

PLANNING STORY

Removing Barriers to Transfer

An Unlikely Alliance

by **Susanna L. Baxter**

Our time calls for creativity, for asking difficult questions that may challenge the “norm” and changing those processes and procedures that research shows to be ineffective.

THE CHALLENGE

GEORGIA, LIKE MANY STATES, is in an educational crisis. Too few students graduate with at least an associate’s degree. According to Complete College America (2011) data for Georgia, in 2011 only 34 percent of adults over the age of 25 had an associate’s degree. Governor Nathan Deal, a champion of higher education, has asked the college community to concentrate on getting students through the educational pipeline and into careers. By 2020, economists predict that the Georgia economy will require a more skilled workforce to be globally competitive. Governor Deal has challenged state educators to have 60 percent of the adult population earn at least a 12-month college certificate by 2020. To reach this goal, Georgia needs to graduate at least 250,000 more students above current graduation trends. Clearly, this goal is unreachable if we only concentrate on students entering college for the first time.

THE RESPONSE

The 25 member colleges of the Georgia Independent College Association (GICA) responded to the governor’s challenge by targeting students who have some college experience, but who have not completed a program. The changing educational landscape in our state now includes a robust Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), with almost all of the system’s 25 campuses having met rigorous regional accreditation standards. Additionally, an increasing number

of TCSG institutions offer associate’s of science and/or associate’s of applied science degrees. A growing number of students start at a TCSG institution, gain confidence in their academic abilities, and then desire to transfer to earn an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Not surprisingly, the transfer process is riddled with difficulties that often leave students having to spend valuable time and money retaking courses at their new college. GICA members sought to remedy the transfer puzzle and, as a first step, partnered with TCSG to find a way to help students move between institutions as seamlessly as possible.

Not surprisingly, the transfer process is riddled with difficulties.

In October 2011, GICA’s board created an Articulation Committee that worked for a year to understand the challenges and opportunities facing both transferring students and institutions. Over those 12 months, GICA facilitated the work of the committee as it conducted a series of surveys to understand which courses our member institutions had accepted for transfer credit in the past and, subsequently, which courses they would consider taking in the future. To aid the institutions in this process, TCSG provided course descriptions and learning objectives for each course under consideration. GICA compiled the results of this work, and the committee painstakingly reviewed and evaluated the results in order to better understand how an articulation agreement might be drafted among as many as 25 independent institutions.

THE OUTCOME

This work culminated in an articulation agreement that addressed technical college students both with and without an associate's degree. In February 2013, Governor Deal invited GICA member presidents and TCSG representatives to attend a formal signing ceremony at the State Capitol in order to recognize this significant milestone in helping Georgia students in their quest for a high-quality, affordable education.

The 19 GICA member institutions that signed the GICA-TCSG articulation agreement have committed to accept a variety of core courses taught by regionally-accredited TCSG institutions. These include 100- and 200-level courses in the humanities, sciences, and mathematics, among other areas. Associate's degree students who have an overall grade point average of 2.5 will be automatically admitted to almost all of the private, not-for-profit colleges participating in this agreement. Four of the 19 institutions went one step further to indicate that students earning an A.S. degree would fulfill their general education/core requirements. This further eliminates any real or perceived barriers to entry that a transfer student may face.

At the beginning of the Articulation Committee's work, the task of generating a sector-wide agreement felt daunting. We had never done anything quite so complicated and ambitious. GICA has no authority over member institutions; thus, the agreement would rely strictly on volunteer participation. We were aided by several campuses that already had articulation agreements in place with several TCSG institutions. These campuses reported great success with TCSG transfer students, noting that the students were academically prepared, determined to graduate in a timely manner, and focused on contributing positively to the academic and social climate on campus. For campuses debating entry into this agreement, these reflections from fellow provosts, deans, and registrars served to soothe the worries that come when moving into uncharted territory.

THE FUTURE

A sector-wide agreement is a new endeavor for GICA, and for some of the 19 campuses it was their first foray into an articulation agreement with a technical college. We recognize that it will take several enrollment cycles to judge the impact this agreement will make on TCSG students and our member colleges. Commencing in late spring 2013, TCSG institutions will begin to include the 19 GICA colleges in campus admission fairs attended by students who desire to go beyond the TCSG experience. This will be an educative process as GICA member colleges seek to inform prospective transfer students about academic programs, financial affordability, and other transfer-related issues.

We will use the 2012–2013 TCSG transfer student numbers as our baseline. We anticipate seeing an increase in TCSG transfer students and will carefully evaluate these figures and other institutional data to ascertain if marketing efforts are sufficient. The agreement needs to be refined, and the committee may need to address other issues that impede transfer.

We are pleased with this agreement and what it will mean for students as they pursue their educational goals. But GICA views this as only a beginning. For Georgia to be economically viable, more collaboration across the higher education, business, and industry sectors must occur. Our time calls for creativity, for asking difficult questions that may challenge the “norm” and changing those processes and procedures that research shows to be ineffective. I'm honored each day to work with GICA member colleges and universities that diligently labor to meet the needs of our time while maintaining high-quality, affordable educational experiences.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Andrew College
Berry College
Brenau University
Brewton-Parker College
Covenant College
Emmanuel College
Georgia Military College
LaGrange College
Mercer University
Paine College
Piedmont College
Point University
Reinhardt University
Shorter University
Thomas University
Toccoa Falls College
Truett-McConnell College
Wesleyan College
Young Harris College

REFERENCE

Complete College America. 2011. *Georgia 2011*. Retrieved May 14, 2013, from the World Wide Web: www.completecollege.org/docs/Georgia.pdf.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

SUSANNA L. BAXTER, ED.D., is president of the Georgia Independent College Association (GICA). Prior to coming to GICA in August 2010, she served as the chief operating officer for the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association for 10 years. She worked as the dean of students at Barton College in North Carolina before beginning her association work. She earned her B.A. in both religion and Christian education from Pfeiffer University. She went on to earn her M.Ed. and Ed.D. in higher education leadership and policy from Vanderbilt University.