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## Onboarding Transfer Students at the University of San Diego

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**Onboarding Transfer Students  
at the University of San Diego**

Andrea L. Garcia

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August 2020

### **Abstract**

In this study, I explored the experiences and needs of transfer students at the University of San Diego (USD) through assessment analysis, the implementation and observations of Spring orientation, and student leader surveys. My positionality as a graduate assistant for New Student Onboarding allowed me to implement Spring orientation programming, analyze postorientation assessment data, and survey transfer student leaders about their experiences. This study provided me a better understanding of how we as a department and an institution as a whole can improve how we onboard our transfer students and further support them throughout their undergraduate career. While cultivating a sense of belonging for transfer students is important, their most basic and essential need is ensuring they have the necessary resources to achieve academic success. Contrary to their first-year counterparts, transfer students have less time to complete their degree once at a four-year institution and research indicates much of their anxiety is due to their academics and pressure to graduate within two to three years. Through this study, I learned USD can improve transfer students' transition to campus by being timelier with admission and connecting students with an advisor. Additionally, the onboarding process should be comprised of only essential information to mitigate overload. And lastly, I learned equipping faculty with resources on how best to support their transfer students would help students feel valued.

## **Onboarding Transfer Students at the University of San Diego**

As someone who identified as a transfer student in my undergraduate journey at the University of Santa Barbara (UCSB) and experienced difficulty during the transition from a semester track community college to a quarter-system university, I am naturally empathetic to the experiences of other transfer students and am aware of the challenges they may face. Though I quickly felt a sense of belonging at UCSB through a preorientation summer program, for the entirety of my first year I struggled academically and questioned whether college was right for me.

Throughout my time at UCSB I started to hear of and witness the different challenges transfer students faced, including—but not limited to—(a) confusion over transferable credits to their major, (b) having to change their major because they struggled to keep up their first semester and did not get the passing grade for their intended major, (c) feelings of isolation, and (d) feeling unseen or not prioritized.

I came to graduate school with the intention to learn how to be a student affairs professional and further learn about the needs of students—and more specifically transfer students—to help guide them through their transition to and at a university and ensure they are being supported and valued on their campus. As a graduate assistant for New Student Onboarding at USD, I had the opportunity to assist in the planning of transfer-specific events and orientations. In this capacity, I wanted to better understand the transfer student population at USD and provide my own insight as a transfer student into the implementation of programming and orientations.

Initially, my research topic and questions focused on what sense of belonging meant to transfer students and what academic and social engagement looked like to them. However, before I could ask transfer students these questions, in my graduate assistant position, I found we as an institution had to improve our processes for admitting, onboarding, and supporting transfer students. Therefore, my research questions became (a) What measures can USD take to better support transfer students' transition to campus? (b) How can my position as graduate assistant at New Student Onboarding help to improve our efforts to onboard transfer students through orientation programming? and (c) How can I help foster the inclusion of transfer student experiences through programming efforts within the New Student Onboarding department?

I think it is important to critically evaluate the processes USD has in place for onboarding transfer students and supporting them in their undergraduate experience to better understand our efficiency and success of our intent to cultivate a sense of belonging.

### **Background**

Over the last several years, higher education has witnessed an increase in transfer students (Zilvinskis & Dumford, 2018). Transfer students are students who have transferred to a 4-year university (also known as a receiving institution) from either a 2-year community college or another 4-year institution (Townsend, 1995; Duggan & Pickering, 2008). Transfer students are diverse in age, socioeconomic status, marital status, part-time or full-time employment and/or student status, and some students may be parents (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Walker & Okpala, 2017). Many studies have shown the reasons why students transfer, including a desire to advance and complete their education, upward socioeconomic mobility, and lack of support at the previous institution (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Duggan & Pickering, 2008).

Most of the research on transfer students has focused on the experiences of those who transferred from community college to 4-year institutions because this pathway to attaining a bachelor's degree has been preferred by millions of students across the country (Laanan et al., 2010). This preferred pathway to a bachelor's degree is most popular among underrepresented students, which include students of color, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and first-generation students (Castro & Cortez 2017; Laanan et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2013). Many students from underrepresented communities decide to start their undergraduate education by way of community college because it constitutes an economical alternative to attaining a bachelor's degree.

The transfer process can be challenging for students because it is not always clear which units are transferable and can be attributed to the lack of support from the advising counselors in both institutions. Studies have shown students feel most overwhelmed during and after the transfer process due to inconsistencies between what was told to them by academic counselors in both institutions regarding matriculation and transferable units (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Rhine et al., 2000). For transfer students to have a smooth transition, there must be a commitment and investment by both the community colleges and 4-year institutions to ensure transfer students are equipped with the necessary support and resources (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Rhine et al., 2000).

Once students do successfully transfer to the receiving institution, they face even more challenges. Research by Long and Kurlaender (2009) and Melguizo et al. (2011) suggests transfer students “complete their degrees at lower rates than do their counterparts who began their studies at the same institution” (as cited by Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017, p. 174). Some of the

challenges they are faced with include (a) being academically underprepared, (b) difficulties connecting with other students and faculty, (c) transfer shock, (d) decline in GPA, (e) financial concerns, (f) prerequisite requirements to declare a major, and, (g) specifically to students of color at certain institutions, a sense of culture shock (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017; Rhine et al., 2000).

Due to these challenges, and considering most of the literature on retention is primarily focused on traditional students, universities find it difficult to retain their transfer students (Duggan & Pickering, 2008). The results of studies suggest the importance of receiving institutions creating programming and spaces tailored to the needs of transfer students. These methods can encompass transfer-specific orientation, identity-specific centers or spaces for underrepresented transfer students, learning communities, and educating faculty and staff about the needs of transfer students (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Walker & Okpala, 2017).

Students are more likely to stay in their receiving institution if they feel a sense of belonging, which can be fostered by providing physical spaces in universities where students can find peers with similar experiences. This is relevant, in particular, to students of color. In an effort to create a more positive experience, universities have been intentional in creating centers that cultivate a sense of community (Andrade, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017).

Physical spaces can cultivate positive relationships among students and between students and faculty. They can also be hubs for students to destress or work in groups. In an attempt to integrate themselves in spaces historically meant for their White counterparts, students of color find ways to create their own spaces on campus used for their academic and personal needs (Andrade, 2017). Similarly, Means and Pyne (2017) found that students of color facing a lack of

diversity on campus can minimize a sense of belonging which is why identity-based organizations and faculty who hold similar identities are crucial to the positive experiences of students of color. Knelman (2010) also highlighted the importance of providing spaces for nontraditional students, such as commuter students, to cater to their needs and foster success. Castro (2016) noted that to better support Mexican community college transfer students (MCCTS) at the receiving institution, the institution must understand their institutional culture and the way they are isolating or including MCCTS. Castro also suggested creating spaces for MCCTS to study and relax, checking damaging biases around this population of students, and hiring faculty and staff with shared experiences or identities as MCCTS. Having centers or spaces for students to call their own, specifically transfer students who tend to be marginalized, is crucial in creating inclusivity and sense of belonging. Additionally, hiring faculty and staff members who were also transfer students and understand the challenges transfer students face, can help students in feeling and being supported and normalize their challenges. For students' lived experiences and intersectionalities to be acknowledged by the receiving institution, however, if there aren't any spaces where students can foster and understand their identities, they will not feel supported.

### **Context**

My positionality as a graduate assistant for New Student Onboarding and a former transfer student provided me the lens to better understand and assess any gaps the university and my department may have in our processes of onboarding transfer students. In particular, I worked alongside the Transfer Learning Communities (TLC) Coordinator on various programs to support transfer students on campus. A particular experience piqued my interest about our



programming efforts not aligning with student interests was a program I helped to implement. This program, Farm to Table, I thought, had many perks and incentives, including providing transportation on a Saturday afternoon to a farmer's market in Little Italy and a \$10 stipend. The TLC Coordinator and I hoped our incentives would increase attendance at our Farm To Table event. Still, only a handful of transfer students showed up and half of them were student leaders who had volunteered to mingle with students.

I felt disheartened and sad students weren't interested in attending the event and getting to know one another. As a person who values community and inclusivity, I started to wonder why transfer students were not engaging in social events and whether it had anything to do with feeling isolated or othered from the beginning of their time on campus or whether creating a social network was not a priority to them. The intention for the social events and programming the TLC Coordinator and I implemented was in the hopes of creating a community among the transfer student population and to strengthen a sense of belonging, but it seemed we somehow missed the mark.

At the end of the Farm to Table event, as I waited for the USD tram to pick us up, I started conversation with student leaders and asked why they thought there was low attendance. Both of them shrugged and seemed unphased by the outcome. They said it had always been a challenge to engage with their group of transfer students because some are just focused on academics and not interested in social activities and others say they will come but don't end up showing up.

Although I wanted to find out how transfer students engaged socially and academically and whether they felt a sense of belonging on campus, my focus shifted as I realized there was an

even greater situation to understand. Through my programmatic efforts in planning and implementing Spring Orientation 2020, I learned before I could dive into whether or not students felt supported on campus, I had to find out what USD was doing to foster a sense of belonging and encourage engagement and if there were any gaps in these processes.

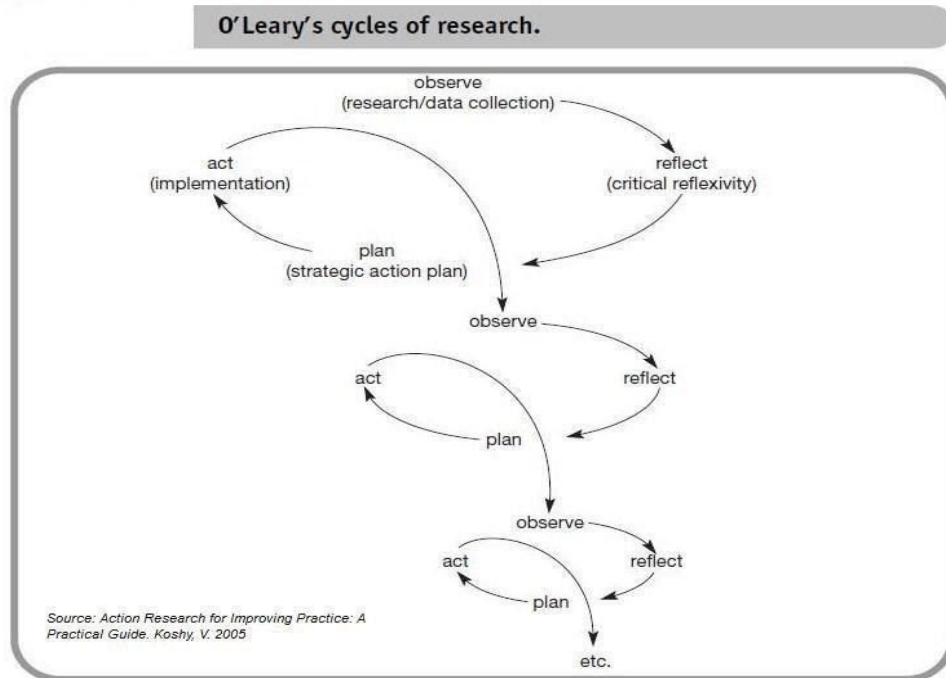
Hoping to better understand the different efforts USD is implementing to foster a sense of belonging and academic readiness for transfer students, I engaged in conversations with staff from various departments on campus. The following departments support transfer students in various capacities: the Commuter Commons, the Center for Student Success, Transfer Living Community (TLC), Admissions, and Military and Veterans Programs.

### **Methodology**

The methodology I used for my action research was O’Leary’s cycles of research model (see Figure 1). O’Leary (2004) explains, “cycles converge towards better situation understanding and improved action implementation; and are based in evaluative practice that alters between action and critical reflection” (p. 140). I appreciate this particular model because it allowed me to utilize preexisting data or data collected from my own research to reflect on my findings before I can construct a strategic plan of action.

### **Figure 1**

*O’Leary’s Cycles of Research*



*Note.* From *Action research for improving practice: a practical guide*, by V. Koshy, 2005, SAGE.

Koshy (2005) suggests this method is “an experiential learning approach to change the goal of which is to continually refine the methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles” (p. 5). Koshy warns against using any type of model excessively and strictly and reminds action researchers to use the method as a tool while also allowing flexibility in the research process to allow for natural learning.

To Koshy’s point, I decided to modify the methodology of my cycles to consist of observation, reflection, and implementation. I used this model in conjunction with my cycles through the use of preexisting data and information from previous years’ orientations, continued

research, data collection of events I observed during orientation, meetings with faculty and staff, and surveyed transfer student leaders on their own experiences.

### **Cycle 1: Spring Orientation Planning**

#### **Observation**

My supervisor, Assistant Director of Student Onboarding, aware of my passion to support transfer students and mindful of my own identity as a former transfer student, offered me the opportunity to lead the efforts of planning and implementing the 2020 Spring Orientation program. Excited for the opportunity to better understand the transfer process at USD, I enthusiastically agreed.

My very first order of business was to meet with my supervisor and the TLC Coordinator to assess the Spring Orientation programming from the previous year and review what was successful and what needed improvements. As a starting point, we analyzed last year's schedule and realized it was a long day full of important content and there was potential for students to feel overwhelmed at the end of the day. I also found that Spring Orientation, although highly encouraged, was not required the previous year and I wondered whether this affected attendance.

It is important to note the timeline to plan for Spring Orientation tends to be challenging because although part of the planning starts in October, most of it takes place in November and December. This poses challenges because colleagues and partners are out of the office during the holidays and campus closes for a few weeks. By the time the university starts back up again in the new year, the team has to hit the ground running to ensure we are ready for orientation in the following weeks and sometimes it is challenging for us to hear back from students in a timely manner.

## Reflection

As I reflected on all the content that has to be covered during orientation, I thought of different approaches to mitigate burnout by the end of orientation and the potential of feeling overwhelmed. I considered splitting the content across two days but as a student myself, I would rather sit through all the content in one day than have to return back to campus for a second part. But perhaps the content could be split in two parts: the first portion would be online and the second portion would be in-person and on campus. I reflected on the possibility of having students receive the first portion of their information through an online platform, similar to the Title IX training every student has to take in the Fall and Spring semesters. This program would allow students to complete it in increments and on their own time, while also having an interactive component to ensure students are paying attention. This online option would potentially help to ensure students understand the content and it would be a required step before they come to campus for orientation. I was not sure how feasible this idea would be though, considering our short timeline and insufficient resources. I still thought it was worthwhile to bring the idea to the team and get their opinions on the topic.

If the two-part orientation would not be feasible, I wondered if there was any way the content could either be shortened or if some of the sessions could be combined. My main questions when planning for orientation were “what information do transfer students care most about?,” “what information is essential for the university to provide?” and “will orientation help to cultivate a sense of belonging?” The first question was easy for me to answer as I envisioned my own orientations both for undergraduate and graduate schools and the answers were academic success and campus resources.

As I thought back to my undergraduate orientation as a transfer student, I recalled my anxiety over wanting to make sure my course schedule was setting me up for success to graduate on time and within the 2-year time frame. Luckily for me, I did have the support of my community college advisor who assisted me in the transition and ensured my courses were transferrable. I know this is not the case for many transferring students and there seems to be a disconnection or lack of communication between community colleges and 4-year institutions and even between 4-year public to 4-year private institutions.

In efforts to better understand the answer to my second question, “what information is essential for the university to provide?” it was important to meet with all campus partners who facilitated sessions at last year’s spring orientation and who support transfer students.

### **Implementation**

At my next meeting with my supervisor and the TLC Coordinator, I proposed the online platform idea and although it was met with appreciation and agreement that it could potentially be useful, the reality was it was not feasible. The online platform would not be feasible due to the short timeline and insufficient funds in our budget to support the program. However, they were willing to see how the orientation day could be shortened. As the team examined last year’s agenda, we decided to make changes we hoped would shorten orientation and optimize the sessions.

Tables 1 and 2 indicate the changes made from the previous year in 2019 to 2020. Instead of scheduling a one-hour check-in with breakfast, an optional advising session with advisors from each academic college was added to the schedule and the check-in time was shortened by 30 minutes. Additionally, convocation was shortened by 15 minutes. Last year’s liberal arts

introduction session took place after lunch and the planning team and I felt students were not as engaged as we hoped they would be. To mitigate this, the liberal arts introduction was combined with the Transfer Learning Community introduction and was scheduled in the morning. Instead of having the lunch hour without any activity, the planning team and I felt it best to make it engaging and create an opportunity for the Transfer Scholastic Assistants (TSA's) to mingle with their students and help create community. Another change we made was having the optional social the same night as orientation rather than a few days after. We figured with the momentum of orientation, students may encourage one another to attend whereas if a few days go by, students become increasingly unsure whether people will attend and therefore may hesitate in attending themselves.

Additionally, we made attendance to Spring Orientation a requirement. Other than losing out on crucial information to assist a student in their transition to USD, there would not be any repercussions if a student did not attend orientation, however, we wanted to ensure students felt as prepared as possible. Last year students were given the option to RSVP for orientation once they deposited but this year, in efforts to increase attendance, we made orientation mandatory.

**Table 1**

*2019 Spring Orientation Schedule*

Time	Duration	Session
8:00am -9:00am	1hr	Spring Orientation Check-In & Breakfast
9:00am-10:00am	1hr	New Student Convocation
10:00am-10:15am	15 mins	Introduction to your TLC Theme
10:15am-10:45am	30mins	Small Group
10:45am-12:30pm	1hr 45min	Community Values and Student Code
12:30-1:00pm	30mins	Taste of Linda Vista Lunch
1:00pm-1:10pm	10mins	Liberal Arts Intro
1:15pm-2:00pm	45mins	The Transferring Process Info Session
2:00pm-2:45pm	45mins	Financial Aid Info Session

2:45pm-3:45pm	1hr	College Specific Academic & Career Readiness Orientations
3:45pm-4:15pm	30mins	TLC Course Meeting
4:15pm-5:15pm	1hr	Campus Tour*
7:00pm-9:00pm	2hrs	RA Social*

*Note.* \*optional attendance. Total duration of Spring Orientation (not including optional sessions) was 8 hours and 15 minutes.

**Table 2**

*2020 Spring Orientation Schedule*

Time	Duration	Session
8:00am-9:00am	1hr	Optional Advising Meetings for students who deposited late
9:00am-9:30am	30mins	Check-In
9:30am - 10:15am	45mins	New Student Convocation
10:15am - 10:45am	30mins	TLC & Liberal Arts Intro
10:45am - 11:00am	15mins	Coffee Break
11:00am - 12:30pm	1hr	Community Values and Student Code
	30 mins	
12:30pm - 1:30pm	1hr	Small-Group Lunch with TSA
1:30pm - 2:15pm	45mins	Course Meetings
2:15pm - 3:45pm	30mins	College Specific Academic & Career Readiness Orientations
3:45pm - 4:15pm	30mins	Optional Campus Tour *
4:15pm - 5:00pm	45mins	Errands Time*
5:00pm - 6:30pm	1.5hrs	Optional TLC Social *

*Note.* \*optional attendance. Total duration of 2020 Spring Orientation (not including optional sessions) was 6 hours and 45 minutes.

Another important component to planning orientation was the collaboration with various campus partners to help carry out move-in, advise students, facilitate sessions, among other details. One of the meetings we had with another campus partner was around dressing the campus and creating an inviting and welcoming environment. At the conclusion of the meeting,



it was clear we were very limited in how we can decorate the campus or specific parts of campus for Spring Orientation. It is important to note the amount of students admitted in the Spring is much smaller than the Fall cohort, which means planning and programming is done on a much smaller scale. While it makes sense that we do not need to dress the entire campus, I do think it is important for move-in and check-in stations to look welcoming and be filled with excitement. Due to our budget constraints and our efforts to be a sustainable campus, we could not use balloons, couldn't reorder a welcome banner that had been misplaced, and we could not have an event management company who we partnered with to install our signs.

### **Cycle 2: Spring Orientation Implementation**

#### **Observation: What I witnessed during Spring Orientation**

The first part of Spring Orientation is move-in day which typically takes place the day prior to orientation sessions. Although we tried to make the move-in process exciting and welcoming, our plans did not quite work out as intended. For one, the welcome sign we had planned to hang would not hold with the tape because it was too heavy and we could not pin it because we did not want to puncture the wall so we had to let that idea go. Instead, we put up feather banners by the front door of the check-in building where students would be greeted, given their room key, and either be provided with a bin to move their belongings into the surrounding buildings or given directions to get to their dorm building across campus where they would be assisted to move-in.

While I assisted at check-in during moving day, I noticed student leaders were not as excited and engaged as I had witnessed them to be during Fall orientation. There was upbeat music playing in the background but their tone when welcoming students did not match the

excited beat. Instead, on several occasions, once a student walked through the door, I would overhear student leaders say “Hi, what area are you living in?” and other times, I would not even hear a “hi” before they asked where the students were living. The times when I heard this, I was assisting other students or parents and could not get the student leaders’ attention quick enough before they helped the next person in line. When I finally did get the chance to have a private moment with them, I encouraged them to be more welcoming rather than getting straight to looking for the student’s room key. I encouraged a friendly “Good morning, welcome to USD! How are you?” Followed by a “Let’s get you situated, do you know where you are staying?” Mindful of how much less attention Spring admits get compared to those from Fall, I found it important that we as an institution do better in making each student we encounter feel valued. Even the smallest of gestures and tone could make a difference.

Later that day, as I was finalizing last minute details for the orientation sessions taking place the following day, my colleague notified me many students had just been admitted and were not placed in their courses. Typically, transfer students are matched with their Transfer Scholastic Assistant (TSA) based on their courses but because students were admitted late and did not have their courses yet, students would have to be matched with a TSA at random. This also meant we would have more students requiring advising during the first hour of orientation than originally planned.

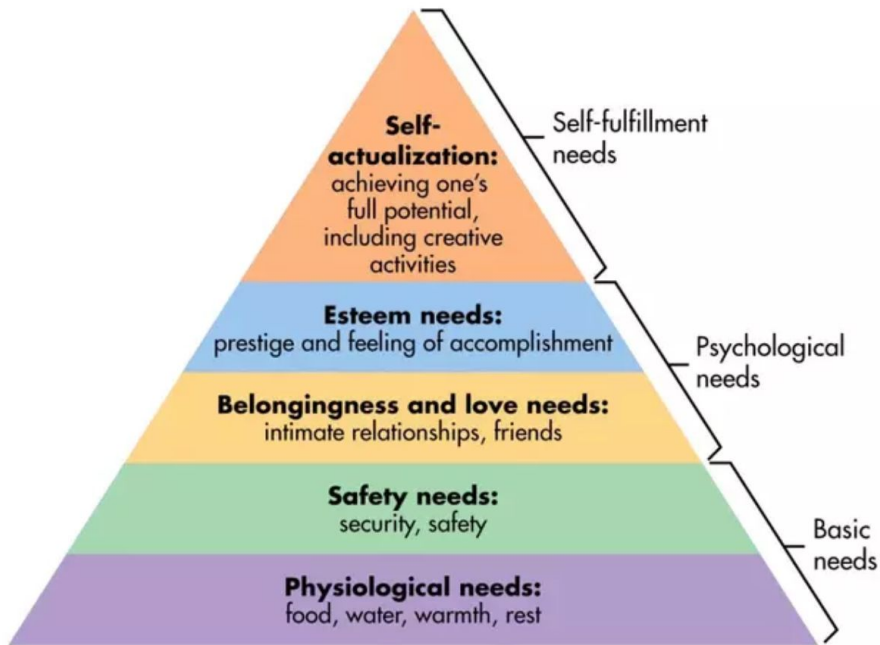
On orientation day, TSAs found themselves in constant rotation as they walked students from the check-in table to the advising rooms and the advisors found themselves overwhelmed by the amount of students requiring assistance. I personally observed students struck with anxiety about needing to speak to an advisor about getting into their courses, some students even

skipping the line at check-in and following the TSA's to the advising rooms. I spoke to one of the advisors who said he could not assist one particular student because his transcripts had not yet gone through and without transcripts, he could not place a student in any upper division courses.

Concerned the students may not be able to focus throughout the remainder of orientation, we asked advisors to allow students to make appointments with them throughout the week to assist them with their courses.

### **Reflection: Critiquing Spring Orientation**

As I observed all that had been taking place during move-in and on orientation day, I could not help but feel frustrated for the students. At USD, we often talk about the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging for our students but I was left wondering how we expect students to feel a sense of belonging if their main concerns or priorities are not being addressed in a timely manner. This reminded me of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure 2) which describes how one cannot achieve a higher need without first being provided with the most basic and essential needs. Figure 2 for example shows that the priority of needs lies in the physiological and safety before getting to belongingness. In the case of transfer students, their most salient need is security and safety. Without assurance about their academics, students will be left feeling insecure and their concern for a sense of belonging will not be salient until they achieve academic security. After my observations, I was left wondering how USD can implement a better process to meet the academic safety of transfer students prior to their arrival to campus.

**Figure 2***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Note. From *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, by S. McLeod, 2020, SimplyPsychology (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>). CC BY-NC-ND 3.0.

**Implementation**

After Spring Orientation, we met with campus partners to discuss ways we can improve the transfer registration process. Some of the discussion topics were around revisiting spring admits with international transcripts timeline and process, possibility of having an earlier deadline for students to deposit by or an earlier timeline to admit students, and being transparent with students about the challenges they may face if they deposit late (e.g., not getting into classes until late January). A great deal of our conversation was around late admission and how the most affected are international students who require transcript evaluation. However, many advisors do

not have the tools or bandwidth to translate the international transcripts and having a short window to do so makes the process even more challenging.

### **Cycle 3: Postorientation Student Assessment**

#### **Observation: Student Assessment Data**

At the completion of the final Spring Orientation session, a survey was issued electronically to approximately 165 students which comprised of new students (both first-year and transfer students). The assessment data consisted of a 37% response rate, specifically, out of the 165 new students, 61 of them completed the survey. Additionally, out of those 61 students, I could not further dissect which of those respondents were transfer students.

Furthermore, as stated previously, I believe the low number of respondents for my transfer student survey was due to the disruption of COVID-19 pandemic. Many students' priorities have shifted during this time and academics may not even be their top priority any longer due to more pressing needs and challenges.

The intention of the survey was to gauge how well we delivered upon our objectives. The objectives for Spring Orientation were Mattering and Belonging, Academic Grounding, and Information. In reference to these objectives, our hope was that students who attended the sessions would:

1. feel they matter and belong to their floor community, TLC class community, TLC theme community, and the larger USD community;
2. feel confident in their ability to begin upper-division work and prepared to begin classes at USD; and

3. utilize critical, timely information to assist in their transition to USD, academically and socially.

The following tables demonstrate various elements of the Spring orientation objectives. The percentages reflect respondents' reporting of *Strongly Agree* or *Somewhat Agree* on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree). Most of the tables provide comparative data between 2019 and 2020 except for the table in Figure 4 because sense of belonging questions were not implemented in the 2019 survey.

Table 3 represents the sense of belonging objective and depicts 86% of students Strongly agree or somewhat agree USD feels like a place where they will be able to be their real selves and 91% Strongly agree or somewhat agree USD feels like a place where they will be able to feel comfortable.

**Table 3**

*Sense of Belonging*

USD feels like a place where I'll be able to...	2020	2019
	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree
...be my real self	86%	n/a
...feel comfortable	91%	n/a

*Note.* Percentages reflect respondents reporting Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree).

\*This is the first year that the New Student Onboarding team utilized the new set of sense of belonging survey questions

Tables 4 and 5 represent the academic grounding objective. It is worthwhile to note half as many students completed the 2020 survey. My assumption for the number of low respondents could be the timing of the surveys, perhaps students' priorities were focused on their academic grounding, or perhaps students felt their feedback would not be valued or taken into consideration, depending on their overall orientation experience.

In comparison to the 2019 data, the 2020 data indicates a 16% decrease of students who Strongly Agree or Somewhat agreed the course scheduling process was easy to navigate and a nine percent decrease of students who Strongly Agree or Somewhat agreed they were connected with their advisor in a timely manner. Additionally, there was a 14% increase of students who strongly agree or somewhat agree they were able to register for the courses they needed to progress towards graduation. Finally, there was no difference between 2019 and 2020 of students who Strongly Agree or Somewhat agree they received/created their schedule in a timely manner.

**Table 4**

*Course Registration Process*

Please reflect on the process you engaged in to register for classes and indicate your agreement with the following statements:	2020*	2019**
	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree
I found the course scheduling process easy to navigate	60%	76%
I was connected with my advisor in a timely manner	58%	67%

I was able to register for the courses I need to progress towards graduation	76%	62%
I received/created my schedule in a timely manner	54%	54%

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*Note.* Percentages reflect respondents reporting Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree).

\**n* ≈ 50

\*\**n* ≈ 95

The data in table 5 indicates a 2% increase of students who felt prepared for the start of classes from 2019 to 2020.

**Table 5**

*Preparedness to start classes*

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Overall, Spring Orientation helped me feel that...	2020*	2019**
	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree
I am prepared to start classes	81%	79%

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*Note.* Percentages reflect respondents reporting Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree).

\**n* ≈ 50

\*\**n* ≈ 95



Table 6 represents the information objective. As a result of attending Spring Orientation, the data indicates, in both years, a strong sense of identifying resources to help students transition to USD. More specifically, there was a four percent increase in 2020 in comparison to 2019.

**Table 6**

*Identifying Resources*

Overall, Spring Orientation helped me feel that...	2020*	2019**
	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree/ Strongly Agree
I can identify resources to help me when I have questions about my transition to USD	95%	91%

*Note.* Percentages reflect respondents reporting Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree).

\* $n \approx 45$

**Reflection**

As I studied the data in table 4, I was not completely surprised by the findings because it matched what I had observed during the advising session at orientation: many students in line to see an advisor and some even skipping the line at check-in when they discovered there were a number of students concerned about their courses too. Most of the percentages that reflect the course registration process were low this year in 2020. The only question that had a higher percentage was “I was able to register for the courses I need to progress towards graduation” and my assumption is that by the time students completed the survey, they were able to meet with an advisor and gain more clarity about their schedules. Although there was no difference in year-to-year data on students receiving/creating their schedule in a timely manner, the percentage

was still rather low than what we would have liked to see.

Table 5 indicated a slight increase, in comparison to 2019, of students who felt prepared to start classes. What I found interesting about this data was the discrepancy between the previous table sets' data. It seemed students found it rather difficult to get the ground running with their course scheduling process and while I witnessed many students who required assistance, my assumption was that by the end of orientation, most of these students were able to secure their courses. My assumption was that although they did not connect with an advisor in a timely manner, by the end of orientation, they were able to do so. This is probably a result of advisors' willingness to make individual appointments with students who still had not had a set schedule.

On the bright side, according to table 6, there were 95% of students who felt Spring Orientation helped them identify resources to help them when they have questions about their transition to USD. This is important as we want students to be knowledgeable about who their support networks are if they have questions or are unsure about their transition.

When my department first looked over the Spring survey questions, I specifically asked for the belonging question to be added. Initially I thought the questions would help to capture whether students did experience feeling a sense of belonging on campus. However, after my observations from move-in and orientation, I feel the data on sense of belonging does not capture entirely our objective for spring orientation specifically. A better question for this objective would have been "As a result of Spring Orientation, do you feel valued as a new member of our community at USD?" The reason for this is the questions asked in the survey convey a possibility of what the USD environment/campus can provide in the future whereas my proposed

question would get to how students were made to feel during their orientation experience.

To clarify, I think the questions we asked are still valid and can be helpful to gauge whether students can envision USD to be a safe place to be authentically themselves. However, in regard to measuring our belonging objective, we need to ask a question(s) that convey what students felt as a result of our orientation efforts/programming, similar to my suggested question. Additionally, I think those questions should be asked first to go in order from past to future.

### **Implementation and Limitations**

My next plan was to interview other transfer students and get their feedback on their own onboarding experience. While I was initially successful in recruiting a few transfer students for my study and had scheduled my interviews with them, my plan had to be altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic that required the entire campus to switch to online platforms and social distance. Soon after, I reached out to my participants to ensure they were safe and being supported through the change and challenges and let them know I would follow up at a later time to reschedule our interview but the priority was their safety and well-being. A few weeks later, when I felt people were getting to the routine of things, I followed up with my participants about scheduling a zoom interview but did not receive a response. Knowing my timeline was cut short and I needed to get some sort of feedback from transfer students, I decided to switch from interviews to a survey to make it more efficient and accessible for students. I sent an email to Transfer Scholastic Assistants and asked them to consider supporting my research by completing the survey that asked them to recall what they remember from their orientation experience, what sense of belonging looks like for them and any suggestions they have about the orientation process moving forward.

I used Google Forms as a method to capture the survey questions which contained a total of 26 questions (see Appendix). The questions were sectioned by the types of questions including Background information, which includes transfer history (when they transferred to USD, from what type of institution, major) and demographics (full-time student or Full-time employment), Orientation experience, sense of belonging, engagement, and Looking Ahead which aimed at suggestions about what the orientation team can do to better foster sense of belonging to foster students and how USD can support transfer students.

#### **Cycle 4: Transfer Scholastic Assistant Survey**

##### **Observation: TSA Survey Results**

Ultimately only two of six Transfer Scholastic Assistants (TSA) completed the survey and I believe this was due to the disruption the COVID-19 pandemic caused in many students' lives. Many students' priorities shifted and academics may not have been their top priority due to more pressing needs and challenges such as financial stability, health, health of their loved ones, and their living or housing situation. If feasible, I would have incentivized students to complete the survey by offering an amazon gift card.

In efforts to ensure confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms for the two respondents. The first is Catalina, a commuter student who was admitted in the Spring and transferred from a community college and Luis who was admitted in the Fall and also transferred from a community college. Additionally, both are full-time students at USD.

On the survey, Catalina and Luis indicated by the time they transferred to USD, they felt academically ready because their community colleges assisted them in their transition. After completing the background information, they were asked to answer questions about their

orientation experience. One of the questions asked whether orientation provided them with the knowledge and resources to assist them in their transition at USD and they both answered “yes.” The next question prompted them to explain further. Catalina responded, “although long and overdone, I felt prepared and decently knowledgeable about the campus.” Luis’ similar response was “Though orientation did seem at times redundant, the classes/representatives provided were overall beneficial.”

The third set of questions were around sense of belonging and they both indicated sense of belonging meant “community.” When asked where they most feel a sense of belonging, Catalina said “at home with friends and family” while Luis answered, “Friends. USD Community.” When asked to share a time when they felt a sense of belonging at USD, Catalina responded, “When I discovered AISO [American Indian Student Organization].” Luis answered, “Every TSA event I have been a part of.”

The fourth set of questions pertain to engagement. The first question asked whether they attend school-sponsored events. Both of them answered “sometimes” and they each specified reasons as to why they do not attend. Catalina’s response was “I’m a commuter and most of the events happen when I am at home” while Luis responded that it depended on his schedule. The following question was in regard to whether the TLC program was helpful in their transition to USD. They both answered “sometimes” and Catalina specified with “I met my best friend in my TLC class, but I feel like [my professor] was not as knowledgeable about life as a transfer as I had hoped” and Luis explained, “she had to leave USD for personal reasons” which I assume the “she” refers to his professor. To better understand their engagement through their role as a TSA, I asked a few questions pertaining to what their experience as a TSA has been. Particularly, I

asked what were some of the concerns their students faced. Catalina answered, “General stress of trying to tackle too many clubs in order to find a place on campus; registration concerns; how to get a new advisor” and Luis’ response was “lack of understanding of what the purpose or benefit is of a normal class with an attached ambiguous theme on the side.”

Lastly, the Looking Ahead section asks what the orientation team can improve on and what suggestions they might have about how USD as a whole can best support transfer students. Catalina’s response was, “Create a transfer commons, something on the west end of campus that can support transfer students who might not find themselves near the [University Center/Student Life Pavilion]” and Luis’ suggestion was to “consolidate information. Students are bombarded with information at orientation. At the end maybe have a one page summary of the MUST NEED information.”

### **Reflection**

The responses I received from the survey helped me to get a better sense of transfer students’ experiences on campus and helped me make connections to some of the events I had previously observed as well as some information from my research on transfer students. For example, Catalina, a commuter student, felt a sense of belonging back home with family and friends whereas Luis felt his community to be among other TSAs and on campus. Although Catalina did not outwardly say she finds community among her friends and family back home, I made this assumption when she explained she was unable to attend school events because she was a commuter student and most events happened while she was at home.

The connection between the ease of building community dependent on one’s proximity to campus brought me to think about how we can better foster a sense of belonging or community

on campus for our commuter students. It is important to note while USD does have a space specific to commuter students, the location of the space may not be as accessible to students who do not frequent that side of campus. Regarding programming, it is important to be inclusive to our students who live at home and who's schedules look differently than most students who live on campus.

Catalina's response to the TLC program question raised a concern about faculty not being mindful about the identities their students hold. It made me feel disappointed that a faculty member who teaches a Transfer Learning Community course is not very aware about the transfer student experiences. Catalina had also mentioned some of her students wanted to know how they could switch advisors and I wonder whether the advisors understand the needs and concerns of transfer students too. Sense of belonging can take place not just among friends and family but the actions of our faculty and administrators also take important roles in cultivating community. Catalina highlighted an important theme that has emerged in this research, the concern students have about their course registration.

The main concern Luis' students had was around understanding the value of having to take a "normal class with an attached ambiguous theme on the side." My assumption is this concern has to do with the integration aspect of their TLC. As part of the TLC experience, transfer students must learn to integrate knowledge across disciplines and make a connection to their TLC theme which is *Engage*. At the end of their first year, students must create a project to show their understanding of the integration and connection to their theme. Through my time working closely with the LLC office, I would often hear about students not understanding the integration project or hear about some faculty not taking the project seriously themselves.

Faculty's lack of care around this project can lead to students' lack of understanding.

Lastly, Luis and Catalina shared some suggestions about what the orientation team can improve on and what the university can do to create community among transfer students. Luis' suggestion to help mitigate the overwhelming amount of information during orientation was to create a one-page summary of what they need to know. I remember my orientation was overwhelming and though I took many notes, I think a breakdown of the information would have eased my anxiety of trying to remember every detail. Catalina's suggestion to provide a center or space specific to transfer students is important and while I know various campus partners have discussed this idea, the reality is there is not any space for it. There had been conversations of making the commuter commons a space for transfer students too but commuter students are also a marginalized student population and sharing a space may not be the best idea. I also think her suggestion to have the center be placed in the west campus is not ideal because it would further create "otherness" of transfer students when all of the resource spaces are located on the east side of campus.

Overall, the survey results were very insightful and although I would have preferred to have more responses, this information was enough to highlight what we as an institution can do better to support transfer students and what my department can improve on in our programming efforts.

### **Implementation**

Although I can continue on with my cycles with all the work left to be implemented, the cycles of my formal research ends here. However, my hope is that these efforts to try and make a positive change for our transfer students does not end when I graduate. While my formal



research has ended, I have already met with campus partners who support transfer students to discuss ways we can provide a more inclusive and thoughtful environment for our transfer students.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Some of the major findings and themes throughout my research included the redundancy of orientation content; transfer students' priority around their academic courses; the ramification of late admittance to the institution; and the inadequate support of transfer students by faculty, administrators, and staff.

In my study, both Catalina and Luis shared the overwhelming amount of information and repetitiveness of orientation sessions, although they both attended different orientations.

Additionally, through my own transfer experience, I knew transfer students' main priority before the start of the semester was having their course schedule finalized and ready. My study and research indicated this was not just an experience unique to me, but rather a shared experience among other transfer students. The basic need and top priority for transfer students is academic success and the first implication of their success is weighed on their course schedules. If students are not able to attain their required courses for their major due to late admittance, this could result in students not being able to add their required courses to their schedules due to capacity.

Faculty, staff and administrators must also be mindful of the experiences of transfer students. It is crucial to understand that transfer students are trying to be academically successful and make the most of their short time on campus all while trying to acclimate to the changes of a new environment. Transfer students, unlike their first-year counterparts do not have the luxury of

having a lot of time to figure things out. As soon as transfer students start their academics in their new institutions, they typically take upper-class courses that fulfill their major requirements and have a busy schedule. Also important to note is that student leaders can also benefit from faculty and staff support—they want to feel valued and heard just as much as students who do not hold leadership roles. Although student leaders may already know of the many resources on campus, it is still important for faculty, staff, and administrators to reach out to student leaders, offer support, and encourage them to use resources on campus.

As we have witnessed vast changes in higher education due to COVID-19, it would not be surprising to see an increase in transfer students over the next few years. To continue to be a top competing institution, USD should consider including feedback from transfer students to help make campus a more welcoming and inclusive institution for transfer students. One way to do so would be to invite TSA's to be part of the planning and implementation of orientation and various campus events throughout the school year.

It is important to note that throughout the time of my research and specifically after Spring Orientation 2020, stakeholders held meetings to discuss ways to improve transfer students' experiences and success. As previously noted, the orientation planning team reflected on the observations of Spring orientation and met with stakeholders and Admissions to act on these observations. While the work is ongoing and implementation can take time, the Admissions team agreed to be more communicative to students about their processes and timelines to help students better prepare for the start of their semester and academics. Additionally, the faculty senate assigned an ad hoc committee to create a new transfer of credit policy which will provide more clarity and transparency to transfer students about transferable

units which can ultimately support academic success. My hope is that there are continuous conversations, meetings and policy reviews that adhere to and support transfer students' ever evolving needs.

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## Appendix

### Transfer Scholastic Assistant Survey

#### Background Information

1. What year did you transfer to USD?
  - a. 2016
  - b. 2017
  - c. 2018
  - d. 2019
  - e. 2020
2. Did you transfer in the Fall or Spring?
  - a. Fall
  - b. Spring
3. Did you transfer from a community college or another four-year institution?
  - a. Community college
  - b. Other four-year institution
  - c. Both
4. Do you have a declared major?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. If yes, what is your major?
  - a. (short answer text)

6. Are you a full-time student?
  - a. Yes
  - b. no
7. Are you a full-time employee?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

### **Orientation Experience**

8. By the time you transferred to USD, did you feel academically ready?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
9. Please explain why you did/did not feel academically ready by the time you transferred to USD.
10. What do you remember about your orientation experience? (activity/session-wise)
11. Did orientation provide you with the knowledge and resources to assist in your transition at USD?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Maybe
12. Please explain further:
  - a. (long answer text)

### **Sense of Belonging**



13. When you hear the phrase “sense of belonging,” what does that mean to you?
  - a. (long answer text)
14. Where do you most feel a sense of belonging?
  - a. (long answer text)
15. Please share about a time you felt a sense of belonging at USD.
  - a. (long answer text)
16. If comfortable, please share about a time you did not feel a sense of belonging at USD
  - a. (long answer text)
17. Who has most supported you during your undergraduate career at USD?
  - a. (long answer text)

### **Engagement**

18. When there are school-sponsored events, do you attend?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Sometimes
19. Why/why don't you attend school-sponsored events?
20. Was your TLC helpful in your transition to USD?
  - a. Please explain further why your TLC was/was not helpful.
21. Why did you decide to be a TSA?
22. What did you enjoy most about your role as a TSA?
23. What did you enjoy least about your role as a TSA? Any challenges?
24. During your role as a TSA, what have been some concerns your students have had?

25. What on-campus resources have you found helpful in your time at USD?

- a. Commuter Commons
- b. UFMC
- c. Black Student Resource Center
- d. Women's Commons
- e. LGBTQIA Commons
- f. Military and Veterans Programs
- g. Counseling Center
- h. Career Development
- i. Student Support Services
- j. Other

### **Looking ahead**

26. What can the orientation team do better to foster a sense of belonging for transfer students?

27. Any other concerns, suggestions, comments about how USD as a whole can best support transfer students?