

Why so many college students decide to transfer

By **Valerie Strauss** January 29

Going through the college admissions process once can be emotionally wrenching — but more than a third of students choose to do it again. A [2015 report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) found that more than a third of college students transfer and that nearly half of those do it more than once.

In this post, a college counselor explains the reasons why so many students are choosing to move. This was written by Brennan Barnard, director of college counseling at the Derryfield School, a private college preparatory day school for grades 6-12 in Manchester, N.H.

By Brennan Barnard

“The best four years of your life!” How often I heard this refrain when I was a senior in high school. By the time move-in day arrived, I was convinced that my college experience would be day after day of fun, excitement and meaningful interactions with classmates and professors. Spoiler alert: it was not.

The first semester was especially hard. After the honeymoon period of novelty and independence subsided, harsh and nagging questions crept in. Did I fit in with these people? [Was I good enough?](#) How could this possibly be the “best four years”? Indeed, was I at the wrong college altogether?

We live in an age of immediacy and instant gratification. If we have a question, we Google it. If we are lost, we ask Siri. Change and adaptation happens overnight and if something is not right, it is easy to start over. In a fast paced, 24/7 unlimited-access world we seem to be chasing the illusion of perfection. And this is just as true of our expectations of the college search as any other realm of society.

January marks a time of transition — a new year and new opportunities. For many college students, the transition on their minds is to a different college. A [2015 report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) found that 37.2 percent of college students changed schools at least once within six years, and of these, 45 percent changed their institution more than once.

This is the month when increasingly my colleagues in high school counseling and I start to get calls, emails and visits from college freshmen searching for a new home. What is behind this uptick in transfer requests? Here are some theories:

Mindset: Persistence, resilience, tenacity, grit, call it what you may but it seems to be increasingly rare. As parents try to protect their children from failure and disappointment, students often arrive at college without having had the opportunity to fall out of the nest and rise again. With this delayed adolescence comes an unwillingness to persevere in the face of adversity and a belief that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence.

The early bird gets to squirm: With ever increasing selectivity and the prevalence of colleges filling their incoming classes with over 50 percent of binding Early Decision applicants and the push towards Early Action applications, students are being forced into decisions that they might not otherwise be ready to make. A lot of growth happens between September and April of senior year and when students are encouraged to “lock-in” by October to increase their admission chances, it hobbles this opportunity. As a result, students sometimes find themselves poorly situated and wondering “what if?”

Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat...Oh My: My 10-year-old son once described Facebook as “a social media chat room where you can share evidence that your life is more exciting than everyone else’s.” This is dangerous when applied to college engagement and happiness. When students see their friends post pictures and videos of college fun and excitement, it provides an unbalanced perspective on that experience. What are not as immediately apparent is the doubt and loneliness that is equally prevalent. Instantly students assume that they are at the wrong school.

Hyper-connectivity: Twenty years ago, in a pre-email and cellphone world, one went to college and likely did not hear from high school friends until the holidays. It was just assumed that everyone else was loving college. Today’s college students are so connected that often they are disconnected. It is hard to be present and engaged in a new community when one can default to the comfort of texting and chatting with established friends and family.

The specialists: Whether because of an unstable job market, parental pressure or otherwise, graduating high school students are often under the impression that they must know what they will do with their life. These pre-professional college students choose a school based on the reputation of a specific program or because of the medical school acceptance rate, only to discover that this is not their calling. When an engineering student realizes that college physics at their technical institute is unlike the course they loved in high school and he would prefer to study philosophy, options are limited. I encourage high school students to find opportunities to shadow a professional or participate in an internship as a way to preview the field they are considering.

The Full Monty: In an effort to market, colleges are in a race to boost application numbers and students are sold on rock walls and other frivolous amenities. When students arrive on campus and the “campy” excitement of orientation ends, suddenly they realize that they have to go to class. The reality of college — with tests, labs, and all-nighters — is exposed and often it doesn’t look like it did in the informational video or admission brochure. This can leave students feeling disillusioned and unsure of themselves.

College 101: Often the largest, most impersonal classes are taken freshman year, as college students take prerequisites and fulfill general education credits. Students coming from high school classes of less than 25 find themselves in lectures of over 100 students — even at the smallest colleges. The close relationships they might have had with teachers are not as immediately available and first-year students can feel uninspired. This is less an indication of school choice and more a matter of experience. After all, as ninth graders in high school it is unlikely the learning was as deep and engaging as it was in twelfth grade.

Sidelined: It is no secret that some youth sports have spun out of control. Young children are playing a single sport year-round and some college recruitment begins before high school has even started. Strong athletes are wooed by college coaches and encouraged to make verbal commitments pre-puberty. When a student chooses a college in her sophomore year without the benefit of two years of maturity, it is not surprising when, in retrospect, she questions her decision. Often coaches change jobs and team dynamics shift. Furthermore, when the star high school athlete finds himself watching from the bench his first year in college, the sport that gave him such joy can quickly spoil the college experience and his sense of self.

Show me the money: Spoiler alert...college is not cheap! In fact, unexpected costs — on top of soaring tuition bills — frequently catch students off guard. What initially seemed like an investment worthy of assuming significant debt can suddenly seem like a poor decision. The value proposition of a high-priced degree was great in theory but financial realities can lead to a reckoning.

Are there valid reasons to transfer colleges? Absolutely, and there are valid reasons to resist a rush to judgment. Where does the responsibility for this transference trend lie? With all of us — students, educators, parents and a culture that is discomfort adverse.

My advice is to invest. Instead of fixating on the aspects of one's college that are disappointing, make a concerted effort to identify the positive. Seize opportunities to become involved, engage peers and seek out professors. Enroll in courses that are genuinely interesting and not just fulfilling requirements. Try something new and be present. Give it time — months not weeks. Grow into it rather than merely react to it. Finally, manage expectations and embrace the experience.

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog. [Follow @valeriestrauss](#)

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