

Fostering a Transfer Student Receptive Ecosystem

by Eileen Strempe

Profound shifts are underway in higher education. As a nation we are challenged by dramatic decreases in state and local government support for academia (and corresponding upward swings in tuition costs), stagnating middle-class wages, and the rise of competitive for-profit educational providers. It seems that almost daily another article about the rising cost of college looms in the headlines; outstanding student loans topped \$1 trillion last year, exceeding the total amount of national credit card debt. These financial pressures make President Obama's aspirational goal of increasing the number of American college graduates seem extraordinarily challenging. One solution to this challenge should be found among and between our various K–16 educational institutions collaborating and collectively lending their expertise to forge visible and viable educational pathways for our nation's students. Our country's community colleges now have eight million degree-seeking students enrolled each year, many of whom intend to continue their education. We need more substantive national policies that promote effective local practices to help more students successfully navigate the key educational pipeline transition point between two-year and four-year institutions.

Obama's agenda demands that we collectively think both strategically and tactically about how to promote successful transfer from two- to four-year institutions. There are many excellent resources that outline best practices, most notably the seminal book *The College Transfer Student in America: The Forgotten Student* produced by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers as well as numerous Lumina Foundation reports, including a recent report written in collaboration with The College Board titled *Improving Student Transfer from Community Colleges to Four-Year Institutions—The Perspective of Leaders from Baccalaureate-Granting Institutions*. My home institution, Syracuse University, has been progressively exploring how to cultivate a more “transfer receptive institutional ecosystem”

while promoting access and excellence as an embodiment of our core institutional mission.

Although these reports offer important context and recommendations, an American Council on Education fellowship afforded me the opportunity to see first-hand how these practices have been implemented with more (or less) success “on the ground.” As a 2011–12 ACE Fellow sponsored by Syracuse University and hosted by Colgate University, my research project centered on transfer student best practices. Over 45 site visits to various institutions around the country have poignantly illustrated that in order to successfully recruit and retain transfer students, institutions must invest in the necessary staff and resources. For the last 15 months I have examined how various institutions across the country have addressed the needs of community college transfer students and how we as a nation might more effectively foster their successful integration into public and private four-year institutions. This fellowship year underscored the importance of working more purposefully—with integrity and intentionality—to assure the success of our nation's community college transfer students.

Best practices, whether associated with transfer students or the broader student body, must clearly be guided by strategic planning and propelled by institutional mission, with a reexamination of *A Guide to Planning for Change* (Norris and Poulton 2010) to inform the process. A transfer-friendly culture affects every aspect of the organization, including marketing, admissions, financial aid, housing, orientation, advising, curricular coordination, career services, student services, alumni relations, and—most critically—faculty. Clearly, any institution making a substantial commitment to transfer students must be invested in creatively re-thinking the transfer process and the transfer student experience in every arena.

The need for coordination among various units within an institution is mirrored by the need for institutions to forge collaborative partnerships. The groundwork of articulation agreements, 2 plus 2 agreements, and transfer admission guarantees (TAG) provides the basic and critical pieces of academic infrastructure that ensure student coursework transfers seamlessly between institutions. These types of important agreements assure transfer students that the time, money, and energy invested in their community college campus coursework will be accepted. However, bringing these agreements to life requires a deeper investment beyond the framing of an academic pathway that must involve faculty, staff, and administrators at the partnering institutions. Ideally, these agreements go beyond assuring the transfer of credits to create curricular pathways that are pedagogically sound. Targeted, mutually beneficial agreements build on the programmatic strengths of both the sending and receiving institution. One dean candidly told me that although he was originally skeptical about the benefit of articulation agreements to his school, he now *only* wants transfer students who come to him via an articulation agreement. Because the coursework has been carefully aligned, students entering under the auspices of the agreement now have the additional benefit of entering as a cohort with a core of identical classes to complete.

A strategic vision should place transfer students at the center of a comprehensive enrollment strategy that is informed by the knowledge that any successful initiative must be systematic, holistic, integrated, comprehensive, and assessed to measure success or lack thereof. As underscored by the important work of the Century Foundation National Task Force on Community Colleges, the resulting partnership opportunities between four-year institutions and community colleges provide a wealth of mutual benefits.¹ While fulfilling the institutional promise and mission of the community college, transfer students provide the four-year institution with a needed net tuition revenue stream by “filling in” gaps left by attrition and vacancies created by students studying

abroad. In addition, their presence on campus may serve the broader goals of an institution’s core mission. Strategically conceived, transfer students contribute to broader student-body richness in terms of race/ethnicity, age, veteran status, geographic or socioeconomic diversity, and life experience.

With the generous assistance of funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, Syracuse University is already engaged in or currently implementing several of the practices I share below. While these tactical suggestions may (or may not) fit a specific institutional context, building replicable models with local community college partners provides a powerful means for developing mutually beneficial partnerships. Our Jack Kent Cooke grant provides proof that when the highest levels of institutional commitment are matched with personal attention, transfer success is greatly enhanced. Even without the benefit of outside funding, these initiatives make sense. High-achieving community college students bring with them not only a proven track record of academic success, but they also, in a “net-tuition revenue” mindset, add to the fiscal bottom line as they fill empty seats. Despite the strategic personnel investments required, an institution should be able to develop a self-sustaining, revenue-generating model of transfer enrollment. Tactical observations from my ACE Fellowship year fall into several broad categories as discussed below.

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ADMISSIONS

Dedicated admissions personnel with a defined focus on transfer students serve two linked purposes. First, they intentionally work to meet targets for applicant, admitted, and matriculated transfer students developed by enrollment management leadership. These targets are necessary for the quantitative and qualitative assessments that inform a recursive feedback loop to enhance and refine both institutional strategy and organizational capacity.

1 More information on the Century Foundation’s National Task Force may be found at <http://tcf.org/media-center/2012/century-foundation-convenes-national-task-force-to-recommend-ways-to-strengthen-community-colleges>.

Second, dedicated admissions personnel ensure that a prospective transfer student has a personal advocate. Too many institutions have no defined expert in the transfer arena, and these professionals are essential in creating a student-centered approach. Their efforts are best supplemented not with general campus visit days, but with tailored campus “Transfer Buddy Days.” These transfer-student focused events provide opportunities for community college students to shadow current transfer students for the day while simultaneously receiving timely transcript evaluations and early course registration for the coming semester.²

STUDENT AFFAIRS

Peer mentors are clearly positioned at the core of any successful student affairs transfer program, but their work must extend beyond campus boundaries and cross back into the heart of the admissions process. For example, students who have successfully transferred might work with prospective students as paid peer mentors. These mentors could help demystify the transfer process and inform and motivate prospective students by visiting local community college campuses alongside admissions officers and then continue to work with these new transfer students as they transition to the four-year university. Institutions especially need to consider how developing a transfer mentors program may improve both transfer and retention rates for underrepresented, underserved, and low-income students by providing near-peer role models.³ Other approaches embody the notion that “orientation is a continuous process”:

- » Prioritize transfer students within student affairs by including a dedicated, trained transfer specialist in charge of transfer-specific programming.
- » Establish discipline-specific orientations (e.g., engineering) for transfer students.
- » Create effective student orientation programs that blend both transfer student-specific orientation events—including a private welcoming ceremony with senior leadership presiding—with more general orientation events. Transfer students have specific needs, but they also need to be integrated into broader campus life.
- » Demonstrate the “institutional face” of transfer students by introducing students to staff and administrators who were transfer students.
- » Connect transfer students with faculty from the start, intentionally encouraging interaction by engaging faculty in the recruitment process at the community college and crafting transfer student orientation panels that include faculty.
- » Devise a series of transfer student interventions throughout the academic year, assuring sustained support that is strategically sequenced.
- » Foster transfer student engagement by creating campus leadership roles exclusively for transfer students.
- » Connect transfer students to career services as part of their orientation process, but with a carefully constructed transfer focus that includes role models (peers as well as senior institutional leaders who were transfer students).

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Institutions locate their transfer efforts (if they have them) in a variety of different units. In my experience, however, these efforts are best housed in the Provost’s Office. There is great benefit to be gained from locating transfer efforts in the Provost’s Office: they are viewed as having the highest levels

² For a fuller discussion, please see *The College Transfer Student in America: The Forgotten Student* (Jacobs et al. 2004).

³ An excellent resource is the Executive Summary of the publication *Transfer Access to Elite Colleges and Universities in the United States: Threading the Needle of the American Dream* funded by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (Dowd et al. 2006).

of institutional support, and they are simultaneously more effectively positioned to work across institutional silos.

Institutions should seek to build an electronic database of all articulated/approved courses to provide clarity, transparency, and consistency in the acceptance of articulated coursework. This effort benefits not only transfer students, but all students. All too frequently, students find themselves on campus and still petitioning (and waiting) to see if a course will count toward graduation.

Several institutions have established transfer seminars as well as summer bridge programs for transfer students, both of which provide select community college students with clear pathways and appropriate academic preparation. The most outstanding programs involve team teaching of summer session courses by community college faculty and four-year faculty and include faculty mentorship as a key aspect of the program. Targeted cohorts built around specific academic disciplines (e.g., engineering) hold particular promise.⁴

FINANCIAL AID

Again, as with admissions, a dedicated financial aid specialist is key to providing individual and effective service. (At Syracuse, our admissions and financial aid transfer specialists are currently funded by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, with the understanding that the institution will continue the positions beyond the life of the grant. Our financial aid specialist is, by coincidence, a former transfer student.⁵)

⁴ Please see *Community Colleges in the Evolving STEM Education Landscape: Summary of a Summit* (Olson and Labov 2012). This rich source contains (as Appendix B) an excellent and highly pertinent chapter titled “Effective Outreach, Recruitment, and Mentoring into STEM Pathways: Strengthening Partnerships with Community Colleges” by professor and co-director of the Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts at Mount Holyoke College, Becky Wai-Ling Packard.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of transfer financial aid strategies, please see *Improving Student Transfer from Community Colleges to Four-Year Institutions: The Perspective of Leaders from Baccalaureate-Granting Institutions* (The College Board 2011).

The allocation of institutional resources must align with institutional priorities, and this is certainly true in regards to transfer students. Thus, financial aid packages for community college students should be mindfully targeted to support transfer student admissions efforts and not constructed to effectively penalize a community college transfer for having “two years on the cheap.” Any financial aid literacy program (such as Syracuse University’s “You Otto Know”) should be specifically tailored for transfer students.

HOUSING

The majority of institutions with a substantial commitment to transfer students guarantee on-campus housing, rather than leaving these students to fend for themselves off campus. Four-year institutions should—at the very least—offer guaranteed housing for out-of-state transfer students. The best option includes a transfer student learning community combined with a transfer student forum (similar to a first-year forum) that provides formal in-class learning opportunities connected to the residential experience.

COMMUNICATIONS/OPERATIONS

Communication is key to the successful coordination of institutional transfer efforts. The internal communications infrastructure should include continuous cross-campus conversations involving institutional representatives from admissions, financial aid, student affairs, academic affairs, schools/colleges, and advancement as well as alumni. The fact that effective transfer programs involve all areas of the institution is another reason why it is important to centrally position these efforts in the Provost’s Office. Institutions should also create comprehensive committees that include standing “working groups” as well as a senior leadership advisory board centered on all transfer efforts. Too frequently, even the best efforts are placed within an admissions silo, without the authority to evoke institutional transformation.

INFORMATION AND ANALYTICS SUPPORT

Both community colleges and four-year institutions need to strategically position themselves to be successful, and a properly designed program of analytic support provides key environmental intelligence. This important evaluative component (both qualitative and quantitative) provides information that can be used to adjust programming and services. Knoell's (1990) classic text recommends that four-year institutions benchmark in these key areas:

- » The percentage of transfer applications completed, accepted for admission, and actually enrolled;
- » The percentage of community college transfer credit for which baccalaureate degree credit is awarded and which satisfies degree requirements;
- » The retention rates and persistence to bachelor's degree rates of transfer students, particularly as compared to those of non-transfer/native students (I would also add time to degree); and
- » The proportion of baccalaureate degrees awarded to transfer students from community colleges as compared with other students, broken out by gender, ethnicity, and field.

CONCLUSION

Successful educational capacity building ripples beyond campus boundaries, with profound effects on our regional and national education agendas. Focusing on transfer students can obviously help with some of the concrete financial and curricular problems that face us in academia today, but this focus can also provide an opportunity for American higher education and for our nation more generally. By ensuring there are educational “on-ramps” to partially offset the many “off-ramps,” we build national capacity that helps assure access and excellence for all. As headlines create an impression that higher education is beyond the reach of many, this “highway” provides an excellent lower-cost

alternative for the students we claim we're here to reach. Capacity building of this kind—from recruitment through commencement—is no longer a luxury. Neither the nation nor colleges and universities themselves can afford to continue ignoring the leaks that siphon promising students from two-year schools out of the educational pipeline. Now, rather than restricting community college transfer (or allowing barriers to remain), we simply must commit to fully serving the entire spectrum of our nation's students.

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