

The Problem With Being a Transfer Student

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It has been well established that two-year students face enormous problems when they decide to complete a four-year degree. By one estimate, only 11 percent of those who indicate their intention to acquire a degree on the day they start in a two-year program actually do so.

There are many reasons for this failure. Certainly, the long, deep recession and the uncertain impact on federal grant and loan programs caused by the budget/debt ceiling implosion playing out so painfully now in Washington only make things worse. Actions have consequences, especially in these moments of global embarrassment for America.

Still, whatever the resolution ahead there will be numerous obstacles to overcome. In fact, sometimes it's not just about the money.

From the outset, students must first overcome a familial, social and cultural barrier. The idea of a college degree can seem entirely irrelevant to first generation families when the concept of going to college is not fully understood and appreciated. It can be an unwelcome intrusion on family life where moving up is synonymous with moving out. And, the support necessary to prepare a student for a college career may not exist nor can it be guaranteed for all children. It's sometimes easier to prepare for paths that are understandable and seem more realistic.

Speaking recently to guidance counselors at a Boston area community college, they made the important point that the term "success" has many meanings. They noted that for their best and brightest students it is almost a leap of faith for these students to consider leaving Boston when they seek a four-year degree.

Further, their students almost invariably chose public over private options even before the financial aid package settled the final cost. For these students, attending a familiar public four-year college stretched their imagination, addressed their practicality, and met aspirations that they had established for themselves.

Obviously, these students often made a great choice and received an excellent education. Many of them also had other good reasons for staying local for their four-year degree. The problem was not the choice as much as the limit to their understanding of what might be possible. For these students, the idea that you only have a problem after a college accepts you, when financial aid often limits options, was a foreign concept.

The inability of these community college students to imagine the possible is partly the responsibility of four-year institutions whose leadership fails to grasp social need and market opportunity. Institutions -- including four-year colleges and universities -- carry into their thinking deep prejudices about two-year students.

Collectively, these prejudices assert that two-year students are not ready for four-year residential learning

experiences. The argument has validity, of course, but the reality is that there is plenty of blame to be shared within American higher education.

First, four-year institutions rely on articulation agreements, often so heavily bureaucratic, inflexible and cumbersome that two-year graduates have no clear route to follow. With counselor to student ratios sometimes approaching 1000 to 1 at community colleges, students can find at best limited help to navigate a very uncertain path.

In addition, aspiring four-year students often find that the rules change from institution to institution. At some, there are institutional guidelines to establish transfer policies. At others, these are policies reviewed by departments, or even individual faculty, that not only create confusion with changing standards but also inexcusable delays that discourage successful application completions. The problem -- there is no clear pathway to follow.

By focusing on the process rather than the individual, higher education fails to offer the kind of seamless transition necessary to achieve stated policy outcomes. It becomes more important to guard quality than guide students.

The solution is to put the student first, judging each student individually and not by preconceived standards that can themselves become the biggest single obstacle to transfer. As hard as state and federal legislators try to "fix" an obvious problem, they only expose a creaking system that is turning away promising students.

Are two-year graduates always ready for the rigors of a four-year degree? No. They can be made more ready, however, through earlier identification, largely through better use of social media.

They will need mentorship beyond what community college counselors can be expected to provide. Programs to acculturate transfers to four-year programs, intensified writing, heightened reading skills, clearer agreements on what constitutes competency by discipline, and a safety net of committed faculty and staff at the four-year college will be critical.

We can do so much more with existing resources. And we will need to put some new money into mentorship -- the same principle that encourages the quality (and higher graduation rates) made possible at national liberal arts colleges. The outcome will be a higher education system that relates parts to a whole.

Nearly [50 percent of the students](#) enrolled in America attend community colleges. Isn't it time that somebody thought about how best to prepare these students to meet their goals and workforce needs? Perhaps we should begin first by asking the students what they need most.