



## CHAPTER 14

# Meet, Greet, and Eat: Creating Community for Transfer Students through a Library Picnic

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## Introduction

Transfer students, coming from various backgrounds with diverse educational experiences, comprise an underserved population within campus communities. The variety of transfer student experiences adds depth to the campus community but also contributes to the difficulty in defining this population. In fact, Poisel and Joseph identified at least six types of transfer students<sup>1</sup> and, in their review of the literature, McGuire and Belcheir emphasize that despite the range of transfer student experiences, the most commonly used definition of transfer student is a student transitioning from a two-year to a four-year institution, also referred to as a vertical transfer.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, other types of transfer include lateral transfer, or moving from one two-year

to a different two-year institution, or from a four-year to a different four-year institution.

In 2016, 1,360,510 transfer students were reported at US postsecondary institutions, down slightly from a peak of 1,543,375 transfer students in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 2017–2018, the US Department of Education began reporting completion data for non-first-time college students, also known as transfer-in students. These new indicators give more precise data about the numbers, enrollment patterns, and completion rates of transfer students. The initially reported results stemmed from students first enrolled in 2008 and tracked for eight years. These results show higher graduation rates for full-time transfer students at public and private non-profit institutions compared to first-time full-time college students who were tracked through 2016 for their graduation rate.<sup>4</sup> The data suggest that there will be a continued rise in transfer students joining campus communities, whether they are originating from community colleges or other four-year institutions. The data further revealed that contrary to long-held stigmas of transfer students as “dropouts” or “non-completers,”<sup>5</sup> transfer students can be highly successful.

This chapter focuses on the importance of engaging the transfer student population as well as on best practices for outreach to transfer students. At its core are a report on the initial outcomes of a pilot event, the Transfer Student Picnic, held at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder), and the sharing of lessons learned.

## Literature Review

Transfer students may encounter challenges to their successful transition at a new institution, with research suggesting that such barriers are unique to each student.<sup>6</sup> To illustrate, for some students, bureaucratic barriers at institutions can present major obstacles to success.<sup>7</sup> Duggan and Pickering discuss further barriers to success for transfer students, such as students who self-report missing homework assignments, are concerned about balancing work and school, or struggle with financing their education.<sup>8</sup> Additional obstacles observed vary by freshmen, sophomore, or upper-division standing and include overconfidence in abilities, too much or too little socialization, lack of career direction, lack of study and time management skills, perceptions of likely failing one or more classes, and fear of not being smart enough to pursue a degree.<sup>9</sup>

Past research conducted on academic and social engagement focused on predictive factors, yet was aimed at traditional student populations.<sup>10</sup> Evidence suggests that these models might not be applied appropriately to diverse student populations, including transfer students.<sup>11</sup> A number of researchers have

found evidence of “transfer shock,” a term often used to describe a marked drop in student’s GPA in the first semester at a new institution.<sup>12</sup> However, some scholars have questioned this phenomenon or advocated for a more nuanced view, especially of institutional practices that may cause barriers or discourage a successful transition for transfer students.<sup>13</sup>

At community colleges, studies indicate that when students are well-informed about policies and articulation agreements as well as future academic requirements at both their originating and receiving institution, they are better able to make the transition.<sup>14</sup> For underrepresented students, advising students toward transfer pathways instead of vocational programs has been positively associated with transfer, as has coaching students on their degree aspirations and career goals.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, community colleges contribute to student success at their new institution by building students’ note-taking, problem-solving, and time-management skills.<sup>16</sup> Institutions that offer strong financial aid programs are also positively associated with transfer to four-year institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Research shows that engaging transfer students early on in their time at the receiving institution contributes to positive outcomes and a sense of student belonging.<sup>18</sup> At the receiving institution, positive interactions with faculty early on can help students to adjust both academically and socially, as can transfer students’ class participation and in-class social interaction.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, research suggests that students who meet with their academic advisor within their first six weeks on their new campus experience a significantly positive impact on their second semester outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Reducing feelings of stigma about being a transfer student was also found to contribute to stronger academic adjustment.<sup>21</sup> Students who were enrolled full-time as opposed to part-time had stronger engagement on their new campus.<sup>22</sup>

Recommendations for creating a welcoming campus environment include transfer-specific orientations and workshops, engaging student-led organizations to help create a sense of community and welcome new transfer students to campus, and working together across academic, student affairs, and counseling services to help transfer students in the “social, psychological, and academic adjustment process.”<sup>23</sup> Perceptions of family and community support were also positively associated with academic engagement, while studying with peers was associated positively with social engagement.<sup>24</sup>

## ***Libraries and Transfer Students***

Recent research conducted through the Assessment in Action project identified positive correlations between academic libraries and student success.<sup>25</sup> Decades of research has demonstrated the value of library instruction for

transfer students.<sup>26</sup> Yet identifying and reaching transfer students through library programming can be a challenge for many academic libraries. Not all transfer students have been exposed to library resources and librarians at their previous institutions, and even those who do have experience in academic libraries may feel intimidated or overwhelmed, especially if their new institution is larger than their previous one.<sup>27</sup> Transfer students often miss or opt out of classes featuring embedded library instruction at their new institutions, resulting in fewer opportunities for librarians and students to connect and a difference in library familiarity between transfer students and their peers.

The growing body of literature offers recommendations for connecting academic libraries with transfer students. Targeted services and interventions for transfer students may include offering library orientations,<sup>28</sup> connecting students with subject specialists soon after transferring,<sup>29</sup> asking transfer students directly what their library needs are,<sup>30</sup> and considering students' families and support networks when planning library programming.<sup>31</sup>

On a more systematic level, librarians can work to foster relationships with academic libraries across their region to enhance collaboration, especially relating to library instruction and shared resources,<sup>32</sup> and advance the interests of transfer students to stakeholders beyond the library to elsewhere on individual campuses.<sup>33</sup> Transfer-student research can be situated within broader theories of learning and development, such as social constructivism, to better consider social and pedagogical interventions that meet transfer student needs.

## Social Constructivist Framework

Social constructivism is “defined as a view of human beings as actively constructing knowledge, in their own subjective and intersubjective realities and in contextually specific ways.”<sup>34</sup> This perspective resonates with the authors because it describes how libraries can provide not only access to information but also a foundation for information literacy. This foundation helps students to synthesize questions, lived experiences, and information sources to construct their own learning. Students learn by struggling with how to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge. The authors are influenced by the theory of social constructivism derived from theorists such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, which in turn informs their teaching practice and outreach activities. This perspective centers students' knowledge creation within the context of their communities.<sup>35</sup> Based on the rich history of social constructivism, the authors understand that students learn in communities while being situated in many communities simultaneously.

The educator's role is to provide opportunities that assist in this process. Learning then becomes a joint venture between student and instructor, and the responsibility for learning falls on both.<sup>36</sup> Since each student's experiences are unique, this framework advocates that individual work with educators is of greater importance<sup>37</sup> than when learning is viewed as a generic transfer of knowledge. As well as overcoming the library intimidation factor, conversations with librarians can assist students in building knowledge through personal interpretation and reflection.

In planning the Transfer Student Picnic at CU Boulder, the authors examined the needs of transfer students through a social constructivist perspective. The authors chose the informal setting of a picnic to facilitate community building and offered information sessions structured to leverage group conversation, especially shared prior experiences of libraries and first impressions of CU Boulder Libraries. The authors planned the event to include a high ratio of librarians to students to allow for personal connections and to build foundations for future relationships. Librarians contributed their experiences, facilitated discussion, and encouraged active exploration of the libraries' physical and virtual spaces. These intentional choices communicated the value of students' prior knowledge while expanding their learning through contextually based experiences at the CU Boulder Libraries.

## **Case Study: The Transfer Student Picnic**

The Transfer Student Picnic was intended to build the foundation for students to view the CU Boulder Libraries as a learning environment, have positive interactions with library faculty, and create opportunities for more in-depth conversations within the community.

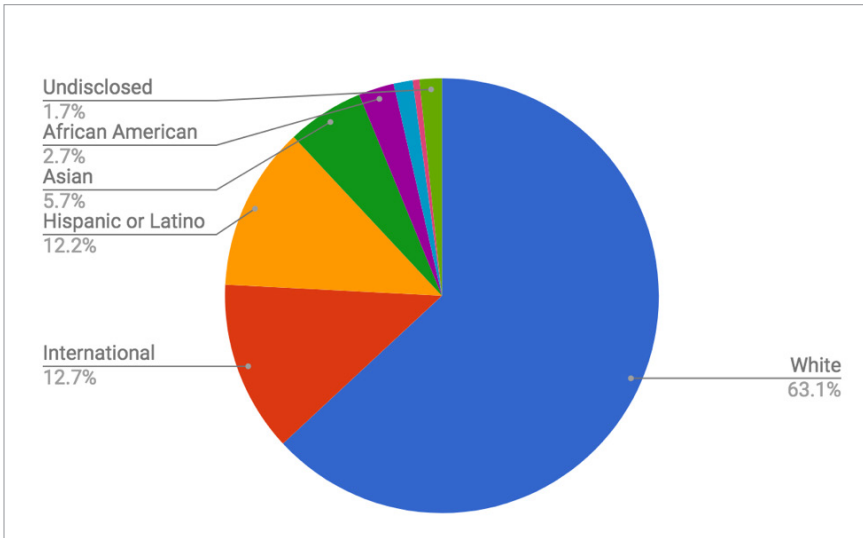
### ***Goals of the Transfer Student Picnic***

The picnic was purposefully designed for students to

- learn about the library space and resources, and to provide their family members the same overview;
- connect with other students on campus, a challenge that was identified in a fall 2016 survey of transfer students at CU Boulder;
- foster agency in participating in a scholarly community;
- apply knowledge of academic libraries from their prior institutions to CU Boulder; and
- feel comfortable connecting with subject specialist librarians.

## Student Population Served

Regionally, CU Boulder's undergraduate programs are perceived as focusing on a residential, traditional-aged college experience. This reputation may discourage students from considering transferring to CU Boulder. In fact, the realities and needs of the student body differ from this regional reputation. CU Boulder received 2,852 transfer student applications and admitted 1,981 transfer students in 2016.<sup>38</sup> This figure represented only 6.9 percent of all Colorado transfer students moving to a four-year institution from a two-year school, or 433 students<sup>39</sup> (most current data available at the time of publication). From two-year schools, the largest number of students (266) came from nearby Front Range Community College. From four-year schools, fifty-nine students, the largest of any four-year transfer group, came from CU Boulder's sister campus, the University of Colorado Denver. Figure 14.1 shows the racial breakdown of transfer students on campus from both two-year and four-year institution types.<sup>40</sup> This student group also included 255 first-generation college students. Of those who enrolled, more than 60 percent of transfer students are from in-state and nearly 40 percent from out-of-state.



**Figure 14.1.** Demographics of the 1,203 CU Boulder Transfer Students, enrolling in fall 2016

The 2016 cohort of transfer students originating from two-year colleges included 62 percent of students who declared a STEM major. This cohort was also more diverse than CU's total undergraduate population, with 12 percent underrepresented students, 24 percent first-generation college students, and

48 percent of transfer students receiving Pell grants,<sup>41</sup> indicating that transfer from two-year schools is currently an important pathway for underrepresented students in Colorado to attend the state's flagship research university.

A campus survey sent to entering transfer students in fall 2016 demonstrated that in their first few weeks on campus, 47 percent of students found making connections with other students on campus to be problematic, 36 percent experienced difficulties connecting with faculty, and 16 percent identified challenges using library resources for research.<sup>42</sup> CU also conducted a survey of students who chose not to re-enroll after attending at least two semesters. Students cited their top three reasons for not returning: difficulty connecting with others on campus, homesickness or family issues, and financial reasons.<sup>43</sup> The authors believe this context is important for considering the environment incoming students experience as well as for how the CU Boulder Libraries can contribute to a more welcoming and supportive campus climate.

## ***Transfer Student Picnic***

The picnic was hosted in a highly trafficked courtyard just outside the main library building early on a Thursday evening during the second week of classes in fall 2017. A registration table featured subject-specialist handouts and activities, and the libraries' outreach bicycle, lawn games, and food were also available to students. Upon arrival, students were asked to check in, fill out a name tag, and collect folders. (See Appendices A and B for materials used at the picnic.) After stopping at the registration table, students were encouraged to help themselves to food and converse with library staff and fellow students. For the duration of the event, the organizers offered two thirty-minute information sessions and two fifteen-minute tours of the main library building.

## ***Goals of the Instruction Session***

As students' previous library experiences differed, the thirty-minute sessions were designed to be flexible and responsive and encouraged students to share their former engagement with academic libraries. Learning objectives for the session included: (1) students will feel that the library is here to help them; (2) students will identify physical and virtual library services; and (3) students will be able to give examples of how to locate further help from the libraries (in-person and virtually). While the academic learning of this particular event was focused on an overview of library services and building relationships with librarians, the primary goal was to set the stage for future positive interactions with library spaces, resources, and staff. The sessions

were purposefully limited to thirty minutes. The organizers also developed a LibGuides guide specifically for transfer students that included practical information about the CU Boulder Libraries and the city of Boulder.

## ***Planning and Collaboration***

Previous outreach efforts to transfer students had been challenging. The CU Boulder Libraries hosted a Transfer Student Scavenger Hunt offered in conjunction with campus orientation for all new students in fall 2014 and spring 2015. Nascent cross-departmental relationships, communication barriers, and recruitment challenges contributed to minimal participation. Although only seven transfer students participated in the fall and one parent in the spring, these events nonetheless fostered quality conversations and community and made clear that there were opportunities for additional outreach events, such as the Transfer Student Picnic. The authors recognized that building cross-department relationships and recruiting students to participate in outreach events can be challenging.

The picnic was supported by the libraries' administration with food and outreach materials funded through the CU Boulder Libraries' marketing and communications budget. The organizers recruited colleagues, including subject specialists in the sciences where a high number of transfer students are enrolled, to help at the picnic. The organizers promoted the event using flyers (Appendix 14B) distributed throughout campus and near service points at each branch library, posts to social media via Facebook and Twitter, and a post to the CU Boulder Libraries' event calendar. Promotional materials included a link to the transfer student LibGuides guide and a link to a LibCal event, which allowed students to RSVP prior to the event.

Outside of the libraries, the authors worked with the New Student and Family Programs Office and the Off-Campus Housing Office to gain information about transfer student needs and to publicize the event. The libraries' outreach bicycle was used to promote the transfer picnic at campus-wide transfer events. This was also an opportunity to provide information about the CU Boulder Libraries for transfer students unable to attend the picnic. Additionally, the authors shared information about the event with the Veterans and Non-Traditional Student Organization. Overall, the picnic provided an opportunity to both create and solidify connections with these campus groups.

## ***Results of the Transfer Student Picnic***

The authors counted seventeen students who attended the event. Many of these students had sent their RSVP, while some attendees saw the event as



it was happening and joined spontaneously. Since the event was designed to allow students to drop in at times convenient with their schedules, many but not all students attended both the instruction sessions and library tours. Some students primarily chose to engage in conversations with the libraries' volunteers or other transfer students.

Participating students came from a variety of backgrounds. One student had attended community college instead of high school, another had transferred twice between larger institutions, and a third mentioned that she transferred from an international institution with a large academic library. In spite of the varied backgrounds, conversations brought to light much common ground. Students were interested in logistical help such as finding study spaces and reserving lockers as well as how to receive answers to in-depth questions. "Wait, can you show me how to get to that chat with a librarian again?" asked one student during the information session. "I didn't know librarians could help with something like that," another student mentioned while discussing the research process.

Although this pilot event involved a small number of students, the feedback and anecdotal evidence are encouraging and provide valuable lessons for next year's events. The authors hope that future events will draw more participation and allow more transfer students to contribute their needs, experiences, and challenges, thus providing a broader picture of transfer students' lives. It is hoped that the picnic helped to spark meaningful relationships with individual librarians and provided bridges to future learning opportunities for the attending students.

## Librarian Observations

Librarian observations indicated that the goals of the event were achieved. One librarian noted that she thought the transfer students were more interested in talking to each other than to her. Reflecting on the event, organizers were pleased with how groups of transfer students who had never met engaged naturally in conversation. A librarian who arrived later commented on the ease in which students were conversing and stated that she thought they had all previously known each other. These observations support the organizers' aims of building community to facilitate knowledge creation.

Casual conversations with librarians also occurred. A higher comfort level of interacting with librarians was evidenced anecdotally and through feedback. Since the CU Boulder transfer student population includes many science, math, and engineering majors, it was beneficial to have science librarians at the event to meet students and begin building relationships. Several students were happily surprised to discover that each major corresponds to a

subject specialist librarian with whom they could discuss their research. Most students stayed at the event for over an hour.

The conversations between students and librarians may help alleviate or minimize the experience of library anxiety, which may include “barriers with staff,” “affective barriers,” “comfort with the library,” “knowledge of the library,” and “mechanical barriers.”<sup>44</sup> Research recommends that librarians focus on cultivating positive library experiences through accessible and friendly services as well as librarian instruction to help reduce students’ library anxiety.<sup>45</sup> The learning experiences associated with the Transfer Student Picnic were intended to mitigate library anxiety for all of these areas, though feedback form survey results show we may have been more successful in some areas than others.

## *Student Perspectives*

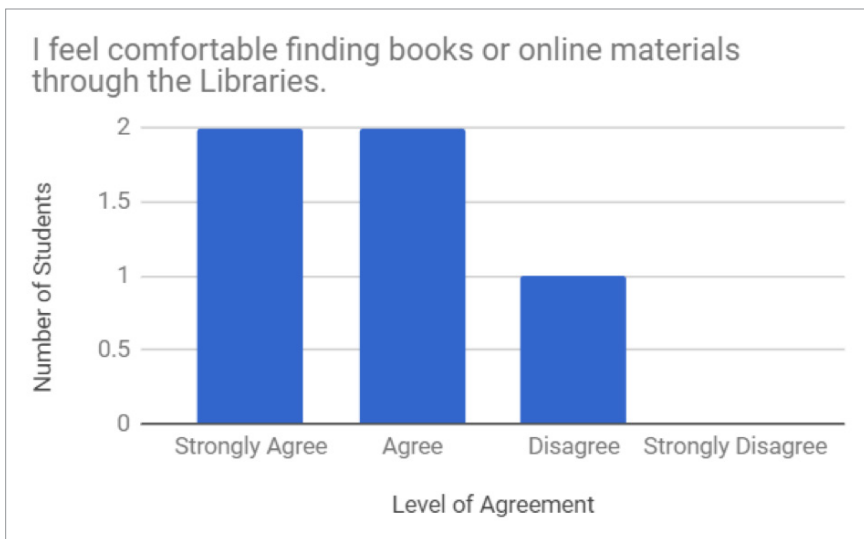
Of the seventeen attendees, only five completed the event’s feedback form (see Appendix 14A), providing generally positive responses. When asked about their first impressions of CU Boulder Libraries, comments ranged from “A good place to study, easy to get help finding materials,” and “Great! Very lavish” to a comment on the quote welcoming students to the library: “Big~ Loved the remarks on Norlin’s lib [sic] ‘One who know [sic] only his generation remains a child.’ Loved it!” and, finally, “Large and overwhelming.”

One question used the Net Promoter Score, a common 1–10 scale used in customer service contexts to determine customer loyalty, to gauge how likely students were to recommend the libraries to friends.<sup>46</sup> To calculate the score, the authors tallied the number of “promoters” (response of 9 or 10) and subtracted the “detractors” (response of 0 to 6) to arrive at the score. When asked “How likely are you to refer classmates to the libraries this semester?” three students responded in the promoter range and two students responded in the detractor range, yielding a Net Promoter Score of 10. With only five respondents, this score can only be an indicator of students’ feelings; however, it suggests that the libraries needs to continue to work on creating positive impressions among students.

When talking with librarians, students frequently discussed library services at their previous institutions. These discussions of previous library experiences relate to social constructivist theories about building on students’ prior knowledge. One student mentioned that she was familiar with using the research and circulation desks at her previous institution’s library. The scale of the CU Boulder Libraries, however, proved daunting for many students. Some students commented that the main library building and branch libraries were much larger than at their previous institutions. When asked to

rate whether “My comfort level has improved as a result of this picnic,” four out of five students responded with “strongly agree,” and the fifth student responded with “agree.” Students were also interested in learning how to rent lockers and find study spaces with outlets in the libraries.

All five students reported “strongly agree” when asked if they felt comfortable asking a library staff member for help and if they could see themselves studying in the libraries this semester. Figure 14.2 shows an opportunity for improvement of next year’s picnic. When asked about their comfort level with finding materials, students gave mixed replies. When planning the information session, the organizers had decided not to provide laptops in the instruction room in order to maintain an active, conversational session that focused on relationship-building rather than on the specific procedures of finding materials. The authors hope that this event fostered connections that will make students feel more comfortable asking questions, such as how to find specific materials for an assignment.



**Figure 14.2.** Responses to the evaluation question, “I feel comfortable finding books or online materials through the libraries.”

## Recommendations for Hosting a Transfer Student Picnic

This experience at CU Boulder suggests that other libraries can easily adapt this picnic to suit their needs. Hosting welcome events that offer food, tours,

and short instruction sessions are common, but not often targeted for transfer students specifically. For this event, food was a compelling draw for students attending the picnic as well as those passing by the event. Although non-transfer students were asked to come back toward the end of the event help themselves to the remaining food, these short interactions were a welcomed side benefit that promoted CU Boulder Libraries services to a broader student audience.

The authors strongly recommend offering a LibGuides guide or similar virtual presence aimed at transfer students as a distinct population. While much of the material included in the CU Boulder Transfer Student Guide was repurposed from existing websites and LibGuides content, students responded positively to information that was clearly intended for them and anticipated their needs and questions. Providing this type of targeted information presents an easy-to-implement outreach opportunity that many institutions can offer without much additional time or resources commitment.

While planning the transfer student picnic, the authors focused on ways in which transfer students as well as their families could engage with the CU Boulder Libraries. Although families with young children RSVP'd, none of these students attended the event. The organizers were prepared to meet the needs of young children through the Libraries' outreach bicycle, which was stocked with children's books, coloring sheets, crayons and markers, and board games. For other libraries looking to plan a similar event, the authors recommend having fun and engaging materials for students to use between structured events.

Reflecting on the picnic, the authors came to a number of valuable realizations. In terms of future promotions, the organizers will continue to work with other campus departments. In particular, the Libraries will leverage cross-campus connections to send email blasts about the next year's picnic, ideally to all transfer students. The authors also plan to connect with community college librarians for future iterations to cross-promote these events. In the future, the organizers hope to recruit student ambassadors to provide lessons learned from their own experiences of successfully transferring to CU Boulder. Ideally, some of these student ambassadors will be those who attended this pilot picnic.

The organizers valued flexibility and adaptability while preparing for and during the event. To illustrate, the structure of the event included tours and information sessions scheduled at specific times throughout the event. However, based on students arriving at different times, the conversational flow, and dinner being served, the organizers decided to adjust the original schedule, being attentive to when the majority of students were close to finishing their meals and providing five minutes' notice prior to the start of the information sessions and tours.

Finally, for future assessment, the organizers will consider asking students to complete the evaluation form differently, perhaps distributing the feedback form immediately after the information session for a better response rate, instead of including the evaluation in students' folders. Additionally, students could be asked to complete the Library Anxiety Scale or could be solicited to participate in future focus group toward the end of their first semester. On the feedback form, instead of asking, "After attending this event, how likely are you to meet with a librarian?" students could rank which method of contacting the CU Boulder Libraries they felt most comfortable using.

## Conclusion

The authors gathered insights about transfer students' needs and barriers from the picnic attendees. Some students found the size of the campus to be daunting and larger than their former schools. Related to the size, students reported questions and challenges about navigating campus offices and structures. In conversation, students asked each other and library staff questions about required training, holds on their student accounts, printing, advising, and bursar's office issues. Some of these insights did not always match the image of transfer students found in the existing literature. In particular, transfer students were not limited to transitions from two-year to four-year institutions; attendees included students who had also attended four-year institutions before matriculating at CU Boulder.

Students also reported on the difficulties of meeting other students on campus. In fact, when planning the event, the organizers suspected that they would need to assist students in starting conversations with their peers. Instead, providing the space and opportunity led to natural and spontaneous social interactions and conversation among the students. Both personal interactions and the instruction sessions focused on sharing lived experiences and contextual realities. The picnic set the stage for students to identify themselves as members of the campus community while valuing their previous academic experiences and identities outside of the university, which aligned with the social constructivist framework used in planning this event.

It can be challenging to understand, meet the needs, and develop best methods for communicating with transfer students, who are more diverse in some respects than the traditional student population. This pilot project confirmed that academic libraries can and should make outreach to transfer students a priority as part of ensuring access and services to all students. The authors hope to see future projects and research studies that continue to investigate and document how academic libraries can implement programs and services that meet the needs of transfer students.

# Appendix 14A

## Transfer Student Picnic Feedback

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Email address:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was your first impression of CU's Libraries?
  
2. After attending this event, how likely are you to meet with a librarian? (Please circle)  
 (Very likely) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 21 (Unlikely)
  
3. How likely are you to refer classmates to the libraries this semester? (Please circle)  
 (Very likely) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 21 (Unlikely)

Please rate the following statements.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. I feel comfortable asking a library staff member for help.				
5. I feel comfortable finding books or online materials through the Libraries.				
6. My comfort level has improved as a result of this picnic.				
7. I can see myself studying in the libraries this semester.				
8. I can see myself attending an event in the libraries this semester.				

9. Do you want to be contacted by your subject specialist librarian later in the semester? *(Your email address provided above will be used)* **Yes No**
  
10. How did you hear about this event?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Flyer	<input type="checkbox"/> Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please describe):
<input type="checkbox"/> University Libraries Staff	<input type="checkbox"/> Twitter	
<input type="checkbox"/> Friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Libraries' website	
  
11. Do you want to be entered to win a \$25 Visa gift card? *(Your email address provided above will be used to contact you if you win)* **Yes No**

## Appendix 14B

### Promotional Flyer

# Transfer Student Picnic

**4-7pm, Thursday, September 7**  
**Sundial Plaza: Norlin East Entrance**

**Join us** for a library tour,  
overview of services, dinner, and fun!  
Including crafts and activities  
for children & families.

**RSVP at**  
<http://bit.ly/TransferPicnic>



University Libraries  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

Be sure to check out our Transfer Student Libraries  
Guide, especially if you can't make it to the picnic:  
<http://libguides.colorado.edu/transferstudent>

## Endnotes

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