

Transfer student success stories.

Cassidy Campbell attends Portland Community College and will transfer to Portland State University, where she will pursue a BA in Communication and a minor in Psychology.

Q: *Tell us about your transfer pathway. What was challenging, and what was helpful?*

A: I am 25 and grew up in Germany, although I'm an American citizen. I moved to the US only a few years ago to attend college. Neither of my parents went to college, so I didn't have help preparing me for what I would encounter. Instead, I had to reach out to people to help me understand the culture and system of higher education in the US. I started college during COVID, which was hard. It was *really* tough to try to find someone to talk to because schools were only meeting online.

When I started out at Portland Community College (PCC), I had a great advisor, but she changed jobs which I found out is a real problem with advisors. It seems like you just start to form a connection and then people move on. Also, because I grew up overseas, I lacked the cultural knowledge that would have helped with my transition to college. First, I went to the help desk at PCC and that is where I found out that I have an assigned advisor. I reached out to her (Alicia), which was so important. She was very helpful and willing to help me locate information. One of the most helpful things she did was to make a Google spreadsheet to help me map out my goals. We created a plan with all the courses I needed to take and a checklist to help me plan things out. There was room for courses I was interested in that didn't fit within my major or minor, which helped me get a big picture of my path to a degree.

I do think that the US educational system was not designed for non-traditional students, like me. For example, I had to get my transcript translated and a lot of the courses I took in Germany weren't acknowledged on my transcript, which was frustrating. I've always done well in math, but PCC didn't know what to do with my grades and coursework from high school in Germany. The German educational system is very different from the US, so it was challenging to try to understand things like general education courses, which are separate (but required) for a major. When I moved here, I was expecting to focus only on my major, but I soon discovered that there was a whole list of courses I had to take before I could focus on communication and psychology. Having said that there are many similarities between the culture in Germany and the US. I think that navigating the US system *and* culture shock must be much harder for students from other countries.

For me, transferring from Germany to the US was also challenging because I had to learn a whole new educational system while navigating a new culture. I am glad that I started at PCC because they were set up to help students transfer. They encouraged me to reach out. There were so many things I was unaware of, like mandatory student trainings and orientation to help prepare you for college. I didn't learn about this until finals week, so I had to cram a lot in during the last weeks of term which overwhelmed me a bit. Like so many other students, I also work which makes it hard to find time to get everything done.

Because English isn't my first language, I felt insecure about completing forms. Now that I'm living in the US it's easier, but while I was still in Germany, lots of the information I needed was inaccessible—especially pre-COVID—because colleges weren't prepared to converse with people online. Before moving here, I was unaware that the transfer process wasn't uniform between all colleges in the US, which also felt overwhelming. That is an area that could use improvement.

Now when I meet with an advisor, I ask for a summary of what we've discussed, including links and any checklists we create. I also ask *lots* of questions. I don't care if you are an advisor or professor, I'm going to ask you lots of questions because I've found that sometimes there is a mismatch of information, and I want to make sure that I get the same information from everyone. I feel like you need to have a lot of agency to work with the US system. It is really hard when you have a lot to do—it's time consuming, but I don't want to waste time and money because someone gave me a wrong answer. Often, when I am brave enough to ask a question, I find that other students have the same question and are glad that I spoke up.

The lists I have created to help keep me on track have been helpful. In fact, I share them with anyone who is interested. I tell other students to check websites because you never know if there is going to be information there that will help. Colleges need to think like students who have no experience with higher education. We're new—we don't know what we don't know. I haven't found any lists as comprehensive as the ones I've created for myself. I include things that I am eligible for, as a student (e.g., like discounts or a free subscription to *The New York Times*).

I think it would be great for the State to have an accessible online system for students. A place where lots of the information needed for transfer could be found. Education itself doesn't make you intelligent. No matter how smart you are, it's really about knowing how to navigate the educational system and learning how to use the system. Some people are born with an advantage because they know people who can help them figure things out. But if you don't have those people in your life, you must fight a little more and work twice as hard. Some people are born with a disadvantage and sometimes are discouraged from pursuing things, like an education. It's easy to give up when you don't feel like the system was created for you.

Currently, I'm working in student engagement at PCC. I love finding ways to create community with students, including brightening their day and helping them along the way. This job has helped me realize that I want to pursue a career in higher education, working with and helping students—especially international students. I want to make a difference.

As an adult with ADHD, I also want to advocate for students who learn differently. I know how important it is to find systems that work for you, individually. It's important to learn to work with the brain you have, not the brain you wish you had. Students need to see that they can succeed, no matter what their diagnosis. I found my way on my own, but there are things like accommodations that can help level the playing field so students can access information in a way that works for them. Students can also ask professors to write out directions—even in online classes—or they can use closed captioning. It helps to learn your communication style and to discover what works for you as far as studying, test taking, etc. This is something that really helps me.

As a perfectionist, I'm learning to do my best and be okay with the outcome. I want people to know that I've struggled a lot and education systems in the US are hard to navigate, but it has been worth it. I've learned by trial and error, and I've had the good fortune of finding some great people to help me, along the way. I also want to mention my mom and grandma, who are part of my support system. They have always been there to inspire me.