Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education

An Examination of Institutional Policies, Practices, and Culture

Edited by

Adrianna Kezar

NEW YORK AND LONDON

Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education

Written for administrators, faculty, and staff in Higher Education who are working with low-income and first-generation college students, *Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education* uncovers organizational biases that prevent postsecondary institutions from adequately serving these students. This volume offers practical guidance for adopting new or revised policies and practices that have the potential to help these students thrive.

This contributed volume is based on empirical studies that specifically examine the policies and practices of postsecondary institutions in the United States, England, and Canada. The contributing authors argue that discussions of diversity will be enriched by a better understanding of how institutional policies and practices affect low-income students. Unlike most studies on this topic, this volume focuses on institutional rather than federal, state, and public policy. Institutional policies and practices have been largely ignored and this volume lifts the veil on processes that have remained hidden.

Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education:

- showcases an often-overlooked issue in diversity discussions;
- outlines how post-structuralism can elucidate the concepts and issues examined;
- highlights organizational policies and practices that can hold back low-income students;
- provides a comprehensive approach to low-income student success;
- offers practical solutions and advice to professionals in Higher Education.

This volume presents tremendous insight and valuable guidance for working within new institutional policy and practice frameworks and will undoubtedly reshape the future of educational opportunities for low-income students in Higher Education.

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First published 2011
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Minion by EvS Communication Networx, Inc.
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education : an examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture / edited by Adrianna Kezar.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Postsecondary education—United States. 2. Educational equalization—United States.
3. People with social disabilities—Education (Higher)—United States. I. Kezar, Adrianna J.
LC1039.5.R44 2010
378.1'9826942—dc22
2009047575

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-80321-2 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-80322-9 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-203-85125-8 (ebk)

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PREFACE

ADRIANNA KEZAR
WITH ASSISTANCE FROM MARYBETH WALPOLE

PURPOSE AND FOCUS

In the last 30 years, colleges and universities have worked to diversify the student populations that attend and succeed in college. Campus dialogues about diversity and multiculturalism tend to focus most on race and ethnicity, to a lesser extent on gender and sexual orientation, and often provide little if any attention to socioeconomic status. Programs, centers, and policies help students of color to succeed, reach out and recruit students from disadvantaged high schools, ensure affirmative action, and provide a bridge between high school and college. Though these efforts are extremely important, campus leaders are beginning to realize that socioeconomic status is largely missing from the policies and practices in place in most college campuses. During a recent interview study regarding advancing diversity agendas on campuses, college presidents expressed comments similar to this sentiment:

> while we need to continue to advance the racial and ethnic demographics of the students and faculty on campus and ensure their success, we largely ignore social class or income and its impact on students. This impacts our success with students of color as well and makes us blind to important issues that may be shaping how students perform, and how we shape (or do not) that success.

A recent study by Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) underscores how important it is to focus on social class. They document that over the last 30 years low-income access rates have dropped and middle- and high-income rates have gone up, making the gap larger than in previous time periods.

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IMPROVING TRANSFER ACCESS FOR LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

ALICIA DOWD

This chapter reports on research of the Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access at Selective Institutions, conducted in 2006 by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) of the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California. I wish to acknowledge the valued contributions of numerous colleagues to the study, particularly my co-principal investigator Glenn Gabbard, as well as Estela Mara Bensimon, John Cheslock, Jay Dee, Dwight Giles, Elsa Macias, Lindsey Malcom, Tatiana Melguizo, Jenny Pak, and Sharon Singleton. The study was funded by The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

Patrick Sullivan, a community college English professor, asserts that poor and working-class community college students "understand that class is a powerful reality in America, and they feel its inequities sharply" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 145). He argues that these students "have been taught by harsh economic realities that classic American 'happy endings' do not apply to them" (p. 146). The findings from a national study of transfer conducted by me and others (Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, et al., 2006) indicates that, indeed, happy endings are elusive when it comes to transfer from community colleges to selective four-year colleges and universities. In this chapter, I synthesize previously reported findings to

suggest steps faculty members can take to improve transfer access for low-income students.

From interviews from our study with faculty, counselors, and students, I describe how faculty can act as "transfer agents," individuals who bring a critical consciousness to help students understand the specialized language of higher education and take advantage of the resources available to them. From our review of transfer programs, policies, and practices at eight pairs of community college and four-year college campuses selected as potential exemplars of equitable transfer practices, I describe how faculty can act as "transfer champions" to modify such transfer structures to facilitate transfer by low-income community college students. In large part this involves becoming aware of class-based inequities in transfer access and becoming willing to take responsibility for changing the programs, policies, and practices that disadvantage low-income students.

Among the solutions that are most often held up as strategies to improve higher education access for low-income students through the transfer function, those that attempt to make the structures of transfer more visible (namely articulation agreements) are the most prominent. However, such strategies will be insufficient if important institutional actors such as faculty are not involved in questioning the hidden assumptions and unquestioned norms that make those structures difficult for low-income students to navigate.

Before exploring the ramifications of overemphasizing structural solutions at the expense of attention to the faculty role in facilitating transfer access, I describe the scope of the problem of limited transfer access for low-income students based on statistical analyses from our study. For two reasons, I focus primarily on transfer to highly selective public institutions. First, public universities enroll the majority of community college transfer students (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008) and many have a statutory obligation to enroll transfers. Second, the admissions practices of highly selective public flagship universities are of special importance when we consider whether the distribution of postsecondary opportunity is meritocratic (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Gutmann, 1987) and whether community colleges are in fact a cornerstone of a democratic education system (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The socioeconomic and racial-ethnic composition of the elite student body is of special concern because elite institutions also function as gatekeepers to advanced, graduate, and professional education and to positions of civic and corporate leadership. The pursuit of "excellence" today may well be displacing a social commitment to equity in higher education, reducing access to highly selective institutions for students from less affluent families (Bowen et al., 2005).

LIMITED TRANSFER ACCESS FOR LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Although community colleges and the transfer function are often construed as the embodiment of democratic opportunities for access to higher education, transfer is primarily something affluent students do. Among high school graduates of the Class of 1992 who transferred to highly selective colleges and universities, 79 percent were from the two highest socioeconomic quintiles. Students categorized as having the lowest level of socioeconomic status (SES) contributed *a mere 2 percent* of the student body who transferred to this group of colleges assigned the highest prestige rankings based on information in the Barron's Profile of American Colleges. This suggests that fewer than one of every one thousand transfer students are low-income students. As we might expect, the share of low-income students increases when we look at transfers from community colleges to institutions of lesser selectivity. Even then, however, affluent students are greatly over-represented and low-income students are nearly absent. The two top SES quintiles still represent greater than half of the transfer enrollment (56 percent) and the lowest quintile *only 6 percent* (Dowd et al., 2008).

The two drivers creating an institutional openness to or demand for transfers are "market" and "mission." Not surprisingly, then, the preferences of four-year institutions for transfer students differs according to their governance and financing (public or private), selectivity, and type (liberal arts focus and federal research orientation) (Cheslock, 2005; Dowd & Cheslock, 2006). Trend analyses demonstrate that it became more difficult to transfer between 1984 and 2002, the most recent data available at the time of our study. Highly selective institutions and private institutions at all levels of selectivity decreased their transfer enrollments during this period. As shown in the transfer enrollment rate trend lines in the upper panel of Figure 11.1, the typical percentage of transfers in the entering class at private elite institutions declined almost by half, from 10.5 percent to 5.7 percent.[1] Private institutions of lesser selectivity admitted a much larger share of transfers, but there too transfers lost about a 5 percent share, as enrollments dropped from near 30 percent to 25 percent.

Transfer is part of the statutory role and mission of public universities. Not surprisingly then, and as shown in the lower panel of Figure 11.1, transfer enrollment rates at public institutions are much higher. From 1984 to 2002, transfer enrollment rates hovered around 20 percent at selective public universities, with a decline in the late 1990s that neared 15 percent before rebounding somewhat. At other public institutions, transfers contributed about a third of the entering class in 2002. Even in this less competitive public sector, by the mid-nineties transfer students

were losing enrollment share. The only type of institution to increase transfer access from 1984 to 2002 was the least competitive public colleges and universities, which suggests that transfers may have been impacted by a "trickle down" effect (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). As entry to colleges

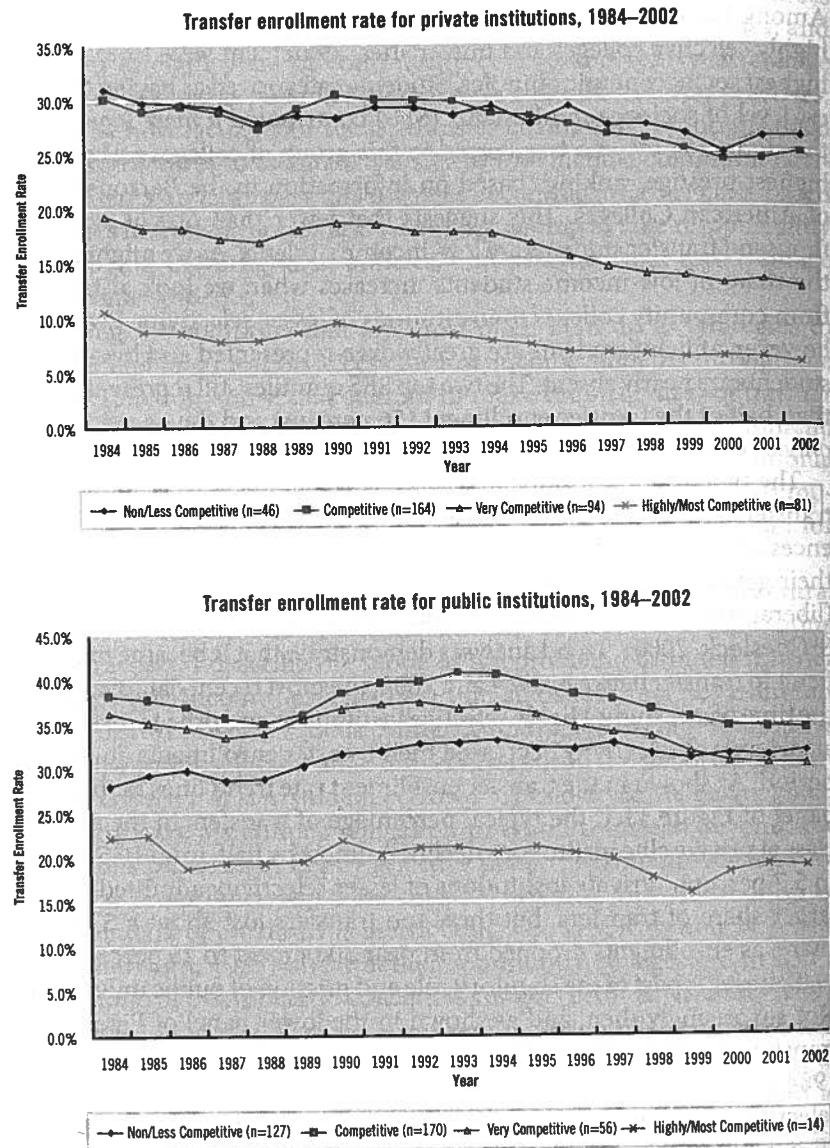

Figure 11.1 Transfer Enrollment Rates for Private and Public Institutions, 1984–2002

with any degree of selectivity became more difficult, transfers may have been redirected to open access four-year institutions. There is some evidence that the socioeconomic distribution of transfer enrollments became more skewed toward affluent students during this period (Dowd & Melguizo, 2008).

DECONSTRUCTING PROMINENT SOLUTIONS FOR TRANSFER ACCESS

The functioning of colleges and universities can be viewed through various lenses. In a bureaucratic mode, institutions rely on structures such as rules, regulations, hierarchies of decision making and information flow, formal divisions of labor and high levels of role specialization (Birnbaum, 1988). Today the most prominent efforts to improve transfer access involve legislating articulation agreements (articulating curriculum requirements and course numbering), creating public databases listing transfer requirements, and providing financial incentives for students to transfer. All of these solutions operate primarily in a bureaucratic mode, with political considerations adding to their perceived importance.

Notwithstanding the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Community College Transfer Initiative, for which my and my colleagues' research was conducted with the express purpose of drawing attention to socioeconomic inequities in transfer access (Wyner, 2006), the problem of the lack of transfer access for low-income students has largely been out of view. Although various forms of articulation have been treated as important policies to improve transfer (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Long, 2005; "Transfer and Articulation," 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Wellman, 2002), articulation policies are mostly about improving the efficiency of the transfer of credits (Roksa & Keith, 2008), not about improving equity in the distribution of transfer resources. They are structural reforms touted by politicians and educational leaders to communicate the efficiency of transfer systems, largely to middle-class voters who, although feeling they are getting closed out of selective four-year universities, may be wary of enrolling their children in community colleges (Anderson, Alfonso, et al., 2006).

Articulation policies aim to improve transfer by canonizing transfer requirements (to regulate institutions) and publicizing them (to inform students of the classes they should take, when, and in what sequence in order to apply credits earned in community colleges to bachelor's degrees). California's ASSIST database, which is the state's official record of transfer requirements and agreements, illustrates the informational aspects of articulation policies. Students can use the data base to identify

which courses to take in order to transfer to certain institutions and to earn degrees in particular programs or majors.

There are many challenges to effective articulation, including differences in course content across the two- and four-year sectors, curriculum sequencing, course numbering, the use of quarter versus semester systems in different institutions, and the inadequate supply of places in upper division classrooms for students in high demand programs. Articulation agreements can quickly become quite complex and managing them becomes as much a matter of "building and sustaining personal relationships" as of bureaucratic compliance. In the absence of strong personal relationships between faculty and administrators at two- and four-year campuses, the quality of articulation agreements is likely to erode (Gabbard et al., 2006, p. 35).

Perhaps not surprisingly then, it appears that articulation agreements have not been particularly effective at promoting transfer (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006; Roksa & Keith, 2008). This is likely due to the fact that when articulation agreements and mandated transfer of credit requirements are instituted, they are treated as structural solutions and the interpersonal and relational aspects of making those requirements work are overlooked.

Transfer structures, like all social and bureaucratic systems (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), shape the occupational identities of those who work in them. From this view, when we create detailed transfer regulations, faculty no longer have expertise to advise students about transfer or the expectation that they should do so. They do not work in transfer centers—the domain of specialized counselors and administrators—nor do they have familiarity with transfer databases, which are designed for students to navigate independently. If low-income students lack transfer access, the faculty are removed from responsibility for this problem because the solution has been constructed almost entirely in terms of rules, regulations, and incentives for students.

Transfer requirements are complicated, so certainly informational transfer databases are needed and valuable. However, putting the information out there is a half-step at best. Many low-income students are first-generation students, unfamiliar with the specialized terms and resources of higher education. The experience of one student, related by Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, Marquez, and Park (2006; see also Bensimon, 2007) based on a life history and narrative analysis of ten low-income community college transfer students who successfully transferred to an elite institution, highlights this point. The life history narrative of Lisbeth Marian Giles (a pseudonym) illustrates that making information available about transfer opportunities is not the same as making students aware that those opportunities are available to *them*.

Even though Ms. Giles "surprised herself by earning a 4.0 grade point average in her first year at the community college," she still lacked confidence or an understanding that she was eligible for transfer because she had internalized the view of herself as not "smart enough" or "rich enough" to transfer to a four-year institution (pp. 28–29). She emphasized her own timidity in the college environment and the fact that she did not act on available information until an adviser finally took her under wing:

> Because when I was a 4.0 student that first year…I never got anything. I was never offered honors. I was never offered Phi Beta Kappa. I was never offered transfer information. There was transfer information on the walls in the transfer office for…local state colleges around here. But that all had to be initiated by the student. And if you're a timid little student who doesn't know anything, you wouldn't go anywhere.

An adviser, Mr. Rollins (a pseudonym), helped Lisbeth Marian Giles overcome her timidity. He "mentored and guided her in a very personal way, almost as a father figure" to help her "overcome psychological barriers" or her "own feelings of inadequacy" (p. 28).

An essential point to be taken from this story is that data are not "self-acting" (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). Students are not able to consume information and make use of it until they realize its relevance to their own lives. Ms. Giles' educational experiences had already shaped her identity so strongly that it was hard for her to believe she was indeed elite "college material." The transfer center director at her community college, Mr. Rollins, acted as an "institutional agent," using institutionally based funds of knowledge (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) to enable her to make use of the transfer information and opportunities available (Bensimon, 2007).

Stanton-Salazar (1997) has argued that practitioners at colleges and universities have "institutionally based funds of knowledge" that include content about, among other things, academic subjects, career planning, and the organization of educational institutions. In addition, he emphasized that practitioners understand the specialized language, relationships, and networks of the people who work at colleges and universities in ways that students new to higher education cannot. When they use this specialized knowledge to help students, particularly racial minority students, to navigate academic and bureaucratic processes such as transfer, they are acting as institutional "agents" to enable students to make use of educational resources. Similarly, practitioners who play this role to facilitate the transfer of low-income students, African Americans, Latinas, Latinos, and other underserved ethnic groups act as "transfer

agents" (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon & Dowd, in press; Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, et al., 2006; Pak et al., 2006).

RECONSTRUCTING SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVED TRANSFER ACCESS

Today prominent strategies to improve transfer, including the various forms of articulation created through regulations, informational databases, and guaranteed transfer programs, neglect the key role faculty can play in facilitating transfer for low-income students. This omission is problematic because faculty can play an important role as "transfer agents" by mentoring students and providing role models (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon & Dowd, in press; Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, et al., 2006; Pak et al., 2006). As we found through our case study of eight pairs of community colleges and highly selective four-year institutions selected as potential exemplars of a transfer-amenable culture, faculty can also act as "transfer champions." In this role, apart from their direct interactions with students, faculty influence institutional policies in areas such as curriculum, counseling and advising, financial aid, and assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness (Gabbard et al., 2006). They draw on their organizational funds of knowledge (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) to reshape institutional cultures and structures to make them more amenable to low-income transfer students.

The specific practices of transfer agents include advising students one-on-one to let them know which rules must be followed strictly and which ones are malleable; assisting students with preparing college application forms; identifying financial resources for transfer, for example by conducting an online search of financial aid databases with a student; alerting students to enhanced academic programming, such as Honors programs, teaching assistantships, research internships, or opportunities for independent study; introducing them to other faculty or staff who can serve as role models or mentors; and physically going with students to university campuses for guided tours.

Transfer champions act by representing the interests and interjecting the experiences of community college transfer students in their service on university committees and in their interactions with faculty colleagues. Gabbard et al. (2006) relate the experiences of community college and four-year college faculty who collaborated to offer extended academic programming, such as a summer research seminar, to community college students. Through the collaborations, faculty gained a better sense of the difficult transitions facing transfer students. They overcame perceptions of the "cultural divide" separating the two sectors that can create mistrust among faculty at institutions of unequal prestige and selectivity (Gabbard et al., 2006, p. 36). Their new knowledge translated into change in their practices. Some four-year college faculty became "sensitized to a greater variety of learning styles" and adopted new teaching techniques.

This played out at an institutional level because these individuals then shared what they had learned with their colleagues, which affected the "larger curricular landscapes" (p. 81). This type of change is particularly important in light of the finding that the four-year faculty respondents were likely to "reject programs and practices that they perceived as remedial" (p. 80). Through interactions with community college colleagues and students, elite college faculty reframed the problem of transfer access away from the prevailing deficit perspective focused on the lack of merit of community college students and the lesser quality of community colleges.

For their part, community college faculty involved in collaborative teaching and curriculum design with faculty at selective institutions learned that their students could succeed at competitive four-year institutions and broadened their sense of the community college transfer mission to afford students the chance to do so. They became more familiar with the admissions review processes at the four-year institutions, which enabled them to "become more skilled at writing letters of recommendation and helping students complete applications to four-year institutions" (p. 81). These insights translated into broader institutional changes in the form of orientation and academic development programs.

Given the powerful role faculty often play as formal and informal institutional leaders, changes in beliefs, attitudes, teaching practices, and personal interactions matter. As one faculty respondent put it, "anything that's going to work in a place like this has to be faculty-driven and faculty-owned" (p. 80). This means that curriculum committees, admissions committees, and faculty governance meetings at four-year institutions are essential venues for improving transfer access for low-income students. These committees determine what kind of curriculum counts when students transfer and how to determine the merit of a student's performance at the community college. In these venues, transfer champions are those who draw on their organizational funds of knowledge about the community college curriculum and community college students to negate unwarranted assumptions of a lack of quality. This is particularly important in the prestige-maximizing culture of many selective institutions. It is difficult to signal the academic accomplishments of potential community college transfers, many of whom are "late bloomers" (Pak et al., 2006), in environments where academic merit is so strongly defined by standardized test scores.

Based on the research my colleagues and I conducted for the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Community College Transfer Initiative, which ultimately awarded grants of approximately one million dollars each to eight highly selective universities to increase transfer access for low-income students, we recommended strategies for creating a "transfer-amenable culture" (Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, et al., 2006). We arrayed these recommendations along four dimensions: structural, informational, relational, and cultural. We chose this configuration to emphasize that the role of faculty, in their relationships with transfer students and through their ability to shape institutional cultures, should be enhanced as a complement to the structural and informational supports for transfer provided through articulation policies.

In making these recommendations, we used the expression "extra mile advising" to characterize what faculty members do when they act outside of institutional norms and take responsibility for ensuring transfer access in very personalized ways. But, it is necessary to ask, what would motivate extra mile advising among faculty at selective universities, where many faculty are focused on their research, or at community colleges, where faculty have heavy teaching loads and little time for advising? Our case study findings highlighted two factors. Individuals who had been transfer students themselves were motivated by their own experiences and identification with the transfer experience. Others were motivated by a sense of empathy, gained through relationships with transfer students or through faculty collaborations that enabled them to understand the cultural shock transfer students experience moving from one sector to another (Gabbard et al., 2006).

But, what would lead faculty unfamiliar with transfer students to adopt such an empathic position, particularly given all the other pressures on faculty for research and teaching? Community college transfers are largely invisible to the majority of faculty at elite institutions and aspiring transfers are one of many different groups of students with differing ambitions at community colleges. First of all, elite college faculty would need to become aware that the problem of inequitable access for low-income transfer students exists and that they can play a role in rectifying it. At community colleges, faculty would need to accept that providing a transfer pathway to elite institutions for academically able students is part of their college's mission (along with transfer to comprehensive, non-selective universities, developmental education, and workforce development), and that they themselves are in the best position to identify and mentor students with the talent and ability to benefit at a prestigious public university.

One way to assist faculty in seeing the lack of transfer access for low-income students as a problem of institutional practice is to engage them in seeing for themselves how difficult it is to navigate the transfer process and how few human and material resources are allocated for assisting students in transfer. The findings I have reported above come from the Study of Economic, Informational, and Cultural Barriers to Community College Student Transfer Access to Selective Colleges (Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, et al., 2006). In addition to generating statistical and interpretive results and examples of exemplary transfer practices, the study led to the creation of two institutional self-assessment protocols focused on transfer, one for community colleges (Dowd, Bensimon, & Gabbard, 2006a) and one for highly selective four-year institutions (Dowd, Bensimon, & Gabbard, 2006b).

These assessment instruments, which are a series of indicators grouped with appropriate assessment scales in categories of institutional practice, were designed to engage faculty (as well as of counselors and administrators) in "action inquiry"(Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Action inquiry involves the systematic use of data, collaboration, reflection, and deliberative practice to bring attention and resources to bear on rectifying problems of practice. The assessment instruments bring current practices into relief by providing indicators of exemplary practice for use in a diagnostic benchmarking process (Dowd & Tong, 2007). These indicators were developed through analysis and categorization of the case study results from our study (Gabbard et al., 2006). Through diagnostic benchmarking, teams of faculty, administrators, and counselors compare their own institutional practices against the indicators and exemplary practices to see what is and is not taking place on their campus to take institutional responsibility for transfer equity (Dowd, 2008).

For example, the section of the assessment instrument on institutional transfer policies and practices at community colleges includes indicators for transfer workshops, transfer credit evaluation counselors, board of trustee and alumni involvement. In regard to faculty involvement it lists professional development opportunities for learning how to assist transfer students. The same section on the four-year version includes indicators for policies enabling standardized test scores to be waived for transfer admissions, clear credit review policies, and training for assessing curriculum and credits earned at the community college. In regard to faculty, partnerships and collaboration with community colleges is highlighted, with indicators for joint faculty research and funding, pedagogy workshops, joint community service, and the presence of community college faculty on committees relevant to the transfer function.

NEXT STEPS

In new projects subsequent to the research reported in this chapter, Estela Bensimon and I have continued to develop and field test transfer self-assessment instruments (SAIs) for action research (on our part) and action inquiry (on the part of collaborating practitioner colleagues) (see Bensimon, Dowd, Alford, & Trapp, 2007; Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris III, 2007; Dowd, 2008; Dowd, Bensimon, Bordoloi, & Watford, 2007). This work has involved our colleagues at USC's Center for Urban Education and faculty, administrators, and counselors at community colleges and four-year institutions in California and Wisconsin.

In field testing, we have been particularly attentive to issues of content validity, examining whether the transfer self-assessment indicators needed modification for the local contexts of action inquiry. This led to modifications of the community college version of the Transfer SAI for our study at Long Beach (CA) City College of transfer-eligible students who do not transfer (Bensimon, Dowd, et al., 2007). In our work in Wisconsin, we are improving the content validity of our transfer self-assessment tools by incorporating indicators of transfer access for racial-ethnic groups underserved by higher education (namely, in the Wisconsin context, African Americans, Latinas and Latinos, and Hmong students) (Dowd et al., 2007).

We also examined the theoretical construct validity of the use of self-assessment instruments to bring about organizational learning and change. In this respect, we adopt Greenwood and Levin's standards for the validity, reliability, and credibility of action research, which, they argue, are "measured by the willingness of local stakeholders to act on the results of the action research" (2005, p. 54). We find that the validity of our action research at Long Beach City College, for example, is demonstrated by the fact that some of the practitioners who collaborated with us in a variety of action research projects have adopted changes in their teaching and advising practices. In addition to these changes in individual beliefs and practices, a new program was instituted, called a Transfer Academy, to provide specialized transfer counseling and advising to potential transfers. This programmatic initiative was accompanied by news of transfer students and transfer requirements on the campus website, revealing new attention to transfer issues.

Practitioners who wish to conduct action inquiry to improve transfer access for low-income students on their own campuses can adopt the transfer self-assessment instruments that we have developed (available from the Center for Urban Education at USC, http://cue.usc.edu/) or examine their own institutional data and assessment practices as a starting

point for inquiry. A number of articles by CUE researchers describe the rationale for creating a "culture of inquiry" (Dowd, 2005) and provide examples of the steps needed to do so (Bensimon, 2004; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004; Bensimon, Rueda, et al., 2007; Dowd, 2008; Dowd & Tong, 2007; Pena, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006). Today, the standards for accreditation self-study encourage inquiry as a strategy for organizational change and provide an important impetus to do so. Two questions should guide action inquiry in the area of transfer. First, are we framing the problems of the lack of transfer as a problem of practice, amenable to our own changes in practice, or are we assuming a lack of merit on the part of aspiring transfer students? And, second, are we acting as "transfer agents" and "transfer champions" to improve transfer equity?

The report from Long Beach City College's action inquiry project, called "Missing 87: A Study of the 'Transfer Gap' and 'Choice Gap'" (Bensimon, Dowd, et al., 2007), provides a detailed example of how to do this type of work and illustrates the potential outcomes (available at http://cue.usc.edu/). At Long Beach City College, approximately 20 faculty, administrators, and counselors divided up into two teams to gather data on the transfer culture and practices at their campus. One team interviewed students about their transfer aspirations and outcomes. Another reviewed documents and observed how transfer advising was conducted at transfer fairs and in the transfer center on campus. This qualitative data was discussed in meetings of the inquiry team, as was quantitative data showing the rates of student progress through the transfer curriculum. Based on what they learned, participants recommended steps for improvement in the project report. As noted above, a number of these changes were incorporated through individual changes in instruction and advising or through changes in institutional policies.

Faculty can spur this type of research on their own campuses by requesting an inquiry process as part of accreditation review or programmatic self-studies. More generally, simply asking for and relying on data about the outcomes of students who transfer or aspire to transfer—along with indicators of their socioeconomic status, such as Pell grant receipt or enrollment intensity (full time or part time)—can motivate attention to the experiences of transfer for low-income students.

NOTE

1. The transfer enrollment rate is the proportion of transfer students among the total number of new freshmen and transfers in an enrolling class. The different levels of selectivity are based on the institutions' rankings in the Barron's Profiles of American Colleges. Elite institutions are defined as those with average combined SAT scores above 1,240.

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