

Transfer and the Dilemma of Our Students: *A Call to Action*

Look at how many of the students who graduated from your college or university in 1995 completed all of their coursework at your institution. The results may surprise you. Anywhere from 10 to 90 percent of the students of any graduating class have had educational experiences as matriculated students at other institutions, experiences that often comprise a significant part of their academic coursework. The time has come to redefine "new student" so that it encompasses rather than excludes the many variations embedded in the term.

Faculty on your campus are sitting, struggling with the concept of general education, perhaps at this moment. They discuss competencies, common themes, specific bodies of knowledge, courses, and programs. But will they discuss what currently happens to students who have taken a full or partial general education program of courses elsewhere? Will the courses and programs so carefully designed to broaden intellectual horizons and open academic doors serve instead to limit horizons and close doors to students who wish to transfer?

Something significant has happened to the student in American higher education that has profound implications for how colleges operate. While faculty and

administrators have focused on defining and realizing the truly unique qualities of the education offered by their institutions, students have become increasingly mobile, progressing through colleges in nonlinear patterns, collecting several institutional imprimaturs before attaining degrees. Technological delivery systems and global classrooms will accelerate and exacerbate this situation. And yet the policies and practices that exist on our campuses are all too often blind to the emerging reality.

Until recently, institutions relegated the process of transfer and articulation to a small corner of the admissions office. Few examined the impact of transfer on overall enrollment, or determined the number of in-transfer and out-transfer students who might be processed in a given year. Nevertheless, transfer has moved from being a peripheral experience to a central one: "In 1991, more than a million students graduated from colleges and universities in the United States; of these, an estimated 325,000 had transferred from one institution to another (or several others) in the course of their academic careers" (p. 35). Other studies have affirmed that the presumptive directionality of transfer, usually depicted as movement from the two year to four year colleges, is better modeled on a swirl: "Transfer is a national phenomenon taking place among all types of institutions and in multiple directions" (AASCU, 1995). Students begin at multiple points, often moving from four-year to two-year and back again, and cross cities, states, or countries (Bollag, 1995; Brown, 1992).

In writing this article we wish to acknowledge the hard work of pioneers in this field, but we also hope to alert many more individuals in higher education to the impact of transfer on our colleges and the success of our students. We do so believing basic injustices are inadvertently perpetrated daily because of counterproductive assumptions and obsolete policies regarding articulation. The academic community must become more generally aware of the issues in order to craft finely-tuned interinstitutional structures responsive to the real needs of our students.

The Current National Context

Transfer and articulation should be viewed in the context of some major issues of concern in higher education. The trend in many disciplines towards the development of national standards for higher education, the pressure to standardize accreditation, the increased calls for accountability of tax dollars, and the impact of technology on many forms of distance learning may all

have an impact on transfer and articulation. However, it is not clear whether these trends will simplify or complicate the process by which students move through multiple institutions and within multiple programs.

Within such a framework, the development of clear transfer/articulation agreements that focus on learning outcomes, as opposed to strictly equivalent course outlines, may promote the campus-to-campus and colleague-to-colleague dialogue necessary to sketch out what such national standards of learning and teaching might look like. Such a process could facilitate student transfer.

However regional accrediting agencies evolve, they will respond to the call for high and consistent national standards that identify real strengths and weaknesses of programs and institutions. Proposals have been offered and rejected, but the clear sentiment is toward stricter, singular standards. Solid transfer articulation agreements can be a part of this move for comparability of educational experience, and could address the need to accurately measure the presence or absence of equivalence.

Conversely, transfer issues may also create conditions that argue against program level standards, if such standards limit easy movement between institutions or programs. A recent antitrust suit by the U.S. Department of Justice against the overly-rigid rules of the American Bar Association regarding salary and program costs is probably an opening salvo against inflexible program-level accreditation standards that unnecessarily limit opportunity. Compromise and flexibility must be valued as integral to a carefully considered, academically-viable educational process.

New levels of accountability for public dollars mandated by public opinion and state legislatures have created a push for standardization and a call to iron out the transfer wrinkles. State legislators are impatient with complaints that courses taught at one unit of a state's public higher education system do not meet general education requirements at another unit. State reimbursement for apparently duplicate courses seems wasteful. At a time when business is benchmarking, decisions by institutions of higher education to accept or reject courses sometimes seems arbitrary, anecdotal, or arrogant. Few research studies exist that suggest, for example, that students who wish to substitute one type of literature course for another are distinguishable in any way from their fellow students upon graduation. As "time to degree" lengthens, students and parents are less willing, in the absence of data, to support the contention that a general education core is not complete if World History

is substituted for Western Civilization (Mellow, 1991). Hopefully, calls for accountability will stimulate better attempts to collect data that will help all parties understand the way in which competencies are, or are not, learned in particular situations. Finally, all discussion of transfer and articulation must proactively grapple with the implications of distance learning (video, TV and/or internet based) and its relationship to individual institutions. How will these courses be assessed and integrated into degree requirements if distance learning becomes a more viable component of all student learning? What will happen to the integrity of degrees from specific institutions? In sum, beginning discussions of national standards, the changing practice of institutional and program-level accreditation, demands for greater accountability, and the wild card of distance learning complicate the conversation about transfer. These are only some of the national contexts that call for reframing the dialogue about transfer and articulation so that it is recognized as a fundamental component of higher education in the U.S. today.

An Honest Conversation about an Elusive Subject

An informal seminar among administrators and faculty from universities, four year colleges and community colleges, at the American Association of Higher Education's national conference in March of 1995, entitled, "Beyond Articulation: What Two and Four Year Colleges Need to Say to Each Other," engaged individuals from different sectors in an honest and forthright dialogue about our perceptions, misperceptions, and conceptual frameworks about transfer of students among institutions.

As this diverse group of administrators, foundation people, faculty and state level review personnel came together, the conversation immediately broadened the definition of transfer from the assumed pattern of a two year to four-year event. Participants acknowledged articulation as also being a four-year to four-year, four-year to two-year, and BA/BS to either two- or four-year phenomenon. To reflect those vagaries, we used the language of "sending" and "receiving" institutions to encompass all possibilities.

Fundamentally, we shared the overarching concern of whether or not our institutions of higher education were serving transfer students by recognizing what they bring to us and their current needs and aspirations. We lamented the lack of in-depth data addressing some of the fundamental questions of transfer. There are few adequate campus-based studies, occasional state-wide studies, and not many specific national studies that explicate the

extent of transfer, the percentages of students who go from one type of institution to another, or the colleges from which and when students transfer.

Some receiving institutions are beginning to examine the actual impact of transfer on enrollment, often finding that the success of transfer students is much more critical to enrollment management than many assumed. For example, several years ago, one urban community college, concerned about a sudden inability to project the number and kinds of sections needed, discovered that approximately 30 percent of the incoming class each year were transfer students. Some studies examine the performance of home vs. transfer students to support or demolish hunches. These small-scale analyses often crush assumed and cherished assumptions about variations between home and transfer students in persistence, performance, and graduation, as does a recent large-scale analysis of transfer students:

Transfer and non-transfer students mirror each other in a number of areas. In demographic characteristics, it is difficult to tell them apart: men and women are almost equally likely to transfer, as are students from various ethnic groups. In quality of work, transfer students' grades are slightly higher than those of the other students.... If grades reflect students' academic readiness as well as their current diligence, then transfer students seem to be as well prepared as other students (IRHE, 1995).

Especially curious is the extent to which colleges do not believe each other's data. In part, this may reflect the difference between anecdotal and qualitative data collected at the sending institution, and quantitative data collected at the receiving institution. Often, the student who does not succeed because of transfer or degree requirement barriers returns to the receiving institution to tell the tale, so community college administrators in particular have horror stories. Our current favorite concerns a student we'll call Mark, an ex-convict who struggled to remake his life and attended a New York community college quite successfully and was accepted at a highly selective, highly competitive ivy league university. Then he was caught in a bind. The university would not accept a lower level algebra course in transfer, which seemed appropriate. However, he was required to take a remedial math course at the university that covered the same material as the non-transferable community college algebra course because that particular course

was missing from his high school transcript! Had a placement test been administered, he would have been waived from having to take a course he had already completed successfully, albeit in a context apparently not recognized by the university.

Educational researchers tend to rely upon quantitative data from summary statistics at receiving institutions. Sending institutions believe these data tell only part of the story. For example, only students who successfully negotiate the transfer hurdles appear in quantitative data analyses, so studies that count the number of courses transferred look impressive. However, they do not take into account the students (and their courses) who disappear during (and perhaps because of) the transfer process. In addition, these quantitative studies rarely indicate how many transferred courses are accepted as electives that complete neither general education nor major requirements and often sit as extra credits that do not count towards graduation. This transfer of credits that do not fulfill degree requirements may help explain why the average number of credits earned by students completing baccalaureate degrees increased over 10 percent from 1972 to 1993 from 126 to 139 credit—almost an extra semester of work (Aldeman, 1995).

Our data do not yet catch the national scene very effectively. While we know that any break in course work is negatively associated with degree completion (see for example Pascarelli and Terenzini, 1991, and NTLA, 1995), we do not have a good handle on the extent to which this is a personal attribute (these students have complex lives that make completion difficult) or an educational administrative attribute (transfer hurdles that make the prospect of returning or gaining credit for past academic work less appealing). Quantitative data must be collected centrally and correlated with qualitative data collected locally in order for a balanced picture to emerge.

General Education and Distinctive Degrees

Honest conversation about transfer uncovers deeper structural questions about the meaning of a college degree. At its best, what happens when faculty come together as a community of scholars to develop sequenced, integrated, interdisciplinary courses is at the center of undergraduate education—the kind of thoughtful, comprehensive process every campus needs. These events are too rare in the academic world, and are hungrily sought by students and faculty alike. If transfer limits certain kinds of creativity in the development of general education, we do students no favor by limiting it.

We affirm the value of general education and its potential centrality to a student's education. On the other hand, significant differences in students' skills, knowledge, or competencies are difficult to prove in most systems of distributed general education. Important differences, even noticeable changes, are rarely discernable more than a year past graduation. Yet, despite the lack of evidence, many colleges rigidly adhere to a general education distribution requirement on a course-by-course basis, accepting no substitution unless it is an exact replica of a required course. The inherent inequities of an unbending, fixed core or distribution requirements are not substantiated by evidence that would warrant the obstacle they present, especially for community college students and all other transfer students.

General education programs have been characterized as providers of the hallmark of educational experience, but they have also been defined as "a full-employment program for faculty." The concept of general education, currently configured as a set of more or less specific courses, must be examined through the lens of the large percentage of students who move between institutions. Current policies probably need to be modified for transfer students who are hurt gratuitously by them.

Questions about costs, especially at public institutions are asked in addition to the general education questions. Why should the public pay to support what appear to be idiosyncratic, local or insular curricular decisions? Arising from the cost issue is the more general question: "What does it mean to be a graduate of this college as opposed to any other college?" If a particular experience is so unique, then, in the spirit of fairness perhaps a college should decide not to accept transfer students if acceptance carries with it the obligation to take a heavy burden of extra courses. At the very least, institutions should candidly communicate the estimated expense of transfer in lost credits so that students may make informed choices.

What Structures Influence Transfer Success?

To facilitate good practice in transfer articulation, we need to develop state-by-state clearinghouses of transfer information in order to grow a national research database. We need both the quantitative and the qualitative data that can guide institutions to craft practices and policies that assist students who transfer within states, across states, and across the world. We need system-wide approaches to monitor the implementation and efficacy over time of course-by-course articulation agreements. We need to evaluate

the actual success of labor-intensive and people-specific approaches to college-to-college transfer and identify whether or not and why programs are actually working. But more than a summary of the patchwork of elements that make articulation and transfer agreements, we need to rethink the paradigm of course-by-course transfer and articulation.

Several states, such as Massachusetts and Maryland, have developed state-wide policies that seem to take a more comprehensive approach to articulation and transfer. These often view broad bands of courses as being applicable, that is, close enough in provision of general education to be substituted for one another. For example, an array of anthropology, sociology, or psychology courses would be seen as fulfilling a social science requirement, even if the receiving institution requires that its home students take a specific course. State-wide equivalency is also evaluated, so that courses with essentially similar content can be used by transfer students within tightly sequenced majors such as electrical engineering.

Other states are experimenting with thematic approaches. Yet, although the global reach of these policies is commendable, the actual practice of transfer can be quite different. The transfer of general education courses often breaks down on campuses where specific majors (for example, education or business) designate distinctive requirements from the general education core that must be met by all native, and, therefore, all transfer students. The implementation of state-wide policies requires both close monitoring and analysis. The policies also require care and feeding. Specific articulation agreements almost inevitably fall apart when the specific people who negotiated them go on sabbatical, retire, or change positions. The transfer process must be institutionalized and the resulting practices must be developed anew and widely shared.

Central repositories of articulation agreements are essential, as is the development of central monitoring to assure that agreements are being honored across institutions, cities, systems, or states, always systematically. The sharing of information among admissions officers is key to this process. So too are the development of electronic and paper publications for students, who need enough baseline information to fight for what they should receive when they transfer. Indeed, students must be given sufficient information to become informed consumers rather than victims of an arcane process.

We need to develop cross-institutional mediation/negotiating teams to speed up the articulation process by identifying which courses can routinely

be accepted for transfer credit as opposed to courses that need the input and discussion of faculty. As a direct result, less time will be wasted dragging chairpeople and faculty to visit each other's campuses to engage in articulation meetings about courses that are clearly equivalent.

We need to share our experiences and learn from each other. For example, some systems and states believe that a common numbering system facilitates articulation, especially if it is tied to state and local funding. Others find such a system costly, cumbersome, and not very useful. In at least one state, common course numbering has resulted in an inflexible system that stifles creativity and discourages the updating and refining of course materials. Such a system may inadvertently devalue innovative cross-disciplinary courses or innovative course configurations that have proven value to students because they fall outside traditional categories and exist in a "no-course land" of nonequivalency.

We need to develop joint two- and four-year admissions agreements that guarantee seamless transfer and worry-free movement by students from one college to another. Ultimately, sets of non-course-specific competencies and skills developed by faculty from both two and four year institutions working together should be substituted for course-by-course articulations. Common outcomes assessment should be developed in place of course-by-course articulations.

We need to track the positive and negative impact of system and/or state transfer initiatives on curricular innovation. Conversely, we need to track the positive and negative impact of curricular innovation (such as the development of a common core of multidisciplinary courses) on the transfer and articulation process.

The paradigm endorsed by the AAHE group would substitute applicability for equivalence in most cases of general education. Users of such a paradigm would acknowledge and act upon any evidence that critical skills and competencies were not being achieved; so too would they develop high, clearly stated standards by which such assessments would be made. Users of the new paradigm could assume a shared belief that what happens in colleges and universities across the country is just, fitting, and rigorous:

After the first year in college, our study showed similar cognitive gains between students at two- and four-year colleges in reading comprehension, mathematics, critical thinking, and composite achievement. These

similarities indicate that students who begin college at two-year institutions do not sacrifice intellectual gains. Two-year colleges' cognitive impact may be indistinguishable from those of four-year institutions (NCTLA, 1995).

The new paradigm would acknowledge that courses or educational experiences should travel easily from college to college and not be institution-specific. Fundamentally, a new paradigm would require that we view higher education from the perspective of the student who encounters multiple institutions on the way to a degree. The paradigm would help us seek ways to help students integrate their educational experiences, instead of attempting to squash past experiences into rigid new configurations.

And Once the Transfer Student Arrives...

Many colleges have freshman orientations to ease transition from high school to college, but far fewer make the same outreach to transfer students. Seldom are transfer students formally welcomed into their new college nor are their existence and special needs typically acknowledged. How can we bring the reality of transfer to the forefront of our consciousness so that even small gestures, such as linking students in pairs as they move from sending to receiving institutions, are used routinely to facilitate the transition?

We need to ask if the conversation about transfer distinguishes between the often wonderful transfer experiences of our most articulate and talented students and the more mundane and considerably less satisfactory experiences of ordinary students. We need to compare institutional responses. Honors graduates of community colleges may move easily to prestigious private colleges, but these same students may receive far fewer transfer credits if they attend a local city or state university. Tenacious and aggressive students survive the battle for credits better than those unprepared to confront authority, question arbitrary decisions, and fight for their rights. We need to reach for a paradigm designed to fairly serve students of all abilities in all kinds of transfer patterns.

Conclusion

With global education and the movement of students between institutions as well as between countries, how can institutions of higher education produce meaningful articulation agreements? We have reached a point in time

when it is unfair to create graduation requirements based on the assumption that students will begin and end at the same college in the face of overwhelming evidence that this is not true. If our college and university students are indeed a nation of samplers, then we as educators must evaluate how higher education can remain accountable for degrees, credentials and learning when students attend multiple institutions before they are graduated from one. We need to acknowledge the facts about higher education today and move forward to address them in ways that are fair to our students, fair to ourselves and our colleges and universities. Only by accepting the pitfalls and the high points of current policies can we move beyond our half-understandings and patchwork attempts to create new working paradigms for new realities.

Suggested Readings

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