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Transfer Champions: The Agents, Connectors, and Advocates Supporting Student Success

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Transfer students bring an invaluable perspective to higher education through their experiences navigating multiple institutions. Their firsthand knowledge of different academic cultures, administrative systems, and learning environments provides crucial insights that can benefit both their fellow students and institutional stakeholders. Isn't it time for us to consider how we can leverage this wealth of knowledge while working to support an increasingly mobile student population?

The ideal we can all strive for is a mutually beneficial relationship between transfer professionals, higher education leaders, and students. And building these bridges starts with being a transfer champion.

What's a Transfer Champion?

"Transfer champion" is a common term used among people who work with transfer students, but what does it mean?

At NISTS, we believe that transfer champions are **agents**, **connectors**, and **advocates**. Through this three-fold role, they work consistently to ensure that transfer student access, persistence, and success aren't just buzzwords—they're deeply ingrained values that guide a transfer professional's work and are visible in the actions they take every day.

Anyone from faculty to administrators to advisors to transfer practitioners and researchers can be transfer champions. All it takes is a special interest in ensuring that the full transfer student experience—from the moment a student starts exploring the possibility of transferring institutions through meeting their educational goals—is as successful as possible for each student.

In other words, transfer champions don't simply go through the motions. They walk their talk, and the difference their support makes for their students is evident.

Despite their value within higher education, transfer students face significant barriers to attaining their goals, for example:

- Students often encounter inaccurate information about how and whether their credits will transfer and be meaningfully applied. This can lead to needing to repeat coursework, extended time to graduation, and increased costs.
- Beyond the added costs of having to repeat coursework or not graduating within their expected timeline, students may face gaps in financial aid. There are fewer institutional grants or scholarships available to transfer students and the deadlines for many financial aid packages don't align well with transfer timelines. As a result, students may need assistance in looking for alternative ways to reduce costs or make money.
- Despite research showing that transfer students with the proper support are as likely to graduate as their direct-entry peers, some faculty and staff automatically view transfer students, especially those from community colleges, as less prepared or academically behind. With this deficit mindset, they may expect these students to struggle or underperform, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy through reduced support or engagement.

While we are wary of offering recommendations that seem to place the burden of fixing systemic issues squarely on the shoulders of individuals, we believe there is much transfer professionals—regardless of their own institutional context—can do to bridge the gap for individual students. This is the transfer champion's call to action.

Defining the Three-Fold Role

Now let's break down this three-fold role and see what makes transfer champions shine, like the students they serve.

Agents

As **agents**, transfer champions seek out, listen to, and validate transfer students' stories while affirming educational aspirations and abilities. Agents demystify the transfer experience for students by proactively filling information gaps about college life, institutional details, and transfer logistics to encourage confident decisions on the transfer journey.

It is not always easy for students to find accurate, up-to-date information about what credits will transfer and how they will count toward the credentials they are seeking. Transfer champions serving as agents can guide students to find the correct answers.

Agents also aren't afraid to enter conversations with their peers and supervisors about transfer practices and policies and amend them to ease student progress. As professionals at two- and four-year colleges and universities, transfer champions are in rooms students don't typically have access to. Transfer champions can support students by representing their interests in those spaces.

Connectors

As **connectors**, transfer champions actively work to nurture a transfer-inclusive culture. Rather than aiming to shift the wider institutional culture (though many may decide to set their sights on this more ambitious goal), many will choose to focus their efforts on

helping students envision their entire transfer journey by clarifying the relationship between completing items on a transfer to-do list and meeting long-term academic and career goals.

Not only do transfer champions connect students to the big picture, they connect students to people and resources meant to ease the transition. As professionals with considerable experience, we understand that personal introductions are more impactful than passive referrals. This is true not only as students learn how to connect the dots that will lead them to a successful career in the future, but also as they find their place on campus or in virtual communities here and now.

In short, connectors work to alleviate transition challenges and actively promote engagement and belonging through culturally relevant practices.

Advocates

As **advocates**, transfer champions are deeply committed to communicating the value transfer students bring to institutions. To do so successfully, they educate themselves about transfer data, research, and stories, and share what they've learned to dispel myths and negative underlying assumptions about transfer students and the transfer process.

Advocates understand that transfer is fundamentally an equity issue. Because most four-year, degree-granting institutions were designed to meet the needs of FTIC students straight from high school, transfer students navigate a system that was not built for them. Also, issues with access, persistence, and success impact historically underrepresented students more acutely.

Transfer professionals are uniquely positioned to influence change and disrupt these iniquities at their institutions. Advocates take every opportunity to discuss transfer student needs and implement research-backed practices, leveraging their positions to ensure that transfer is accounted for in strategic and financial decisions.

Concluding Thoughts

Transfer champions play a vital role in transforming higher education by actively supporting transfer student success. Whether serving as agents who guide and validate, connectors who build bridges, or advocates who drive systemic change, these dedicated professionals help ensure transfer students can achieve their educational goals.

As institutions face growing enrollment gaps and turn to transfer populations to fill that gap, the work of transfer champions becomes increasingly crucial. Their commitment to walking their talk—through direct support, relationship building, and advocacy—creates lasting positive impact for both individual students and institutions as a whole.

Join in our Collective Brainstorming:

Can you think of examples of how you or your colleagues act as agents, connectors, and advocates for transfer students?

Read others' responses and add your own to this Google Sheet.

NISTS Blog

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