

When Is a Student Not a Student?

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“How many transfer students are enrolled this semester?”

When a university president asks this question, it seems like there should be a quick and simple answer. But, based on my experience as an enrollment professional at a Virginia public higher education institution, the president will likely receive conflicting answers from different offices across the university. This unfortunate situation occurs because, in the professional and academic worlds, often the same term can mean different things to different people, causing significant problems. This confusion can result in poor business decisions and loss of credibility in the information provided by the various offices.

Let's take the “enrolled” part of the request. The Enrollment Management office might consider individuals auditing courses to be enrolled students while the Office of Institutional Reporting might exclude these individuals. The “transfer” component presents additional complications. The Registrar office might consider any student who has earned credits at another higher education institution to be a transfer admission. In contrast, the Admissions might consider students who have fewer than 15 transfer credits to be a freshman admission. And in order to satisfy State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) requirements, the Office of Institutional Reporting, cannot define students who have previously attended that university as a transfer.

So, how can we help mitigate this problem?

In the world of technical and professional communication, it is critical that the audience understand what each term means. This is true for lengthy and official documents, such as proposals or product documentation, but also for more informal documents, such as memos or meeting notes. To accomplish this, the writer must supply three key components about each term: (1) the definition, (2) a clear name, and (2) limitations/filters.

(1) **Definition:** The definition is the initial, basic description of the term. For the transfer example, university leadership could select one of the definitions above for the “official” definition. So, for example it could use the Registrar definition: “any student who has earned credits at another higher education institution.”

(2) **Name:** Simply selecting one definition would still lead to confusion, because other offices would be using the same term to mean different things. So, the second component, a clear name, would come into play. While the term “transfer” would now be officially used according to its accepted definition, the other offices could then use their own internal definitions with renamed terms such as “Admissions Transfer” and “SCHEV Transfer.”

(3) **Limitations/filters:** The third component is the specification of any limitations, or filters, on the term. For example, the official definition of the term “enrolled” could limit that population to “individuals enrolled in at least one credit-bearing course” during the semester in question. If other offices needed to consider individuals outside this population (i.e. those individuals enrolled in only non-credit courses), they could create an additional, well-defined term to include their specific population of interest.

So, back to the question from our university president...

If the process described above were in place, the president would receive one official answer to his question. He might still receive other answers. But those answers would be clearly identified with different names and different limitations. And, armed with all this clarity, he could select the term with the definition that he needs and then proceed to make appropriate business decisions with confidence in this well-defined information.