Focus Group Sessions
Perspectives from Transfer Students

Office of Academic Assessment
University of Southern Maine

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Introduction

Upon the request of the Transfer Affairs office, a total of four focus group sessions were scheduled in February 2004 to receive feedback from transfer students about their experiences transferring to USM. A sample of transfer students were randomly selected and were emailed the dates of the focus group sessions. A total of 12 transfer students participated in the sessions. The questions and the actual student responses were documented (see below) in order to get a full understanding of the student perspectives.

Individual Responses: Focus Group Sessions for Transfer Students

1) **Why did you choose USM?**

I liked what the music professors told me about the music program at USM, and they encouraged me to come here. I spent two years after high school in New York spending time with famous musicians at another university, because that is what I wanted and initially I did not want to go to USM. I did grow up near Portland, so my parents encouraged me to talk to the music professors here. I wasn’t sure I wanted to come back to Maine, but now I am glad I did. I have actually enjoyed my music program here.

One of my parents is ill, and my family lives in Maine, so I decided to transfer to USM instead of being far away. I was in Connecticut. It’s more of a convenience thing, I am not being drawn here because of a particular program.

I chose USM because I wanted to get away from my parents. Also, I was going to UM in Orono, but decided to transfer down here because there might be more job opportunities in the southern area of Maine.

I transferred from Orono to USM because my husband got a good job in Portland, so I really had to change campuses. It certainly wasn’t because of the program. I was happier in Orono with the Nursing Program than I am here, but because of the family circumstances, I really didn’t have a choice if I want to get a degree in nursing.

Maine is my home state where I was brought up and raised, so I decided to come back and transfer my credits to USM. I was at Brown University which is far away from my family.
My boyfriend is a student of USM and a few other friends, so I decided to transfer here. I did not come for any other reason. I transferred from out-of-state because I wanted to be closer to my friends. My parents live 5-hours away.

My family lives in Farmington and I was attending college there, but I decided to transfer to USM hoping that there were better opportunities here.

I had a friend who lives in Rockland and was attending USM so when I came to visit him, he told me about his program. Then, when I decided to move to Maine, we agreed to share living expenses and so I transferred to USM.

I was in the nursing program at UMA and wanted to continue with my bachelors in nursing, so I thought I would transfer my credits to USM.

My first contact with USM was very pleasant, so I wanted to come here and finish my degree.

It was mostly a matter of convenience for me. I needed to come back home (to Maine) to be closer to family, so if I wanted to continue with my studies, USM was the choice. I was attending college in Hawaii during my military assignment since high school.

Because I met some really personable and great friends here at USM after taking one class, so I decided I would transfer my credits from New Jersey.

2) What were your expectations before coming to USM and how does that compare with the reality now that you are here?

I expected the college to be a little more diverse, but in reality, it really is not. Many of the same type of students are here. I really noticed the difference, because I was going to school in NY where you have to accept everyone’s differences. Here at USM not everyone respects each other.

I expected it to be the same as my other university, but at USM the academic standards are a lot more relaxed than my previous college. The atmosphere at USM is that professors lecture and students are passive, but my other school, students had to be more active in the classroom all of the time, regardless of the course you took.
I went from a private school to a public school. According to what is written about USM, I expected the experience to be somewhat the same. But at USM, everything is so rigid about policy issues, but totally relaxed are careless about informing students about the policy issues. At my previous college, we were given constant information ahead of time about policy issues and what is allowed and what isn’t. Here it’s a guessing game and no one knows the answer.

My expectations and reality were similar, but I agree about policies and procedures, nothing is clear to students.

I expected to like dorm life a little better. It’s a bad situation, the dorm rooms have vents that need to be cleaned out, windows to be cleaned, etc. which are not done regularly. The dorms smell bad and no one cares what you do to trash the place. Its like no one cares whether students are happy with their living situation or not.

Full-time students have to eat here all of the time if you have classes spread out through out the day or evening. But, there is a tendency to want to get food off-campus because the food is so bad and expensive. We can get better food for cheaper prices going off-campus. I think USM is losing a lot of money this way, because students would prefer to hang out at the student center and socialize during a meal with friends. Too bad there isn’t some improvement made in this area. At Orono, we had a lot better food and more socializing events with other students during meal times. It was fun!

I expected a more traditional population before I came here, but I was really happy to see that there are a lot of older students here. I am 35 years old and felt comfortable with the age diversity on the campus, so my reality was better than what I expected.

I had similar expectations going from my other college to this college. Some things are similar, and some things are very different. The biggest difference is the physical appearance of USM. I expected cleaner dorm halls, more accommodating seating in the classrooms, buildings to have working lights and comfortable heating, etc. Unfortunately, USM only has a few buildings on the campus that actually look attractive and decent. When it comes to other stuff, USM is similar to my other school in that you have to take responsibility to make your experience worthwhile to you.

I expected USM to be more integrated between the Portland, Gorham and Lewiston campuses. It is advertised to be integrated, but in reality, things are very different on each campus and you might as well make them different schools because that is how decentralized the campuses are.
I expected to be able to get the courses I needed in my major. I am a junior and I can’t even get some of the required classes I need to graduate because the major has so many students and professors will only let 20 students allowed in the required coursework. At this rate, I don’t see me graduating at my planned time. Other students in the major told me it happens every semester and that Communication majors have to plan on more than 4 years to graduate. That really messes up my goals, and had I known that when I entered this school, I would have made arrangements to go somewhere else.

I expected small personable classes and a personal touch from professors in the classroom. I expected not much racial or religion diversity. In reality, I was a little surprised that professors are rather rigid and not too personal at all, and for diversity, there is mostly age diversity and I have seen quite a few people with varied religious rituals. I noticed that many gays and lesbians are in the closet. Also, at USM, there has been more ingrained student and faculty prejudices than I have found anywhere else. Some people don’t even know how prejudice they are, probably because they have never left this area and are very narrow-minded.

3) Tell us about your experience with academic advising at USM?

So far, I have been here a year and I am happy with my music program. The advisors in the music dept have been extremely helpful and they completely laid out what I needed to do to graduate.

The Transfer office should communicate to the advisors in our major, it would help so we don’t get conflicting information.

I had to ask for an advisor in my major, because I wasn’t assigned to anyone and I had lots of questions. But, the Advising Office was helpful in directing me where to go and who to contact.

I had to switch my advisor in Nursing because once you get into the upper level courses, they make you switch. I found the switch kind of difficult, it was not very smooth.

The advising element is confusing here at USM. What if you have an advisor that doesn’t know the core curriculum well enough, or anything about previous credits earned, then its hard to know where to go from that point. Who do you contact? It’s not clear.

No problems, I had a good experience with my advisor in the Advising Office and with my major advisor. Both were helpful.
No consistency at all with advising. I have had three different advisors in the Business program since I arrived, three different answers to all my questions and no one knows which catalog to follow when you are a transfer student. Advising is terrible! I get more and better information from students who have learned things through their experiences than from the faculty and staff who work here.

I have had advisors in the Advising Office and advising in the major department. Completely different! I would say that the Advising Office gives more complete information, but it is confusing when you hear that other students were told something different.

I recommend Peer Advising when possible, as long as the peers have been trained properly. A peer advisor saved me because it was a lot of helpful and available than regular advisors who don’t have the time of day. Faculty advisors are useless!

Most of the advising I have had has been pretty good, but I have to know what questions to ask, if I don’t know the right questions, no one will volunteer extra information that might be helpful.

Advising in the major department is quite complicated because sometimes its not clear if the faculty advisors know anything about the graduation requirements. I have got many conflicting answers to questions. I didn’t think I would have to get a second opinion every time a faculty or staff give me an answer to a question, but I feel like I have to because of missed opportunities if I don’t.

There are some really good advisors and some really bad ones who know absolutely nothing and don’t really help me at all. Advisors are not as useful as getting information from your peers who have already experienced the bad stuff (like helpful prerequisites before taking certain courses).

4) **We are interested in hearing about your transfer transition—what was the best part of the process—what about the process could be improved?**

For me the process was pretty smooth, the music department stayed in touch with me while I was in NY. I don’t have complaints about the process.

It hasn’t been too bad, I guess I don’t have too many complaints. It would have been nice to find out more about what credits transfer and what credits don’t transfer into your desired program.
Regarding Nursing, it was a difficult transition. No one tells you ahead of time what credits transfer into the program at USM, so when you get here, you find out you have a whole extra year because certain things don’t transfer. I transferred from Orono and transferring from the Nursing program there to here was an ultimate nightmare…and it’s still not over. I have talked to my advisor, the Dean of the school, and nothing is being done about my concerns. I was happier in Orono. It is a joke when USM says there is no problem transferring credits from another Maine university.

The transition is very confusing. Nothing is very clear. I transferred to USM partly because of the reputation of the athletic program, but I missed the whole first week of sports events and practices because the transition was so confusing. I was told one thing on the phone and then when I got here, I kept getting the run-around that I had to go here, then there, then back to some other department, what a mess!

Being a transfer student is interesting, no one is around the week before classes start and that is when I was told to come and be oriented. There is a lot of improvements that need to be made and the major thing is too be clear about the process.

Not a quick process at all. As a matter of fact, it’s so slow that I don’t know if it is worth being a transfer student. You might as well pretend that you’re a freshmen all over again. For instance, I did not find out what credits were transferring into USM and which credits were not going to count (so to speak) until I was here more than one year. I was told upon arrival here that certain credits were probably not transferable into my program, so I accept that with some reservations but end up taking the courses I need, when I don’t hear anything from USM. Then I find out a year later, that those credits were accepted after all and I could have taken another class instead. To me, this is just plain unorganized and stupid to treat transfer students in this way.

Extremely slow process. I don’t understand why it is so difficult to find out what I need to graduate, but no information was given to me right away. I waited more than one semester to get answers on how many credits were transferred, and what courses were accepted or not.

5) Tell us how comfortable or knowledgeable you feel getting your academic needs met and finding the information you need. How easy/difficult is our system to navigate?

The most difficult thing is finding out about courses that are only offered occasionally or only once every two years, I think they are called rotational courses. Had I realized that, I would have changed my
schedule to take these classes when they are offered. I found out a little too late about a few of these type of classes.

There is no bulletin board that has all the information for students. Things are posted some places in the student centers, and sometimes special dates are posted elsewhere. If students knew where to go to get all the information, then it would help the college experience be more enjoyable. I am always wondering if I forgot to do something I should of….I hear that from other students. Is there a general student letter on the web?

There is no sense of community at all here at USM. At Orono, we got an email every morning of all the events going on during the day…like lectures, seminars, games, barbeques, dances, sports events, and special events….everything. If your email wasn’t working or for some reason you didn’t get it…there were flyers in every building that you could pick up so that you didn’t miss anything. Here, you have to hear from other students and only if you are in the right place at the right time. If you wonder why events are not well attended, perhaps that’s the problem. Ask any student!

A daily or even weekly newspaper or flyer would be helpful telling us what’s happening would be very helpful. I agree with the other students, information is difficult to get around here. I missed several opportunities; I would have liked to go an event at the campus center last week but didn’t attend because I didn’t know about it until after it was done.

From my perspective, the faculty are so traditional and don’t know anything about email or websites. They rarely can tell you anything going on, they rarely are involved with students beyond the classroom. It was very different at my other school, the faculty encouraged students to be involved continuously.

Information is definitely difficult to obtain around here. Nothing is clear, and it’s hard to figure out where to go to get answers to questions. There should be a Transfer Student information office or something like that. My other college had an office that dealt with transfer students only.

6) Do you feel connected to USM? Academic life? Student life?

I am connected to the music students because I see them all of the time. But, unfortunately, I am a junior and I have to be in a freshmen dorm because I am a new student. So I am surrounded by the freshmen students who are all excited that they don’t live with their parents any more. They want to party all of the time and stay up all night, and they have a different
focus on life than I do, so it makes it tough to be friends with them….I already went through that part of my life and now I am more serious about my major.

It is hard to feel connected because I came to USM in the middle of my degree program and it is harder to get to know others at this point.

I would say I am not feeling very connected. Just want to get my degree and get out. Its unfortunate, but faculty are so disconnected with students outside of the classroom and sometimes even in the classroom. Regarding student life, not sure what that is at this school.

Its nice to have a student center where students can get together and talk, its just too bad that there is no encouragement to go there between classes to meet faculty and other students. At my other school, there was no student center, but there was such a feeling of connection between faculty and other students. Quite a different feeling here.

No real connection. I am serious about my studies and want a career life, but find it hard to feel connected. There really is not many warm feelings in the air.

I have taken 10 courses here so far, and I had only one faculty who used email to contact students. At Orono, faculty give out email addresses to students so that we can ask questions at any time. We got to know faculty well, and they were helpful. Here, faculty need to get updated with web and email, that is our future!

Feeling connected, hardly!

The good part of USM is that the class size is usually pretty small, at least with most of the upper level courses. Small class size makes me feel more connected to USM because at least you get to know most of the students in the class. The relationships with faculty are hardly what you call relationships or mentors.

I work and take classes, so I am busy all of the time. I try to connect with other students and faculty before and after classes, but I only have a short period of time before going to work. Its hard to connect at USM, unless you don’t work and have all kinds of time.

I lived in the freshmen dorm my first semester here at USM, when I was a transfer student. It’s so degrading, because freshmen students and upper-level students have a completely different focus. There should be a residence area for newly admitted transfer students, especially since I hear that USM is full of transfer students.
7) Are there services USM should offer to transfer students that would improve their experience?

 Maybe there could be some special events for first year transfer students. Then, we could meet other transfer students who are serious about their studies, and what they like to do for fun, and find others who have similar interests, but not necessarily the same major.

 Transfer students are treated like first time freshmen around here, instead of realizing that we have been to college before and know some of the basic stuff. We just need to know the dates and descriptions of various events (from social event dates to pre-registration dates).

 Like I mentioned before, an information bulletin would improve the experiences a lot; then getting involved on the campus would not be such a chore.

 Improving the whole transfer process and giving us a guide to follow would have improved my college experience greatly; along with information about how to contact staff and faculty and where to go to get to know other students.

 Providing a daily information source would be helpful. A list of contacts and where to go to ask questions about how we can get credits for what we have already learned.

 There should be a map of where courses are located. Some rooms on the Gorham campus are hard to find. I had a course that was moved after the first week to a room above a locker room, it took me forever to find it because when I asked where it was, not even some of the university staff knew where it was!

 Better communication between departments would help. It is so easy to get misguided information. Just ask anyone regarding the Core Curriculum, you can get a whole set of different answers depending upon who you talk to.

 In general, information about how things work here. Maybe a step-by-step resource saying what the fees are and why we pay them, getting the inside scoop about dorms, and what courses are absolutely essential to take before other courses. The general catalog doesn’t give the real inside lay-out of the university.

 The faculty need to work on being friendly and act like they like their teaching jobs. Some faculty are so rude and don’t respect students. I am a non-traditional student and have different needs than younger students.
Printing costs at the computer labs are ridiculous, we do pay a technology fee that should cover these costs. Electronic reserves at the library are inaccessible. USM needs to shift their culture to more technological-based. USM is still in the dark ages when it comes to technology.

8) What are your educational goals while at USM? How well do you understand your role in achieving these goals?

I have a specific goal and that is to get a music education degree. I have no doubt that I will achieve it at USM, it will be easier if I have a good experience along the way.

My goal is to get my degree. I think I know what I have to do to get it. I think you just go to your major department and ask them what I need to graduate. The problem is sometimes they don’t have all the information you need.

My educational goals are to become an RN. But, I noticed I can’t get a minor in Psychology. If you can get a major in a field, why can’t you get a minor?

Other than get my degree, I would like to do an assistantship or an internship with a faculty member.

I would like to do some field experience in my major, but so far I haven’t heard that USM provides courses that are of that type. This is a goal of mine, also to do an internship of some kind to get some more experience.

I have a self-designed major and getting a degree this way is challenging. I can tell that USM doesn’t deal well with students setting up their own agenda. In my previous school, combining several majors into a new major was a self-designed degree and it was do-able. But, here the dynamics are a bit challenging and uncertain because options are limited.

My primary goals are obviously to get my bachelors, but my secondary goals are to open myself up to other opportunities of growth.

My goals are to find out if my educational goals are the right ones for me. Talking to faculty about careers would be helpful. At my previous college, they had career days in which faculty participated and talked about careers in a particular field.
To accomplish my goals is why I am here…the degree, of course. It would be better if the college experiences were enjoyable along the way. So far, most things are going well and I can see that my goal is reachable.

More courses online would be helpful in fulfilling my educational goals. The web is a great source and very un-utilized on this campus. Courses online can provide other opportunities for students.

I think I just want to get my degree and I will do anything to get it and get out of college. I would like to have a good experience and enjoy my college life until I have my goals completed. But, sometimes, courses are not as enjoyable as you would like. It’s the professors that either get you to enjoy their course or not, if they are just teaching as a routine duty and don’t make you feel that the learning is exciting, then taking courses is a drag. If you get an enthusiastic professor, wow…its makes all the difference!

9) When looking for information about USM, where do you find your information?

It is very difficult to get information about events on campus. If you live on the Gorham campus and most of your courses are in Gorham (like music), then rarely do you find out the events going on in Portland. I missed some really great music and cultural events happening on the Portland campus because it was not advertised on the Gorham campus anywhere.

Information needs to be organized better. Perhaps there are lots of events going on, but it’s too decentralized and you don’t know where to go and what questions to ask. If you ask one of your professors, they don’t even know.

I usually go to the web for information, because that is how my other school was. You could get all your questions answered just by searching the school’s website. Here, the website is confusing and not very friendly, it doesn’t really provide any crucial information.

It’s like pulling teeth to get information, no one knows anything ahead of time, so you can’t plan your schedule until the last minute.

**(Answers were the same as question #5. Students revealed that obtaining information is difficult and it causes problems in meeting both academic needs regarding faculty and social needs. Students did not see any difference in questions #5 and #9).**
10) Do you participate in student activities outside of the classroom?
Why/why not? Tell us what student activities you would participate in if offered at USM?

Yes, I like to participate in social activities, but it's hard to find out about them. Is there a calendar of events?

I would if I knew about activities ahead of time. I would have liked to go to a dance and meet people, but I didn't know about it until I heard from other students.

If we knew where the activities outside of the classroom were, then I would participate. Don't know much about the club or student organizations to be involved.

I would be more involved in other student activities, but right now, I am in the athletics program and there is not much I have time for. I guess if I knew ahead of time what is also offered here, then I could do some juggling between classes, my sports program, and other student activities.

I live in the dorm, but parties go on all of the time...is that all the activities that go on outside of the classroom. Very little options.

I think each major should provide an information flyer for that area, or assistantship information for that major, or special events with other students in the major. There is nothing really offered for the history major; any organizations or events that I know of. When I ask, no one knows.

I get involved when I can and if I see any advertisements for activities besides classroom stuff. But, there is no way of finding out what the monthly activities are, who is the coordinator for student activities and functions? What office do you go to if you want to find out if there is a social event for students?

If I knew what the activities were ahead of time, then I would try to get work hours that would make me available to be more involved. If there is nothing to get involved in, I might as well work.