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A Comparison of Transfer and Native Students on Educational Experiences: Results from the 2005-2006 Graduating Senior Survey

I. Introduction

The Office of Institutional Assessment has been conducting Graduating Senior Surveys since 1989. Senior students who graduated in summer 2005, fall 2005 and spring 2006 were directed to complete the Graduating Senior Survey online as they completed their online graduation application. In this academic year, 3,639 graduates earned a total number of 3,655 undergraduate degrees from Mason. Among them, 3,123 completed the survey for a response rate of 86%.

The 2005-2006 Graduating Senior Survey included a variety of topics: learning outcomes, writing experiences, synthesis courses, change of major, mid-term grades, civic engagement, satisfaction, etc. This *In Focus* report compares the educational experiences of transfer and native students. It examines the following questions: Why did it take some Mason students more than FOUR years to complete a baccalaureate degree? How many times did they change majors and why? Are there any differences between transfer and native students in terms of educational growth at Mason? Are transfer students as satisfied as native students with their educational experiences at Mason?

For this *In Focus*, all survey respondents were categorized into two groups using the following definitions:

- **Transfer students:** those who started college at another post-secondary institution as first-time freshmen and, later, transferred into Mason. They accounted for 57% of the survey respondents.
- **Native students:** those who started college at Mason as first-time freshmen. They accounted for 43% of the survey respondents.

The results of additional survey questions are included in the full report of the 2005-06 Graduating Senior Survey. For detailed information on college and program level results, and for characteristics of survey respondents, please visit our website at <http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingSenior/2006/index.cfm>.

ALL results are based on the responses from 3,075 distinct graduating seniors who self-identified as having one of the following statuses: "started college at Mason" or "started college at another institution and transferred to Mason." Because of rounding, not all percentages equal to 100% in this report.

II. Highlights

- Among the students who graduated in the 2005-2006 academic year, 53% of native students and 74% of transfer students said it took them *more than four years* to complete their baccalaureate degree.
- Change of major/selecting a second major and working full-time/part-time are the most frequently cited reasons for extended Time-to-Degree completion by native students. For transfer students, working and transferring from another institution are the most frequently cited reasons.
- 43% of native students and 24% of transfer students changed majors while they were a Mason student. Personal interest in the subject matter and a better fit for career goals are the primary reasons for changing majors.
- Over 40% of native and transfer students think Mason has contributed “very much” to their growth in critical thinking and analysis, written communication, global understanding, social and behavioral sciences and synthesis. On several general education learning goals, *native students* are more likely than transfer students to say Mason contributed “very much” to their growth.
- Both native and transfer students had very positive experiences in synthesis courses. A majority thought these courses required them to think critically and to organize ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships.
- One third of transfer students and one fourth of native students said they “always” had sufficient opportunities in their upper-level courses to revise their writing after receiving feedback from an instructor. They felt the writing assignments in these courses and the feedback-and-revision process contributed to their learning.
- Both native and transfer students are most satisfied with education in the major, academic courses, and the education they received in general at Mason. Transfer students are more likely than native students to say if they were to do it all over, they would attend Mason again.

III. Time to Bachelor’s Degree Completion

“Time-to-Degree” refers to the time taken to complete all degree requirements, from the point of admission to graduation. Obviously, Time-to-Degree will be shorter for full-time students vs. part-time students, for students enrolling only in courses which are required for their degree program, and for those who maintain continuous enrollment through completion.

1. Starting Year

The starting year (i.e., the first year a student was enrolled at Mason) provides a good *estimate* of how long it takes a student to earn a bachelor’s degree. A more accurate analysis should take into account a student’s starting semester and graduation term, which we were not able to do through this survey.

Table 1: What year did you first enroll at George Mason University?

	1999 or earlier	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Native students	10%	12%	34%	42%	2%	0%
Transfers	7%	3%	9%	22%	33%	25%

Native Students. As Table 1 shows, among the native students, 34% first enrolled in 2001 and 44% were first enrolled in 2002 or later. These students earned their baccalaureate degrees in four to five years. It takes the remaining 12% six years and 10% at least seven years to complete a degree. These figures provide a complimentary but different picture than we usually see when we look at Mason’s graduation rates. For instance, the Office of Institutional Research and Reporting (IRR) reports that, for the 1999 first-time full-time degree-seeking freshman cohort, the four-year graduation rate is 33%, five-year rate is 48% and six-year rate is 52%. IRR obtains their figures by tracking *entering freshman cohorts*, while the survey results are based on the responses from the 2005-2006 graduating class.

Transfers. Most transfer students matriculated into Mason as sophomores or juniors. As Table 1 shows, 22% started in 2002, 33% started in 2003, and another 25% first entered Mason in 2004. Nineteen percent entered Mason in 2001 or earlier. These Time-to-Degree figures are very close to what we found from the transfer students who graduated during the 2004-2005 academic year.

The data presented in Table 1 are not exhaustive. For example, it is very likely that some native students who entered Mason in 2001 will graduate in 2007. What we can say about the graduating class of 2005-06 is that a majority of native students took about 4-5 years to graduate *from Mason* and most transfers took 2-4 years.

2. Reasons for Extended Time to Complete a Bachelor’s Degree

More than half of the native students (53%) and three out of four transfer students (74%) said it took them *more than four years* to complete their baccalaureate degree. The following responses were from these students only!

Note: For transfer students, this Time-to-Degree includes the time they were enrolled at other institutions.

Possible Reasons for Extended Time-to-Degree. Native students are most likely to cite the following reasons when asked why it took them more than four years:

- I have to work full-time/part-time (selected by 52% of the native students who spent more than four years completing a baccalaureate degree)
- I changed my major or I selected a second major (43%)
- Some courses were not offered at convenient times for me (35%)
- My job(s) was/were off campus (34%)
- I had some academic difficulty (31%)

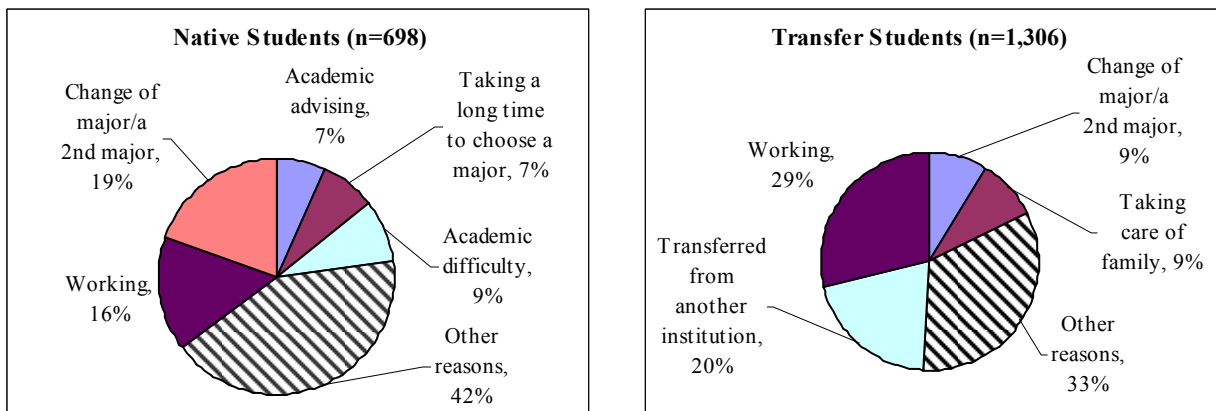
Transfer students who spent more than four years to earn a college degree are most likely to cite the following reasons:

- I transferred from another institution (61%)
- I have to work full-time/part-time (59%)
- My job(s) was/were off campus (33%)
- I changed my major or I selected a second major (31%)

The Most Important Reason. Native students and transfers responded differently when selecting the most important reason from a list of 14 possible reasons. As Figure 1 shows, a change of major/enrolled in a second major was rated as the most important reason by 19% of **native students**, followed closely by working full-time/part-time (selected by 16% of native students). A lot of native students (42%) selected “other reasons,” which ranged from courses not being offered at convenient times (5%), a lack of motivation to complete in four years (5%), being enrolled in a certificate program or a minor (4%), to other reasons not included in the list (15%).

For 20% of **transfer students** (see Figure 2), transferring from another institution was the most important factor that caused a delay in completing a bachelor’s degree. However, even more transfers (29%) thought working full-time/part-time was the reason that they could not finish in four years. Another one third selected “other reasons,” such as insufficient financial resources (4%), lack of motivation (3%), courses not being offered at convenient times (3%), taking a long time to choose a major (3%), to other reasons not included in the list (10%).

Figures 1 and 2: The Most Important Reason for Extending the Time to Complete a Baccalaureate Degree*



* The figures only include the respondents who said it took them more than four years to complete a bachelor’s degree.

IV. Change of Major

Change of Major – Frequency. Native students are more likely than transfers to say they officially changed their major while they were a Mason student: 43% of native students and 24% of transfers have done so (see Figure 3). A majority of these students changed major only once. A previous survey also found that among transfer students who graduated during 2004-2005, 23% changed major one or two times, and 1% changed major more than three times.

Reasons for Changing Major. There is little difference between native and transfer students regarding the reasons for changing major. The reasons most frequently cited by the students who changed their major at Mason include personal interest in the subject matter and a better fit for career goals (see Table 2). Lack of interest and academic difficulties in the previous major were cited by more native students than transfers.

Figure 3: Have you ever officially changed your major while you were a Mason student?

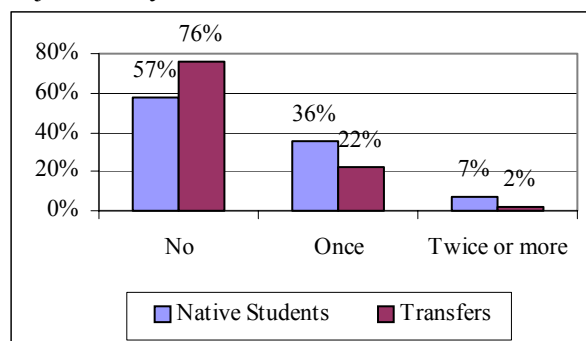


Table 2: Reasons for Changing Major (ONLY for those who Changed Major at Mason)

Reasons for changing major (select all that apply):	Native Students (n=560)	Transfers (n=427)
More interest in the subject matter of the new major	68%	59%
The new major better fits my career goals	42%	40%
Lack of interest in the previous major	39%	26%
Academic difficulties in the previous major	25%	15%
Dissatisfaction with the previous program	18%	14%
The new major was easier for me	16%	14%

V. Educational Outcomes

This section summarizes Mason’s contribution to students’ educational growth. The survey lists all the 15 general educational learning goals of the University and asks students to rate the extent to which Mason contributed to their growth in these areas. These 15 learning goals (as listed in Tables 3 and 4) cover a wide range of competencies (e.g., critical thinking, written communication, oral communication, etc.) and subject matter (e.g., arts, social and behavioral sciences, western civilization, etc.). Over the years, we have found that students answer these questions based on their entire educational experiences at Mason, not just their general education experiences. In addition, students tend to rate their growth in competencies (such as critical thinking and analysis) much higher than their growth in a specific subject matter, particularly if the subject is not related or reinforced in their major.

As Table 3 shows, over 40% of native and transfer students thought Mason had contributed “very much” to their growth in the following areas: critical thinking and analysis (56-57%), written communication (54-56%), global understanding (44-47%), social and behavioral sciences (40-45%), and synthesis (39-40%). Most of the above learning goals are emphasized throughout the entire undergraduate curricula. The high rating on “social and behavioral sciences” is likely related to the fact that a majority of these graduates majored in these disciplines.

Approximately half of transfer students and 40% of native students thought Mason contributed “a little” or “not at all” to their growth in understanding the arts, western civilization and U.S. history (U.S. history no longer exists as a core requirement). There are likely many reasons why students rate their growth in “subject matter” courses lower than they do their growth in overarching university-level competencies. One is that, unlike competencies, some subjects required by the general education curriculum are not addressed throughout the curriculum. Indeed, “subject matter” courses contribute to student growth in competencies such as critical thinking, and oral and written communication. Another reason may be linked to the fact that the approved courses to satisfy U.S. history

and western civilization requirements are all 100-level courses, which students may have taken early in their college career.

Table 3: Mason’s Contribution to Student Growth – Frequency Comparison

Indicate the extent to which Mason contributed to your growth in each of the following:	Native Students				Transfers			
	Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all	Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Critical Thinking and Analysis	56%	36%	7%	1%	57%	33%	9%	2%
Written Communication	56%	36%	8%	1%	54%	33%	10%	3%
Global Understanding	47%	39%	13%	2%	44%	37%	14%	6%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	45%	35%	16%	3%	40%	34%	17%	9%
Synthesis	40%	40%	15%	5%	39%	37%	17%	7%
Oral Communication	32%	54%	12%	3%	23%	58%	13%	6%
Information Technology	32%	40%	24%	5%	32%	38%	21%	9%
Literature	31%	45%	20%	4%	28%	40%	21%	11%
Quantitative Reasoning	30%	42%	23%	5%	32%	40%	18%	9%
Scientific Reasoning	29%	41%	26%	4%	28%	38%	23%	12%
Natural Sciences	27%	40%	27%	6%	25%	34%	21%	20%
Understand and Apply Ethics in IT	27%	34%	27%	13%	28%	35%	22%	14%
Arts	25%	38%	26%	12%	21%	32%	23%	24%
U.S. History	20%	39%	31%	10%	20%	30%	26%	25%
Western Civilization	19%	39%	33%	9%	19%	32%	26%	24%

It is not surprising that **native students** are more likely to say Mason has contributed “very much” to these general education goals than transfers (see Table 4). Some transfer students may only need to take two general education courses at Mason (i.e., English 302 and a synthesis course) if they have completed equivalent courses at another institution. In the following areas, **native students** rated significantly *higher* than transfers: written communication, global understanding, social and behavioral sciences, oral communication, literature, scientific reasoning, natural sciences, arts, U.S. history and Western civilization.

In two areas, transfer students rated as high as native students: critical thinking and analysis and synthesis. Presumably this is due to an emphasis on these areas in synthesis courses and courses in the major. In the remaining three areas, quantitative reasoning, information technology and understanding and applying ethics in information technology, there is no significant difference between native and transfer students either.

Table 4: Mason’s Contribution to Student Growth – Mean Comparison*

Indicate the extent to which Mason contributed to your growth in each of the following:	Native Students	Transfers	Sig.
Critical Thinking and Analysis	3.46	3.44	
Written Communication	3.46	3.38	0.023
Global Understanding	3.31	3.18	0.000
Social and Behavioral Sciences	3.22	3.05	0.000
Oral Communication	3.15	2.99	0.000
Synthesis	3.14	3.08	
Literature	3.04	2.87	0.000
Quantitative Reasoning	2.98	2.95	
Information Technology	2.98	2.93	
Scientific Reasoning	2.94	2.81	0.000
Natural Sciences	2.88	2.63	0.000
Arts	2.76	2.50	0.000
Understand and Apply Ethics in IT	2.75	2.78	
U.S. History	2.69	2.45	0.000
Western Civilization	2.67	2.46	0.000

* Mean values are calculated on a 1-4 scale: 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=somewhat, and 4=very much. Only statistically significant results $p < .05$ are reported in the “Sig.” column.

VI. Synthesis Courses

Every undergraduate at Mason is required to take a synthesis course, which is the culminating course in the general education sequence. Synthesis courses are designed to engage students in the connection of meaning and the synthesis of knowledge and require students to demonstrate advanced skills in oral and written presentation.

The 2005-06 survey results indicate that synthesis courses seem to be achieving important learning outcomes, particularly in critical thinking. On a list of eight statements about synthesis courses (see Table 5), the ratings from native students are comparable to those from transfer students. Graduating seniors (88%) are *most likely* to “agree” or “strongly agree” that the synthesis courses they took required them to think critically. Other highly rated items include:

- The course required me to organize ideas, information or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships.
- The course was intellectually challenging.
- The course was well organized.
- The course linked issues in my major to wider intellectual and community concerns.
- The course held my interest.

Students’ level of agreement is relatively lower on two statements: “the course improved my writing skills” and “the course improved my oral presentation skills.” One out of four students disagreed with these two statements. Although unknown, there may not have been sufficient oral presentation or writing assignments included in the synthesis courses these students took.

Table 5: Student Experiences in Synthesis Courses

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about the synthesis course you have taken.	Strongly agree	Agree	Mean*
The course required me to think critically.	38%	50%	3.22
The course required me to organize ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships.	36%	49%	3.18
The course was intellectually challenging.	35%	49%	3.14
The course was well organized.	33%	51%	3.13
The course linked issues in my major to wider intellectual & community concerns.	34%	49%	3.12
The course held my interest.	33%	50%	3.11
The course improved my writing skills.	24%	50%	2.93
The course improved my oral presentation skills.	23%	50%	2.89

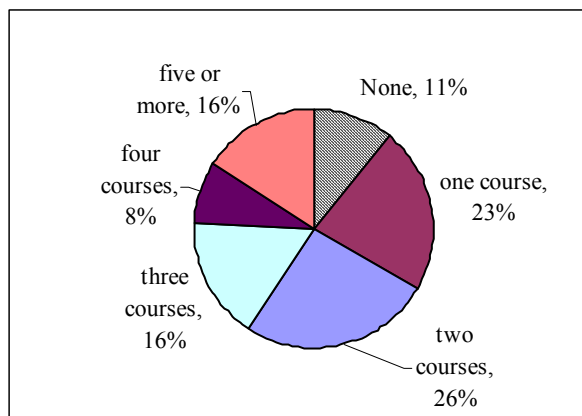
* Mean values are calculated on a 1-4 scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree.

VII. Writing Experiences in Upper-Level Courses

The 2005-06 survey included a revised set of questions about student writing experiences in 300-level or above courses (excluding English 302), as suggested by the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee. These questions intended to examine whether students receive any feedback about their writing from instructors in upper level courses other than English 302 and whether they have opportunities to revise their writing after receiving the feedback.

Number of Upper-Level Courses. Students were asked to report in *how many* upper-level courses they had the opportunities to revise their writing after receiving feedback from their instructor on an earlier draft. The

Figure 4. In how many courses at Mason, 300-level or above, did you have the opportunity to revise your writing after receiving feedback from your instructor on an earlier draft?



responses from native and transfer students are almost the same. Overall, 23% said they had one course, 26% reported two courses, and 16% had three courses (see Figure 4). Eleven percent of students did not have such a course. A detailed analysis found that students' responses to this question vary greatly by academic program. Generally, students graduating from what-was-then the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) tend to report more courses than their counterparts at other colleges. For all college and program level data, please visit our website at: <http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingSenior/2006/index.cfm>.

Perceived Opportunities for Revision. When asked whether they have sufficient opportunities in upper-level courses to revise their writing after receiving feedback from an instructor, students' responses differ significantly by transfer status. One third of transfer students said they "always" have sufficient opportunities, compared to one fourth of native students.

Contribution to Student Learning. A large percentage of students agreed that the writing assignments in upper-level courses contributed to their learning (see Table 6). Students are most likely to agree that the writing assignments from upper-level courses have increased their understanding of their field either "a great deal" or "somewhat." A majority of students also feel these courses, particularly the feedback-and-revision process in these courses, have helped to improve their confidence as writers and improve their writing skills.

Table 6. Contribution to Student Learning

To what extent did the <u>300-level or above courses</u> help you in the following areas?	Native Students			Transfers		
	A great deal	Somewhat	Very little/ Not at all	A great deal	Somewhat	Very little/ Not at all
The writing assignments from these courses have increased my understanding of my field.	40%	45%	15%	45%	39%	16%
These courses have improved my confidence as a writer.	35%	48%	17%	39%	44%	17%
The feedback and revision process in these courses has helped me to improve my writing.	33%	50%	17%	42%	41%	18%

VIII. Satisfaction with Educational Experiences at Mason

Satisfaction with Educational Experiences. Over 90% of students are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the following (see Table 7): education in the major, academic courses, and education in general. There is no statistically significant difference between native and transfer students.

Table 7. Satisfaction with Educational Experiences

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your education at Mason?	% "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied"		Mean Comparison*		
	Native Students	Transfers	Native Students	Transfers	Sig.
Education you received in your major	93%	93%	3.43	3.40	
Academic courses	95%	95%	3.26	3.30	
Education you received in general	95%	93%	3.25	3.28	
Opportunities to improve your writing	87%	89%	3.09	3.17	0.002
Preparation for work	84%	86%	3.01	3.08	0.012
Preparation for post-baccalaureate study	79%	80%	2.96	2.99	
Advising you received in your major	68%	75%	2.81	2.95	0.000

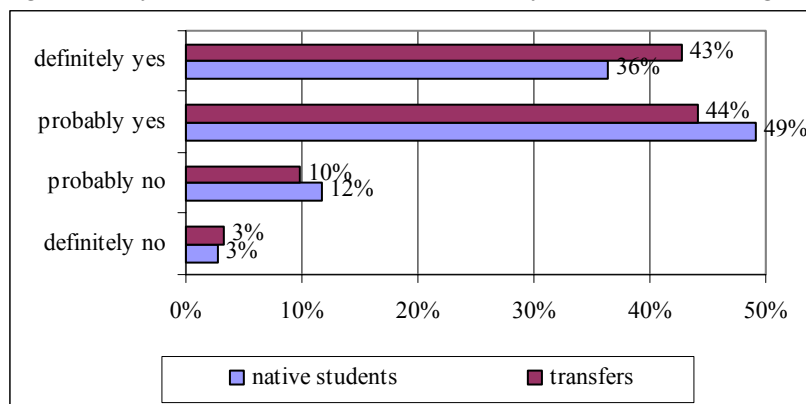
* Mean values are calculated on a 1-4 scale: 1=very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=satisfied, and 4=very satisfied. Only statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) is shown in the "Sig." column.

On opportunities to improve writing, preparation for work, and preparation for post-baccalaureate study, over 80% of students are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied." **Transfer students** are slightly *more satisfied* with the first two items than native students. The item receiving the *lowest* rating is advising in the major, with which

transfer students are also more satisfied than native students. Earlier studies at Mason suggest that transfer students come to Mason with clearer educational goals than native students. They may feel less of a need for advising and/or may be more receptive to the advice they receive. Also, as noted earlier, transfers are far less likely to change majors than native students, which might result in a better connection to their major advisors as well as a greater familiarity with degree requirements for the major.

Overall Satisfaction with Mason Experiences. Student satisfaction with overall Mason experiences and sense of belonging at Mason do not vary by transfer status. Eighty-nine percent of students are either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with overall Mason experiences and 74% are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with sense of belonging at Mason. However, **transfer students** are significantly *more likely* than native students to say if they were to do it all over, they would “definitely” attend Mason again. As Figure 5 shows, 43% of transfer students would “definitely” make the same decision, compared to 36% of native students; 44% of transfer students would “probably” make the same decision, compared to 49% of native students.

Figure 5. If you were to do it all over, would you attend Mason again?



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