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Report: College transfers can muddy quality of experience

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

Nearly half of college seniors are "swirling" through school — that is, they have taken or are taking classes at multiple institutions on their way to earning a bachelor's degree, a report released Monday says. And, it says, those seniors tend to be less engaged in their education compared with peers who have spent their college years at one school.

Engagement is important because "the more time and energy students devote to desired activities, the more likely they will develop the habits of the mind that are key to success after college," says George Kuh, an Indiana University professor of higher education and director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, which released the report.

The report is based on surveys of 237,000 first-year students and seniors at 528 four-year colleges nationwide. More than 80,000 of the seniors also responded to a longer questionnaire about attending multiple institutions.

Findings show that 45% of seniors had taken at least one course from either a two- or four-year college before enrolling at their current institution, and a third had taken at least one course at a two- or four-year college while enrolled at their institution.

From the survey

Other tidbits from the National Survey of Student Engagement:

- A majority of college and university students (54% of first-year students and 63% of seniors) say they often discuss ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class; more than nine out of 10 do this at least sometimes.
- Three of 10 first-year students report studying just enough to get by.
- African-American and Asian-American students are the least satisfied with their college experience.
- High-profile student athletes generally take part in effective educational practices at the same level as other students.
- Students who worship frequently or engage in other spirituality-enhancing practices such as meditation also participate more in a broad cross-section of collegiate activities.

When compared with seniors who had attended only one institution, all transfer students participated in fewer educationally enriching activities such as doing volunteer work or helping a professor on a research project.

Also, transfers from two-year schools had fewer interactions with faculty. Transfers from four-year colleges participated in more active and collaborative learning, but they viewed the campus as less supportive and were less satisfied with campus life.

Of concurrently enrolled students, 58% took most of their additional coursework at a vocational-technical school or a community college; 42% did so at another four-year college.

Those students also cited convenience as a factor in their decision; 47% said the arrangement enabled them to complete degree requirements sooner, 21% cited a better course schedule and 17% said they did it to take an easier course.

The survey was designed to help schools assess their effectiveness in encouraging student learning.

But swirling — a phenomenon that was first identified in the 1990s that appears to be increasingly common — muddies the picture when it comes to institutional accountability.

"The more swirling, the less the public really knows about the quality of the educational experience," Kuh says.

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