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**Transfer Pathways: Ensuring Transfer Student Success**

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Introduction

This report reflects the partnership between the University of Massachusetts Boston’s Gastón Institute and Bunker Hill Community College’s Center for Equity and Cultural Wealth to build cultural inclusivity in curricular and co-curricular practices with the diverse student bodies served by both postsecondary institutions. The partnership was created with the aim to develop activities and create data, including data sharing and joint data collection, to explore and create common research questions that will help close diversity gaps across the two institutions.

This report is part of a study that seeks to improve the partners’ understanding of student transfer pathways between these two Minority Serving institutions and how they are used in order to advance student success. The study will help to inform strategies to advance student success by identifying common challenges facing students who transfer from BHCC to UMB. Additionally, data analysis will highlight areas for improving student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. The findings will inform best practices for helping the students succeed in both of our Institutions.

Context

Historically, a large percentage of students at UMass Boston enter as transfer students. For example, in the 2006-2007 academic year, transfer students represented about 69% of all enrollees (new students enrolling in September 2006 or January 2007). And of these transfer students, nearly two-fifths (39%), came from community colleges.

A dozen years later, however, in the 2019-2020 academic year, even as the total number of new students increased slightly, the number of transfer students dropped from 2,426 to 1,733 (from 69% of new enrollees to 43%). The drop was especially marked regarding transfers from community colleges, from 939 to 262 (from 39% of total transfers to 15%). (These figures are not affected by the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic became a nationwide phenomenon during the 2019-2020 academic year, since that did not happen until March 2020 and the enrollment figures are from September 2019 and January 2020.)

1 These and other data have been obtained through a data sharing agreement with the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning at UMass Boston. The data analysis was conducted by the authors at the Gastón Institute.
Within the smaller cohort of community college transfer students in 2019-2020, it was notable that one institution, Bunker Hill Community College now constituted over half (51%) of all community college transfers into UMass Boston. This was especially true for Latino students: nearly two-thirds (64%) of Latinos transferring-in from community colleges came from Bunker Hill. These figures underline the value of understanding the path to graduation of Bunker Hill transfer students to guarantee that they find at UMass Boston the necessary services and support to achieve their goals.

**Latino/Latine/Latinx**

The authors would be remiss not to acknowledge the politics of the term “Latino.” Due to Spanish grammar rules, the term “Latino,” while technically gender-neutral, is in reality a masculine term. There has been a push from portions of the Latin American community to adopt the terms “Latinx” or “Latine” as true gender-neutral alternatives. After much consideration, the authors decided to use the term “Latino” when discussing preexisting research in order to more accurately represent their findings. However, when presenting our own finding, we will be using the term “Latinx” in order to honor the increasing gender diversity of Latin American students.

**Research Questions**

Researchers at the Gastón institute used qualitative research methods to better understand the experiences of BHCC Transfer students and to identify challenges they face as well as opportunities for success. The research team conducted interviews with staff from the registrar and admissions offices at both institutions. Initially, we constructed a set of research questions geared to students, registrar, and admissions office. In the end we could not conduct focus group interviews with students, which altered the final research questions to this project, to better represent the focus on interactions that registrar and admission staff had with transfer students. The main goal of these interviews was then to investigate the answer to the following questions about transfer students of color:

i. What challenges or obstacles experienced by nontraditional college students of color (including the majority of transfer students between these two schools) have these advisors identified?

ii. How does student support in Bunker Hill differ, if at all, from student support at UMass Boston?

iii. Why does race matter for successful advising of these students?
Literature Review

Who does Academia Serve?

To understand the social role of American universities we must first look to the origins of the European universities from which they are descended (Geiger 2014). While originally, universities were religious institutions granted the right to award degrees by the pope or a reigning monarch, they eventually rejected the church’s narrow scholastic focus. As they broadened their intellectual scope, universities became socialization tools for the wealthy, who sent their sons there to learn the skills necessary to be members of the upper class. When universities were eventually established in the United States, their purpose as socialization sites for elite, white men continued and was at times amplified through their use of slave labor (Dancy, Edwards, and Davis 2018). This history reveals that Academia is not simply a neutral party generating knowledge for the good of mankind but a political entity generating the knowledge used to maintain a specific status quo.

In recent times there has been a shift in how universities are conceptualized. Their role as socialization sites for the elite has been deemphasized and their role in helping the lower classes to attain economic mobility has been emphasized (Alexander et al. 2007). However, the high cost associated with four-year institutions seems to contradict this narrative, forcing those belonging to marginalized groups to seek out other pathways. A prominent alternative for those lacking the resources to attend four-year institutions consists of community colleges, due to their low cost, short time to degree (or certificate) completion, and the ability to transfer to a four-year school (along with their credits). These qualities make community colleges seen as a low-risk option for individuals with diminished access to resources. This is evidenced in the demographic make-up of students in community college, who skew female, working class, and non-white (Roksa 2006).

This demographic and ideological shift in who education is for creates strain between the historic foundations of academia and the needs of these new students. For example, Latino students are more likely to have dependents or older relatives they are economically supporting, and as such are more likely to be working full time while they attend college (Alexander et al. 2007; Crisp and Nora 2010; Fry 2004; Nora 1990). Due to these additional responsibilities, Latino students are more likely to seek out schools that can accommodate their lifestyle, such as those offering night-classes (Suarez 2003). Additionally, these students are less likely to have family members familiar with higher education, leaving them without crucial guidance on how to navigate higher education systems (Alexander et al. 2007). This means that
the institutions serving these students have to reconceptualize their own relationship to their students: services like providing financial aid (Crisp and Nora 2010; Nora 1990) and educating parents on institutional processes (Alexander et al. 2007; Nora 1990) have become increasingly more important to the success of their students.

Improving Persistence and Commitment

Transfer students should not be seen as distinct from other college students, but rather as a subset of them. This is to say, factors that help traditional students graduate often help transfer students graduate as well. Various models have been developed to examine why some students complete their degrees and others do not, and the common variables between them are persistence and commitment (Nora and Cabrera 1996; Tinto 1975). Persistence refers to the act of consistently enrolling in classes in a given institution, while commitment is sticking to the goal of getting a degree (Nora and Cabrera 1996). One of the earlier models measuring educational outcomes is the Student Integration Model (Tinto 1975). Low persistence can be seen as a result of a poor fit between a student and an institution, referred to as low student integration. There are two main outcomes for students with low persistence: they drop out or, if their commitment to education is high enough, they transfer to a different institution.

The Student Integration Model was later elaborated upon to create the Student Adjustment Model (Nora and Cabrera 1996). This model identified many variables that increase persistence and commitment, often in ways that reinforce themselves. For example, parental encouragement directly increases student persistence, but it also increases goal commitment, which in turn increases student persistence. One of the most important findings of this model is that these variables inform each other in ways that amplify their own effect, implying that a change to one of these variables may have a stronger impact than expected.

While these models center college students as a whole, they also provide us with clues as to why transfer students may have significantly lower rates of degree completion than traditional college students (Arbona and Nora 2007). The Student Integration Model finds that as students approach graduation, they become less likely to drop out (Tinto 1975). In part this is because the cost of school becomes an investment only once a degree is attained. This finding implies that to minimize transfer student dropouts, schools need to ensure that the transfer process gets them closer to achieving their four-year degree. This is further emphasized by the fact that while precollege factors are the strongest predictors for degree completion,
community college transfer students are indistinguishable in that respect from students who enter four-year institutions directly (Arbona and Nora 2007).

**Improving Educational Outcomes and Successful Transfers**

While high school performance is often the best predictor for college outcomes, there are many tactics available to colleges to help improve their student’s educational outcomes and likelihood of transferring. A popular tactic is to create diversity and inclusion programs to support minority students. However, the effectiveness of these programs is mixed (Cole and Espinoza 2017; Tovar 2015). The reason for the limited impact of these programs is not quite clear, but it could be due to Latino students’ competing responsibilities. Latino students in community colleges often have busy schedules and can’t attend these program’s activities and therefore see little direct value in them (Suarez 2003). Furthermore, social interactions among Latino students are not associated with improved educational outcomes as they are in other students (Tovar 2015). Considering that successful student integration has been linked to improved educational outcomes (Arbona and Nora 2007), this seems to imply that they don’t have access to individuals who are more qualified to provide advice and support.

These two findings allude to certain tactics which do work. For one, Latino students have better educational outcomes when developing one-on-one relationships with school counselors. Meeting with counselors is particularly important as they can help students plan their schedules and aid in the transfer process (Alexander et al. 2007). Counselors help students navigate sequenced courses ensuring that students will gain their degree in a timely manner, and they can help students understand the various nuances of the transfer process, such as the transferring of credits. Schools must be proactive in creating these relationships as Latino students are usually hesitant in seeking out this help, only seeking it if/when the need for it becomes unmistakably clear (Tovar 2015).

Lastly, certain institutional changes need to be made in universities to ensure the best educational outcomes. By and large, this means ensuring that the institution is committed to the transfer process (Suarez 2003). In part this means ensuring that a student’s transfer to four-year institutions should be a shared responsibility between student and faculty. This also means structuring courses, both at community colleges and four-year colleges, in such a way that students don’t get stuck taking courses that don’t help them gain their degrees. Latino students often need to take developmental courses in order to catch up to their white peers, but these courses must be structured with care so that they lead to other courses which help them
attain their degrees (Crisp and Nora 2010). Alternately, schools should consider eliminating these courses as they have been found to have little impact on persistence and a detrimental effect on transfer rates (Crisp and Delgado 2014). Additionally, schools need to be mindful that while one-on-one interactions with school faculty are imperative for improving the educational outcomes of students, these experiences can turn negative when the students are stereotyped (Tovar 2015). Because of this a certain degree of cultural literacy is imperative among school staff.

**Methods**

For this project, we interviewed a total of 14 staff members at UMass Boston and Bunker Hill Community College. UMass Boston is an unusually diverse public university in Boston, Massachusetts, and is, in fact, the only public university in the city. It is a majority minority institution with 51% of its freshmen being non-white and 59% of its undergraduate population being first generation students. Additionally, of its transfer students, 60% come from community colleges. These factors have all helped shape its institutional identity, which can be seen in the commitments to diversity, urban spaces, and accessibility made in its mission and values.

Bunker Hill is a community college also located in Boston. It is a majority minority institution as well, with people of color comprising 65% of its student body. Almost two-thirds (63%) of Bunker Hill students attend classes part-time, reflecting their non-traditional background (by traditional we mean students who enter college immediately after graduating high school and who study full-time as their main responsibility). Working with underserved communities, Bunker Hill places a strong emphasis on equity. This is expressed in its student success goals, which include improving college infrastructure, improving career readiness, and creating transfer pathways between colleges. UMass Boston and Bunker Hill have strong relationships, with Bunker Hill being UMass Boston’s top feeder school. The two have collaborated at length, with Bunker Hill ensuring that its degree programs are compatible with those of UMass Boston. Additionally, UMass Boston employed a transfer counselor whose main job was to aid Bunker Hill students with transferring to UMass Boston. This collaboration was deemed successful until the position was vacated. During the time of our interviews with Bunker Hill advisors, a new person was hired for the job, and the reestablishing of those connections was imminent.

For this project we interviewed seven UMass Boston staff members from various offices and departments along with seven advisors from Bunker Hill. Two interview schedules were developed, one for each institution. The two interview schedules were adapted to the different nature of our two subject institutions; they sought to
identify student needs in general, the specific needs of transfer students, and potential strategies for transfer student success. These semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via zoom and had a one-hour duration. The work of advisors is often much more complex than one would assume at first glance, as they have many unofficial responsibilities competing for their time. By conducting these interviews virtually, we enabled the advisors to incorporate the interviews more easily into their schedules. Interview transcripts were then analyzed for emergent themes using NVivo. Due to the small number of individuals interviewed it is difficult to discuss their demographics and positions within the university without inadvertently revealing their identity. Because of this, respondents are identified simply with letters (for UMass Boston respondents) or numbers (for Bunker Hill respondents), as either “white” or “non-white,” advisor, and with gender-neutral pronouns. Likewise, respondents are called “advisors” regardless of whether that is their job title. Referring to all respondents as advisors is done in part to conceal their identity and in part to highlight that regardless of school staff’s actual job title and responsibilities, they often must assume the role of an advisor when engaging with students.

**UMass Boston Findings**

**Race**

When discussing race, the majority of respondents were wary of broaching the subject, often avoiding the question by citing campus diversity. When asked to describe the average transfer student, B, a white advisor, pulled up a document containing campus statistics attempting to remove themselves from their commentary and explicitly expressed a fear of being misquoted. However, the impact of race was often impossible to ignore. For example, this same respondent acknowledged the relationship between UMass Boston being a majority minority institution and the large number of transfer students on campus.

> Secondarily, as you may know from some of your research, students of color start at community colleges at higher rates. And UMass Boston being a majority-minority institution, being in an urban center, I think the demographics of the students that we’re serving just kind of line up with community college students.

B, white advisor

Here B is acknowledging the impact that race has on UMass Boston as a campus. Students of color go to community colleges at higher rates. Because UMass Boston
is a minority majority campus, we can thus expect UMass Boston to have a large number of community college transfer students. Though outright mention of race was uncommon, many coded references to race could be identified in the interviews. Respondents would often refer to students as not speaking English, as immigrants, or as international students. It was not uncommon for discussions of the difficulties transfer students might face to be framed through the lens of culture, with discussions of institutional cultures, whether spaces are welcoming, assimilation, and whether or not students lack necessary cultural capital. For example, when asked why students may hesitate to contact their advisor, respondent F responded:

I think there are many factors of the hesitancy then one of them could certainly be cultural. There’s definitely a possibility that some students, like, culturally don’t have the cultural kind of capital to navigate some of this stuff. And you know, I think it’s a frustrating one for advisors as a unit, because the solution to that is difficult to see. You know, we are as institution- as most institutions are, we are very concerned with providing equity and what that implies. And we have meetings about it a lot and they’re great ideas that we generate but, in practice, you know it doesn’t always work, the way we want it to.
F, white advisor

Here we see a few interesting comments. First, F frames the hesitancy of some students as being cultural in nature. However, as F continues speaking, the idea changes to cultural capital. While both terms ostensibly mean the same thing, this change in wording implies a change in framing. If the problem is cultural, it implies that the student’s culture (the meaning of which is unclear) is wrong or deficient; however, by shifting to cultural capital the conversation changes to discuss a student’s lack of familiarity with how to make best use of campus resources. Here F also brings up the university’s goal of “equity and all that implies.” This signals that the advisor and university are aware of and trying to address larger systems of inequality. This provides context to help us understand what they are alluding to when discussing culture, and when taken together with B’s previous statement, seems to imply that this is an indirect allusion to race.

The two advisors who were able to speak most candidly about race were non-white themselves. G, for example, was hesitant to discuss race, defaulting to the same discussion of diversity as the white advisers. However, when asked if their race helped them connect with students, they began to speak more candidly revealing how their background gave them a familiarity with the needs of non-white students of a similar background. This is then leveraged to form connections with students and better advise them. Another non-white advisor, H, in comparison to all other
respondents, was extremely comfortable speaking about race and at times would bring up the subject unprompted. As with G, these discussions of race often came up in reference to the unique needs of non-white students. However, H also noted that students themselves are also very aware of their racial backgrounds and how it might impact their own futures.

...[T]his group in particular are very aware of who they are, and more so I think than years past. I think the identity, what it means to be Latino/Latina, I think is a lot more... I think this generation of students is more aware of that, they have more definitiveness to it, whereas I don’t know if that was always the case before. Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention, so that’s one thing.... But this group knows. And we had our intern, who wants to work somewhere where they’re not gonna be the token Latino/Latina having to explain everything to folks. To me, that stood out. Like... I don’t remember a time where I really have heard that, you know- I mean, I know it happens, but that’s something that is the first time I’ve heard that out loud right.

H, Non-white advisor

This quote reveals a new dimension in the importance of race during advising: Students seem to be increasingly aware of how their racial background will impact their experiences. If this is true, it is quite shocking that H was the only advisor to communicate such an experience, given that previously quoted comments by B and F reveal that race does in fact play, to some degree, a role in how the university defines itself. This creates various questions as to why that is. Are students bringing up these concerns and advisors are unable to identify or engage with them? Or do students not feel comfortable bringing up these concerns with most advisors? While it is difficult to make a definitive statement with the collected data, we are able to examine the strategies advisors deployed to connect with students and if they are conducive to creating an environment where students feel comfortable sharing this information.

Effective Advising

A constant theme throughout the various interviews was not only the importance of advising but also the difficulty of doing it effectively. Often one of the biggest obstacles advisors face is simply getting students to meet with them, as they tend to wait too long to make use of university services. Students wait until their final year to make use of the career center, or wait until they’re overwhelmed to seek help managing their courses. This problem is addressed by implementing “advising holds” on students’ accounts. This forces students to meet with advisors at least once per
semester. However, from an outside perspective the benefit of this system seems unclear.

We do, what we call community advising during very busy periods in order to get the most students seen and the best for continuing students, really. To get the most students seen and get their advising holds lifted so they can register in a timely manner and get the best selection of courses.
E, white advisor

The most common thing for students to be with their advisors is because they have an advising hold on their account each semester, so they have to check in with us make sure they’re going to enroll in the right classes for the following semester or - maybe the right classes is too specific a term - make sure they know what their class options are for next semester.
F, white advisor

Right now it’s registration time so students have an advising hold meeting with me to review their schedule for the spring semester and to remove the advising hold. That’s what we’re doing at this point, but throughout the semester I outreach to students to remind them of important dates and deadlines like pass/fail, add/drop, and have any additional resources that are available to them. And, more importantly, too, I reach out to students who are in a poor academic standing so if they fall below 2.0 it’s my duty to reach out to them and create an academic plan to get them back on track and get them back into good standing.
G, non-white advisor

Here we see three advisors who describe the main purpose of advising holds as existing primarily to review the courses selected by students for the next semester. This leads to advisors being in high demand during certain portions of the semester. E notes that the department carries out a community advising model in order to manage the volume of students who need to have this hold removed. The narrow focus of advising holds is highlighted by G, who also notes that they still need to reach out to students to remind them of the various deadlines. While the advising hold does get students to meet with advisors, the way advisors describe it creates the impression that little advising happens during these sessions.

That is not to say that meeting with students to review their schedules and ensure they are on track to graduating has no value. Students often have misconceptions about higher education, its goals, and how it functions, all of which need to be clarified.

I think [students] tend to think “Hey if I complete just my major requirements,” you know, “my gen-eds, I can graduate right? That’s what I
Understanding the various requirements needed to obtain a degree can be confusing to incoming students. They need to keep track of degree requirements, general education requirements, and electives and they need to obtain a certain number of credits. They also need to plan ahead as certain courses must be taken in a specific sequence, during certain semesters, in order to graduate on time. Keeping track of credits themselves is further complicated if the student has to take remedial courses, which grant no credits, or if they transfer and it is unclear which credits will transfer and what they transfer as. These complex needs mean that meeting with students to ensure they’re on track to degree completion is important; however, it’s unclear if these advising holds really help establish the necessary rapport between students and advisors needed to ensure that advisors are able to do their job.

Throughout the interviews it became clear that building rapport with students is crucial for advisors to do their jobs effectively. While advisors may know degree requirements and how they should be navigated, advisors do not know what the specific needs of a given student are. Students often need guidance on how to make the most of their time on campus, but this can only be done if the advisor identifies a need or the student informs the advisor of the need.

A lot of times I tell students it’s not about how quickly you finish the race, but how steady you’re going through it - you don’t want to get injured in between. A lot of students want to just graduate super, super quickly or as fast as they can, but they have a 2.0 GPA and they can’t take five classes ... because they have a parent who is sick or they have a child who doesn’t have childcare. All of these things affect the academic advising because then I’m not going to recommend four or five classes, I’m going to recommend two classes, because you still get financial aid for that. [...] I can’t properly advise a student on what’s best for them if I don’t have the big picture about what’s going on with them.

G, non-white advisor

Here G reveals the difference between the abstract process of degree completion and the complex reality of what it actually entails. Attending a class is not simply the act of showing up to the lecture; it is also completing the course work used to determine their grade at the end of the semester. However, students lead complex lives; these scholarly responsibilities must be balanced along with their other responsibilities such as caring for family members and working. When students prioritize time for degree completion under these circumstances, it often leads to low grades or “injuries,” likely a metaphor for burnout. Advisors need to understand the
complexities of a student’s life in order to craft a plan that caters to the student’s needs. All advisors emphasized the importance of personalized advising to ensure the best student outcomes at every stage of their college career.

We can do as much state policy as we want, we can have as many pathways as possible, but the end of the day the labyrinth to navigate as a transfer student is confusing. And what you find is if you have personal interventions that can carry someone through, you can change someone’s life.

B, white advisor

They contact me and say, “Yeah, I’m having a real problem with calculus.” I go, “What is the issue?” and we’ll talk about that. And maybe, if the issue is having difficulty understanding some of the concepts, “Okay well, you can get individual tutoring for that.” “Oh, really? Oh great!” and they you know they can go through the Tutoring system, set up individual Tutoring meetings with someone and- You know, in theory, yes, they should have known about that because they’ve been told 100 times about it, but part of the problem is they’ve been told 100 times.

F, white advisor

A couple of weeks ago, a student came in about dropping a class because she didn’t have the prerequisites....She asked me about whether she should drop the course or not. And so, then I started talking to the student, and turns out that she wanted to be a nurse and...she wasn’t taking the right class for nursing. So, then we sat down and we started talking. And the bottom line is, she really didn’t want to be a nurse, but she thought she wanted to be a nurse. And she was going to end up taking courses that wouldn’t count for any other degree. And then after a half-hour’s worth of conversation, because looking at her grades, I knew she wasn’t probably going to make it into the nursing program based on grade point average. But we worked out what would be a better degree for her. And we put her in the right classes. I rearranged her entire schedule. We put her in the right classes, and she was very happy. And that night I got - maybe not that night, the next day, I got a really nice email from her saying that she was so happy that she ran into me and that I was the first person on campus that had spent more than five minutes with her.

D, white advisor

Throughout these accounts, a common theme appears: The creation of resources and pathways to graduation is simply not enough. Students often make decisions based on limited knowledge, preventing them from making the best use of the resources available to them. F points out that this is in part due to the constant bombarding of students with information, which overwhelms them and renders it
largely useless. D points out how students often make decisions based on what they “think they want,” which often doesn’t align with reality. Students often make decisions based on achieving an end goal (a specific degree or profession) without considering what the actual process entails. Although it might seem inconsequential, students need to be reminded that something as simple as choosing a major they enjoy needs to be included in their decision-making process. In this way advisors help bridge the gap between what students expect college to be and what it actually is. However, advisors can only do this when students reveal enough information for advisors to identify where student’s expectations are misaligned with reality.

In order to build rapport with students, advisors need to act mindfully and with purpose to create an environment where students feel comfortable speaking freely. However, this can at times lead to conflict, as creating an environment where even members of marginalized populations feel welcome can require publicly acknowledging their existence and needs.

The [UndocuAlly] butterfly kind of. It’s not on our door, it’s within our email signature. I know- I have books, I’ve purchased textbooks of some of those trainings and I tried to place them where they’re visible so someone can see them. And that wasn’t always popular because I have had students who don’t agree with what’s going on there, and I have to just politely focus back on the conversation because it’s not our place to tell people what to believe, and what to think. But we’re certainly here to be helpful resources for those that need it, so I don’t think it makes sense to keep those things hidden just because I might have had one or two people who didn’t agree with that message.

H, non-white advisor

Here H describes taking active steps to make sure their office is a welcoming place for undocumented students. However, this also means that students opposed to the presence of undocumented students also become aware of this fact, creating conflict the advisor then needs to defuse. While H seems to have developed the skills to manage this situation, it is easy to see how this dynamic could discourage advisors from taking similar steps if they aren’t prepared for the unexpected conflict it may create. No other advisor spoke so candidly about the steps they take to ensure all students feel welcome, so it is difficult to say how impactful acts like this are. That being said, this is a potentially important avenue of research. If visibly signaling to students from marginalized communities that they are welcome truly does facilitate rapport building, then failing to do so may leave those students underserved with the advisors none the wiser.
Transfer Students and Transfer Processes

Generally, when asked about transfer students, advisors view them as capable and self-sufficient. Transfer students are already familiar with how higher education functions and need less help understanding the fundamentals of how to be a college student, such as knowing how to schedule their classes and what the academic expectations are.

Well, transfer students, their questions are probably a little more precise about what they need to do to either get into the major they want or what kind of requirements they have left to fulfill. And first year students, they might be, they are asking sometimes, very basic questions, like, do I have to come to school on the days that I don’t have class?

E, white advisor

This comment by E reveals that advisors don’t just see transfer students as more capable, but also as better able to self-advocate. By knowing what’s expected of them and what they want, they are able to ask better, more specific questions to get their needs fulfilled.

However, this belies some of the difficulties transfer students experience in their transition to new institutions. While transfer students do know the basics of being a college student, each college is its own institution with its own culture and standards. This can lead to students making mistakes, such as waiting too long to register for classes or taking on too many courses.

Students who transfer from community colleges.... I think they don’t expect the course load. So, I have one student in particular, he transferred from I think it was community college. It was ... I want to say it was Bunker Hill. So, his first semester at UMass Boston, when we met at orientation, I always ask how many classes are you able to register for, he said five because he had done five at Bunker Hill and it was fine. He registered for 5 classes at UMass Boston, he ended up dropping down to four and then, when I met with him two weeks ago he’s thinking of dropping down to three because the course load is a lot different than what he was used to have Bunker Hill. ... So, I think the first semester can be a little tricky for the transfer students, but these are also students who are maybe 60 credits out and are really driven and they make it work. They may end up taking less classes each semester, and that made them delay their graduation. I see that a lot, like they’re very motivated to hop on to five classes early on, but then realize maybe three or four is what’s going to work best for me. And that’s fine.

G, non-white advisor
Here we see that transfer students’ familiarity with college is the cause of this difficulty. Some students assume that because at their previous institution they could wait until the beginning of the semester to register for classes, they could do so as well in their new institution. In the quote above G trusted the student to know how many classes he could take in one semester because as a transfer student he was already familiar with his limits. This assumption is made by both students and advisors and can lead to difficulties that may not be discovered until after they negatively impact the student. This is not to say that advisors should assume transfer students are ignorant of college as a whole, but rather that they need to be cognizant of the difference between being a college student and being a college student at their specific institution.

An example of when advisors are more cognizant of the unique needs of transfer students has to do with the transferring of credits. Which credits transfer and how they transfer is a common struggle faced by transfer students. Their familiarity with the intricacies of credit transfer can be seen, not only in the collection of tools advisors use to assess which credits will transfer, but also in their knowledge of the limitations of these tools. When discussing the benefits of the development of a new in-house database that allowed the creation of unofficial transfer credit evaluations (TCE) at UMass Boston, C says the following:

I was working with a student who was in the military... Because she’s been in the military, she’s been all around. So, it was good there to see for someone with a more complex picture. And this is someone where, because she’s in the military, payment is not going to be as much of an issue because of the G.I. Bill and stuff like that. But just knowing, in her case it was purely like, “Okay, how are these credits going to transfer over? Because I want to maximize my time here.” And I was able to tell her, “Yes, this is going to come in through this.” And the other thing that I like with the unofficial TCEs is that it helps students a lot for future planning. I think because with this student, she was able to be like, “Okay, I see on my unofficial transfer credit evaluation that I need two courses in the arts and humanities. If I sign up for this course and this course, would that be fulfilling the requirement?” And I was able to tell her, “Yes, that would be fulfilling the requirement. And if you do this...” And I could even run a new transfer credit evaluation for her right then if I wanted.

C, white advisor

Here the benefits of this transition reveal just how many variables are at play when a student changes institutions. First, we should not assume that transfers only involve two institutions; students may be transferring credits from three or even more institutions. Second, we must consider not only if the credit will transfer, but also how the credit will transfer. This has the potential to become even more complicated...
when the previous consideration is taken into account, as it is possible a credit may have transferred in different ways at different institutions. Third, even if courses transfer appropriately, institutions may have different degree requirements altogether. And lastly, students don’t only consider what classes they have taken, but also what classes they will take.

By recognizing the unique features of UMB when compared to other universities, the university was able to develop a way to ensure that these differences don’t negatively impact students. However, the following question remains: Why are the credit transfer difficulties acknowledged and addressed, while other difficulties are not? The most likely reason is simply that problems with credit transfers and their consequences are highly visible. When a student transfers into the university they are informed which credits transferred and how close they are to degree completion. Students who disagree with how their credits transferred are likely to seek an advisor, and if they’re unable to resolve this issue there is the possibility they will leave the institution.

On the other hand, a student who is unprepared for the more subtle, qualitative changes between institutions (which are often vaguely defined as changes in “difficulty”) may only realize these differences exist later in the semester when they fall behind. When they do realize this, they still have to identify why they’ve fallen behind. By the time the student realizes they need help, it might be too late to course correct, and damage control may be the only option. This has the potential to create an invisible problem, where advisors may only hear from more extreme cases and students with less extreme versions of this problem are left to manage without support.

**Bunker Hill Findings**

**Race and Higher Education**

Race can often be a difficult subject to talk openly about. Some advisors at Bunker Hill avoided the subject, and some even expressed reticence about it. However, Bunker Hill advisors were overall more willing to talk about race than their peers at UMass Boston. A unique example was Respondent 1, a white advisor, who defaulted to color-blind rhetoric when asked what measures they take to ensure equity on campus, stating “Well frankly, I don’t segregate, you know, white, Black, Latin, Asian-I don’t direct me and my services based on an ethnic group or agenda.” After the interview ended (and the interviewer stopped recording) they took time to clarify that they understood the uniqueness of the experience of students of color in higher
education. While brief, and “off the record” in nature, Respondent 1 spoke fairly candidly and emphatically about race - not simply that of the students, but also the whiteness of educational institutions.

This identification of the whiteness of educational institutions is quite important and was made by a few advisors. There are many unique aspects and implications to this critique, but it is important to recognize that it is only possible when advisors feel educated and empowered to speak about race. To further examine how race is discussed at Bunker Hill, we can look at this statement by Respondent 2:

Being a white advisor in a predominantly BiPoC institution I gotta be aware of the experiences many of our students may have had in probably very diverse high schools, and probably have majority white leadership and guidance counselors and teachers.

Respondent 2, white advisor

Here we see multiple processes happening at the same time. To begin with, the advisor notes, not only the race of their students, but their own race as well. This latter recognition allows them to adopt a student’s perspective and turn that lens inward. According to Respondent 2, students of color at Bunker Hill are likely to come from high schools with a large student of color population but with white leadership. Now, as they enter this new institution, they find themselves in a new iteration of this same environment. This framing of college as a continuation of a student’s high school experiences has a few implications. First, we shouldn’t assume students of color enter college completely ignorant of what to expect. To the contrary, the very structure of Bunker Hill as an educational institution (presumably white leadership and a diverse student body) signals to incoming students that they should expect college to be a continuation of their high school experience. Second, this similarity implies that if universities aren’t mindful or aware of these inequalities, they are liable to replicate them.

This idea of academic inequality came up again from other advisors. For example, Respondent 5 recalled their experience working with transfer students when they previously worked at a different institution:

I worked at the [previous institution’s nursing program] and one of the things that we found there was ... a course where students started to pivot from the prerequisites and science classes toward NCLEX-style preparatory courses. NCLEX is the certification exam to become a nurse: ... it’s required that you pass the test and it’s required for the accreditation of nursing programs that they have a certain level of pass rates of their students. So, a lot of the teaching became focused on getting students to learn how to take NCLEX-style tests and learn how to think in that way. And so, as you can imagine,
since it’s a standardized test you’re going to see the same dynamics as any other standardized tests that pretty much just test whether you’re rich and white, and it doesn’t actually tell you anything about a student’s actual skill or intelligence.

Respondent 5, white advisor

Respondent 5 then goes on to describe how transfer students from nearby community colleges, primarily women of color, begin to suffer academically once they take these exam preparation courses. Respondent 5’s experiences working at their previous institution allowed them to demonstrate a much more holistic analysis of the implications of race in higher education. First, we once again see a critique of how whiteness is institutionalized in higher education: standardized testing. Respondent 5’s claim that standardized tests measure whiteness and wealth presents certain issues which we must grapple with. If standardized tests fail to measure skill and instead only measure wealth and whiteness, then they only serve to justify the exclusion of low-income students and students of color. This argument is backed up by their observation that transfer students of color’s diminishing academic achievement coincided with the transition from standard courses to test preparatory courses.

A second important detail that Respondent 5 noted has larger implications. NCLEX courses are part of larger accreditation process for nursing students and nursing programs. This means that the choice to implement standardized testing is not entirely in the hands of educational institutions. Instead, these institutions face conflicting pressures, the needs of its student body and larger accrediting bodies that serve as gatekeepers for certain professions. Failure to conform to the standards of these gatekeepers means that they risk losing their accreditation and diminishing the value of their graduate’s degrees. This point is not brought up to absolve institutions of their responsibility to advocate for the needs of students of color, but rather to highlight how universities are subject to outside pressures which can compromise their ability to do what’s best for students.

Another place where the institutionalization of whiteness was identified was in the relationship between different universities. According to advisors, a large proportion of Bunker Hill students eventually transfer to a four-year university. This transfer process is often problematic, as reflected in the following comment from Respondent 6:

I get frustrated sometimes thinking about partner institutions and some of the issues we’ve had with the curriculum maps with mass transfer.... Some people really want to guard their curriculums saying, “Ours is the best,” and I hear this with private schools too, “Students come to our school for our
curriculum. We're the experts in this area, in this field, so students need to do all their major requirements with us.” and I think that that's an old-fashioned way of looking at it. I mean, I think it stems from this tradition that education is for white men of privilege. Cis males that have money, that's who education is for. And that kind of mentality, I think is very much connected to that power and privileged position. So, I think if we think about “Okay, how do we make education work for the people that are actually at our institutions?” If you look at Bunker Hill, we're almost 70% people of color. We're a majority female identifying, so we're not this white privileged cis male, and so why are our policies and practices and traditions kind of still stemming from that perspective?
Respondent 6, white advisor

Here we see another instance of standard educational practices being challenged. Much as Respondent 5 argues that standardized testing only serves to exclude low-income students and students of color, Respondent 6 argues that curriculum-safeguarding practices only benefit certain kinds of students. These safeguarding practices serve to build a university’s prestige by transforming degrees from documents that certify ownership of knowledge to documents that certify ownership of the right kind of knowledge.

While Respondent 6 struggles at describing specifically how these processes favor privileged students, this may be due to the various implications that arise from connecting education to prestige: To begin with, this process is founded on the premise that the same exclusivity that creates prestige is indicative of quality. “We are the experts in this area,... so students need to do all their major requirements with us.” Because exclusivity is then the defining feature of quality, the additional costs it generates can be framed as necessary to receive a quality education. These additional costs then lead to inaccessibility in ways that replicate historic inequality. “...Education is for white men of privilege. Cis males have that money.” The inequality generated by this process is even more egregious when we consider that the excluded students may not want or value the prestige these processes generate, instead valuing the degree for other reasons. “We’re not like this white privileged cis male, so why are our policies and practices and traditions kind of still stemming from this perspective?” In this way, we can interpret Respondent 6’s struggle to explain the connection between safeguarding practices and privilege, not as uncertainty, but instead as an attempt to convey the true enormity of the problem’s scope.

Whether or not we agree with this argument about what standard academic practices imply, this perspective serves largely as a justification for adopting a different problem-solving approach. A key part of Respondent 6’s statement is “How do we make education work for the people that actually are at our institution?” This
is part of a reframing process that redefines the problem and goals of the institution. Here the goal is not to acclimatize students to the traditional institutional practices, but instead to adapt these practices to student needs. Bunker Hill works with a population of students who have unique needs and goals: they come from underserved communities, they are often balancing multiple responsibilities while they attend classes, and they likely view college education first and foremost as a tool to attain economic stability, not as a way to gain social prestige. These features mean that institutions need to develop new evaluation metrics and support structures that actually meet the needs of the student body.

The idea of the “stop out” can be used as a specific example of how this reframing process is used and its results. While explaining steps Bunker Hill takes to support Black and Latinx students, Respondent 5 mentions that “stop-outs” are common among that population. When asked what this term means, Respondent 5 explains that the more common term “drop out” to refer to students who stop enrolling in classes is inaccurate. Often, these students will reenroll in classes after a semester or two, and using the term “stop out” acknowledges that fact.

[In] open access institutions it’s a pretty common dynamic where there are students who are making progress towards a degree, and then they stop coming for a semester, or two semesters, or longer. And so, there’s actually a whole body of research out there around different predictors for reenrollment of stop outs. There’s different kinds of best practices, like financial incentives, you know, giving students economic assistance. There’s outreach or having peer mentoring. So there’s different kinds of interventions that have been studied around the country that can be good best practices for getting stop outs to re-enroll. I think the underlying motivation is that having some college but no degree is basically just having debt, rather than an asset that can help you with social mobility and things like that.

Respondent 5, white advisor

Here we clearly see how the language of “stop out” is part of a larger rhetorical shift in how this problem is constructed. The term “drop out” implies a finality in a student’s decision to stop enrolling in classes, a finality that implies it is too late for a solution. On the other hand, “stop out” does not carry that sense of finality, instead implying a pause or disruption of some sort - a pause or disruption that can be remedied if the university is able to act quickly enough.

While Respondent 5 does not explicitly mention why students are stopping out, the comments seem to imply that financial factors may be the root cause. Most obviously, at the end of their quote they frame the importance of a degree in economic terms. An incomplete degree is simply debt, while a completed degree
provides social mobility. Later on, Respondent 5 explicitly connects financial problems to student’s academic experiences, explaining that they often refer students to on-campus social services for help with “any kind of nonacademic issues that are impacting the students’ academic experience,... whether they’re in a housing crisis, or need health care, or need food. Single Stop basically has embedded social workers that can help students connect with various kinds of financial and social resources.” Importantly, this statement adds further nuance to the role economic factors play in a student’s decision to “stop out.” While the previous quote focuses on whether or not a student can afford to attend college, this quote reveals that institutions, in order to better serve students, need to have a more holistic understanding of how a lack of money shapes a student’s relation to their education. For example, it is not hard to imagine that the stress caused by a housing crisis could result in a student “stopping out.” In such a case, having a resource on campus to help students find housing can be an invaluable tool to help minimize student stop-outs.

In being open to discuss race, Bunker Hill sets off a chain of events which result in a reconceptualization of the problems the advisors encounter. They understand, not only how race impacts the lives of the students, but also the structure of higher ed itself. By turning this critical gaze inward, they are able to redefine the problems they encounter, and as such are able to generate new solutions to these problems. However, these solutions are limited by outside factors, such as transfer processes to four-year universities and national accreditation procedures.

**Bunker Hill Student Needs**

Time and time again advisors brought up the unique needs of their students. Broadly speaking, these needs can be categorized as economic needs, outside responsibilities, and lack of familiarity with higher education; importantly these categories are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive. Understanding how these students and their needs are distinct from those of traditional students is important to understanding why these students behave the way they do, and why traditional approaches to problem solving don’t work. Respondent 1 gives us the following example:

> You know our students are not 17 year olds with nothing else to do but go to school. That’s just not a student - sorry, we might have a few students that fit that category. Most of the time [our students are] here and running, they’re running and they’re taking their classes then they may do an activity or two, but then they’re out to work. Many come in, they have families, they have jobs, they’re busy. They just need to get the information that they need, and they keep moving, so we need to be able to give the information to students in different formats.

Respondent 1, white advisor
Here Respondent 1 contrasts Bunker Hill students with “17-year-olds with nothing else to do but go to school,” who are likely meant as a representation of the larger cultural image of who Americans assume college students are. While they do walk back that statement, by creating this contrast, Respondent 1 is attempting to highlight how the practical realities of a given student’s life impact how they interact with the school they attend. Bunker Hill students are presented as busy, with multiple responsibilities competing for their time. This means that their time spent on campus is limited and as such advisors need to be pragmatic and efficient when disseminating information to them. While Respondent 1 doesn’t elaborate on how the hypothetical “17-year-old” student acts, their use as a point of contrast seems to imply certain things about their behaviors. They are explicitly described as going to school exclusively, implying that their time is not as restricted. If Bunker Hill students do an activity or two before they have to work, the implication seems to be that the 17-year-old students are likely able to spend more time on campus participating in activities held by the school. Lastly, if Bunker Hill students need information presented in a format that doesn’t interfere with their busy schedules, we can infer that information can be disseminated more gradually to 17-year-old students.

The role that economic needs play in Bunker Hill students’ experiences was a common theme throughout many of the interviews. Interestingly, economic pressures shaped the experiences of these students in a myriad of ways. Consider the following quote from Respondent 7:

They’re thinking a lot about their financial situation and I think sometimes it’s not that the content of classes is hard, what makes college hard for students is really just financially being able to be there and show up, and not have to worry about working 40 hours a week on top of taking, you know, potentially full-time classes or not, right? ... Sometimes they’ll say Oh, I have to get my doctorate, I don’t know if I can afford to be in school that long. Or, you know, Okay, that seems like it might be eight years away. I need something that can potentially help me get a job now, so that if I want to go to school for that in the future, maybe I can afford it.

Respondent 7, white advisor

Here we see how all-encompassing economic pressures are. To begin with, a student needs to be able to afford to show up to class. Going to college is itself an economic burden! These pressures continue as students are forced to balance their employment with their classes, a struggle that inevitably impacts their college experience. Classes become harder, not because their content is difficult but because students’ time and energy is compromised. Additionally, when Respondent 7 describes students having “potentially full-time classes,” this signals an additional consideration these students have: Can they afford to be a full-time student, and can they balance being a full-time student. Being a full-time student means that this time and energy strain they experience is magnified. On the other hand, being a part-time
student implies delaying degree completion as well as the economic opportunity it represents.

The economic opportunity a college degree represents is then the final way economic pressures shape the experience of Bunker Hill students. While advisors were clear that students weren’t making decisions about their academic goals exclusively based on economic prospects, the way these pressures influenced their decision-making process was also very evident. As Respondent 7 explains above, students determine the academic path they take in part by examining how quickly they can obtain a degree, which is seen as a tool to attain economic security. Interestingly, Respondent 7’s statement implies that their students don’t see graduate degrees as undesirable but instead, they are seen as aspirational: Once they have used their Baccalaureate to improve their economic standing, they will consider returning to college to obtain a higher degree. If this is the case, it raises the question of whether a student’s choice to forgo a graduate degree constitutes a “stop out” of sorts.

These economic pressures are often exacerbated by student’s lack of familiarity with the higher education system as revealed by Respondent 3:

> We have a lot of students that come in with that financial need, and we do have a lot of students that do qualify for the program FAFSA. Even filling out those forms and getting the required documents, that can be hard for some students. So, I would say that [there are] a lot of first-generation students too, so I think that first time in college, whether it’s because their parents didn’t go to it or they’re coming from a different country - so we do see a lot of students, that this is their first time navigating the school system here in the US and so, that’s a challenge, sometimes because they don’t really know what the resources are.

Respondent 3, non-white advisor

Here Respondent 3 notes that the process of acquiring financial aid is itself an obstacle that needs to be overcome. To begin with, a student who qualifies for financial aid may not necessarily receive financial aid because to receive it the student must first apply for it. This means that students who are unaware of this resource will not apply for it and therefore will not receive it. Not only that, but even the students who are aware of this resource may struggle obtaining the documents needed to apply for this financial assistance, especially if they are the children of immigrants. This creates an additional difficulty for advisors, who must then bridge this knowledge gap; failure to do so can exacerbate other struggles that the student is facing.
This idea of students lacking institutional knowledge crops up a few times and expresses itself in many different ways, often presenting itself through passivity. For example, Respondent 6 shares the following anecdote:

You don’t know what you don’t know. Students don’t know that they have more options, they kind of go with the default. I mean, I was one of those students. I was a first-generation college student. I went to Bunker Hill as an older student, I was nontraditional and I was very successful in college. I did really well. And I was encouraged by one person to apply to a program at Tufts University. I did, and I got waitlisted and I never advocated for myself. I never followed up and had I gotten into that program my education would have essentially been paid for.... I don’t get to work with students very much anymore, but when I did I was like- You have to advocate. I will advocate for you. You want me to write a letter? I will write a letter. We’re gonna do whatever we can so, at least at the end of the day, you know that you tried every avenue to get into this program that you want to get into.

Respondent 6, white advisor

Here Respondent 6 uses their own experience as a Bunker Hill alum to illustrate that what may look like passivity to an outside observer is actually a student misunderstanding the options available. From the student’s perspective they are engaging with the system on its own terms; they studied hard, excelled academically, and applied to a program through the proper channels. The reason they don’t use alternative channels to self-advocate is that they don’t realize there are legitimate options available to them. Sharing similar experiences with advisees, Respondent 6 is aware that there is a need to educate students on these alternate pathways that students can use to improve their own outcomes.

It is also important to note that economic concerns emerge once again. Respondent 6 notes that if they had gotten into the program at Tufts, their education would have been paid for. As discussed previously, financial aid is not important simply because certain kinds (i.e. grants) allow students to graduate without debt, but it also allows students to attend college in the first place. While ultimately everything worked out for Respondent 6, we see that by failing to get into a program with financial aid, the obstacle of money remained in place. Students need to be taught the myriad of options available to them, not simply so they can capitalize on the various opportunities that may present themselves, but also to minimize the threats that can put their education at risk.

Lastly, there is the issue of outside responsibilities. This has been touched upon previously, but primarily through the lens of employment. However, as shown in the quote by Respondent 1, another of these outside responsibilities is family. Respondent 3 also brings up the role family has on their student’s choices, “We have
students that come in, who are primary caregivers to their family, who are working full time jobs and so, that affects how many classes, they can take.” Like Respondent 1, Respondent 3 mentions family in conjunction with work. However, Respondent 3 also clarifies that these students are primary caregivers. Thus we are able to gain a more holistic understanding of the lives of their students. These students don’t simply work to cover their own cost of living, but they work also to provide for their family. It also puts Respondent 1’s comment about 17-year-olds with “nothing else to do but school” in a new context. It isn’t simply that these 17-year-olds have fewer responsibilities competing for their time, it’s that their responsibilities don’t intersect and conflict in the same ways that non-traditional students’ responsibilities do. Giving this hypothetical 17-year-old a full scholarship may be enough to ensure that they are able to graduate; however, for non-traditional students this is only one variable in a much more complex equation. While receiving financial aid may be helpful to this student, it doesn’t change their need to physically care for, and financially provide to, their dependents. Additionally, if we are to assume that the hypothetical 17-year-old is meant more as a rhetorical device that represents cultural notions of “traditional students,” we are also forced to consider whether or not this student even exists.

In many ways the finding of Bunker Hill students’ unique needs is rather straightforward: Bunker Hill students don’t fit into the archetype of a traditional college student; therefore, traditional solutions to traditional problems don’t work for them. However, framing the problem in this way implies that all that needs to be done is to find solutions that do work. It ignores that there are forces outside of the university that impact student priorities and behaviors. It also ignores the complex webs of responsibility that these students find themselves in. For institutions to meaningfully address the needs of these students, solutions need to be created that either simplify this web or at the very least don’t interfere with it.

**Bunker Hill Innovation**

Faced with the unique problems of their students, advisors at Bunker Hill were able to mobilize and adapt fairly quickly. However, often this adaptation was born out of necessity. Respondent 1, when asked how they decided what workshops they created, explained that when they came into their position, students would sign up for transfer advising sessions in 15-minute intervals. However, Respondent 1 noticed that not only were 15-minute sessions too short to meaningfully educate students, but also that the students who came in were asking the same questions. These common questions were then grouped by topic and used to create information packets, which would become the basis for the various workshops offered to
students. These workshops were then utilized as a way to educate students, but also as a way to collect data from students via questionnaires. The data on the questionnaires were used, not only to better tailor the workshops to known student needs, but also to identify and address additional student needs. In a particularly notable example, Respondent 1 explained how students at Bunker Hill were having a problem answering a question on the common application, so advisors collaborated with representatives of the common application to clarify this question.

This example by Respondent 1 reveals many interesting details about the problem-solving processes at Bunker Hill. To begin with, there is a sense of pragmatism that runs through the entire process. The allotted 15 minutes per student isn’t enough time and students are all asking similar questions, so creating workshops to answer these questions is an efficient way to solve this problem. Not only that, but by creating these workshops they create an opportunity to collect data from a specific, self-selected group of students which can then be used to identify other problems experienced by these specific students. Interestingly, these data are not used to develop strategies to modify student behavior, but to modify institutional structures, even those outside of Bunker Hill, to student needs.

Collaboration with outside agents is a common practice among Bunker Hill advisors. For example, Respondent 5 mentions how Bunker Hill has collaborated with both Success Boston and the Lumina Foundation on projects to improve Bachelor completion rates among Black and Latinx students. They also brought up collaborative projects with UMass Boston to create transfer pathways for their students, an incredibly important undertaking since a large proportion of Bunker Hill students eventually transfer to UMass Boston. As a part of this collaboration, Bunker Hill and UMass Boston advisors developed a joint curriculum for their psychology programs, ensuring that the transfer experience is as smooth as possible.

Respondent 6 emphasized not only all the changes made to aid students through the transfer process, but also the role administration played in facilitating these changes. In particular, transfer advising was moved, both bureaucratically and physically, from the academic records department to the advising department. This change ensures that students have one designated location to go to for whatever kind of advising they need. In addition to a one-stop approach to transfer and academic advising, proximity to each other allows transfer and academic advisors to communicate more effectively. For their part, the transfer advisors have shown a lot of initiative, developing various transfer workshops for students and transfer partnerships. An important new workshop is their “Competitive College Week,” where advisors help students apply to highly selective universities. Respondent 6 argues that this is incredibly important as students who transfer to these selective universities have better overall outcomes.
Respondent 6’s account presents us with another example of the ways pragmatism is prioritized in Bunker Hill. While bureaucratically it may make sense to group transfer advising with academic records, grouping all forms of advising together streamlines students’ experience. Overall, by prioritizing student experience, Bunker Hill makes it easier for advisors to do their jobs. However, it also highlights how the lack of proper staffing works to counteract that process. As Respondent 6 says “We only have two full time transfer counselors for the student body that we have, which is massive. The ratio is not in their favor, in the favor of the students or the transfer counselors. But they’ve been able to do really great work despite you know, probably needing more people than what we actually have.”

While a lack of resources resulted in a need for innovation, this innovation then reveals that the need for these services is actually much greater than previously anticipated. Returning to Respondent 1’s discussion of the creation of advising workshops, this account ended as follows:

I just had a necessity, because you can’t keep saying the same stuff over and over and the volume of students was great. So, these workshops were very helpful, and when offered them initially- like, every day we had a different one. And then we grew the webpage because our students aren’t always day students. They’re night students or they’re day students and then they go to work, and they only have time at night. So, then we had to put the stuff on the web, so that they could get to a workshop... so the website became our next tool. And we started putting more and more information [on the website].

Respondent 1, white advisor

Here Respondent 1 reveals that while creating advising workshops may have made them more efficient, this efficiency doesn’t reduce the workload. Instead, as they become better at advising students, the demand for advising services increases. Not only that, but its success also reveals its limitations; students who come at night or working students who spend little time on campus are unable to benefit from it. In order to solve this problem, the school website was updated to hold recorded versions of these workshops, which revealed the website’s value as an advising tool. In the end, this innovation hasn’t diminished the advisor’s workload, instead revealing a need for growth.

Overall, advisors at Bunker Hill describe a campus in the midst of large structural change, with advisors displaying leadership in a wide range of areas. The changes being made are student-centered and data-driven, with various respondents specifically referencing internal data collection processes. By centering student needs in their overhaul of internal systems, they were also able to effect larger systemic change in higher education as a whole, most notably through their work with the common application. Lastly,
although these changes have dramatically increased the efficacy of advising at Bunker Hill, it also highlights the shortage of resources, namely advisors, available to serve student needs.

**Recommendations**

Comparing advising practices at UMass Boston and Bunker Hill reveals the importance of discussing race and acknowledging that different students have different needs. Though obvious, it can be easy to forget. Low-income students may need economic resources. First-generation students may need to be taught how to navigate higher ed. Students with family duties may need services provided outside of normal operating hours. This is especially important when it comes to students of color, as their needs are more complex. This means that universities and colleges don’t simply need to identify the one resource these students need; they need to develop a variety of resources for a variety of student needs, and then they need to develop processes to identify which resources a given student needs and then direct them to those resources. However, when advisors aren’t able to talk about race, it becomes difficult to identify needs, create resources, and then evaluate their efficacy. Race matters, not because students within a given racial group all have the same specific needs, but because systemic inequality means this population is more likely to belong to one of the aforementioned groups.

At both institutions, when advisors felt comfortable talking about a group of students with a specific need, they also felt empowered to mobilize and make the decisions necessary to effectively advise them. This is incredibly important as advisors play an important role in helping incoming students adjust to their new environment, including transfer students who may underestimate the importance of familiarizing themselves with the norms of their new institution. At Bunker Hill talking about race specifically is such a common occurrence that advisors there were able to recognize how whiteness rooted itself in the values and processes of higher ed. This leads advisors to reevaluate the status quo with a more critical eye and examine which processes actually serve student’s interests. This led to a series of innovative changes to Bunker Hill processes which focused on adapting to the specific needs of their student body. These changes then resulted in increased student use of these services, revealing a great need for these services.

With these findings in mind, we make the following recommendation to UMass Boston:
Recommendation 1: Collect Data to Help Advisors Help Students

First, we need to emphasize the importance of an advising team that is well equipped to deal with the unique needs of transfer students, particularly those from community colleges. These students tend to have a different relationship to education than traditional students, which leads to different behaviors. Additionally, while they’re likely to be more familiar with what it means to be a college student in general, they’re not necessarily familiar with what it means to be a college student at their new institution. This has the potential to result in these students falling through the cracks as small misconceptions compound, unbeknownst to the student and their advisor. This reveals a need to gather data on transfer students, to identify common needs, obstacles, and misconceptions that advisors should then use to develop strategies to better assess transfer student needs and help create a smooth transition.

Recommendation 2: Use the Embedded Transfer Advisor to Maintain Institutional Relationships

Complementary to the above is the importance of reinstating the embedded transfer advisor model. In our interviews, advisors at both UMass Boston and Bunker Hill spoke highly about the previous advisor who occupied that position. This advisor functioned as a link between the two institutions, aiding prospective transfer students and serving as a channel of communication between the two institutions. Ensuring that this position is in place and well supported can facilitate the previously mentioned data collection process. By being embedded at Bunker Hill, this advisor can relay information about advising processes at Bunker Hill to UMass Boston advisors who can use that information to anticipate transfer student needs. Additionally, this advisor can also develop strategies to educate prospective students on UMass Boston processes, ensuring the transition is as smooth as possible and minimizing misunderstandings that may negatively impact the transfer experience.

Recommendation 3: Learn to Talk About Race

Lastly, we must confront the issue of race. Talking about race can be scary for school advisors, as should they approach the subject in the wrong way the consequences vary from alienating students to being seen as racist. And, considering that UMass Boston is a majority minority campus, being seen as racist can have various negative social and professional consequences. In turn, being able to
acknowledge the impacts of race (and by extension systemic racism) on a student’s experience is incredibly important to ensure student success. We can see the need to talk about race in the coded ways that advisors broach the subject, such as discussing some students’ lack of cultural capital. This reticence to talk about race is especially problematic considering UMass Boston’s goal of equity.

By putting advisors in an environment where race is so prominent, but without the tools necessary to engage with it, the university is creating an environment where race and its impact are ignored. However, by ignoring the impact of race on a student’s experience, advisors are missing important information needed to accurately assess students’ needs and help them excel in higher education. The university needs to develop a protocol on how to engage with race. As there is already an institutional desire for equity it can serve as a launching point for these discussions. We encourage university advisors to seek to collaborate with Bunker Hill to identify a specific and timely goal to aid transfer students of color in their transition to UMass Boston. While the advisor embedded in Bunker Hill could potentially serve as a liaison between the two groups of advisors, it is important to remember that this is about improving advising for students who are already at UMass Boston. When developing it, this goal and plan of action should be student-oriented, focusing on adapting university systems to student needs, not student behaviors to university needs.

The advisors should set modest goals for this initiative, as the primary goal is to model and facilitate the respectful and purposeful discussion of race which should serve as a catalyst for larger institutional change. Although modest, this goal should not be treated as inconsequential. To the contrary, relevant staff and faculty should be empowered to make reasonable and relevant changes to university systems where appropriate in order to accommodate student needs. The goal of this process is to encourage innovation and to streamline advising systems. It should be noted that increased efficiency in advising processes is not expected to result in diminished labor requirements. In fact, it is likely that these services are being underutilized by students because the current process is inefficient. If this is the case, then we can expect an increase in student use as advising processes are improved.

These recommendations are intended to identify both opportunities for growth and ways to support existing advising processes. There is no “one size fits all” approach to advising and this should be seen as a strategy to facilitate innovation at UMass Boston. By trying to better understand the needs of transfer students while also collaborating with Bunker Hill, UMass Boston can develop new strategies to improve student outcomes. Focusing on creating a concrete goal, one that furthers equity on campus, forces advisors to talk purposefully and respectfully about race, ultimately
giving them the tools needed to critically examine how the various advising processes serve (or don’t serve) students’ needs. Lastly, for innovation to exist, advisors need to be trusted as experts at advising students and assessing their needs. While changes must be planned, methodical, and sustainable, these changes must come from advisors themselves as they are the ones who know what they need to do their job. While practical considerations and university bureaucracy may limit the ability of administration to permit certain changes, we strongly encourage administration to facilitate changes requested by advisors as much as possible.

**Limitations**

Originally, this project intended to recruit and interview undergraduate students who transferred to UMass Boston. As such, portions of this project were originally constructed to observe and analyze student behaviors. However, due to logistical constraints imposed by the pandemic and the delay in recruitment of staff from both institutions, the recruitment and interviewing of transfer students never occurred. This means that we only have accounts of student experiences through the eyes of advisors. Other iterations of this project are planned to conduct focus group interviews with students.

Additionally, we originally sought to focus on the experiences of Latinx transfer students, and as such much of our preliminary research focused in on this population. However, the data collected from interviews deal with transfer students of color in general. There are two primary reasons for this: First, respondents were often hesitant to talk about race and/or ethnicity. This is seen in the use of coded language such as allusions to student’s “culture.” This obscures the identity of the students discussed. Second, discussion of student experiences is largely approached through discussion of inequality as a root cause for student needs. This means that Latinx students are enmeshed in a complex web of needs along with students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. To have a conversation about Latinx students in this context, respondents would have to make distinctions about student experiences in a way that is not natural for them. A future study seeking to focus on Latinx students, could identify a specific program or service for Latinx transfer students to serve as a vehicle for that discussion.
Conclusion

Effectively advising students is not a simple process: advisors need to have an intimate familiarity with the institution at which they work and a general understanding of the kinds of problems their student body has, and they must also be able to quickly build trust with students. The importance of these trust-building skills should not be undervalued as this is what allows advisors to deliver personalized service to students, by creating an environment where students feel comfortable sharing crucial information about themselves. However, the avoidance UMass Boston advisors exhibit when talking about race is potentially emblematic of a larger fear to see students as anything else than a “typical” student, which can result in “atypical” students being underserved.

It is important to recognize that even though all UMass Boston participants are called advisors in this piece, this was done in part to protect their anonymity, since respondents occupy various positions within UMass Boston. This safeguard implies a larger institutional hesitancy to broach sensitive subjects in general and race in specific, which is problematic for a majority minority institution with a mission of equity. This is in part because by refusing to talk about sensitive topics, it has the potential to render problems rooted in that subject-matter invisible. On the other hand, interviews with Bunker Hill advisors reveal why broaching these subjects head-on is important: it allows university staff, faculty, and administration to critically analyze the institutions they work in and innovate to better serve their student body. It is important to talk about matters like race, not to connect with students at an interpersonal level, but to reveal how larger, historical systems of inequality, racial or otherwise, create a disconnect between university processes and the students it claims to serve. Failing to fully grasp the impact of these larger historical processes leads advisors to default to treating all students as archetypical students, presuming that these students don’t have unique needs.

This paper recommends that advisors at UMass Boston work at identifying the unique needs of transfer students in order to ensure their transfer process is as smooth as possible. Additionally, we highlight the importance of the embedded advisor position at Bunker Hill. This advisor can serve as a valuable asset establishing a line of communication between UMass Boston advisors, Bunker Hill advisors, and prospective students. Ensuring this position is well supported can help identify potential areas of improvement. Lastly, advisors at UMass Boston should seek to collaborate with advisors at Bunker Hill to develop a specific and timely goal to improve the academic outcomes of transfer students of color. In doing so, we seek to facilitate productive conversations about race which should in turn lead to
advising innovation. Changes should seek to alter university systems according to student needs, as transfer students have complex lives that make altering their behavior difficult if not outright impossible. Administration should empower advisors to make changes to relevant systems whenever reasonable and appropriate. Additionally, both advisors and administration should prepare for the possibility that improvements to the efficacy of advising may increase student use of advising as well.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that traditional measures of academic success seem to be becoming increasingly obsolete, especially when applied to transfer students. Low-income, first-generation, and non-traditional students conceptualize and interact with higher education in different ways than the archetypal traditional student. These students have a more utilitarian view of college and are more likely to take breaks between semesters or be part-time students. Due to various systemic factors (in this context racism), students of color are more likely to be low-income, first-generation, and/or non-traditional, and thus exhibit those same attitudes and behaviors. This means that new metrics and standards need to be developed in order to accurately assess the outcomes of these students.

All in all, the work done by Bunker Hill to ensure that their students are able to succeed in whichever school they transfer to is impressive. That being said, it is important to remember that unlike UMass Boston, Bunker Hill doesn’t have to balance teaching with research. This allows them to dedicate proportionately more of their resources to optimizing student outcomes, which potentially serves to facilitate student-centered innovation. While this may mean that not all of this innovation is transferable as is, it also means that four-year institutions should be paying close attention to the strategies community colleges develop to adapt to a changing educational landscape.

**Works Cited**


About the Institute

Established in 1989, the Massachusetts Legislature created the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy in response to a need for an improved understanding of the Latino experience in the commonwealth. Now in its 34th year, the Gastón Institute continues its mission of informing the public and policymakers about issues vital to the state’s growing Latino community and providing information and analysis necessary for effective Latino participation in public policy development. To learn more about the Gastón Institute, visit www.umb.edu/gastoninstitute.

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