transfer students. It provides a holistic view of the unique academic and social needs of transfer students and gives a road map for future work to ensure transfer students persist and succeed.

Additionally, App State is in the process of updating the university’s strategic plan. Past versions have never mentioned transfer students, which represent one-fourth of the undergraduate student body. By passing

along the strategic plan, the team is able to offer insight into the needs of this population that they hope will be considered as the next overall strategic plan is developed.

For those readers working in offices as a solo practitioner or who have small teams, a strategic plan like this also creates buy in and partners across campus. By involving faculty and staff from across campus, practitioners are able to identify issues and find advocates that will help address the needs of the transfer student population (Wilkinson, *et al.* 2007). Regardless of how big the transfer student population is on campuses, they have unique needs and challenges that need to be addressed differently than a traditional first-year student.

Ultimately, this was a valuable reflective exercise that identified the strengths and weaknesses in how App State works with the transfer student population on campus. It represents a point in time view of what is done well and where there is still work to be done. It is not a one and done process, however. As the university begins to address the initiatives and goals proposed, the campus climate will change. This work will need to be assessed and then repeated in the future to ensure the needs of transfer students are always met. But for now, it will provide a lot of work to keep the transfer services team busy.

References

- Appalachian State University. 2021a. *About Appalachian State University*. Boone, NC: Author. Available at: <appstate.edu/about/>.
- Appalachian State University. 2021b. *Transfer Services Team*. Transfer Admissions & Engagement. Boone, NC: Author. Available at: <transfer.appstate.edu/node/626>.
- Cook, L. P. 2010. Values drive the plan. *New Directions for Student Services*. 2010(132): 27–38. Available at: <onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ss.373>.
- Glenn, R. 2009. Shared enrollment services as a potential SEM strategy. *College and University*. 84(3): 79–84.
- Roberts, K. G., T. Bowles, and J. P. Lavelle. 2015. *Building a Better Transfer Community: Improving Engagement and Advising of Prospective Transfer Students*. Paper presented at 122nd ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, June 14–17, Seattle, Washington. Available at: <peer.asee.org/building-a-better-transfer-community-improving-engagement-and-advising-of-prospective-transfer-students.pdf>.
- Schroeder, R. 2021. A second demographic cliff adds to urgency for change. *Inside Higher Ed*. Available at: <insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/second-demographic-cliff-adds-urgency-change>.
- Transfer Services Team. 2020. *Transfer Experience Strategic Plan Survey*. Qualtrics Survey. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University.
- . 2021. *Transfer Student Experience Strategic Plan 2021–2026*. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University. Available at: <transfer.appstate.edu/sites/default/files/transfer_student_experience_strategic_plan_2021_2026-compressed.pdf>.
- University of North Carolina System. 2021. *Transfer Enrollment Trends*. Interactive Data Dashboard. Chapel Hill, NC: Author. Available at: <northcarolina.edu/impact/stats-data-reports/interactive-data-dashboards/>.
- Wilkinson, R. B., J. S. Taylor, A. Peterson, and M. Machado-Taylor. 2007. *A Practical Guide to Strategic Enrollment Management Planning*. Virginia Beach, VA: Educational Policy Institute. Available at: <files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED499875.pdf>.

About the Authors

**Kim Morton**

Kim Morton, Ed.D., is Director of Transfer Recruitment and Retention at Appalachian

State University. She has a B. A. in management from Gettysburg College, a master of education in student affairs in higher education from Kutztown Uni-

versity of Pennsylvania, and a doctorate of education in educational studies from the University of Nebraska.

**Kelly C. McCallister**

Kelly C. McCallister is Associate Dean of University Libraries/Associate Professor at Appalachian

State University. She has a B.A. in Anthropology from Mississippi State University, an M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Southern Mississippi, and a MLIS in

Library and Information Science from the University of Southern Mississippi. She is working on her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Appalachian State University.