

# Understanding the Transfer Student Experience: An Analysis of Factors that Affect Transfer Student Satisfaction with Academic and Social Experience

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## Introduction

Transfer students can have unique academic and social experiences that influence their satisfaction with their academic, social, and overall college experience. This report presents a data-driven examination of what factors influence transfer student satisfaction with their academic and social experiences and how those differ from that of first-year entrants. This research used existing UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) data from 2016 and 2018 to analyze the transfer student experience at UC Berkeley. We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic was a very disruptive time for students and their college experience. Thus, the more recent 2020 UCUES survey was excluded from this study in the hope that we might observe effects unrelated to changes induced by the pandemic.

## Findings

Academic experience

- A **higher** proportion of transfer students were satisfied with their academic experience compared to first-year entrants
- Transfer students who agreed with the statement “I feel I belong at UC Berkeley” were more likely to be satisfied with their academic experience than those who disagreed

Social experience

- A **lower** proportion of transfer students were satisfied with their social experience compared to first-year entrants
- Transfer students who agreed with the statement “I feel I belong at UC Berkeley” were more likely to be satisfied with their social experience than those who disagreed
- Participation in a student organization increased the likelihood of transfer students feeling satisfied with their social experience

## Key Recommendations

Based on our findings, we suggest prioritizing the improvement of social support systems and to foster a sense of belonging. We found this to be a crucial factor related to transfer student satisfaction with their overall social experience. More specifically, we suggest sending out surveys to transfer students to

- Investigate how transfer students form a sense of belonging and look for any demographic differences
- Understand why transfer students have low participation in student organization relative to first-year entrants.

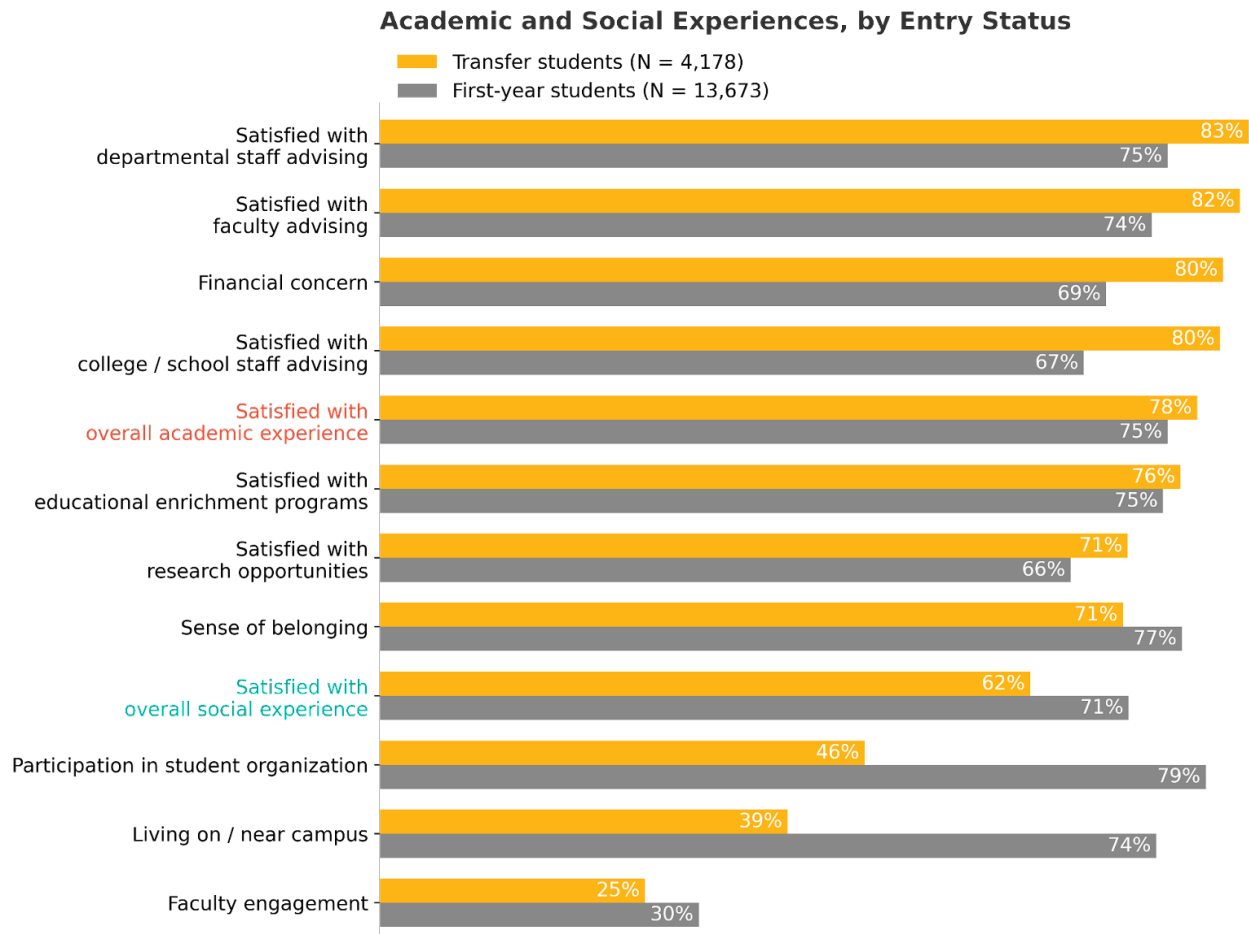
- Investigate how transfer students form communities at UC Berkeley

## Summary of Analysis

We analyzed how academic factors could influence transfer student satisfaction with their academic experience and, separately, how social factors could impact transfer student satisfaction with their social experience. Seventy-eight percent 78% (n = 3,259) of transfer students were satisfied with their overall academic experience, and 62% (n = 2,588) were satisfied with their overall social experience at UC Berkeley. Figure 1 details academic and social experiences of transfer students and how they compare to those of first-year entrants. Most transfer students were satisfied with academic advising and felt that they belonged. However, high proportions had financial concerns, and relatively low percentages participated in a student organization or lived within one mile of campus.

### Figure 1

*A summary of the academic and social experience of transfer students, compared with that of first-year entrants.*



## Academic Experience

We looked at how the sense of belonging, financial concern, engagement with faculty, satisfaction with academic advising, and satisfaction with educational extracurriculars (e.g., research opportunities, internships, study abroad, etc.) was related to transfer student satisfaction with overall academic experience. Of the 4,171 transfer students who answered the question, these factors each had a statistically significant relationship with satisfaction with overall academic experience. On the contrary, concern with paying for their education and engagement with faculty were not significantly associated with satisfaction with overall academic experience. A transfer student's sense of belonging and satisfaction with academic advising were positively correlated with satisfaction with overall academic experience.

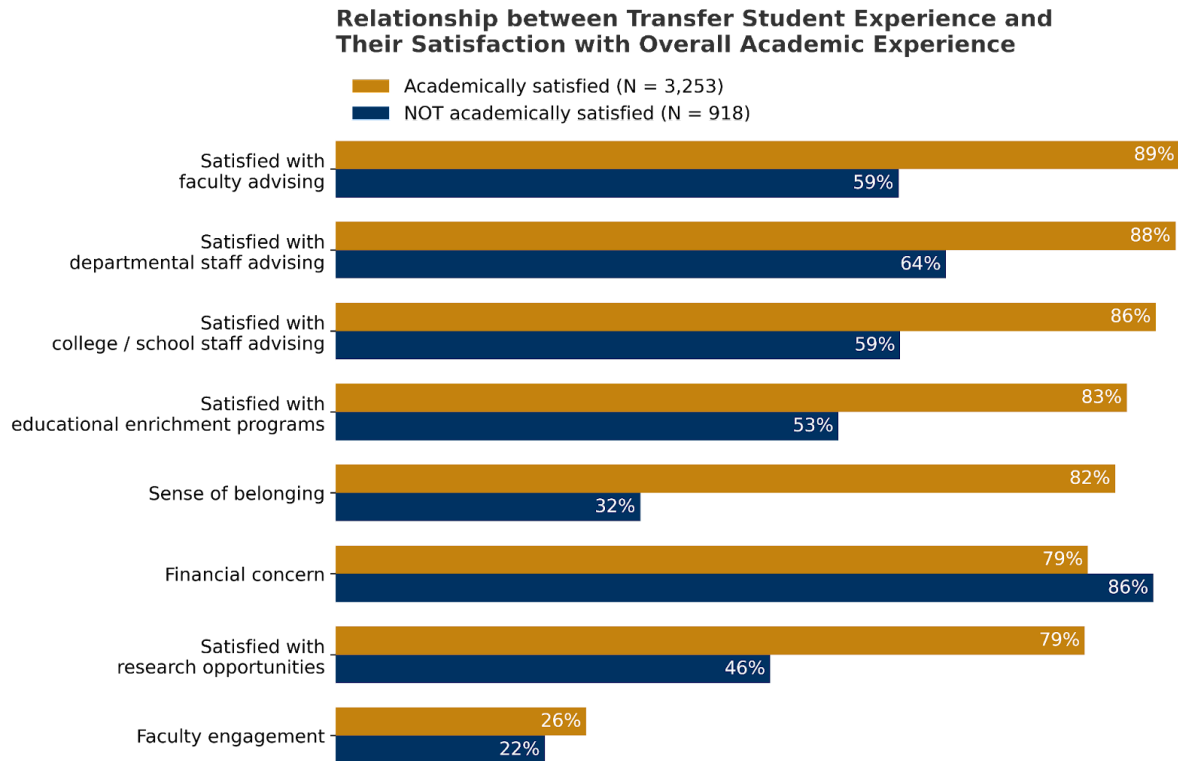
Holding other academic experiences constant,

- Transfer students who agreed with the statement "I feel I belong at UC Berkeley" were 34% more likely to be satisfied with their academic experience than those who disagreed.
- Transfer students were 2% more likely to be satisfied with their academic experience than first-year entrants. This difference is statistically significant.

In Figure 2, transfer students were broken up into two groups based on satisfaction with overall academic experience. Eighty-eight percent of the transfer students who were satisfied with their academic experience were also satisfied with departmental staff advising, but only 64% of those who were not satisfied with their academic experience were satisfied with departmental staff advising.

**Figure 2**

*The relationship between academic experiences and overall satisfaction with those experiences among transfers who were vs. were not satisfied with their academic experience.*



## Social Experience

We looked at how the sense of belonging, financial concern, participation in student organization, and commuting distance impacted transfer student satisfaction with overall social experience. Of the 4,170 transfer students who answered the question, sense of belonging and participation in student organization had significant effects on satisfaction with overall social experience. On the other hand, financial concern and commuting distance did not significantly affect satisfaction with overall social experience.

Given that all other social experiences resemble what most transfer students experience,

- Sense of belonging had the strongest influence on a transfer student’s satisfaction with social experience.
  - Transfer students who agreed with the statement “I feel I belong at UC Berkeley” were 59% more likely to be satisfied with their social experience than those who disagreed.
- Participation in a student organization increased the likelihood of transfer students feeling satisfied with their social experience. Transfer students who participated in a student organization had a 87% chance of being satisfied, while those who had never

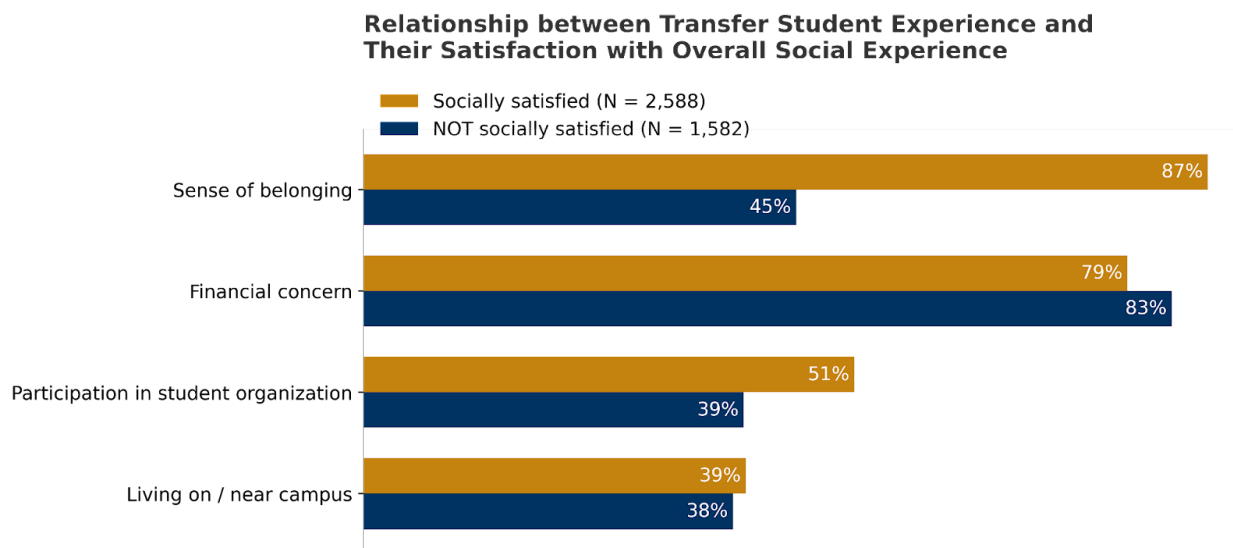
participated in any student organization had a 80% chance of being satisfied with their social experience.

- Transfer students were about 4% less likely to feel satisfied with their social experience than first-year students. This difference is significant.
- Commuting distance was not significantly related to transfer students' satisfaction with their social experience.

Figure 3 shows a comparison of students satisfied with their social experience and those unsatisfied, and how their social experiences relate to their satisfaction with overall social experience. There is a striking difference in sense of belonging between students who are satisfied with their social experience and those unsatisfied with their social experience.

### Figure 3

*The relationship between social experiences and overall satisfaction with those experiences among transfer students who were vs. were not satisfied with their social experience*



### Process of Analysis

First, we consulted UC Berkeley staff who work closely with transfer students and their records to identify pain points of their academic and social experience. We then created a list of variables we hypothesized as factors that significantly influences a transfer student's academic and social experience. In order to operationalize these variables, we perused existing surveys (UCUES, Survey of New Students, Golden Bear Orientation Survey) and eventually chose UCUES as our data source because the questions in UCUES matched our variables of interest the best. In an effort to limit access to sensitive information like student ID, we did not include additional datasets. Once the data was acquired, we visualized and manipulated the data by removing responses that are not identified as either transfer students nor first-year entrants. Then, we produced twelve logistic regression models to investigate three main ideas: 1) what impacts transfer student satisfaction with their overall academic experience, 2) what impacts a transfer

student satisfaction with their overall social experience, and 3) how the effects of those factors may differ with regards to first-year entrants.

We performed logistic regression to quantify how certain experiences affect transfer student satisfaction with their academic/social experience and whether or not those effects were significant. More specifically, logistic regression models allowed us to quantify the odds of transfer students being satisfied with their academic and social experience and how they differ from those of first-year entrants. We included first-year entrants when looking at potential differences between first-year and transfer student satisfaction. For analyzing investigative factors that only influence transfer student satisfaction, we focused on UCUES responses from transfer students and performed separate analyses for two different outcomes, satisfaction with academic and social experiences. Satisfaction with academic experiences is modeled by academic variables (satisfaction with academic advising, satisfaction with education extracurriculars, engagement with faculty, financial concern, and sense of belonging), while satisfaction with social experiences is modeled by social variables (commuting distance, participation in student organization, financial concern, and sense of belonging). Financial concern and sense of belonging were the only two factors that were used in both academic and social models. We chose these variables because domain experts and statistical methods (results from chi-squared tests) confirmed a significant relationship between each variable and the outcome. In both the academic and social analyses, responses with missing values for the outcome were excluded from the analysis.

## **Limitations**

There are three major limitations to our analysis:

1. We used existing, observational data in our analysis. This creates two limitations:
  - a. Lack of data that perfectly describes what we want to measure
  - b. It is difficult to guarantee a causal relationship. While we can infer causation using statistical methods, there still exist unknown factors in the world that may impact how satisfied a transfer student is with their academic and social experience (the pandemic is a good example of one we avoided).
2. The transfer student experience is complex and multi-faceted. There were other variables whose effects remain unmeasured that could influence a transfer student's academic and social experience.
3. We naively assume satisfaction with academic experience and satisfaction with social experience were independent of each other. While we understand that one's academic experience may impact their social experience, and vice versa, we do not describe those effects in this simplified design.

While our results provide a good estimate of how transfer student experience may be impacted, we acknowledge that these limitations exist. As a result, our insights may not perfectly describe real-world scenarios.

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