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# Meeting Transfer Students Where They Are: A New Organizational Approach to Transfer Student Communication, Support, and Recruitment

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# MEETING TRANSFER STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE: A NEW ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH TO TRANSFER STUDENT COMMUNICATION, SUPPORT, AND RECRUITMENT

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

MEETING TRANSFER STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE: A NEW ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH TO TRANSFER STUDENT COMMUNICATION, SUPPORT, AND RECRUITMENT

Transfer students have long played a significant role in the growth and diversity of colleges and universities. Recent research points to a continuous decline in enrollment over the coming decade (Kelderman, Gardner, & Conley, 2019), and as tuition costs continue to increase and enrollment numbers decrease, institutions of higher education have begun turning to transfer students to fill their lecture halls and football stadiums. A key variable in higher education's transfer recruitment blind spot is a fundamental lack of understanding of the structural and organizational changes needed to both attract and retain these non-traditional students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). For too long, leadership in higher education has operated under the assumption that the ingredients for recruiting and enrolling prospective transfer students are largely consistent with the strategies and practices used in the recruitment of an incoming freshmen class. While these strategies may produce a consistent and reliable yield of transfer students, it falls short of producing the type of wholesale change needed for institutions to leverage transfer students as a tool for growing enrollment.

KEYWORDS: Transfer Students, advising, higher education recruitment,

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DEDICATION

*To my wife and daughter who always make everything brighter.*

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Transfer students have long played a significant role in the growth and diversity of colleges and universities. Recent research points to a continuous decline in enrollment over the coming decade (Kelderman, Gardner, & Conley, 2019), and as tuition costs continue to increase and enrollment numbers decrease, institutions of higher education have begun turning to transfer students to fill their lecture halls and football stadiums. While these reforms have aided in stemming the tide of enrollment deficits in the short term, they have fallen short of producing the type of sustainable transfer recruitment strategy necessary to foster meaningful enrollment growth over the long term.

A key variable in higher education's transfer recruitment blind spot is a fundamental lack of understanding of the structural and organizational changes needed to both attract and retain these non-traditional students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). For too long, leadership in higher education has operated under the assumption that the ingredients for recruiting and enrolling prospective transfer students are largely consistent with the strategies and practices used in the recruitment of an incoming freshmen class. While these strategies may produce a consistent and reliable yield of transfer students, it does little for universities that are becoming increasingly reliant on these non-traditional student populations and looking to rapidly expand their transfer student classes.

This study will focus on the transfer recruitment strategies at the University of Cincinnati, a major metropolitan research university that has taken significant steps in recent years to improve advising access and credit evaluation services to prospective transfer students by forming the Transfer and Transition Advising Center (TTAC). While internal data show positive enrollment outcomes for prospective transfer students who utilized the TTAC, less than 6% of prospective transfer students had contact with TTAC advising staff in 2020, thus representing a missed opportunity to utilize the center's resources to their greatest extent.

This problem of practice will be examined using a Mixed Methods Action Research (MMAR) framework (Ivankova, 2008). In the paragraphs to follow the context of this MMAR study will be explored, along with the researcher's role within the organization. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the key stakeholders with whom there lies a vested interest, the steps taken toward diagnosing the overarching problem of practice, and a brief overview of relevant literature surrounding the topic.

**Study Context**

This MMAR study will take place at the University of Cincinnati (UC), a large, research one institution in southwest Ohio. With an undergraduate student population of 34,914, UC is one of the largest public universities in the state of Ohio and has steadily increased its undergraduate enrollment over the past five years (Office of Institutional Research). Under the leadership of President Neville Pinto, UC has pursued a bold and expansive *Next Lives Here* initiative that seeks to improve the academic experience of UC's student population. A critical piece of this initiative has become known as "Bearcat Promise," a strategic plan to "create an ecosystem that proactively assists students in discovering their path and obtaining the skills, knowledge, and experiences to achieve personal success" (Next Lives Here).

As part of an advising needs assessment conducted in 2016, the University of Cincinnati advising community identified transfer students as a specific population that needed additional support from the University (Advising and Academic Services). As a direct result, the University created the Transfer and Transition Advising Center (TTAC) which operates under the umbrella of the Office of Enrollment Management. The TTAC houses eleven full-time staff members, including seven academic advisors, one program manager, two assistant directors, one director, and seven part-time student workers. The staff in the TTAC work predominantly with current and prospective transfer students and serve as a support network for the wider university advising community. Because the TTAC is housed under the Office of Enrollment Management and not a specific college like other advising communities, it enjoys the latitude and flexibility to explore creative solutions to the complex problems that face the universities growing transfer population. The TTAC staff report directly to the Assistant Vice Provost of Advising and Academic Services, who oversees and shapes the strategic direction of the UC advising community.

The TTAC serves as an entrance point for all prospective and incoming transfer students. While the advisors within the TTAC do not carry a structured caseload of students, they serve as a central resource for all questions related to transfer. The TTAC has a significant stake in transfer student success in that they measure success in the quality of service offered to transfer students at UC and the college experience that these students have once they matriculate to the University. To that end, the TTAC staff schedule in-person, phone, and video appointments with current and prospective transfer students to evaluate credit, explore potential options for a major and identify the obstacles to transferring to UC. In addition to individual advising, the TTAC staff also develop regular programming and events marketed to transfer students and serve as a secondary communication arm to prospective transfer students in conjunction with the Office of Admissions.

As part of the *Next Lives Here* initiative, the University of Cincinnati plans to continue to expand its undergraduate student population and has specifically identified transfers and non-traditional students as playing a crucial role in the future growth of the University (Next Lives

Here). With its position under the Office of Enrollment Management and expertise in transfer advising, the TTAC is poised to play a significant role in the growth of the University transfer population in years to come.

***Stakeholders***

Participatory research and stakeholders are key elements in any action research study. As such, Ivankova (2015) argues that "decisions about data collection should be made jointly with those who have the insight and the firsthand experience with the studies problem" (p. 209). While it may be convenient to rely on the expertise and opinions of a few well-positioned stakeholders, to ensure that the data collected are of the utmost quality, the researcher must branch out to all relevant parties.

The first stakeholder in this action research study is the assistant vice provost of Advising Services at the University of Cincinnati. The assistant vice provost is a singular voice in the strategic direction of enrollment management and is responsible for the flow of information from upper-level administration down to the front-line staff. In addition to the vice provost's role within enrollment management, the vice provost also works closely and supervises a large and diverse cross-section of the enrollment management team. As one of the leading figures within enrollment management, the Assistant Vice Provost of Advising controls the flow of information from the University of Cincinnati to prospective transfer students.

Two additional stakeholders who play a central role in this MMAR study are the director and assistant directors within the TTAC. The TTAC Assistant Director supervises the front-line advisors and oversees the day-to-day operations of the TTAC and the various events that the advising unit provides for the University's transfer student population. The TTAC Director supervises the other assistant directors within the office and plans the strategic direction and allocation of departmental resources.

A third stakeholder group for this study is the front-facing advisors within the TTAC. These five advisors work primarily with prospective and current transfer students at UC and serve as a first point of contact for nearly all prospective transfer students. Due to the amount of direct communication that these advisors have with current and prospective transfer students, the TTAC advising staff are in a unique position to identify common questions, concerns, and trends among prospective transfer students, thus representing an important resource in any plan for enrollment growth or improvements to applicant communication.

A fourth stakeholder group in this study is the transfer mentors, a group of current UC transfer students who work closely with the TTAC staff to improve the transfer student experience at the University of Cincinnati. The transfer mentors are an invaluable resource to the TTAC in that they have had first-hand experience of the transfer process at UC and can share insight into their own experiences during the application and enrollment process.

A final stakeholder group that plays a significant role in the recruitment and eventual enrollment of prospective transfer students are the admissions counselors housed under the Office of Enrollment Management. The admissions team consists of 13 full-time admissions counselors, five regional enrollment coordinators, three assistant directors, and two directors. As a unit, the admissions staff oversee all prospective undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati and provide answers to all admissions and enrollment questions. The admissions office works hand in hand with the TTAC in that they frequently refer academic-related questions to the TTAC advising team and play an important role in connecting transfer students with an academic advisor.

***Researcher Role***

At the time of the diagnosis phase of this MMAR study, I served as a senior academic advisor in the TTAC at UC. In my role as a senior advisor, I provided resources and advisement to prospective transfer students, students changing their majors, and non-matriculated students. In addition to advising responsibilities, I worked closely with enrollment management leaders on graduation and retention strategies, advisor assessment, and contact tracing and impact for the TTAC. I also supervised and ran the TTAC Transfer Mentor program, which employs seven part-time student workers who provide support and programming for transfer students. During the course of the study, I was promoted to the position of assistant director of advising, and currently supervise all of the academic advisors housed on the University of Cincinnati main campus.

Due to my work with advising assessment, transfer programming, and data analytics, I am in a unique position to regularly engage with transfer students and develop an understanding of the problems they face, as well as view those problems within the context of the wider undergraduate student population. As a supervisor of transfer student workers and front-line advisors, I interact daily with transfer students to develop programming and communication strategies that are tailored to the unique needs of transfer students. Finally, as an academic advisor who regularly fields phone calls, emails, and in-person and virtual advising appointments with current and prospective transfer students, I witnessed firsthand the struggles that this student population has when making the transition from their previous institution to UC.

While my role as a front-line advisor and supervisor aids in my general understanding of transfer student needs, my most impactful work lies within how I track and measure the impact of TTAC services. As part of my senior responsibilities within the TTAC, I have taken a leading role in tracking appointment contacts and “touchpoints” between front-line advisors and prospective transfer students. I have developed a way for the TTAC advisors to track the number of advising touchpoints in the form of transfer credit evaluations and unscheduled phone appointments to gain a more accurate understanding of how many prospective transfer students utilize the resources of the TTAC.

In this study, my role will include developing surveys for prospective transfer students and conducting an in-depth review of institutional data on the Fall 2020 prospective transfer student class. Based on observations and findings during reconnaissance, my role will also include the organization and management of an action plan aimed at improving communication and marketing strategies employed by the TTAC to increase the percentage of prospective transfer students who utilize the advising resources offered by the TTAC.

**Mixed Method Action Research Framework**

Mixed methods action research provides many benefits to social science researchers, chief among them being the ability to move beyond mere numbers to investigate the often-hidden motivations of respondents. This additional step allows researchers to develop a more confident summary of findings that would have otherwise relied heavily on assumptions of quantitative data alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Furthermore, decades of mixed methods action research studies have demonstrated the flexibility of the design and its adaptability to an ever-widening list of educational disciplines (Tashakkori and Cresswell, 2008).

This study utilized an MMAR Framework (Ivankova, 2015: Figure 1.1) that included six phases. The diagnosis phase is an important first step in the MMAR process in that it provides the researcher with an initial level of confidence that a problem exists within his or her work environment. It provides the opportunity to explore the problem in greater detail through informal conversations with stakeholders, a brief review of relevant literature, and ultimately develop an initial plan to remedy the problem of practice.

Based on the identification of the problem of practice, the next phase is reconnaissance. In this phase, a more well-rounded understanding of the problem is established. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered to understand the problem at hand and allow for the formulation of an intervention to address the problem. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data during the reconnaissance phase “helps generate more thorough interpretations of the assessment results and create meta-inferences that inform the development of the plan of action/intervention (Ivankova, 2008, p. 62).

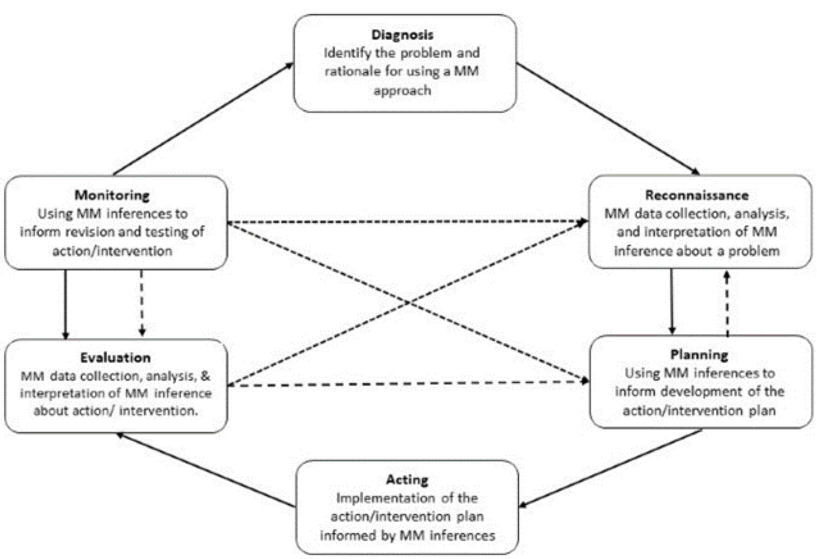
Following the reconnaissance phase is the planning phase, where the researcher will “critically reflect on the meta-inferences that were generated as a result of conducting a mixed methods preliminary assessment of the issue” (Ivankova, 2008, p. 62). The planning phase also represents the first opportunity for the researcher to set goals and objectives for the intervention and begin designing an action plan to address the underlying problem of practice.
Immediately following the completion of the planning phase is the acting phase, where the researcher will utilize the meta-inferences gleaned during the previous MMAR phases to implement an action/intervention to address the problem of practice. The acting phase is a crucial step in the MMAR process in that it allows the researcher the opportunity to address/fix an underlying problem within his or her organization. The proper execution of the acting phase is essential to the overall effectiveness of the broader MMAR study.

The acting phase is followed up by the evaluation phase, where the researcher critically reflects on the action/intervention’s relative success and impact. The evaluation phase is key in that it allows the researcher to measure projected outcomes and whether or not the stated objectives and goals initially set out in the planning phase were met. According to Ivankova (2008), "The use of mixed methods during the evaluation phase involves collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and interpretation of the integrated quantitative and qualitative results" (p. 62).

The final phase in the MMAR process is the monitoring phase, where the researcher will evaluate all of the new data collected from the acting and evaluation phases and determine whether or not any further changes need to be made to the underlying action/intervention. At this point in the MMAR process, the researcher will ultimately decide whether changes need to be made to the action/intervention; if additional reconnaissance collection is necessary to better understand the problem of practice; or if the current action plan is working and can proceed as is.

**Figure 1**

*MMAR Design Template*



## Diagnostic Phase: Problem of Practice

Ivankova (2015) argues that the diagnosis phase of an MMAR study centers on conceptualizing the study by identifying the problem area, reviewing relevant literature on the topic, developing a plan of action, and specifying the study's plan and intended outcomes. The diagnostic phase is a critical step in any MMAR study in that it provides the justification for the subsequent reconnaissance phase and sets the expectations for the resulting study design and research objectives. For this study, sources used to identify the problem of practice included conversations with stakeholders, a review of institutional data, and a review of relevant literature on the topics of transfer student recruitment, communication, advising, community and admissions trends.

### *Conversations with Stakeholders*

Weekly meetings with TTAC staff members and regular advising appointments with prospective transfer students have offered valuable insight into how the University of Cincinnati communicates with transfer students, and the types of information this population is looking for during the transfer process. TTAC staff meetings allowed time for the entire staff to come together and discuss university-wide initiatives aimed at transfer students and discuss ways in which the TTAC can market itself to reach a greater number of these students. Throughout 2019, the TTAC had been actively considering rebranding itself and changing its name (previously the Center for Pathways Advising and Student Success – CPASS). While CPASS encapsulated the different resources offered by the office, internal surveys conducted back in 2019 of current transfer students and conversations with other departments on campus revealed that very few students knew CPASS existed, and even fewer had an accurate understanding of the resources offered, thus, a name change to TTAC was established at the end of 2019.

TTAC staff have also proven to be a valuable resource in keeping a finger on the pulse of prospective transfer students and the various questions and concerns they have. Regular meetings with TTAC advisors revealed trending questions among prospective transfer students and have provided valuable insight into the current communication strategies employed by the center. Furthermore, any significant changes in traffic of prospective transfer students will directly impact the day-to-day work of TTAC front-line academic advisors. Their advice and consideration proved vital to this study's action plan.

***Institutional Data***

Institutional data also played a significant role in identifying the underlying problem of practice in that it has revealed a disconnect between the TTAC and the students they serve. These data include student surveys of the undergraduate student population that revealed that while close to 90% of surveyed student agreed that the University of Cincinnati needed an office dedicated to transfer and transition students, less than 10% had a clear understanding that the TTAC was created to assume that role.

Similar trends have emerged through the prospective student appointment and contact tracking that the TTAC records on a weekly and monthly basis. The TTAC tracks virtual, phone, in-person, and email appointments with all current and prospective transfer students and initial estimates of prospective student contacts reveal that while the TTAC advertises itself as a resource to all incoming transfer students, the center only interacts with around 6% of the incoming transfer class.

A final piece of institutional data that points to the lack of visibility of the TTAC at the University of Cincinnati came from attendance numbers at the various social and professional development events the TTAC regularly hosts throughout the year. These events were explicitly advertised to confirmed transfer students every Tuesday, throughout the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters. While the TTAC invested a considerable amount of time and resources and advertised these events to the entire transfer population at the University of Cincinnati, attendance was often exceedingly low and fell well short of expectations.

***Relevant Literature***

The literature review for this study was conducted using primarily online research databases through the University of Kentucky Library website. The ProQuest Education Database, the Chronicle of Higher Education Database, the Education Resources Information Center and the Journal for Marketing in Higher Education were the primary databases used for the initial literature review. These resources provided a good foundation for initial research on the transfer student experience and how colleges and universities communicate and structure themselves around the needs of transfer students. To obtain a more thorough review of existing literature, the search was expanded to other databases, including InfoKat and the general article search tool on the University of Kentucky and University of Cincinnati library websites. The keywords predominantly used for this review included: transfer students, transfer experience, transfer programming, transfer enrollment, transfer student communication, university transfer students, and non-traditional student enrollment. The research was primarily limited to studies conducted from 2000-2019. Bibliographies of other closely related studies were also used as a resource to identify other potential research strands.

Much of the literature surrounding transfer students explores the differences between non-traditional students and their more traditional “legacy” student counterparts (Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Britt & Hirt, 1999). While understanding the characteristics of transfer students is undoubtedly important to any study aimed at improving communication strategies, it is just one of several pieces to the puzzle that is the prospective transfer student. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explore the unique needs of transfer students, how institutions can best communicate with prospective transfer students, and finally, how institutions can better structure and market themselves to meet the needs of this specific population.

The unique needs of transfer students is discussed frequently in the literature, and while a paucity of research on the transfer student experience was available in the 1990s and early 2000s, the topic began to appear in the literature more frequently in the mid-2000's onward. This timeframe matches the slow decline of enrollment nationwide and the sharp increases in overall tuition costs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This increase in research might be attributed to the demand within higher education to uncover strategies aimed at growing enrollment numbers in an age of wealth disparity and fewer graduating high school seniors. One of the most widely published researchers in this area is Dr. Barbara Townsend. Townsend's work has focused on topics such as transfer student neglect, partnership programs between community colleges and 4-year schools, and the transition experiences of non-traditional students entering 4-year colleges and universities.

When exploring the needs of transfer students, a topic that emerges time and again is the importance of advising. Institutional data at the University of Cincinnati uncovered that academic advising was among the top priorities of the undergraduate student population and a thorough review of the literature reflects these needs in prospective transfer students as well

(Allen, Smith, Cathleen, Muehleck, Jeanette, 2014; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Britt & Hirt, 1999; Chinn-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Harbin, 1997; Otis & Cooper, 2014, Ghosh, Javalgi, & Whipple, 2008). Perhaps the most critical advising that transfer students need is a thorough evaluation of their credit and how it applies to the various programs the receiving institution offers. Ott and Cooper (2014) reinforce the importance of credit evaluation and applicability to the academic decisions of transfer students. Their review of transfer enrollment practices revealed that “many colleges provide degree-specific transfer credit evaluations only after students commit to attend the institution by making a nonrefundable deposit-typically of several hundred dollars – to hold their place in the incoming class” (p. 15). While these strategies may make financial sense, they are not “transfer-friendly” practices and fall short of providing the proactive advising prospective transfer students are looking for when making the often-difficult decision to change academic institutions.

While there are certainly some financial implications associated with providing individualized advising resources to prospective transfer applicants, the literature speaks to the potential benefits these services could offer enrollment managements bottom line. While the majority of transfer student efforts and resources have centered on community college partnerships, articulation agreements and transfer admissions representatives, Don Hossler and Bob Bontrager argue that trailblazing universities “will not only provide information via admission staff but will include university advisors to provide students with on-the-spot guidance toward university course requirements” (133).

While advising has emerged as a critical need among prospective transfer students, it is far from the only consideration for enrollment management leaders. Many peer-reviewed studies have also explored the transfer student experience concerning feeling welcome and being treated in a way that is reflective of their experiences (Townsend, 1995; Townsend, 2006; Townsend, 2008; Townley, Katz, Wandersman, Skiles, Schillaci, Timmerman, Mousseau, 2013). The literature points to the fact that transfer students are very different from their freshmen counterparts and want to be treated accordingly (Townsend, 2008). There exists a good deal of scholarly research on the importance of higher education institutions to develop an educational structure that is inclusive of the changing student populations on university campuses – specifically the growth of transfer and non-traditional students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Laanan, Starobin, Eggleston, 2010; Townley, Katz, Wandersman, Skiles, Schillaci, Timmerman, Mousseau, 2013; Wardley, Belanger, & Leonard, 2013). Enrollment management leaders and front-line advisors who work with transfer students would be well advised to be very careful with the communication strategies they use to connect with prospective students, as these students place a great deal of importance on how they are perceived by the schools to whom they are applying.

The connection formed between a prospective transfer student and the schools to which they are applying is essential to that student's eventual enrollment. Colleges and universities who are trying to increase their transfer enrollment must recognize that students do not take the decision to transfer lightly and are often making the decision because of unfortunate circumstances that are beyond their control. Consequently, the transfer student population is a vulnerable one, and establishing a genuine social and academic connection with another university is a crucial step in their decision-making process. One of the preeminent authors on the subject of mattering and its connection to social transitions is Nancy Schlossberg. In a 2011 study on the challenges associated with making transitions in life, Schlossberg observes that "transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p.149). She further contends that it is not necessarily the transition itself that adds stress and complications to our lives but instead the disruption to our routine and the unfamiliarity with the unknowns. Consequently, by properly preparing and having a transition plan in place, people can avoid many of the hardships associated with changes in our lives.

Another important component in the relative success of growing and sustaining a large transfer population is an effective communication network between prospective students and university representatives. Communication emerges as a critical topic in the literature on transfer enrollment, and numerous authors have drawn a link between communication strategies and positive transfer outcomes (Johnston, 2010; Monroe, 2006; Sutton, 2016). Due to the relatively modest size of most transfer classes at large universities, seldom are there communication plans that are tailored directly to these populations. Instead, most universities tweak existing communication strategies targeted towards the incoming freshmen class so that it uses language that is more consistent with transfer students. In the past 10-15 years the communication flow from colleges and universities to prospective transfer students has changed dramatically and university communication over websites and social media are playing a bigger and bigger role in higher education’s recruitment strategies (Saichaie & Morphew, Shields, Peruta, 2018). Adopting a marketing and communication plan for specific student populations can be a daunting task for institutions of higher education, as it would require a nimble and adaptable admissions structure that is largely foreign to large, traditional research universities. Despite this, recent research has found that university marketing strategies can identify the unique characteristics of prospective student populations and tailor a communication and marketing plan accordingly and that such strategies have the potential for very positive enrollment benefits (Ghosh, Javalgi, & Whipple, 2008). Researchers further point to the fact that universities must not only identify the differing prospective populations they are recruiting, but also recognize the ways in which students are making decisions. Students have a very complex decision-making process and while it may be helpful from a communication and marketing standpoint to assume that competition stems from a handful of geographically close regional institutions, in reality, the competition within higher education is much more complex and dynamic (Dawes & Brown, 2005).

The trouble with not adapting a communication plan specific to transfer students is that it implies to these students that they are no different from their freshmen counterparts. As was discussed in previous paragraphs, transfer students are cognizant of how they are perceived by their receiving institution (Townsend, 2008). Consequently, how enrollment management teams communicate with prospective transfer students will play a large role in whether they eventually enroll. Conversations with enrollment management leaders at transfer friendly schools reveals an individualized approach to transfer student recruitment and underscores the importance of recognizing that each prospective student's situation is different, and there exists no silver bullet to satisfy the needs of all transfer students (Sutton, 2018).

The best practices in marketing and recruiting prospective transfer students is to avoid treating them like they are interchangeable cogs. It has been established that transfer students are very different from their freshmen student counterparts with regards to demographics, decision-making, and motivations. However, perhaps the biggest challenge facing enrollment management leaders and existing recruitment efforts surrounding transfer students is the relative recruitment and application windows that exist for these students. Don Hossler and Bob Bontrager (2014) underscore that for transfer students, "the enrollment funnel operates different from the typical first-year student funnel and follows a different timeline. The first-year funnel has traditionally been wide at the prospect stage, narrowing from inquiry to application. The transfer funnel is much narrower with a substantial number of applicants for whom the original source is the application itself" (131). Due to these fundamental differences, traditional recruitment methods often fall short of reaching transfer students, as their application timelines differ so drastically.

While the practice of transfer specific recruiting efforts is scarce across the higher education landscape, it is by no means completely uncharted territory and best practices can be found in the literature related to strategic enrollment management. Hossler and Bontrager (2014) surmise that while there exists some question as to who exactly should be assisting prospective transfer students (i.e., sending vs. receiving institutions and admissions vs. advising offices), "several studies [have] found that neither institution does enough in [their] capacity and instead, the student frequently relies on his or her ability to advocate and/or investigate on their own" (132). Consequently, colleges and universities that can break this mold will often foster a better transfer student recruitment pipeline.

One of the most important resources in the marketing and recruitment of prospective transfer students are the college and university websites that are created to provide information and funnel prospective applicants to the resources they require. Ersin Caglar and Ahmet Mentes (2012) contend that "the university website is not only a cost efficient and timely method to communicate with various stakeholders, it is also a way for an institution to shape its image" (23). While for decades the higher education competitive landscape has centered on campus beautification and investments in on-campus student services, in the past several years, colleges and universities have increasingly invested in online programs and digital resources that expand access and afford flexibility to both its existing student population, as well as those prospective students interested in attending, as “prospective students may be more likely to apply to a university if the insightful communication is presented clearly and [correctly] on the university website” (23).

It comes as no surprise that most large universities lack a specific communication network or advising approach tailored to transfer students. Indeed, while enrollment numbers have trended downward in recent years, most schools have continued to double down on freshmen recruitment and investment – as this is how most tuition dollars are generated. The reality is that the disconnect between colleges and universities extends beyond the recruitment processes of prospective transfer students and can also be seen through the existing university structure and campus organization. Townsend and Wilson’s (2006) research on the transfer student experience found that "four-year college efforts to facilitate the fit of community college transfer students into the receiving institution have been minor in comparison to efforts to assist first-year students" (p. 454). As a result, transfer students often have a difficult time making social connections at their receiving institutions, ultimately impacting their success and retention. The research of Townsend sets the foundation of our current understanding of the transfer student experience at 4-year universities and the structural challenges universities face when working with this student population.

Institutional fit is a major factor in the decision-making process of transfer students and one of the more common questions to advisors during prospective appointments. The ways in which colleges and universities receive their incoming transfer students is important, as are the assistance programs provided to these students during the onboarding process (Cawthon & Wood-Roof, 2004; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Institutions should work to close the gap between the incoming freshmen experience and that of its transfer population.

While this investment may seem at odds with current university enrollment numbers, the resulting campus culture will be one that is more inclusive and welcoming to the wider prospective transfer population that enrollment management leaders are trying to win over.

**Research Problem Statement**

The University of Cincinnati houses a state-of-the-art transfer resource in the Transfer and Transition Advising Center. However, due to a flawed communication structure, inadequate resources, and a lack of understanding of the relative impact that individualized advising has on transfer student recruitment, only a small fraction of prospective transfer students were aware of the advising resources available to them. Consequently, most prospective transfer students at the University of Cincinnati navigate the process on their own, resulting in stagnant transfer enrollment numbers. Research on university recruitment of prospective transfer students reveals that academic support and advising are key components in the successful recruitment of transfer students (Allen, Smith, Cathleen, Muehleck, Jeanette, 2014; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Britt & Hirt, 1999; Chinn-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Ots & Cooper, 2014). Further research also shows the ways in which colleges and universities communicate and advertise resources to transfer students plays a significant role in igniting interest from prospective students and, more broadly, positive transfer outcomes (Johnston, 2010; Monroe, 2006; Sutton, 2016).

In this study, there was a gap in the current understanding of the specific kind of information that prospective transfer students looked for when initiating an application at the University of Cincinnati. While some research supports proactive advising practices and relationships between universities and local community colleges, there is a paucity of literature on effective ways to market and communicate resources to prospective transfer students from other 4-year colleges or universities – a group that represents the majority of the University of

Cincinnati transfer population. This study sought to discover how prospective students learn about resources at the University of Cincinnati, and the types of resources they found valuable. This allowed enrollment management leaders to market information directly to future prospective students, with the goal of increasing the percentage of prospective transfer students that utilize the resources of the TTAC at the University of Cincinnati.

If successful, the benefits of this MMAR study could be far-reaching. In the short term, the TTAC at the University of Cincinnati may be able to reach a larger percentage of the incoming transfer population, thus helping a larger number of students identify their best-fit major and make informed decisions. In the long-term, a better communication structure, increases in funding and resources, and increased traffic to the TTAC could result in a higher yield of transfer student confirmations to the University of Cincinnati, further securing a steady enrollment stream during a time of strenuous enrollment trends nationwide.

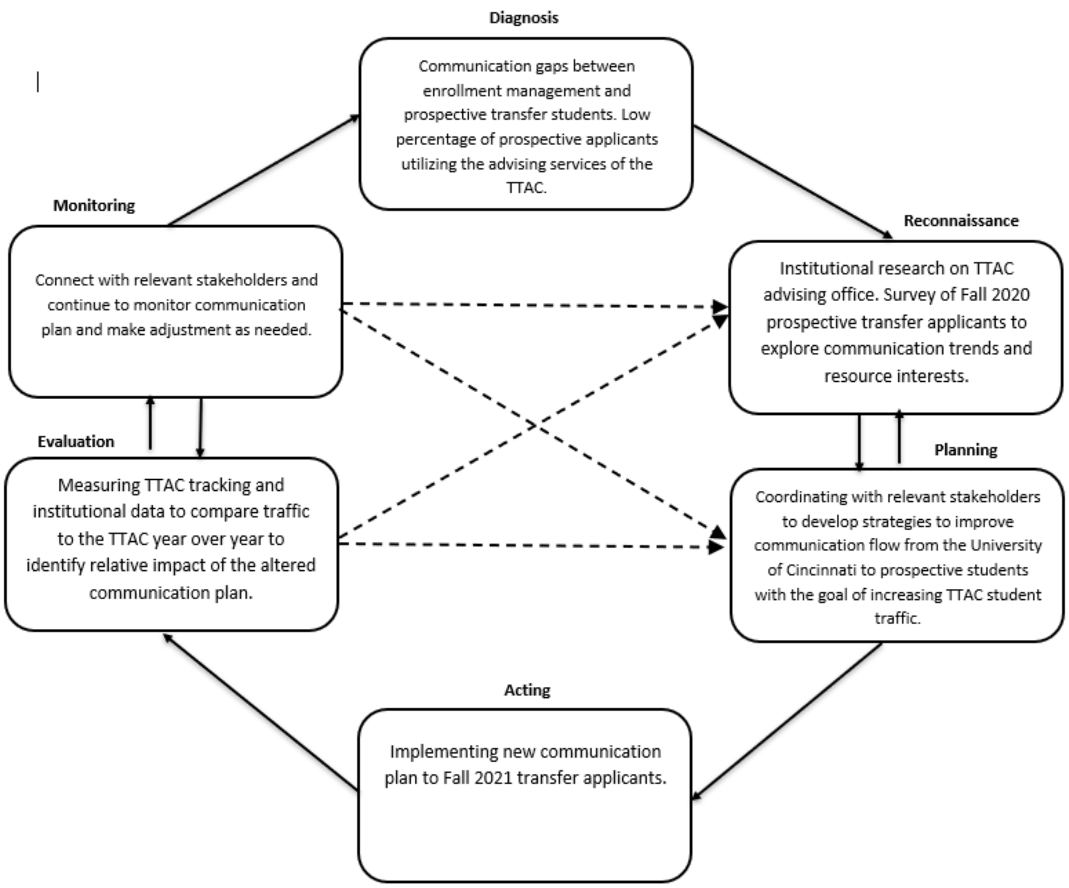
**Study Purpose**

The purpose of this MMAR study (Figure 1.2) was to develop a more effective communication strategy targeted to prospective transfer students at the University of Cincinnati to increase the percentage of prospective students who utilize the resources of the TTAC. The goal of the reconnaissance phase was to identify the percentage of the Fall 2020 prospective class that met with TTAC advisors and identify the questions and concerns these students had throughout the transfer process. This MMAR study utilized a two-stage multistrand design with two concurrent quantitative + qualitative stages to explore the use of the TTAC advising services by prospective transfer students. This quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed to create a better communication strategy targeted to the Fall 2021 prospective transfer student class.

The goal of the evaluation phase of the study is to determine if the TTAC interacted with a larger percentage of the Fall 2021 prospective transfer student class by using a concurrent quantitative + qualitative mixed methods design to collect and analyze qualitative appointment data from TTAC advisors and quantitative survey data from the Fall 2021 prospective student class. The rationale for applying mixed methods in the study is to gain more insight into how prospective transfer students best receive information from the University of Cincinnati and the specific questions or concerns these students had concerning transferring so that it may lead to a more effective problem solution.

***Figure 2***

*MMAR Study Design on Improving Prospective Transfer Communication*



**Ethical Considerations**

When working with student data, it is vitally important to take ethical considerations into account. The Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act sets strict standards on how and when to disclose student information, which will be strictly adhered to in order to safeguard the identity and privacy of any sample student population. This study will also require qualitative and quantitative surveys, which may need IRB approval. Furthermore, due to the wide variety of reasons that students choose to transfer from one school to another, this study will likely involve sensitive material of a personal nature, requiring steps to ensure the privacy of the individuals involved. It is also important to keep all participants and stakeholders informed of the study's progress and updated on any potential changes.

In addition to the ethical considerations afforded to survey participants, it is also important to recognize the overarching relationship between action research and the various human subjects stakeholders that are heavily involved throughout the study. Action research is by its nature a democratic process and relies heavily on input from a wide variety of stakeholders from diagnosis to intervention (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006). In light of this, it was also important to promote ethical practices when working with individuals within my organization, to ensure that any data or input collected from them was protected. All stakeholders were thoroughly briefed on the action research process as a whole, and the specific ways I planned to use their quantitative and qualitative input. All stakeholders were also updated frequently throughout the action research process and promptly informed of any changes or pivots during the various phase designs.

It is crucial that action researchers be afforded a nimble and flexible research process – as this is vitally important to the often quickly evolving nature of organizations. If action researchers were required to request institutional review board approval every time they wanted to gather input from stakeholders, it would slow down the action research process – thus blunting the overall success of the study design. While it may not be feasible or necessary for action researchers to obtain IRB approval for involved stakeholders, it is nevertheless important for researchers to acknowledge this potential ethical dilemma and take appropriate steps to serve the best interests of all stakeholders.

**Summary**

In this chapter, a problem was presented in the form of a fractional percentage of prospective transfer students utilizing the resources of the TTAC advising office at the University of Cincinnati. Relevant literature concerning best practices and other university strategies were presented. To address this problem of practice, an MMAR study has been proposed that seeks to further explore the problem of practice around the interaction the TTAC has with prospective transfer students at the University of Cincinnati to support the development of an effective communication strategy that drives more prospective students to the TTAC. The next chapter will detail the reconnaissance plan for the MMAR study and present the study design to be used.

## Chapter 2: Reconnaissance and Planning Phases

The purpose of chapter one of this dissertation was to describe the breakdown in communication between prospective transfer students and the various transfer resources available to them at the University of Cincinnati. This included a presentation of the diagnosis of the problem of practice, with the overall goal of developing an improved communication plan to increase the percentage of prospective transfer students' use of the Transfer and Transition Advising Center services. In this chapter, a detailed review of the overall study design will be presented. This will be followed by details of the reconnaissance phase of the study. The chapter will end with an overview of how data from the reconnaissance phase informed the planning phase of the study.

### Overall Study Design

Unlike traditional research designs, action research explores the specific needs and problems within an organization, allowing the researcher to approach the investigative steps in a manner that is more specific in nature to the underlying problem of practice. This study used an MMAR framework that consisted of six phases. Within those six phases, I used a multi-strand concurrent design to collect data within the reconnaissance phase, which informed the action to be taken and the resulting evaluation phase of the study.

### Research Setting

At the time of this study, prospective transfer students interested in the University of Cincinnati had a variety of methods for accessing university resources. A large majority of students start and eventually completed the online transfer application found on the University of Cincinnati Office of Admissions website. The application varied based on the desired major but required all applicants to pay a $50 application fee and submit official transcripts from all previous post-secondary institutions attended. Official transcripts were then sent to the credit evaluation team for assessment, and the student received a credit evaluation report (CER). The timeline for admissions decisions varied depending on the major selected, with most decisions made on a rolling basis each Friday by 5:00 p.m.

Prospective transfer students typically learn about the TTAC via online websites and resources that advertise to prospective transfer students. Traffic is also pushed to the TTAC via referrals from admissions counselors and academic advisors from local community colleges who have previous experience working with the TTAC. All prospective transfer students had access to TTAC resources, and the TTAC did not require admissions fees or official information in order to meet with prospective students. Prospective transfer students typically contacted the TTAC in one of three ways. First is via an email to the general TTAC email account, which was monitored by the four academic advisors housed within the center. Prospective transfer students also contacted the TTAC via phone. Calls were generally triaged by transfer student workers who recorded call information and provided resources accordingly. Finally, prospective transfer students could contact the TTAC via an information request form found on the TTAC website. This form asked prospective transfer students to provide relevant information pertaining to their transfer goals and to attach an unofficial transcript.

Based on the questions and concerns of individual prospective transfer students, the TTAC advisors responded accordingly – often answering quick questions about admissions requirements, application deadlines, and other campus resources. Most questions fielded by TTAC advisors involved credit evaluation/applicability and degree exploration based on previously completed coursework. TTAC advisors scheduled individual appointments, which could occur over the phone, in-person, or via video chat. Advisors created unofficial credit evaluations of incoming credit and walk prospective transfer students through how that credit will apply to their desired major, the admission requirements for those majors, and a tentative timeline to graduation.

It is important to note that this study took place in the run up to and during the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on the ways in which higher education institutions, including the University of Cincinnati, operated. In response to some of the enrollment uncertainty surrounding the pandemic in early 2020, enrollment management leadership at the University of Cincinnati invested heavily in marketing campaigns aimed at solidifying student enrollment for the Fall 2021 semester and pivoting significantly with regards to how staff and faculty serviced students questions and meetings, shifting largely to a remote setting for much of the 2020 and 2021 school years.

**Reconnaissance Phase Design**

The overarching goal of the reconnaissance phase of this MMAR study was to identify the Fall 2020 prospective transfer students to the University of Cincinnati, determine what questions these prospective students had, and resources they utilized during the Fall 2020 application window. The reconnaissance phase occurred over a period of time from Summer 2020 through May 2021 (Figure 2.1) and utilized a multistrand design that included two stages of concurrent quantitative + qualitative strands (Figure 2.2). Stage one involved the analysis of institutional records surrounding advising appointments with prospective transfer students. Findings from stage one were used to inform the development of a survey with both closed (quant) and open (qual) ended items in stage two. The data across both concurrent stages were integrated to plan an improved communication and marketing strategy for prospective University of Cincinnati transfer applicants. Ultimately, these data supported meta-inferences to help guide the remaining phases of the MMAR study.

**Figure 3**

*Reconnaissance Data Collection Timeline*

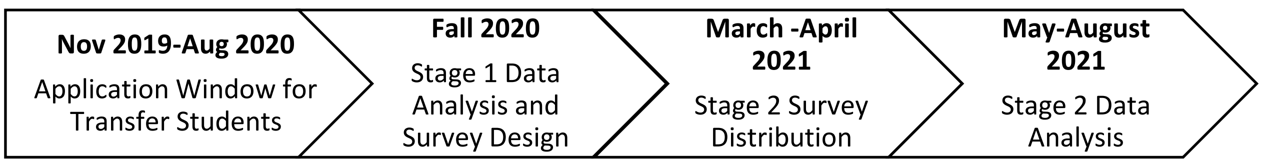
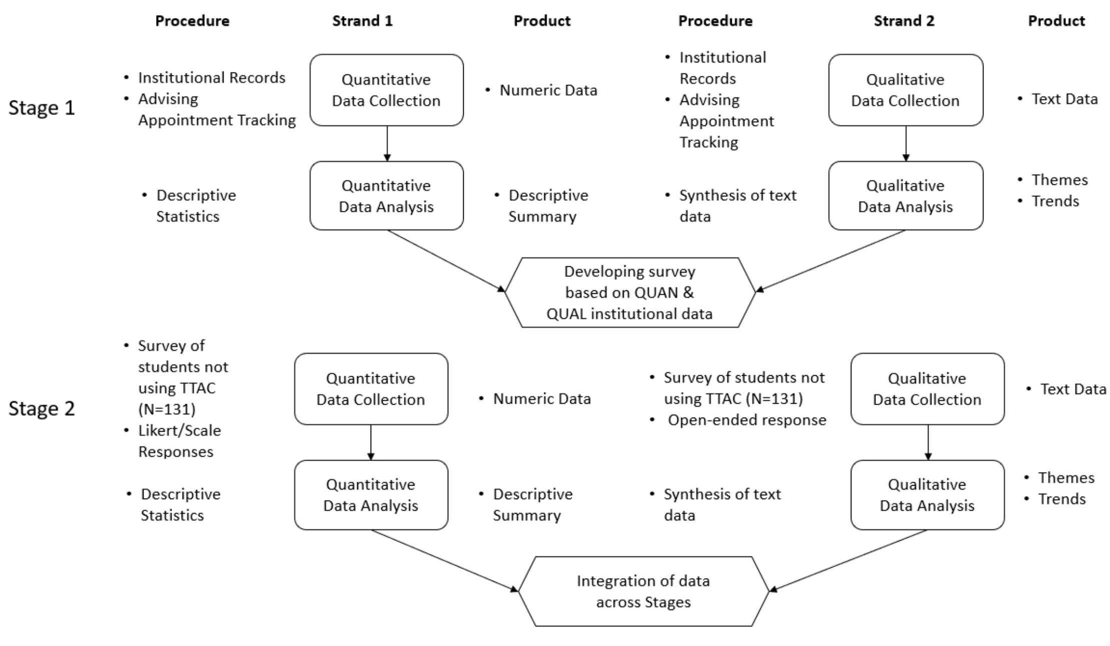



**Figure 4**

*Reconnaissance Study Design*




### ***Stage One: Concurrent Quantitative + Qualitative Design***

Stage one of the multistrand design consisted of concurrent quantitative and qualitative strands. The goal of stage one was to identify the population of prospective transfer students that met with TTAC advisors during the Fall 2020 application process and to determine common questions and resources these students identified when meeting with TTAC advisors. The quantitative strand included a review of institutional data surrounding the total number of prospective transfer students to the University of Cincinnati and the total number of prospective transfer students who had contact with the TTAC. Concurrently, qualitative analysis of TTAC information request form notes helped determine which TTAC services prospective students utilized and why students made enrollment decisions for the Fall 2020 semester.

***Quantitative Strand: Review of Institutional Data***

The goal of this strand in Stage one was to explore the use of advising services by prospective transfer students for the Fall 2020 application cycle at the University of Cincinnati. For this study, the Fall 2020 application cycle was November 1, 2019, through August 1, 2020. The research questions guiding this strand were:

1. How many prospective transfer students applied to the University of Cincinnati during the Fall 2020 application cycle?
2. What percentage of Fall 2020 prospective transfer students had contact with a TTAC advisor during the Fall 2020 application cycle?

***Data Sources***

The data sources for this strand included application data managed by the University of Cincinnati Office of Admissions. Transfer application information was organized and compiled in Slate, a multi-layer enrollment management and communication software that manages and filters all student applications at the University of Cincinnati. To manage transfer applicant numbers year to year, a workbook within Slate was used by TTAC staff to track the total number of transfer applicants throughout the year. Application numbers are updated in real-time and can be filtered by any variable collected during the transfer application process (e.g., demographic details, previous transfer institutions, etc.). Data collected via the TTAC slate workbooks were checked against the overall transfer numbers reported by the University of Cincinnati Office of Institutional Research and the Office of Enrollment Management to ensure that the final numbers reported were accurate. Due to organizational limitations with some smaller UC programs, not all transfer applications are reported in Slate, therefore efforts were undertaken to add applications as needed after the enrollment deadline for the Fall 2020 semester.

A second source included advising appointment reports created by the four TTAC advisors. The four academic advisors within the TTAC each tracked their prospective student contacts individually and shared them collectively in a Microsoft Teams shared excel spreadsheet. For this study a "prospective student contact" included an advisor interaction with a student that met one or more of the following benchmarks: (a) an in-person advising appointment with a prospective transfer student; (b) a phone or virtual appointment with a prospective transfer student; (c) Email communication with a prospective transfer student resulting in a credit evaluation report; (d) continuous contact with a prospective transfer student resulting in greater than 20 minutes of work on behalf of the advisor. TTAC advising appointment reports include numeric data generated through a count of the individual prospective student contacts TTAC advisors tracked throughout the Fall 2020 application cycle. Data were regularly updated as prospective student contacts were added throughout the Fall 2020 application cycle, and a final tally of TTAC contacts was generated on August 1, 2020, after the Fall 2020 application cycle.

### *Data Analysis and Findings*

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (sums, percent, means) and compared the total number of prospective transfer students during the Fall 2020 application cycle with the total number of prospective transfer contacts the TTAC recorded during the same period. A Slate report was run after the Fall 2020 application cycle to identify how many unique prospective transfer students applied to the University of Cincinnati. Separately, all prospective transfer student contacts tracked by TTAC advisors were exported to Microsoft Excel and matched against Fall 2020 application records to determine the total number of unique prospective transfer students who worked with TTAC advisors.

For the first research question related to the number of prospective transfer students who applied, overall, 5,168 prospective transfer students applied to the University of Cincinnati in the Fall of 2020. Related to the second question of those who applied (n = 5,168), 296 or 5.7% had contact with the TTAC during the application cycle.

**Qualitative Strand: Review of Institutional Records**

The goal of the qualitative strand of Stage 1 was to explore the use of TTAC advising services by prospective transfer students for the Fall 2020 application cycle. For prospective transfer students who met with TTAC advisors, the research question was *What questions and concerns were raised by prospective transfer students in submitted information request forms?*

***Data Sources***

The data source for this strand included institutional records of information request forms submitted to the TTAC from prospective transfer students during the Fall 2020 application cycle. Information requests forms (Appendix A) asked students to respond to a variety of questions that allow advisors to properly prepare for a future appointment. For the purpose of this study, narrative data was collected from the "Any Additional Questions" section of the information request form.

***Data Analysis and Findings***

Between May 1 and August 1, 2020, the TTAC collected 131 unique information request forms, 40% (n = 53) of which included narrative data related to additional questions prospective transfer students had about the transfer process. Narrative responses varied in length from a few words, e.g. “Transfer Credit”, to multiple statements posed in an extended, narrative response. Narrative responses were entered into Excel.  For responses that contained more than one question, responses were broken out into individual questions for analysis. For example, for the following narrative response, the statements were divided into three entries:

> [Question 1] I was wondering if my credits will transfer. [Question 2] If they do not transfer and I end up being accepted into the online BSW program, what a rough estimate of the full cost of tuition would be. [Question 3] Should I apply to the University of Cincinnati as a Transfer Student?

In total, the 53 narrative responses contained 58 individual questions.

To organize the data, responses were read individually to identify an overall topic that best represented the question. A color-coding system was developed, where a unique color was used for each topic identified. After all responses were color coded, topics were grouped into larger categories of questions. Across the 58 questions, four categories were identified: (a) credit applicability/graduation timeline (N = 37); (b) admissions standards (N = 15); (c) university resources (N = 3); (d) major exploration (N = 4).

Credit evaluation/graduation timeline was the most common category, with 64% of the overall questions assigned to this category. This included topics of transfer credit evaluations, timelines to graduation, course planning, and curriculum layouts. The second most common category was university admissions (26% of questions). This category included topics of average GPA for admittance, course pre-requisites, and required test scores. Major exploration was the third most common category (7% of questions). This category included topics such as best-fit major, career exploration and major feasibility. The last category was university resources (5% of questions). This category included responses that spoke to veteran benefits, financial aid rewards and scholarship availability.

### *Stage One Findings and Inferences*

The overarching goal of stage one was to identify the population of prospective transfer students that met with TTAC advisors during the Fall 2020 application process and to determine common questions and resources these students identified when meeting with TTAC advisors. Overall, few prospective transfer students (5.7%) had contact with TTAC during the application process. Of those who did, topics of discussion centered on credit evaluation, graduation timeline, and admissions standards. These topics represented potential aspects of an applicant's motivation when deciding to apply to transfer to the university. The target population and potential questions for inclusion in a survey to be developed in Stage 2 were identified using these findings.

## Stage Two: Concurrent Quantitative + Qualitative Design

The overarching goal of stage two in the reconnaissance phase centered on identifying specific resources Fall 2020 prospective transfer students used during the application period and where these students looked for those resources. Specifically, in stage two the research questions focused on (a) the degree to which prospective transfer students were aware of the advising services available to them at the University of Cincinnati, (b) which advising services they found most beneficial throughout the transfer process, and (c) where prospective transfer students found those resources.

To address these questions, a concurrent quantitative + qualitative design was implemented using a single instrument, a survey that included both closed- (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) responses. In the following paragraphs, I will break down the survey questions through a quantitative and qualitative lens and review the research findings from this stage in the reconnaissance process.

#### ***Sample***

The target population of this strand included 4,858 prospective transfer applicants identified by the UC Admissions office as having submitted a transfer application in the Fall 2020 semester who had not previously met with a TTAC advisor. Thus, 296 Fall 2020 applicants who had met previously with the TTAC were excluded from the sample.

#### ***Instrumentation***

A within-strategy data collection process was used via a Qualtrics survey that included both quantitative and qualitative questions (Appendix B). The survey was designed to identify the perceptions of Fall 2020 transfer applicants of critical needs and motivations and the locations and resources they utilized during the transfer admissions process. A survey was chosen for the speed at which it could be developed and deployed, allowing for a quick transition between the reconnaissance phase and the subsequent planning and acting phases of the MMAR study (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014). The survey was developed in collaboration with TTAC advising staff and relevant enrollment management leaders to ensure questions were consistent with previous university surveys and to time survey deployment with other university assessment plans. Specific questions included in the survey were developed based on the inferences gleaned from Stage one of reconnaissance. The survey consisted of quantitative and qualitative questions with a variety of response types (Table 2.3) that spoke specifically to the experiences and motivations of prospective transfer applicants.

The survey included three sections. Questions one and two included “Yes/No” response options that gauged the visibility of transfer resources at the University of Cincinnati and whether respondents ultimately confirmed their intent to enroll. Questions three through seven included Likert scale questions gauging student satisfaction throughout the transfer process. Response options were on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). These questions addressed the general experience of transfer students during the application process and common questions and concerns that applicants frequently encountered. Questions eight through eleven contained open-ended questions centered on students' biggest concerns throughout the transfer process, what the University of Cincinnati could improve upon during the application process, and how/where students went about locating information about transferring.

**Table 1**

*Quantitative Survey Question and Response Types*

| **Survey Item** | **Response Options** |
|---|---|
| Q1 & Q2 | Yes/No/Unsure |
| Q3 - Q7 | Strongly Agree (4) Agree (3) Disagree (2) Strongly Disagree (1) |
| Q8 - Q11 | Open-ended |

***Data Collection Procedures***

The survey was disseminated via Qualtrics to 4,558 Fall 2020 transfer applicants via a link to the email account listed on the application that prospective students had on file with the University of Cincinnati. The invitation to participate was disseminated the first week of April, with reminder emails sent weekly for three weeks, at which point the survey was deactivated. All data collected were stored on the secure University of Cincinnati platform to protect student identities and personal information. To further protect student identities, all response data appear anonymous.

**Quantitative Strand Data Analysis and Findings**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to yes/no questions. Likert scale responses were analyzed by calculating the mean and standard deviation (Table 2.4). In total, 131 unique applicants responded to the survey representing a response rate of 3%.

The first question of the survey addressed the degree of visibility of the Transfer and Transition Advising Center among Fall 2020 prospective transfer applicants. Overall, a slight majority of applicants (57%) indicated that they were aware of the resources offered by the TTAC, while 43% were either unaware or unsure of whether those resources existed. The second question in the survey centered on whether respondents accepted admissions offers from the University of Cincinnati and found that 67% of respondents did accept an admissions offer, while 29% had not accepted an admissions office and 4% were unsure.

As it related to applicant ratings of the transfer process at UC (Table 2.4), the highest level of agreement was on the ease of the transfer process (M = 2.93; SD .87), followed by feeling supported throughout the process (M = 2.79; SD = .96). The lowest level of agreement was feeling a need to meet with an academic advisor before committing to the university (M = 2.58; SD = .90). Questions 5 and 6, spoke to the general understanding that prospective applicants had regarding how their incoming transfer credit would count (M= 2.70; SD = .86) and the ease in which applicants were able to locate information and answers to questions during the transfer process (M = 2.74; SD = .87).

**Table 2**

*Transfer Advising Experience Survey Results*

| Item | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean (SD) | % (N) | % (N) | % (N) | % (N) |
| found the transfer process to the UC to be simple and easy to navigate | 2.93 (.87) | 27.7 (36) | 44.6 (58) | 20.7 (27) | 6.9 (9) |
| felt the need to meet with an academic advisor before deciding to commit to the UC | 2.58 (.90) | 18.6 (24) | 30.2 (39) | 41.9 (54) | 9.3 (12) |
| understood clearly how my credits would transfer and apply to my desired degree program at the UC | 2.70 (.86) | 16.9 (22) | 45.4 (59) | 28.5 (37) | 9.2 (12) |
| was easy to locate information and get answers to my questions about the UC. | 2.74 (.87) | 19.4 (25) | 44.9 (58) | 26.4 (34) | 9.3 (12) |
| felt supported throughout the transfer process to the UC. | 2.79 (.96) | 26.1 (34) | 38.5 (50) | 23.8 (31) | 11.5 (15) |

Strongly Agree = 4 to Strongly Disagree = 1

**Qualitative Strand Data Analysis and Findings**

Qualitative data were collected from the survey in the form of open-ended text entries. The same color-coding strategy employed in stage one, was also used for this stage of reconnaissance. Text entries were entered into Excel and the same categorization steps described earlier were used to group narrative data into categories. The first question (Q8) focused on where applicants looked to find transfer resources at the University of Cincinnati. A total of 85 responses were collected from this question. Due to the phrasing of questions, qualitative responses were overwhelmingly specific to individual categories, and little overlap was observed. As a result, each qualitative response was grouped into a unique category that best described the experience of the respondent. Responses (N = 85) were grouped into four categories: 1) online web services and advertisements (75%); 2) personal referrals (17%); 3) location-based awareness (4%); 4) failed to find adequate resources (4%).

By far, the majority of responses provided by participants were related to online web services and advertisements. Specifically, respondents mentioned the UC website, television commercials, web advertisements, and paper flyers as examples of where they looked for transfer resources. To a lesser degree, respondents indicated personal referrals as a source of information. These included academic advisor referrals from previous institutions, recommendations from friends and family, and referrals from personal employment. Finally, respondents identified location-based awareness of the University of Cincinnati, including proximity to the University of Cincinnati and a general understanding of the university's standing in the region. The balance of the respondent comments focused on a general struggle to locate adequate resources during the transfer application process.

In Question 9, applicants were asked to reflect on their biggest questions and concerns during the transfer process. A total of 84 unique responses were received, resulting in 93 questions/concerns. Four categories of responses emerged: 1) transfer credit/graduation timeline; 2) cost/finances; 3) campus resources/organizations; 4) other. Transfer credit/graduation timeline was the most common category of responses by prospective applicants (57%) and included concerns related to credit evaluation, timeline to a degree, and credit applicability. The second most common category identified by respondents related to cost/finances, which accounted for 14% of responses. In this category, respondents' concerns centered on financial aid, scholarships, tuition, and benefits. Campus resources and organizations made up 12% of responses. This category included items such as campus clubs/organizations, cooperative education, education abroad and Greek life. The final category, "other," accounted for 17% of responses and included response types that did not fit into one single category, such as comparison to previous colleges/universities, familial bonds on campus, and previous negative experiences.

In question 10, applicants were asked to reflect on what the University of Cincinnati did well during the transfer process. There were 61 unique respondents totaling 65 individual narrative responses. The responses were clustered into three categories: 1) academic advising/support; 2) communication; 3) admissions/onboarding. The first category was academic advising/support (41% of responses) and included quick advisor assignments, timely advisor responses, course registration, and individualized advising conversations. Communication (34%) included regular credit evaluation reports, proactive outreach and reminders, and regular email and phone calls. The last category was admissions/onboarding processes (25% of responses) and included easily accessible information, quick and easy application processes, and a transparent review process.

In question 11, respondents were asked to describe ways the University of Cincinnati could improve the transfer admissions process. Responses (N = 55) were grouped into four categories: 1) advising/academic support; 2) communication; 3) admission/enrollment; 4) financial assistance/scholarships. Advising/academic support made up 45% of the responses and included individualized advising, clarity of credit applicability, and advisor visibility. Communication was mentioned in 22% of the comments. For communication, this included comments related to proactive outreach, enrollment reminders, easier access to pertinent information, and connecting applicants with resources earlier. Two categories, admission/enrollment, and financial concerns/scholarships were mentioned in 16% of the comments. In the admission and enrollment category, respondents mentioned making admissions more holistic, requiring mandatory one-on-one meetings during the application process, and expediting the transfer application decision process. For financial concerns/scholarships, respondents mentioned increasing the number of transfer scholarships, financial aid flexibility, and lower tuition costs.

**Stage 2 Findings**

The overall goal of stage two was to identify the specific resources, questions, and concerns on prospective transfer students' minds during the application process and where these applicants looked for answers. Overall, a substantial portion of applicants (43%) were unaware of whether transfer advising resources were available to them during the application process. Furthermore, students identified transfer credit applicability as an area of confusion during the application process. Overall, the University of Cincinnati could focus efforts on improving both academic advising and communication resources for transfer students.

**Reconnaissance Findings**

The overarching goal of the reconnaissance phase of this MMAR study was to identify the Fall 2020 prospective transfer applicants to the University of Cincinnati and determine what questions and resources these applicants had and utilized during the Fall 2020 application window. Through the reconnaissance phase, the following was observed. First, credit evaluation and individualized advising are vitally important to prospective transfer students during the application process. Second, prospective transfer students utilized web resources and personal referrals when searching for questions during the transfer process. And third, proactive outreach and communication to prospective transfer applicants are important for ensuring that they follow through with utilizing resources and deadlines.

**Planning Phase**

Following the reconnaissance phase of this MMAR study was the planning phase, where reconnaissance findings were discussed with relevant stakeholders to explore and debate the feasibility and implementation of an intervention to address the underlying problem of practice. The stakeholders involved in this study included TTAC staff members (N = 9) and leadership in enrollment management (N = 4). In the two weeks following the collection of survey results, results were discussed during weekly TTAC staff meetings. These meetings consisted of largely frontline TTAC advising staff and lower-level administrators tasked with supervising the day-to-day operations of the TTAC. Due to time constraints and impending application deadlines, all survey themes and potential action plans were discussed during these two weekly staff meetings, emphasizing the relative impact on daily operations and advisor work capacity.

Over the same two-week period, separate meetings were also held with senior administrators within enrollment management to discuss the overarching goal of the action plan and the potential scope and impact that planned actions could have on the University of Cincinnati's strategic enrollment initiatives. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explore the three major findings from the reconnaissance phase and how stakeholder discussions contributed to identifying an action we could take to address the problem.

Applicants identified credit evaluation and individualized advising as critical in the transfer process. Applicants discussed credit evaluation, graduation timeline, and major selection as the most important questions when deciding whether they should transfer from their current institution to the University of Cincinnati. This information was vitally important, as it provided a template for how we should market the resources offered by the TTAC to prospective transfer applicants. This is reinforced in research by Hossler and Bontrager (2014), who identified individualized advising as a "trailblazing" practice in recruiting and retaining prospective transfer applicants. Existing marketing materials guide students through the application process by merely referring to the TTAC as an additional resource. This additional information provided valuable insight into how UC can better advertise the specific ways it can assist prospective applicants, with an end goal of funneling more students through the doors of the TTAC.

These findings were further validated after conversations with TTAC advisors revealed that most prospective student appointments center around the major themes uncovered during reconnaissance. Furthermore, frontline TTAC advisors universally agreed that while prospective transfer students arrive at our doors with exceedingly complex questions and circumstances, they are primarily focused on credit applicability, graduation timeline, and their best fit major. TTAC and EM stakeholders agreed that these specific resources and conversations would need to be advertised front and center in any action we take to increase the number of prospective transfer applicants meeting with the TTAC.

A second theme uncovered during the reconnaissance phase centered on where and how prospective applicants were finding information about the transfer process. Survey respondents identified the UC website and simple online search engines as the most common method of discovering the steps involved in applying to UC. These findings were consistent with the existing literature surrounding the prospective transfer student experience which describe university websites as playing a crucial role in the successful recruitment, retention, and overall experience of prospective transfer applicants (Caglar & Mentes (2012); Hossler & Boutrager, 2014).

Reconnaissance findings and supporting literature were presented during multiple TTAC staff meetings where we had discussions that centered on potential obstacles our applicants were having when navigating the TTAC website and potential strategies to streamline the ways in which prospective students contacted our office. TTAC advisors noted that many applicants reach out to the TTAC office after interacting with a wide variety of different offices on campus, and many applicants described a type of “shuffle” that exists at the University of Cincinnati as they are passed from office to office. Furthermore, advisors noted a high degree of frustration with prospective students reaching out to the TTAC and failing to provide the required information necessary to perform a credit evaluation report, resulting in numerous email exchanges, further delaying the advising experience. These stakeholder discussions revealed that the TTAC website fell well short of providing prospective transfer students with a seamless pathway to a meeting with a TTAC advisor and would need to be redesigned with the specific needs and motivations of prospective transfer students front and center.

A third pattern observed during the reconnaissance phase was that while many prospective transfer students located transfer information on their own via web searches, phone calls and emails, numerous survey respondents underscored the importance of their community college advisor in helping them navigate the transfer landscape. These findings are consistent with the literature on the topic, that identifies strong personal relationships between universities and community colleges as the bedrock of a thriving transfer student environment (Kisker, 2007). While there are numerous articulation agreements and statewide policies that exist to promote vertical transfer practices between Ohio community colleges and the University of Cincinnati, internal TTAC data revealed that despite the proximity of several large community colleges, the TTAC met with a relatively small number of these prospective students.

During conversations with TTAC staff members and EM leadership, it became apparent that while local community colleges send hundreds of transfer students to the University of Cincinnati every year, there existed virtually no personalized relationship between TTAC advisors and the advising staff at these local feeder schools. Furthermore, TTAC advisors noted that appointments with these local community college students uncovered a large amount of confusion surrounding the UC admissions standards and other basic transfer admissions information. These conversations revealed that despite their close proximity to the University of Cincinnati, local community college students were no better informed or prepared to transfer to the UC than their out-of-state counterparts. TTAC staff and EM leadership universally agreed that any action aimed at increasing the number of prospective transfer students meeting with the TTAC must address this disconnect between the University of Cincinnati and its local community college partners.

**Summary**

Chapter two outlined the reconnaissance design used to explore how the Office of Enrollment Management can improve the existing communication structure between the University of Cincinnati and prospective transfer applicants to drive a higher number of prospective students to the advising resources offered by the TTAC. The chapter included information on the overall two-stage concurrent multistrand reconnaissance design and findings and how they were used with stakeholders to inform the planning phase. As a result of a thorough review of the reconnaissance data with stakeholders, three strategies were identified for implementation. In the chapter to follow, I will present how these three strategies were implemented and evaluated.

## Chapter 3: Intervention, Evaluation, Monitoring and Discussion

The previous two chapters have identified a problem of practice within the TTAC and collected and analyzed both primary and secondary research materials relating to that problem. Stakeholders were then consulted, to design and implement an action plan aimed at addressing the existing problem of practice. In the paragraphs to follow I will look at exactly how this action plan was structured and implemented within the TTAC. Then, I will explore how the intervention was evaluated for effectiveness, how it will be monitored moving forward, and the implications of the study.

### Acting Phase

The acting phase of an MMAR study requires the researcher to develop a novel strategy to address the underlying problem of practice. This strategy is informed by both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the reconnaissance phase and the relevant literature surrounding the topic. To address the underlying problem of practice of increasing the number of prospective transfer applicants that have contact with the TTAC, an action plan was developed that centered on three specific strategies: 1) redesigning the TTAC Website; 2) individualized outreach to prospective transfer applicants; 3) establishing a stronger partnership with local community colleges. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explore each of these strategies in more detail and take an in-depth look at how they were implemented, and the initial results observed.

#### *TTAC Website Redesign*

The first strategy of this intervention centered on redesigning the existing TTAC website to better aid prospective transfer applicants in getting connected with the advising services offered by the TTAC. While the previous landing page on the website provided all the pertinent information that prospective transfer students would be looking for, the design and layout of the page made it exceedingly difficult to find out how to schedule an appointment with an advisor to have previous credits evaluated and transfer questions answered. To address these structural problems, the TTAC website was redesigned so that all users were immediately directed to a pop-up box advertising the TTAC Information Request Form – a form designed for prospective transfer students to collect information and trigger immediate outreach by an advisor. Further, the language used on the TTAC website landing page was changed to address the specific questions and concerns that survey respondents identified during the reconnaissance phase. These specific website changes and the overall vision of the website landing page were presented to the Program Coordinator housed within the TTAC in April of 2021. These changes were reviewed by relevant stakeholders within the TTAC including academic advisors and student staff. The new website was officially launched on May 1st of 2021.

***Individualized Outreach***

The second strategy centered on individual outreach to prospective transfer applicants, alerting them to the advising resources of the TTAC. This portion of the action plan took the form of an outreach program from TTAC student workers. Each student worker was paired with a TTAC advisor so that they could provide any/all interested applicants with a warm referral to an academic advisor for any questions or concerns they had about the transfer process. Each TTAC student worker was provided with a list of around 100 prospective transfer students who had applied but not yet confirmed admission to the University of Cincinnati. Student workers were provided with an email template (Appendix C) that was sent from transfer student workers within the TTAC and specifically addressed the central advising concerns gleaned from the previous literature review and reconnaissance phase. Each student worker was paired with a TTAC advisor and conducted outreach throughout a 3–4-month period during the Spring 2021 semester, referring all responses and questions to a TTAC advisor for follow-up. The transfer student workers were also tasked with adding notes about their interactions, tracking how many of their prospective transfer applicants met with the TTAC and recording their specific questions and concerns.

### *Community College Partnership*

The final strategy employed for this action plan centered on strengthening the community college partnerships that the TTAC has in the region with the hopes of connecting with more of their graduating students. To accomplish this strategy, I attended staff meetings across all Sinclair Community College campuses, connecting with over 50 academic advisors who work for Sinclair Community College – the second-largest feeder school to the University of Cincinnati. These meetings were conducted virtually via Zoom and ranged in length from 45 – 90 minutes. Sinclair advisors were provided with a brief overview of TTAC resources and then meetings were opened for discussion surrounding common transfer and admissions questions that students and advisors had alike. Sinclair advisors were given individual contacts within the TTAC for any questions or concerns and follow-up meetings were scheduled for subsequent semesters to review any changes to policy and procedures.

## Evaluation Phase

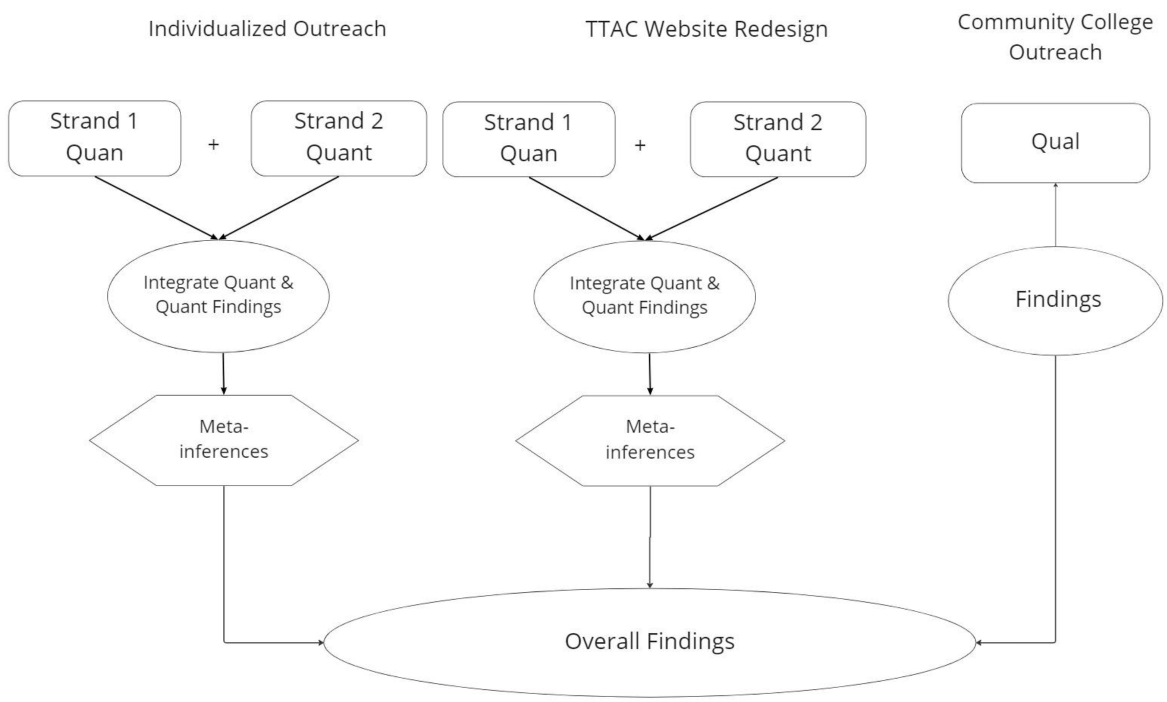
The goal of the evaluation phase is to identify the relative impact that the designed action phase had on the underlying problem of practice. In the paragraphs to follow, the design of the evaluation phase will be outlined in detail, with descriptions surrounding the rationale for the overall design, samples, instruments, procedures, and the approaches to data analysis. Following this, major findings will be presented, along with the monitoring phase of the study and overarching implications.

### *Evaluation Phase Design*

The evaluation phase of this MMAR study consisted of a three-stage concurrent quantitative + qualitative design (Figure 3.1). The concurrent stages aligned with the three strategies implemented. A three-strand concurrent design was chosen because of the flexibility afforded to the researcher to collect complementary quantitative and qualitative data from independent strategies within the action plan. The primary advantage of this design is that it allowed the researcher to collect a wide range of information from different strategies simultaneously.

**Figure 5**

*Evaluation Phase Design*




## Stage One: Concurrent Quantitative + Qualitative Design

The first stage of the evaluation phase focused on the changes made to the TTAC website. These changes to the website were designed to increase the number of prospective transfer applicants who submitted the TTAC Information Request Form and ultimately contacted a TTAC advisor. The primary changes made to the website included: (a) redesigning the landing page for all website visitors so that they are immediately directed to information on how they can contact a TTAC advisor, and (b) re-wording the resources and services offered by the TTAC in order to speak to the specific interests and needs of most prospective transfer applicants (Appendix D).

For this stage of the evaluation phase, a within strategy, concurrent Quan + Qual design was selected. The within strategy was appropriate as the same data source could be used to answer two overarching research questions. The first research question, *did the number of information request forms generated between May 1st and August 1st of 2021 increase from forms generated between May 1st and August 1st of 2020,* was answered using quantitative data. The second question, *what TTAC services and resources were prospective transfer students searching for when they submitted an information request form,* was answered using qualitative data.

***Data Sources***

Internal data collected from the UC website was used. These data included information request forms submitted via the TTAC website, which were cataloged and dated. Data were downloaded to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and organized by date and time to identify how many information request forms were collected during the time period of interest. For the second research question, narrative text data from one question on the information request form was used: Additional Comments and Questions.

***Data Analysis and Findings***

To determine the changes in the number of request forms submitted, the overall number of forms submitted was determined, then a percent change was calculated. From May 1st to August 1st of 2020, the TTAC received 131 unique information request forms from prospective transfer students. From May 1st to August 1st, 2021, the TTAC received 245 unique information request forms. This represented an increase of 87%.

The text data collected as part of this qualitative strand was analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis allows the researcher to make inferences based on any themes or trends that emerge from the qualitative text data collected. The text entries provided by the prospective transfer students who submitted these information request forms were downloaded into Microsoft Excel and grouped into categories and themes so that trends could be identified. The same color-coding strategy employed during reconnaissance was used for this phase of the MMAR study. The trends and themes observed from the forms collected from 2020 were compared with themes and trends observed in 2021, so that I could identify similarities and differences in how prospective transfer students utilized the TTAC website and available resources.

Qualitative data from May 1st – August 1st of 2020 revealed that most student information requests centered on topics such as Credit Evaluation and Graduation timeline, with 71% of prospective applicants identifying these specific questions. The second most common question centered on the admissions process, which represented 20% of information request forms submitted during the 2020 window. The balance of responses collected identified things such as degree/major exploration (7%) and resources offered outside of the TTAC such as veterans benefits and scholarship information (2%).

When comparing these findings to the same time period a year later, after significant changes to the TTAC website were made, the types of topics were more evenly dispersed. Credit evaluation and applicability was still the dominant question on applicant's minds, representing 52% of responses. Admissions and application questions were the second largest topic, with 28% of respondents identifying these types of questions or concerns. Degree-specific questions and major exploration accounted for 12% of responses and questions that fell outside the scope of the TTAC accounted for the remaining 8% of responses. These responses reflect that not only did the TTAC receive a significantly higher number of information request forms in 2021 when compared to 2020, but the topics and questions asked by prospective students aligned with the specific changes made to the messaging on the TTAC website.

## Stage Two: Concurrent Quantitative Design

The second stage of the evaluation phase looked at the relative impact that community college outreach had on driving up prospective transfer applicant contacts within the TTAC between the 2020 and 2021 Fall application cycles. In responding to some of the qualitative findings in reconnaissance the TTAC presented to and had discussions with all frontline advisors at Sinclair Community College in Dayton Ohio, in the hopes of creating some lasting partnerships and facilitating some warm referrals from Sinclair Academic Advisors, on behalf of their students.

### *Quantitative Strand*

The goal of the quantitative strand was to identify how many unique students from Sinclair Community College had contact with the TTAC during the Fall 2021 application cycle, and how that number compared to the same time period in 2020 in order to measure the impact of relationship building among the Sinclair advising office and the TTAC advising staff. The primary research question guiding this strand is:

1. How many unique transfer applicants from Sinclair Community College had contact with the TTAC advising office before and after the proactive outreach to the Sinclair advising team?

***Data Sources***

The data source used for this strand included internal appointment tracking data collected from the individual TTAC advisors. These data consist of the unique applicant contacts that the advisors accumulated during the 2020 and 2021 application cycles. All contacts were manually entered into a Microsoft Excel document that cataloged the applicant's name, application number, application status, major, and previous institution (Appendix E).

***Data Analysis and Findings***

The quantitative data collected from the internal TTAC tracking spreadsheets were analyzed using descriptive statistics (sums, percent), which were used to compare the total number of unique Sinclair Community College transfer applicants who had contact with a TTAC advisor during the Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 application cycles. Data from the two years were compared to determine how the total number of Sinclair transfer applications had changed as a result of the intervention.

During the Fall 2020 application cycle, TTAC advisors met with 20 unique Sinclair transfer applicants, which represented 8.6% of the total number of Sinclair applicants during the Fall 2020 application cycle. During the Fall 2021 application cycle, TTAC advisors met with 50 unique Sinclair transfer applicants, which represented 24.6% of the total number of Sinclair applicants during the Fall 2021 application cycle. This also represented a 150% increase year over year in unique Sinclair transfer contracts.

## Stage Three: Concurrent Quantitative + Qualitative Design

The third stage of the evaluation phase looked at the relative impact of individualized outreach to prospective transfer applicants during the Fall 2021 application cycle. In response to the problem that current TTAC practices had not enabled advisors to meet with a large percentage of prospective transfer applicants, a list of current applicants was obtained from the central admissions office and divided up into three separate lists. These lists were provided to three student workers within the TTAC, who were instructed to reach out to each individual applicant with a template email offering information on TTAC services and contact information.

For this stage of the evaluation phase, a within strategy, concurrent Quan + Qual design was selected. The within strategy was appropriate as the same data source could be used to answer two overarching research questions. The first research question, *how many unique prospective applicants responded to the individualized outreach by TTAC student workers,* and the second research question, *how many unique prospective applicants made a connection with a TTAC advisor as a result of student worker outreach,* were answered using quantitative data. The third question, *what specific questions or concerns were raised by prospective transfer students who responded to the email outreach of TTAC student workers,* was answered using qualitative data.

### *Data Sources*

The data sources used for this strand included internal records kept by three TTAC student workers. Student workers were given access to individual lists of prospective student applicants who had applied to UC but had not yet confirmed their intent to enroll and had not yet met with a TTAC advisor. These lists of prospective applicants were saved in an Excel spreadsheet and the student workers kept notes on who they had reached out to, whether the student responded to the outreach, what, if any, questions or concerns the applicant had, and whether or not the applicant was interested in making contact with a TTAC advisor.

### *Data Analysis and Findings*

The quantitative data collected in stage three was analyzed using descriptive statistics (sum & mean) and was collected from Excel spreadsheets utilized by TTAC student workers to track and catalog interactions with applicants on their lists. Of the 264 prospective students contacted by TTAC student workers, 10 total applicants responded to the email inquiry, and of those 10 applicants, 5 applicants ultimately met with a TTAC advisor. This represented a 2% yield from the email campaign.

Similarly, to Stage one of the study, text data collected as part of this qualitative strand were analyzed using content analysis. The text recorded by the three TTAC student workers throughout their outreach was recorded in a Microsoft Excel document. This text data were analyzed for themes and trends using the same color-coding process described in chapter 2 and the following themes and trends were identified: 1) admissions and enrollment, 2) credit evaluation and applicability, 3) other.

Two applications – 20% of respondents, had specific questions about their admissions and enrollment status at UC, specifically asking about the timeline for receiving admissions decisions, or whether the university could waive application fees. Three applicants – 30% of respondents, asked specific questions about credit evaluation and applicability, specifically asking about their timeline to graduation or whether or not UC accepted all of their credits. The remaining five applicants – 50% of respondents had other reasons for not confirming their enrollment to UC and did not wish to meet with an advisor in the TTAC. Notes from these applicants revealed that some had not yet made a decision, some were waiting on financial aid or scholarship decisions, and others had already decided not to attend UC.

**Monitoring Phase**

During the monitoring phase of this MMAR study, I looked specifically at the successes and shortcomings of the interventions outlined in the paragraphs above, and how these interventions will be managed by the organization moving forward. At the conclusion of the initial intervention, a meeting was convened with relevant stakeholders, specifically the advising and support staff within the TTAC, the TTAC student workers, advising assistant directors, and the director. During this meeting, we held a general discussion of the findings of the intervention phase, the impact these interventions had on the day-to-day operations of the TTAC, and what recommendations and ideas existed moving forward to sustain and improve the intervention. In the paragraphs to follow, we will look at each step in the intervention and identify the obstacles and changes proposed and developed as part of the monitoring phase of the MMAR study.

The intervention that had the largest impact on the day-to-day operations of the TTAC and the underlying problem of practice, were the changes made to the TTAC website. Stakeholders unanimously agreed that the TTAC had seen increased traffic since the website changes were put in place and when looking at this growth and impact on the TTAC moving forward, stakeholders discussed the concern of manageable growth and the importance of tracking data closely for the future, so that leadership can be kept apprised of the future staffing needs of the TTAC.

The second intervention that had a tangible impact on TTAC traffic was the outreach to community college partners, specifically Sinclair Community College in Dayton Ohio.

Stakeholders agreed that outreach to Sinclair produced a much higher number of prospective students originating from Sinclair, and outpaced prospective students from any other community college in the area.  When discussing growth opportunities for the organization in the future, we discussed the value of maintaining current relationships with Sinclair Community College and the potential of replicating partnerships with other area community colleges and assigning high-feeder schools to different TTAC advisors.

The third and final intervention was thought initially by stakeholders as holding the most promise of driving traffic to the TTAC, ironically, had the smallest relative impact on the problem of practice. Stakeholders, specifically TTAC student workers, agreed that while well-conceived, individual outreach to prospective transfer students via email, produced minimal results and was not worth the time and effort involved. Moving forward, the TTAC has partnered with the admissions office to change the language on automated admissions letters that connect applicants to the TTAC email account and information request form, in hopes that more applicants will read this message and ultimately reach out to the TTAC. This decision to abandon the original outreach program for students' workers has also enabled the TTAC student workers to focus more on event planning and other office tasks that impact the office more significantly.

The main takeaway among TTAC stakeholders surrounding the intervention was that it was very successful in increasing the total number of unique contacts the TTAC saw during the Fall 2021 application cycle. The TTAC office in Fall 2021 saw a total of 456 unique transfer contacts, an increase of 35% from Fall 2020. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explore the implications of this MMAR study and the ways in which TTAC leadership can best leverage the success of increased traffic to the TTAC moving forward.

## Discussion

The overarching problem of practices identified in reconnaissance centered on a lack of prospective students utilizing the services of the Transfer and Transition Advising Center (TTAC) at the University of Cincinnati. Despite all the resources allocated to the TTAC and the numerous marketing campaigns aimed at driving up prospective student traffic, the TTAC continued to experience stagnant numbers of prospective transfer applicants and was consistently seeing less than 5% of Fall prospective applicants in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In response to this problem of practice, a reconnaissance plan was developed to identify the specific questions and concerns that prospective applicants had throughout the transfer process, and where exactly they looked for this information. These findings were then used to develop an action plan to market specific transfer admissions resources in locations that they were likely to utilize during the transfer process. As a result of these actions, the TTAC saw significant growth in its overall prospective student contacts in Fall of 2020 and much of these gains centered on the specific strategies employed as part of the MMAR intervention – lending confidence to the idea that the study was tremendously successful in addressing the TTAC's underlying problem of practice.

## Implications

In many ways, the University of Cincinnati has positioned itself as a trailblazing university in the world of transfer enrollment. As one of the few large, research universities with a dedicated team of academic advisors working with prospective transfer applicants at any stage of the transfer process, the University of Cincinnati has positioned itself in an incredibly advantageous position to leverage its transfer resources as a counterbalance to future declines in first-year enrollment, and as a tool for growing overall enrollment in general. However, despite its advanced standing in the world of transfer admissions and advising, leadership at the

University has failed to realize this potential, and until the necessary investments are made, the potential benefits of increased transfer enrollment will remain unreachable.

### *Implications for the TTAC*

When considering the implications of this study for the University of Cincinnati, it is important to consider both the short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, the actions taken as part of this MMAR study have directly led to a substantial increase in the share of prospective transfer applicants that are interacting with TTAC advisors. This increase in traffic to the TTAC has helped pave the way for adding an additional academic advisor to the TTAC staff and has enabled the TTAC to grow its footprint within the wider University community, allowing TTAC staff and administrators to play larger roles within the broader Enrollment Management mission at the University of Cincinnati. While this increase in advising capacity and respect across the University has improved and expanded the TTAC reputation, it has also carried the burden of additional responsibilities that often fall outside the scope of the TTAC's core mission, which if not checked, could offset any potential benefits of increases in advising capacity. When considering the implications of an expanded TTAC presence, it is important that leadership not lose site of the core function of the office and avoid a scenario where the TTAC is put into a position where it must sacrifice efficiency in order to bend to the broader needs of enrollment management at-large.

### *Implications for the University of Cincinnati*

Beyond the short-term implications that impact the day-to-day operations of the TTAC, it is also important to recognize the longer-term implications for the University of Cincinnati broadly. From an enrollment management standpoint, the University of Cincinnati functions in much the same way as most large research institutions. While UC has a cutting-edge transfer resource in the TTAC, the center has never played a major role in the strategic thinking of growing transfer enrollment and is often thought of as an auxiliary office that assists the broader goals of transfer admissions, recruitment, and college advising. As recent literature suggests, proactive academic advising plays a crucial role in positive enrollment outcomes and is considered the best practice when trying to attract, enroll and retain prospective transfer students (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Despite these best practices, the University of Cincinnati, along with the majority of higher education institutions, have persisted in building a strategic wall between the prospective student and the individualized academic advising they so desperately need (Ott & Cooper, 2014). The University of Cincinnati has at its disposal, a center that exemplifies these best practices and the institutional knowledge to expand and contribute to an admissions and enrollment strategy that is centered around individualized academic advising, as opposed to the same transfer admissions practices that have produced the stagnant transfer enrollment numbers of the recent past. Research has conclusively pointed to the fact that higher education can expect a significant dip in enrollment in the coming years (Kelderman, Gardner & Conley, 2019) and these looming changes have presented the University of Cincinnati leadership with a real opportunity to rethink its strategic approach to transfer enrollment.

***Implications for Higher Education Leadership***

It is also important to look past the immediate implications that this research has for the TTAC and wider Enrollment Management team at the University of Cincinnati, and focus, instead, on the potential impact to university leadership at-large. Future enrollment trends nationwide present a clear and present danger to university leaders who are now faced with the often-conflicting charge of increasing enrollment while simultaneously decreasing attrition. For years, the latter has been successfully addressed with significant investments to academic advising services, which has been definitively linked to a wide variety of student success metrics (Kot, 2014). While academic advising has long been used as a strategy to improve student retention numbers, it has traditionally only been a resource for matriculated students and has not been widely used at the prospective stage in the enrollment process.

Leaders within higher education could benefit from this study's findings by developing a better understanding of the specific needs of prospective transfer students, and the strategies involved in funneling these students through the admissions pipeline. Further, given the well-established links between academic advising and improved enrollment outcomes amount transfer students (Hossler & Bontrager. 2014), university leaders would be well-advised to consider making similar investments in academic advising at the prospective enrollment level, as they have at the college level in recent years.

### *Implications for Future Research*

While this study establishes some effective strategies for funneling prospective transfer students to existing advising resources at the University of Cincinnati, there are also some significant research avenues that have yet to be explored and could present significant breakthroughs for enrollment management leadership. The scope of this study dealt primarily with transfer student communication strategies, but recent research has pointed to the beneficial enrollment outcomes of advising at the prospective level (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014) and further research into the long-term enrollment and retention outcomes of students who participate in individualized advising at the prospective level could yield interesting results that further justify investment in academic advising at the prospective applicant level. Furthermore, it could be argued that students who receive individualized advising during the transfer application process are better informed of their timeline to graduation and prospective major plans, potentially leading to a higher retention and graduation rate. Further research into the long-term implications of prospective transfer advising could demonstrate a link between individualized advising and degree completion – a metric that is frequently used at the state level to determine funding for public colleges and universities.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any research project, this study was not without its limitations. Chief among them is measuring other outside factors that may or may not have influenced transfer student trends at the prospective level. A number of outside factors were not accounted for throughout the research project, chief among them being the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic send a shockwave throughout the higher education community and triggered a wide variety of marketing initiatives at the University of Cincinnati. Furthermore, discussions with TTAC advisors revealed that the uncertainty that the pandemic created among college-age students also contributed to a higher number of transfer applicants – as many students cited the pandemic as a primary reason for transferring institutions. It is difficult to determine the impact the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent marketing initiatives had on the traffic to the TTAC and it is important to acknowledge these events and continue to monitor TTAC traffic in application cycles in the future to determine any potential discrepancies.

Another limitation of this study, as with any action research study, is the reality that the findings and data collected were tied specifically to a problem of practice at the University of Cincinnati and cannot necessary be applied to the wider higher education community at-large. While many of the problems that face the University of Cincinnati undoubtedly exist across the wider landscape of higher education, the strategy to address these problems were developed with the specific organizational structure and constraints present at the University of Cincinnati and would require a different approach based on the circumstances of each individual institution.

A final limitation can be found in the approach to data collection and the sources used to support the study. This MMAR study focuses heavily on secondary sources and internal data collected from the TTAC. This reliance on secondary sources could point some potential bias in the data collection procedures and the underlying assumptions made. Furthermore, I was limited in data collection by the institutional structure of the TTAC and the ways in which the office approached data collection in years past. From 2016-2018 the TTAC did not track individual student contacts, but instead, just students who signed in at the office front desk. This previous tracking procedure led to an inaccurate accounting of the office's total contacts. Due to this discrepancy in tracking, the historical data used for this study could only extend back to 2019 and it is impossible to track data from the early years of the TTAC office.

**Personal Reflection as the Researcher**

As the primary researcher for this MMAR study, it proved an eye-opening experience to work methodically through each phase of the process. Oftentimes in higher education, new initiatives are started hastily, with little thought given to the underlying goals, steps, or stakeholders involved. The MMAR framework required me to take an intentional approach from the original conceptual design all the way through to implementation, involving stakeholders at every phase and ensuring that each step in the process aligned with the study's aims. While the process took much longer than a typical initiative, the documentation of steps and the thoughtful approach has led to increased confidence in the study's outcomes and directly led to buy-in from interested stakeholders at the University of Cincinnati. Furthermore, by serving as the primary researcher, I have uncovered numerous related avenues of potential research and have uncovered additional gaps in the research surrounding prospective transfer advising and enrollment management approach to prospective transfer students in general.

Overall, this MMAR study proved to be as beneficial to my career as it was difficult to write. The methodical steps involved in the study forced me to interact with a wide cross section of the Enrollment Management community and provided a myriad of opportunities to demonstrate the benefit of evidenced based research. Through the course of this study, I was able to effectively justify the expansion of the TTAC advising team and in so doing, was promoted to the position of assistant director where I oversee the day-to-day operations of the TTAC and manage the main campus advising team. The action research process proved beneficial in that it opened my eyes to the potential benefits of taking a slower, deliberate approach to institutional change – a practice that is often lost on higher education administration.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: TTAC Information Request Form

New form submission

*Pathways Information Request Form*

Submitted on 17 October 2022, via IP 24.92.131.91 by Anonymous

*Need help navigating the transfer process at UC? The Transfer & Transition Advising team is here to help!*

*Please fill out the form below for an unofficial credit evaluation and an advisor will reach out to assist. Please allow 48 business hours for an advisor to respond.*

| | |
|---|---|
| First Name: | Sarah |
| First Name: | N |
| Last Name: | Good |
| Email: | Sarahua711@gmail.com |
| Phonenumber: | 6146348066 |
| Number: | 07/11/2000 |
| Have you previously worked with a UC Staff member? If so, please include the name of the person you worked with. | |
| Have you already applied to the University of Cincinnati? | Yes |
| Have you ever previously enrolled as a student at the University of Cincinnati? | No |
| Previous Institution(s) | Columbus State Community college & Ohio University |

*In order to best assist you, please let us know the program you are interested in pursuing. If you are not sure, please include an interest or focus area (or state you are trying to complete a degree the fastest way possible). The following link provides a searchable database of all the programs UC has to offer: UC Undergraduate Majors and Programs*

| | |
|---|---|
| Program of Interest | Information technology |
| Select a choice | Both On-Campus and Online |
| Please indicate the semester and year you'd like to transfer to UC | spring 2023 |
| Meeting Preference: | Phone,Video Conference |
| Reason for visiting Transfer & Transition Advising Center: | General Transfer Assistance,Credit Evaluation,Major Selection |
| Days and times that you are typically able to meet: | Mondays and wednesday after 11 would be ideal. Otherwise I could do before 10:30 on tuesdays, thursdays and fridays |
| Any Additional Questions: | |
| File Upload - Transcripts | transcript.pdf |
| Student's E-Signature | Sarah Nicole Good |

**Appendix B: Reconnaissance Survey Questions**

Please answer the following questions by indicating yes/no/unsure

1. I am aware of the advising resources offered by the Center for Pathways Advising and Student Success (CPASS) at the University of Cincinnati.
2. I accepted an admissions office from the University of Cincinnati.

Please respond to the following questions/statements by indicating whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree or Strongly Disagree:

3. I found the transfer process to the University of Cincinnati to be simple and easy to navigate
4. I felt the need to meet with an academic advisor before deciding to commit to the University of Cincinnati
5. I understood clearly how my credits would transfer and apply to my desired degree program a the University of Cincinnati
6. It was easy to locate information and get answers to my questions about the University of Cincinnati.
7. I felt supported throughout the transfer process to the University of Cincinnati.

Please respond to the following open-ended questions:

8. How and where did you find information about transferring to the University of Cincinnati
9. What were your biggest questions or concerns about transferring to the University of Cincinnati?
10. What did the University of Cincinnati do well during the transfer process?
11. How could the University of Cincinnati improve the transfer process?

## Appendix C: Sample Email Outreach Template

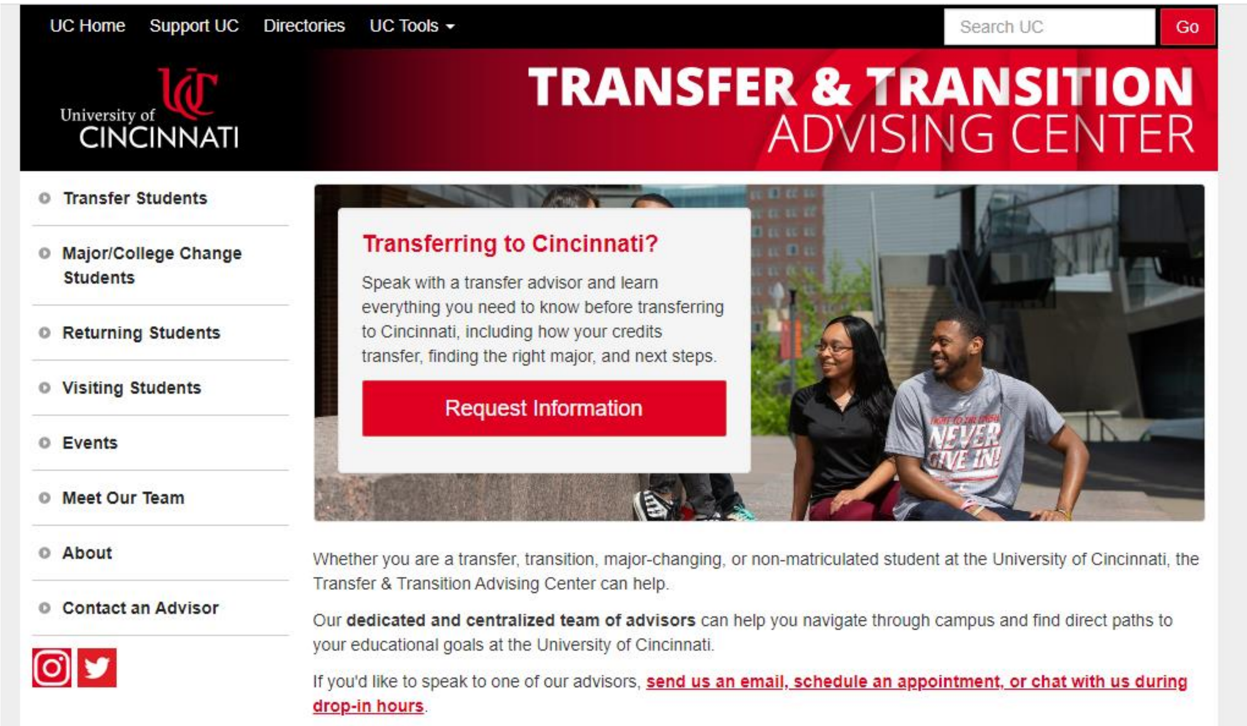
Hello Jackson!

I'm a current student at UC who transferred from Texas A&M University about a year ago. I am a computer science major in the college of engineering here at UC as well as part of the Air Force ROTC. I wanted to let you know that you can meet with an advisor if you haven't already, learn about your graduation timeline, and receive a credit evaluation before you confirm your decision to UC! Meaning you can know how your current credit will apply to a UC program and how long it will take you to complete the program, without committing to UC or paying your confirmation fee. These services are offered through UC's Transfer and Transition Advising Center, where I work as a Transfer Mentor.

If you're interested in connecting with an advisor, receiving an evaluation of your credits, or learning more about the transfer student experience at UC, let me know by responding to this email!

All the Bearcat Best!
Izzy

## Appendix D: TTAC Website Re-design



## Appendix E: TTAC Contact Data Tracking

| | A | B | D | E | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | First Name | Last Name | Offered Admission | Confirmation Complete | Notes |
| 2 | Sam | Collins | Awaiting Materials | No | Fall 2021 |
| 3 | Brenden | Shelley | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 4 | An | Nguyen | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 5 | Trevor | Forrest | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 6 | Caleb | Persinger | Yes | Yes | UCBA Fall 2021 |
| 7 | Diana | Aguilar | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 8 | Sanjana | Butala | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 9 | Henry | Haas | Awaiting Materials | No | Fall 2021 |
| 10 | Suraj | Tamang | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 11 | Chloe | Lehn | Awaiting Materials | No | Fall 2021 |
| 12 | Alyssa | Markarian | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 13 | Mery | Muluberehan | Awaiting Materials | No | Fall 2021 |
| 14 | Dylan | Turner | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 15 | Jacob | Chapman | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 16 | Cullen | Smith | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 17 | Charnay | Craig | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 18 | Tammy | Kaninberg | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 19 | Christina | LaSeur | Awaiting Materials | No | UCBA Fall 2021 |
| 20 | Donna | Munn | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 21 | Samantha | Erb | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 22 | Hafiz | Hussein | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 23 | Elise | Burlowski | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 24 | Natalie | Gillingham | Awaiting Materials | No | Fall 2021 |
| 25 | Madeleine | Mohler | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 26 | Myles | Wallace | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 27 | Stephanie | Orozco | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 28 | Gabriel | Kaufman | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 29 | Jack | Shimrock | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 30 | Elise | Probst | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 31 | Patrick | Alcox | Yes | Awaiting Confirmation | Fall 2021 |
| 32 | Lacie | Batiste | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |
| 33 | Michaela | Marie | Yes | Yes | Fall 2021 |

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