

STUDENT

Argumentative Writing

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### Ethnography: Baylor Transfer Council

Baylor's Transfer Council members are a lively bunch. They filter into the room one by one, claiming seats in the rough circle of sectionals and chairs assembled on the left-hand side of the room; a few even perch on top of chair stacks beneath the flatscreen TV that broadcasts the meeting's agenda. The latter doesn't seem like a particularly comfortable seating arrangement to me, but the officers who've claimed those spots— my friend Stephen Rahimian and his roommate Christian Zarate — don't give any indication of minding. They're too busy chattering away with two of the other officers present, Emily Knaub and Colin Milford, who lead them in a fast-paced discussion that jumps from the recent death of a student at the nearby University of Texas to the presidential election to, of all things, New York sports teams. More officers chime in with contributions as they arrive (the group's sponsor, Joe Oliver, an already balding man who looks only to be in his late thirties, broaches each of the rapidly changing topics with gusto), or else break into their own clumps of conversation. The end result is a room buzzing with talk and laughter: a lighthearted, casual atmosphere that suggests a bunch of friends gathered to hang out, rather than a selection of transfer students committed to making fellow transfers' move to Baylor as smooth and enjoyable as possible.

For that is the Council's decidedly important duty, even if, from the looks of things, it's not one that ends up being all too serious. The Council is the student arm of Baylor's leading effort for transfer students, the Transfer Year Experience Living-Learning Center. Baylor prides

itself on its LLCs, as they're known, boasting a full seven options for different subsets of students. They are designed to provide students with a dorm community more or less tailored to their residents' interests or experiences— creating for them a home away from home, so to speak, as well as offering what the official site terms “academic services and programming.” For TYE residents, that means roommates and neighbors who are also living through the often tumultuous process of life as a transfer and residential faculty who are well-equipped to guide them through it all. It's doubtless a comfort to incoming transfers in particular, who frequently face a steep uphill climb when adapting to the academics and culture of their new schools.

I had heard some stories from Stephen during our hangouts that indicated as much, but it was only through my time spent with the Council that I really understood the depth of the issue. Everyone, it seems, has some story of transfer troubles. Even Emily, who at the Transfer Council meeting appears effortlessly at ease with laptop in hand, acknowledges going through difficulties when first transferring to Baylor. “Transfer shock is real,” she assures me. She describes struggling to acclimate herself to a graduating class already inured to traditions completely foreign to her; fighting to reconcile her course credits from her old college with the Baylor system; trying her best not to flounder too much in the transition process, knowing that her previous semester's GPA wouldn't be there to bolster her grades. Academic research bears out Stephen's and Emily's experiences and those of countless like them. Phil Lewis, in his study of transfer students and their challenges, notes several factors that provide complications for transfer students as they acclimate themselves to their new schools. Credits failing to transfer—the same issue that Stephen and Emily both lamented about to me — is a big one, as are institutional policies such as scholarships and eligibility, all of which Lewis states “are geared towards students entering a freshmen.” In spite of these trials, however, Lewis spots a silver

lining: with the proper academic and social support, transfer students can overcome the barriers they face and graduate at the same rate as traditional students. Thankfully for Emily, Stephen, and the other transfer students at Baylor, the TYE offers that crucial support— support provided in no small part through the work of the Transfer Council.

According to its web page, the TYE LLC Leadership Council, as the Transfer Council is formally known, is responsible for coordinating events for TYE members and, overall, influencing the LLC's direction. That is to say, in terms of the two-pronged approach to support that Lewis finds in universities with successful transfer populations— academic and social — the Council takes charge of the latter. It's only fitting for the student-led branch of Baylor's transfer initiative to prop up transfer students' social lives: true, the on-site faculty are both committed and familiar— I marvel at the ease with which Joe and his Council sponsees interact — but only transfers who have lived the experience can have the keen feel for the pulse of their fellow transfers, can know what's required of a community in order to keep any one member from floundering underneath the weight of transition. As Emily, in her role as de facto informant, confided in me, that's what made the Council so special to her in the first place: it offered the framework for a community that empathized with her in her struggles and lifted her up. Its myriad social and service events introduced her to loyal friends who provided her with precisely the form of social support that transfers need to succeed, a tight-knit community that she was inspired to give back to by joining the Council as Social Chair.

Her position is one of four chairs on the Council: the others include Outreach, Academic, and Service. The chairs, along with a pair of secretaries (communication and administrative), are grouped under the Dean of Council. It's an imposing title, but the current Dean, Colin, is relaxed and unassuming in his blue Theta shirt as he converses with Emily and a few more of the officers

who have just walked in. His duties mostly consists of leading meetings and keeping everyone in order. The chairs, however, have more complex roles. Dinne Thomas, who has just taken a seat across from me in the circle, recruits new members to the Council and reaches out to prospective transfers in her capacity as Outreach Chair. My friend Stephen has taken on the responsibility of Academic Chair, which, he informs me, mostly entails planning TED Talk showings, workshops, and much-needed finals study breaks. The Service Chair, one Tisha Traore, helps organizing volunteer opportunities for the TYE; participation in Baylor's traditional day of service, Steppin' Out, is a must, but Tisha has found additional service hours with Campus Kitchen, an on-campus organization where volunteers make snacks and meals for the hungry. Rounding out the group is, one again, Emily. Her position of Social Chair involves planning the vast array of social events the Council sponsors to bring the transfer community together: from semi-official junkets like the back-to-school get-together to more casual activity nights throughout the school year. It's something of a tall order, her responsibilities, or at least they seem to me. In fact, all of the Chairs appear have a lot on their plate. So it is not entirely unsurprising when Stephen lets me know that each Chair, per the Council's bylaws, has up to four additional officer positions below them. This explanation also clears up another seemingly puzzling fact: namely, the far-larger-than-I-expected crowd that has filtered in over the past five minutes.

They have gathered for their usual once-a-week meeting, except this particular one isn't quite so usual as all the rest: today, the Council is planning their traditional end-of-the-year bash. It's an occasion designed to celebrate what has been a year gone well for the Council and the TYE— a Welcome Week event with Baylor President Ken Starr in attendance, a widely praised bowling trip that Emily is effusively proud of — and to just let Baylor's hardworking transfer students relax with their friends. But before any relaxing can take place, there are plenty of

preparations to be made. Colin calls the meeting to order; he is the Dean, after all. But in the spirit of his laid back pre-meeting manner, he doesn't lord his position over the other officers. Instead, he more or less allows them free rein once the humdrum agenda points have been delegated and then read out. Then, it's onto matters too important for the Dean alone to hold sway: namely, what type of popsicle they should serve at the coming party. Emily, who has been leading the party talk, defers to Joe for the details on the pops; as their official sponsor, Joe has taken over the very official duty of supplying edibles for the event. He reasons that everyone will support his selection of Vitek's for lunch (he is correct), but what kind of popsicles do they think he should get?

He floats a couple of options. Pretty quickly it comes down to a contest between Mexican popsicles and Steel City Pops. People are pretty ambivalent, overall. A few (well, mostly Christian) extol the sweetness of the Mexican pops, but in the end it is Steel City that wins the day with nine hands raised its favor. It seems that it doesn't really matter that much what kind of popsicles are to be had, after all, just so long as there *are* popsicles to be had.

During the exchange, I am struck again by how relaxed the Council members are. They go through the agenda promptly, those of whom answers are expected delivering them without missing a beat, but the air never becomes businesslike even when the items (like their upcoming elections) encroach on "serious business" territory. There's a sense of comfort in their interactions, from the laid-back way they address to Joe to the way they gently— or not-so gently — tease each other. They have inside jokes aplenty, most notably one about Micah, the absent administrative secretary, who has somehow earned the revealed-in moniker of "Macaw!" And they reminisce about graduated officers with the fondness of close friends or family members.

That's what they seem like, anyways, to me: a family, or a longtime group of friends. In total, they number a little under a dozen, but they function on a far more intimate level. It surprises me to learn that Emily has only been participating on the Council for two semesters; she is one of the most talkative members, alternately relaying important information about the party and poking fun, laughing and taking notes. They all fit together as though they had known each other for years. I wonder if that is what comes from not only working on the Transfer Council, but participating in its activities and living alongside one another in the TYE.

Transferring, judging by the accounts I've heard and read, can almost be a trial by fire; and these appear fire-forged friends. Emily refers to them fondly as "the dorkiest people on the place of the planet," but also acknowledges that they "understood each other's struggles"—their relationships hinge upon the deeper connection of shared experience, and have blossomed into something that is unexpectedly wonderful to watch.

If there is anything to test this bond, though, it would seem to be t-shirt color. Later, Colin passes around color printouts of prospective t-shirt designs from Bear Cotton. Christian, seated to my right, offers me one to examine. To be fair, the designs are quite nice, with yellow-and-black, brown-and-gold, and dark blue-and-white color combinations and an assortment of TYE logos to choose from. But I am far more interested in the room's reaction to them. If before they were loud, if before they were teasing—well, now they are a riot of ribbing. Passions are running high. "I like the yellow!" someone calls out. And a horde of detractors descend. It's back and forth, back and forth, yellow or not yellow, with a great deal more heat than I ever thought the mellow hue could inspire in anyone, comically exaggerated or no. But, apparently, in the words of a different officer, "We feel very strongly about yellow!" They do indeed; another dissenter exclaims in mock fury, "Yellow only looks good if you're not WHITE!" (The whole

body has an absolute field day with the implications of that last statement for an officer named Bradlee, who is wearing a yellow LEGO shirt and is, yes, white) Eventually that joke fight fizzles out and turns into one of frocket versus no frocket. This battle doesn't quite reach the fever pitch of yellow-not yellow, but it does inspire Christian to at one point remark that the Council should just forget about the shirts and get matching TYE tattoos instead.

It's a warmly playful series of disagreements that, again, reminds me of a family: specifically, of myself and my brother, who enjoys picking these kinds of nonsense, just-for-fun fights with me. But, like any family, blood or otherwise, the Transfer Council has its series of real arguments from time to time. Emily confesses that "we do have our moments of tension," vaguely citing a member who "likes to hear their voice more than contribute to stuff." Stephen has more specifics. He references an officer who consistently fails in her duties; he assures me that she will not be voted back to next semester's board. At this meeting, she is to all appearances competent and welcomed as a part of the group, and I wonder at the dissonance between Stephen's description and the (to all appearances) fine girl before me. But Stephen's assessment must be sound, for a few weeks later, the other members do not vote her back in, and she abandons her post early in a huff.

Her lack of responsibility (though admittedly fueled by anger and hurt) is not one that the rest of the officers seem to share. In fact, they are rather hyper-responsible, at least from my perspective. Their commitment to the Council and to other duties is highlighted when, earlier in the meeting, Colin goes around the circle drumming up volunteers for TYE's Spring Premiere booth. He's quick to meet his quota— Emily is one of the first to hop aboard — which is a statement in and of itself, but I am also struck by the reasons those declining give. These are no slouches, ducking out on the council for no good reason. No, they participate in other things. In

addition to Council membership (which I'm sure would be enough to overwhelm me!), they belong to sororities and fraternities and other volunteer groups. Stephen and Christian take part in a Catholic fraternal order at our church. Emily is a key member of Baylor Chamber, again in an events-planning capacity, but one which makes her work on the Council seem like a piece of cake. J.D., a very vocal and dramatic officer who hides his recently shorn head under a beanie, is (fittingly) involved in Baylor theater. By and large, I get a picture of a group of people not only dedicated to the transfer community, but dedicated to the greater Baylor community as well.

That fact, I believe, speaks to the success of the Transfer Council and the TYE effort as a whole. Not only have the two institutions created a transfer-specific community, they have truly nurtured these students. I cannot speak fully to their academic achievements— though Emily's future law school attendance and Stephen's solid record in his engineering coursework indicate to me that the academic part of their transitions have also gone well — but what I see and hear around me at this meeting is proof enough that the Council has integrated its members into the social fabric of Baylor University with stunning success. Happy, laughing, smiling, joking, working to serve the TYE and non-transfer Baylor students, too— the people seated in this circle, in this room have not only adjusted to Baylor life, they thrive in it, so much so that they desire to bring out the same in others. I cannot think of a greater endorsement of Baylor's transfer programs than that.

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