2020 WVU Transfer Students: Exploratory Research

University Relations

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WVU TRANSFER STUDENTS:
EXPLORATORY RESEARCH
NOVEMBER 2020
Background, Purpose, Methodology

Undergraduate enrollment is on the decline and the number of high school graduates is also expected to decrease, so WVU wants to concentrate on recruiting more transfer students. While the University’s overall yield for transfer students far exceeds that of freshmen, there is an opportunity to significantly improve yield, particularly among out-of-state students.

In October 2019, qualitative research was conducted with students who chose not to matriculate to WVU. However, now Admissions wanted to conduct market research to understand why students choose to transfer to WVU. The findings will be used to inform decisions related to transfer process and communications with this segment.

Specifically, the research objectives are:

- To understand the factors that led them to consider WVU
- To understand their decision-making process
- To identify pain points
- To understand if the University’s communications are effective and responsive
- To determine messaging that will best resonate with prospective students

Since Admissions is interested in developing an in-depth understanding of why students transferred to WVU, transfer students were invited to participate in a one-hour chat board session and compensated with a $25 Mastercard gift card.

NOTE: This research was qualitative in nature. The findings should not be considered projectable, and no statistical inferences should be drawn from the information.
Executive Summary

Participants in the online chat board consisted of eleven transfer students. Five transferred from another school in West Virginia, two from schools in both Maryland and Virginia, one from a school in Ohio and another from a school in North Carolina. Nine of the schools are 4-year and two are community colleges. The students represent a variety of majors.

Their motivations for transferring schools are diverse, yet most acknowledged they only applied to one school as a transfer student - WVU. Some had considered WVU a viable option when they began college, so they were at least somewhat familiar with the school. Others learned about WVU by touring the campus, emailing and/or speaking with individuals at the University, as well as in their major.

In terms of communication with these prospective students, WVU appeared to be proactive - reaching out through direct mail brochures, phone calls and emails, all of which appeared to be welcome. Another significant source of information was the website, which students touted as “impressive.” One student also noted that she was attracted to all the videos on WVU’s social media pages.

These students chose to transfer to WVU primarily to save money, as well as take advantage of a strong program in their major and be able to transfer most of their credits. They also believe WVU is the perfect distance from home and has a great campus, and they can sense the pride that WVU students have – either through having friends who attended or by visiting themselves. One student aptly described WVU, concluding …

“The campus feels like you have the benefits of a city, but the welcoming community of a small town.”
Executive Summary

The overall transfer process was relatively fluid, and students were satisfied with the clarity of information provided. If students did struggle with transferability, they found WVU staff and advisors were allies. They demonstrated flexibility and advocated on the students’ behalf. When students had issues or questions, they described communications with the University as “smooth,” “extremely helpful,” and “great.”

This differs from the experience recounted by many transfer students who participated in an online discussion board last fall. Those were students who chose not to matriculate to WVU. They reported being part of a rather haphazard process - citing the inability to get timely answers to questions, feeling lost in the process, receiving no follow-up communication and not feeling valued by the University.

Thinking again about the students in this discussion board, none of them has regretted transferring to WVU and all but one reportedly felt welcome when arriving on campus. The advice these students feel is important to give prospective transfer students considering WVU is that while WVU is a big school and the reputation of a “party school” may still precede it, the University is well-established and offers countless opportunities for students to find their place and be successful in their studies. Also, the opportunities afforded at WVU can open a student’s eyes to a career path they may never have considered. Additionally, its location, welcoming atmosphere and friendly students encourage others to take advantage of its varied outdoor activities that are difficult to find elsewhere – making the overall college experience at WVU positive, memorable and rewarding.
Executive Summary

Recommendations: According to EAB, “Institutions must intentionally become transfer-friendly by dedicating the staff, structures, and resources necessary to serve the unique needs of transfer students. By becoming more transfer-friendly, institutions are able to reach unengaged transfer prospects early and with increased frequency, keep students on track for transfer through early prospect advising and relationship management, and guide prospects to enrollment by providing timely support throughout the admissions process.”

Have a Dedicated Staff and Resources
Based on the qualitative feedback from these eleven transfer students, WVU does a good job providing transfer students with the information they need in a timely manner. However, it falls short of being transfer-friendly in that it does not provide a dedicated staff and resources (aside from the website) for those students. Having a dedicated staff and resources would ensure that no one falls through the cracks.

Establish mentoring programs with staff and other students to help transfer students make a smooth transition, both in class and in campus life.

Include Experiential Quotes on the Website
According to Higher Ed Marketing, many students considering transferring look to school websites for answers, so it is imperative that these resources are clearly available. With that in mind, it might be useful to include some student testimonials on the website that convey the ease at which they were able to complete the process at WVU and get timely assistance, as well as how welcome they felt on campus.
Executive Summary

Optimize the website
Optimize the website’s content to align it with transfer-friendly search keywords.

Utilize Social Media
These students appeared to be somewhat familiar with WVU before researching it further. However, in order to reach those who are unfamiliar or uninformed about the University, social media is a must. Consider utilize transfer student brand ambassadors and targeting the parents of community college students with transfer program ads.
DETAILED FINDINGS
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<td>Wheeling, WV</td>
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<td>Asher</td>
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<td>Jacob</td>
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<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Odenton, MD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jessi</td>
<td>Fairmont State University - WV</td>
<td>Human Nutrition and Foods</td>
<td>Hampshire County, WV</td>
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Reasons for Transferring

There are variety of reasons these students wanted to transfer schools:

- Community college’s Ag program did not meet expectations
- Ohio University did not have as good a design program as expected
- UNCW (a little beach college in Wilmington, NC) only offered forensics as a certificate
- D2 school didn’t offer as much as WVU
- No sense of belonging at the school
- School was too small and did not offer their major
- Decided in-state tuition was a better long-term career move than out of state tuition
- Community college did not offer a degree in mechanical engineering
- Wanted more of a community and the outdoor activities
- Unreliable online system of classes during COVID-19; thus felt like getting the best education

“I was going to a small community college in my county and their Ag program was not where I would have liked it to be. I transferred to WVU to better my education through Ag and gain new experiences!” – Blue Ridge Community College

“I transferred to WVU because of the community – after talking to friends I heard that everyone here was super friendly. Additionally one of the other reasons was that WV is one of the best states for outdoor activities such as backpacking.” – University of Maryland

“My reason for transferring was my major. Only two schools in WV have a nutrition major and WVU is one of them! I originally went to Fairmont State. After this, I will go on to a dietetic internship.” – Fairmont State

“I didn’t feel a sense of belonging at my previous school. It was very small and also did not have my major.” – Shepherd University
Factors in the Decision-Making Process

- Most of these transfer students only applied to WVU. Two applied to multiple schools, including the University of Delaware, UMBC, a community college, and the University of Vermont. For some, once they chose a major, they knew that WVU was the right school for them academically. Others mentioned the following reasons for focusing on WVU:

  - Low/no-debt upon graduation (5)
  - Would be able to transfer most credits (3)
  - Perfect distance from home (3)
  - Strong academic program (3)
  - Parent/siblings are alums
  - Location
  - Student pride

"All of my siblings and high school friends went/go to WVU and it is very close to my home. I feel students here have a lot of pride for this school and that is something my old school lacked." – West Virginia State University

"I first made sure most of my credits would transfer, and also knew I would have a lot of credits from high school because I went in-state, and it's only an hour from my hometown." – West Liberty University

"I came to visit a high school friend originally, so I only chose WVU by the strength of the program and being a good distance from home. I decided I would apply to WVU early on so I would be able to get a good dorm and get my scheduling worked out. I also wanted to make sure everything fell into place before I withdrew from my old university." – Ohio University

"I began by researching what schools offered mechanical engineering and had a good program. Then by the area the school was in." – Ann Arundel Community College

"The social aspect (which given at the time I looked into it COVID wasn't a big deal) and the different activities" – University of North Carolina
Choosing WVU

When students were asked what was it about West Virginia University that compelled them to consider it as a school you might transfer to, elements of WVU’s environment topped the list.

- The environment/atmosphere (3)
- The campus
- The social aspect/various activities (2)
- The location

“I’m originally from South Carolina, but my family now all lives here in WV. I’m doing the Education MDS. The only reason I considered WVU is because it’s close to where my family moved to so I can commute.” – Marshall University

“I really liked the area that WVU is in. I was excited to go to football games and I like the outdoors.” – Ann Arundel Community College

“Being in state was the biggest reason, born and raised here and don't plan on leaving anytime soon, and I like the area of Morgantown.” – Virginia Tech

“By saying that I like the environment, I meant that I like how large of a list of majors, activities, clubs, etc. there are because there is something to offer for everyone. “There are many research and study abroad opportunities. Also, I love the social aspect of WVU (fall fest, WVU games, etc.)” .” – West Virginia State University

“I knew WVU had my program so that was easy. Ease of transfer was great. All of my credits transferred with no issue. My debt will be limited thanks to scholarships. My courses are somewhat difficult. My academic program is amazing! I am about 2 hours from home.” – Fairmont State University
The Transfer Process

• Students relied on a number of resources when they began to research transferring schools. The great majority were very pleased about the amount and transparency of information they received from WVU.

  - Looked at the website (6)
  - Met with an Admissions advisor (3)
  - Toured WVU/met with tour leaders
  - Met with Transfer Admissions

  - Talked with department head
  - Called the Mountaineer Hub
  - Spoke to the Admissions department
  - Emailed people in their college department

• Those who had issues conveyed they had trouble getting in touch with people, that the transfer process took a bit longer than they anticipated or that the amount of time it took to find out if they were accepted took too long.

  “Very dissatisfied in how transparent they were about credits that would transfer within colleges. Like I had to take classes at community college until my first transcripts were finalized, and WVU told the community college that the classes I wanted to register for there would be taken by WVU, and then when I went to transfer they said that those credits weren't equivalents and I had to fight for those credits.” – Marshall University

  “I struggled so much with scheduling. I would call to try and talk to people for help and I would always be told either 1. It’s your advisor’s job or 2. They would send me to someone who would continue to send me to like three more people and then I would get an answering machine and never hear back.” – Ohio University

  “I had to make a very late transfer because of COVID (late June) and I did not hear back from WVU for roughly a month. This was stressful for me when it came to creating my fall schedule because I didn't know if I had been accepted yet.” – West Virginia State University
Another student found the process unnecessarily time consuming, and one noted an inconsistency.

“I was fairly satisfied, I will say it was very frustrating having to look through the whole data base for each university to if some of my credits would transfer.” – Virginia Tech

“I don't remember the specifics, but there were a few pieces of conflicting information on how to navigate TERR.” – University of North Carolina
The Transfer Process

• The ease at which they reported being able to transfer credits was a mixed bag.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Struggles</th>
<th>Successes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some had trouble using the website to determine which credits were transferrable</td>
<td>• Some class credits were negotiable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some had to sift through the entire database for each university to determine if credits would transfer</td>
<td>• Some found the website easy to use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some class credits were not negotiable</td>
<td>• Assistance was given regarding how to understand the website, if needed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advisors were helpful in advocating for transfer credit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• When asked what was best about the transfer process, most students reiterated that the transfer process was an easy one.

“The smooth transition and not having to worry if anything was left out or behind.” – University of North Carolina

“I would say that everything just fell into place, my credits transferred and it was very smooth transition. The thing that worked best I guess was how they allow transfer applicants until late into the summer, or I wouldn't even be here.” – Virginia Tech

“The best part had to have been the transfer advisors, always prompt and informative communication while answering questions I didn't know I had.” – University of Maryland
The Transfer Process

• All but a few students had only positive interactions throughout the overall process, and there were few hiccups between the assistance they received as they moved down the chain from the University to their college and then major.

“There were times I got bounced between people trying to get answers, but even if I was transferred to someone who couldn’t help me, they were always nice.” – Marshall University

“It was great for me. Everyone told me exactly what I needed to know to get me through, and if I did not know Mountaineer Hub was always so helpful.” – West Liberty University
Experience as a Transfer Student

- All but one of these transfer students reported feeling very welcome when they arrived on campus.

  “Also I feel like there isn’t a lot of info for transfer students. Like first years have the week of everything and tours and all these events for them to know the campus and stuff, but as a transfer student I feel like I got thrown in with not a lot of info.” - West Virginia State University

- Students named a number of things that are most important for prospective transfer students to be aware of when considering WVU.

  | There are countless opportunities | It offers something for everyone (clubs, outdoor activities, etc.) |
  | The school provides a high-quality education | It’s big school but offers lots of ways to get connected and not feel overwhelmed |
  | Student resources is always there to help | People want you to succeed and will help you do so |

  “I think they should realize that they may need to take additional courses, and that all of their credits might not count towards the same classes so they may have to do some extra work to get back on track. But regardless, there is so much opportunity here, so there really is something for everyone!” – West Virginia State University

  “Prospective transfer students should be aware of all of the opportunities that WVU offers instead of just what they come in thinking about. They really have everything you can think of here!” – West Liberty University

  “WVU is a well-established school and there isn't anything to worry about, all schools won't accept every credit but the people here and outdoor opportunities truly set it apart.” – University of Maryland