

7

Presidential leadership contributed to the implementation of New Jersey's transfer articulation legislation.

The Role of Presidential Leadership in Improving New Jersey's Community College Transfer Experience

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For the past 45 years, New Jersey community colleges have helped thousands of students pursue higher education to gain skills, earn college credentials, and better their lives. Today, New Jersey's 19 community colleges enroll over 400,000 students across 70 campuses, fulfilling community colleges' traditional core mission: granting *access* to higher education. Yet while access remains core to our mission and an essential goal, it is no longer a sufficient aim. Our country's economic future depends on our ability to develop an educated, highly skilled workforce. By 2018, nearly two thirds of all American jobs will require a postsecondary certificate or degree (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, 2010). If the United States were to proceed with current college graduation rates, our country would not produce enough graduates to fill these new jobs. Such projections make it imperative that institutions of higher education improve the number of students completing a college credential. For their part, community colleges across the country are adopting a refined and recharged mission with *access to success* at its core.

To address this critical mission of college completion and student success, along with the more challenging fiscal climate, New Jersey's community college trustees and presidents agreed to pursue collectively the best and boldest ideas to promote economic sustainability, improve quality, and most significantly, improve student success. Launched in 2010 by the New

Jersey Council of County Colleges and chaired by all 19 community college presidents, the Big Ideas Project consisted of eight work groups with membership from all of the New Jersey community colleges. The groups have tackled work across eight important areas:

1. Transforming Developmental Education
2. Aligning Expectations Between K–12 and Community Colleges
3. Improving Student Success Data
4. Promoting Adjunct Faculty Development
5. Enhancing Joint Purchases
6. Promoting Academic Consortia
7. Building Alternative Learning Systems
8. Using Core Student Learning Outcomes and Common Assessment Tools

Each of these initiatives has made progress in the two years since the Big Ideas Project began. In transforming developmental education, for example, the presidents approved a statewide plan aimed at improving the success of developmental education, and in fall 2012, the state's community colleges convened a first-ever Student Success Summit to engage faculty teams in the implementation of these important recommendations. Another example of significant progress is the presidents' approval of a revised Student Success Model. Based on emerging national trends and developed by the statewide community college Institutional Research Officers, this robust data model is being pilot tested by seven New Jersey community colleges. Finally, after identifying the 10 highest-enrollment community college general education courses in the state and collecting course syllabi for each course, New Jersey is in the process of identifying common student learning outcomes, appropriate teaching methods, and core assessment tools.

In addition to these significant efforts to strengthen student achievement in postsecondary education, one issue critical to college completion and improving student success continues to be the student transfer experience from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions. As Kisker, Wagoner, and Cohen (2011) write, "Improving what is often a complex community college-to-university transfer process, many analysts argue, is key to improve bachelor's degree production" (p. iii). Especially in a time when college tuition has increasingly gotten more expensive, more traditional-aged students are beginning at community colleges, hoping to transfer credits into a four-year college or university. In 2003, students who were less than 22 years old represented 44 percent of the total New Jersey community college enrollment. However, by 2010, this jumped by 7 percentage points to 51 percent (State of New Jersey Higher Education, 2011). And whereas total enrollment across New Jersey community colleges increased by 17 percent between 2006 and 2010, transfer rates from New Jersey community colleges to four-year colleges and universities in New Jersey increased by almost 33 percent. With more students coming to

community colleges with the goal of transferring, the issue of ensuring smooth transitions from community colleges to four-year colleges or universities became even more of an imperative. It is New Jersey's dedication to this critical issue that led to the passage of New Jersey's transfer articulation legislation in 2007: Assembly Bill 3968, otherwise known as the "Lampitt Bill."

Pre-Lampitt Bill: Laying the Groundwork

A number of events in New Jersey led to passage of the Lampitt Bill. In 1997, staff and faculty from the 19 community colleges worked together to develop a general education foundation for associate of arts, associate of science, specialized associate, and certificate programs. Since then, New Jersey's community colleges have maintained the development of a state-wide process for reviewing and approving general education courses, which is led by the colleges' chief academic officers. Any newly proposed general education courses from any college are reviewed against a common rubric, which is analyzed by the academic officers who work together to examine the course content and student learning outcomes. Courses meeting the standard as an approved general education course are recommended to the presidents for approval. Additionally, in 2007, New Jersey community colleges standardized placement tests and cut scores for remediation. These two efforts supported the development of a common approach to transfer.

Legislative initiatives also contributed to the need for a stronger transfer articulation. New Jersey, as a matter of public policy, has taken the approach of encouraging more students to start at a public community college. One of the policies that facilitated this was the creation of NJ STARS (www.njstars.net) in 2004, a scholarship exclusively for New Jersey students who graduate in the top 15 percent of their high school class that covers the cost of tuition at any of New Jersey's 19 community colleges. This landmark legislation was the first program of its kind in the country to target merit-based scholarships specifically to community college students. NJ STARS II, a scholarship for NJ STARS graduates who transfer to a New Jersey college or university, began in 2006. Another initiative began in 2003 when the legislature started a pilot program, called Tuition Aid Grants (TAGs), for part-time community college students. This program offers eligible students state financial aid and now provides over \$10 million in scholarships each year to over 10,000 needy part-time students.

These policies helped elevate the role of community colleges in New Jersey's higher education system. However, given the increasing number of younger students aiming to transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities, these policies would only make sense if community college students could successfully transfer to senior colleges without having to repeat courses. It soon became apparent that there was an alarming gap for transfer students in New Jersey. For example, as Kisker,

Wagoner, and Cohen (2011) report, New Jersey legislators heard stories of students across the state who had to repeat courses upon transferring (p. 9). Policymakers were concerned that the funds that went into supporting students' community college education (including state and county funding, as well as student and family resources) were, in many ways, wasted because the students would take the same courses after transferring. It was clear that something needed to be done to better support students by allowing them to seamlessly transfer and apply community college credits to a senior institution.

The Lampitt Bill

Given the groundwork that had been laid previously, New Jersey State Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt sponsored Assembly Bill 3968 (New Jersey Legislature, 2006), to help students transfer seamlessly into a baccalaureate institution. The bill, which was passed unanimously, required public New Jersey colleges and universities to enter into a statewide transfer agreement that provided for the full transfer of academic credits from a completed associate of arts or associate of science degree program to a baccalaureate degree program. The bill directed the New Jersey Presidents' Council—which is composed of the presidents of all two- and four-year, public, private, independent, and proprietary institutions in the state—to develop the details of the agreement. According to the bill, the Council was to work in consultation with what was then the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (in 2012, the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education took over all responsibilities previously held by the Commission on Higher Education) to develop a comprehensive statewide transfer agreement that detailed the policies and procedures that would provide for this full transfer of community college credits to senior institutions.

Prior to the legislation, there were only college-to-college articulation agreements, in which a single senior institution would enter into a transfer agreement with a particular community college. However, to take advantage of these agreements, students had to target a transfer institution early in their college career to ensure they took the appropriate courses specific to that agreement. Once the statewide transfer agreement was implemented, students could choose from a wide range of transfer options. While some of the college-to-college agreements still exist, they are now supplemental to the statewide transfer agreement.

In addition, the Lampitt Bill required four-year universities to annually submit data on the transfer of credits to the Office of Higher Education and required an annual report that includes “an analysis of the effect of the agreement on the transfer process and on the academic success of transfer students at the senior institutions, and an analysis of each participating institution's compliance with the provisions of this act” (New Jersey Legislature, 2006, p. 2). The report, in its current form, shows the percent-

age of community college graduates who received half or more of the credits needed for the bachelor's degree when they transferred—both statewide and for individual state colleges and universities.

Finally, the legislation required each of the senior institutions to develop, implement, and publicize an appeals process that enables students to submit a formal request that a college or university reevaluate the transfer and application of credits. If a student believes that a receiving institution did not act appropriately under the statewide transfer agreement, the student files an appeal directly to the receiving college.

To help communicate this agreement to students and their families, the state utilized an existing Web site called NJ Transfer (www.njtransfer.org). Developed previously as a joint initiative of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and the New Jersey Presidents' Council, the Web site provides information about transfer articulation and allows students to find course equivalencies, plan their academic program, and evaluate courses. The Web-based transfer tool has significantly helped students prepare for transfer at any point in their community college experience. With the Lampitt Bill and the NJ Transfer program in place, the stage was set for college presidents throughout the state to play the key role in implementing New Jersey's statewide transfer efforts. Their leadership led to the creation of the important details that would ultimately realize the legislation's vision.

The Importance of Presidential Leadership in Facilitating Implementation

The New Jersey Presidents' Council was the implementing body for the transfer legislation. The Council formally adopted the necessary agreements to enact what the legislature demanded: an agreement on the full transfer of the associate degree, the requirement that students have a process to challenge actions that do not honor that full transfer, and the requirement that the results of the legislation be collected and reported annually.

The first requirement was to develop the required statewide transfer agreement, outlining how the colleges would comply with the law's requirements. The statewide transfer agreement was drafted by a core group of presidents and was both simple in its approach—equating an associate degree with 50 percent of the credits required for a bachelor's degree—and direct in its intent, confirming a “corollary principle” that transfer students should not face requirements different from those imposed on native students. Specifically, the agreement stipulated that any “A.A. or A.S. degree from a New Jersey community college will be fully transferable as the first two years of a baccalaureate degree program at New Jersey public four-year institutions” (New Jersey Presidents' Council, 2008, p. 1). Further, the agreement specified that students would, upon their enrollment at the

baccalaureate institution, automatically hold junior status. The agreement also noted that any 100- and 200-level courses of equivalent content would be accepted at four-year universities, and recognized the complexity of college curricula, noting that a receiving institution should provide a student with clear direction about those remaining credits that would constitute the second half of the degree. There was significant opportunity for discussion and revision—at both the sector and the Presidents' Council levels—of the agreement before it was completed. Through this deliberative process, presidential leadership statewide provided an unambiguous endorsement of the law's intention.

New Jersey has a designated structure for coordinating statewide transfer issues, the New Jersey Presidents' Council Transfer Committee. The statewide transfer agreement specifically charged the New Jersey Presidents' Council Transfer Committee with the following responsibilities:

- Assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of the Statewide Transfer Agreement, in particular: (a) the rates of achievement of baccalaureate degrees by transfer students, and (b) the actual implementation of the terms of the Statewide Transfer Agreement by participating institutions.
- Recommending to the Presidents' Council any modifications to the statewide transfer agreement or related procedures.
- Hearing appeals from institutions on behalf of students.
- Impaneling ad hoc subcommittees, if and when necessary, to research and make recommendations in regard to specific issues related to transfer.

Membership on the Transfer Committee consists of five senior college representatives, five community college representatives, one proprietary school representative, and one representative from the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education.

Beyond the initial implementation efforts, the Presidents' Council charged its Transfer Committee with continuing to work on the spirit of the legislation, eliminating barriers to successful transfer. To that end, the committee began by conducting regional summits for professional staff and faculty involved in transfer to explore the issues that were most likely to thwart the straightforward implementation of the statewide transfer agreement. Supported by the Presidents' Council, these summits identified specific disciplines or programs that had more levels of complication: specific course sequences, differing prerequisites, complicated experiential or externship requirements, and great variations among institutions either at the associate degree or baccalaureate level. What emerged was a call for additional work in facilitating transfer in popular majors. This work will be modeled on statewide articulation agreements developed in other states and will provide students and their families with a more direct and less confus-

ing path to accomplishing their educational goals without limiting institutional autonomy or faculty creativity. Thus, the next effort will be to build a professional team from all sectors of higher education to develop transfer pathways in three areas identified as high interest for students and high challenge in transfer: psychology, business, and education.

The Transfer Committee also considers the formal reports from each of the senior public institutions each year, and has identified several challenges that cross institutional lines. One key challenge is the number of students whose associate degree is not presented to the receiving institution. This has raised logistical challenges that the Transfer Committee is addressing, including more effective and efficient ways of producing and transmitting transcript data between institutions, along with potential improvements to the statewide data system. It has also identified ways in which institutions can better communicate with students about the importance of providing accurate, timely information throughout the transfer process.

The Presidents' Council Transfer Committee existed prior to the implementation of the Lampitt legislation, but the legislation provided a powerful guide for the committee. The law provided the opportunity for New Jersey's presidents to assert, formally, their support for the importance of the transfer function and, through the statewide transfer agreement, their confidence in the associate degree.

In looking at New Jersey's experience implementing the Lampitt Bill, some key lessons emerge. First, although presidential leadership at the community college level played an integral role in creating and implementing the transfer articulation policy, presidential leadership at the senior institutions also had a profound influence. In New Jersey's case, a president from a state university took a leadership role in bridging the two groups. Without this individual's guidance and insight, it may have been more difficult to get the senior colleges on board with the vision of the Lampitt Bill. Second, although the policy's scope included only public institutions, the legislation has also had an impact on private institutions throughout the state. Although private colleges are not subject to the legislation, many private institutions—not wanting to miss out on attracting transfer students—have entered into their own transfer agreements with community colleges. Therefore, the bill provided some leverage with which to incentivize private colleges' participation in helping to improve the transfer process. In some cases, these private colleges have gone above and beyond what the legislation requires, allowing students to transfer up to 75 or 90 percent of the credits necessary for a bachelor's degree, compared to the 50 percent guaranteed by the Lampitt Bill. Finally, although the legislation has had a profound impact on improving the transfer experience, it requires constant effort to ensure that its vision is being carried out. This process requires community college leaders to be vigilant in monitoring the transfer processes to ensure the policies are upheld with fidelity.

Moving Forward: What Is Next for New Jersey's Transfer Experience?

New Jersey has made much progress in improving statewide transfer policies and practices since the passage of the Lampitt Bill. But as is usually the case with bold initiatives, continued energy and resources are needed to keep things moving in the right direction after the initial burst of activity subsides. As Kisker, Wagoner, and Cohen (2011) note in their analysis of transfer reform in several key states:

We were struck by the power of personality in enacting large-scale organizational change. Yet individuals do not develop transfer associate degrees on their own; to be effective in implementing systemic transform reforms, they must work through a clear and ongoing organizational structure. (p. 12)

Such has surely been the case in New Jersey as strong personalities—both in the legislature and among the college presidents—led to the enactment of the Lampitt Bill and the subsequent approval of the statewide transfer agreement by the New Jersey Presidents' Council. Since then, an effective structure has emerged through the work of the Transfer Committee, and the various student challenges that cause institutions to re-think the application of policy under the requirements of the statewide transfer agreement. This structure must be supported by clear and consistent information and must include what is expected of the students, of the sending institutions, and of the receiving institutions. It should contain clear guidance for students about when and where a final transcript must be sent. There may be some benefit in the community college sector of standardizing parts of the transcript to facilitate clear communication. There is certainly benefit in fully implementing an electronic transcript system to ensure timely delivery of important student information. All of these issues are under review by the Transfer Committee in an effort to continue to improve this process and to ensure full compliance with the spirit of the legislation. New Jersey's experience confirms that an organizational structure and support system, coupled with the ongoing attention of the higher education leadership, can help to maintain momentum in transfer reform.

What are New Jersey's next steps in reenergizing its transfer reform agenda? First, New Jersey community college presidents are recommitting to the cause and are taking this recommitment to their four-year colleagues on the Transfer Committee. The bottom line is that some modest resources are needed to ensure continuity in these efforts. However, it is a delicate process. For all of the obvious reasons, there has to be joint ownership of transfer activities by both community colleges and senior colleges throughout the state. There seems to be an emerging consensus among the Presidents' Council Transfer Committee on the first priorities for reenergizing the statewide transfer reform agenda.

Strengthening Data Collection. It is important to strengthen the annual collection of transfer data required by the Lampitt Bill so that efforts are more evidence-based in the future. New Jersey needs to take a closer look at the community college graduates who are not accepted with full junior status when they transfer so that stakeholders can better understand what happened and why. The following questions need to be answered about these students: What was their community college major? What was their senior college major? What community college did they transfer from? What senior college did they transfer to?

Identifying Early-Major Pathways. The evidence is clear from other states that transfer sequences in select disciplines are important tools for improving statewide transfer practices. Thus far, education, business, and psychology have been identified as the disciplines that will be first to build early-major pathways in New Jersey.

Involving Faculty. Another priority is convening regular meetings of discipline-based faculty work groups to develop the major-to-major transfer pathways as well as provide overall leadership on statewide transfer reform efforts. When all is said and done, faculty leadership and involvement matters most in achieving successful transfer results for community college students.

There is no doubt that New Jersey has made great strides in improving the community college transfer experience. Thanks to strong state transfer legislation and the leadership of New Jersey's college presidents, students throughout the state can be guaranteed a smoother transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions. While progress still needs to be made to address some specific remaining challenges, New Jersey will continue to move forward to improve transfer processes and, as a result, improve college completion.

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