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Commentary

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Silent Partners in Transfer Admissions

By Stephen J. Handel



In the last 18 months, education leaders have made important progress in helping students who wish to transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. California is set to standardize [transfer requirements](#) from the state's community colleges to any campus of the California State University system. Arizona, Kentucky, and Colorado have passed similar measures. At the federal level, Education Secretary Arne Duncan has directed his staff to study the extent to which community-college students have difficulty transferring credits to four-year institutions.

This interest in community colleges and transfer is unprecedented. I have worked in the field for 15 years, and I have never had so many colleagues interested in a topic that was considered an educational backwater just a few years ago. In light of President Obama's ambitious college-completion goals, legislative and policy leaders are anxious to ramp up college-completion rates, with transfer among the options of greatest interest.

Doug Paulin for The Chronicle

Still, we have a long way to go. And the question isn't so much who has been working on the issue, but who hasn't. Where are most of America's four-year colleges and universities in the effort?

In their recent book, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*, William G. Bowen and his colleagues concluded that well-qualified students at a community college are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than students with similar qualifications who begin at four-year colleges. "It is pretty hard to argue with the data," Bowen told an interviewer. "If you want a bachelor's and you can start out at a good four-year institution, that is what you should do."

What was less reported, although no less important in the book, was that community-college students who transfer are as likely to earn a bachelor's degree as "homegrown" students at a four-year institution. Bowen and his co-authors noted that those who cross the transfer chasm are a special brand of student, displaying a tenacity that four-year institutions should welcome.

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Community colleges, they argued, serve as a "sorting mechanism" to provide students who, having survived the transfer process, are ready for the rigors of the upper division.

Faint praise was never quite so damning.

Although the "penalty" of starting at a community college is a well-known secret in the research community, the understandable outcry in response to the Bowen book from community-college advocates was boisterous. Acknowledging that the institutions he represents must do a better job of preparing students for transfer, David Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, nevertheless says that much of the problem is caused by "the utterly unjustifiable practices of many four-year institutions that prevent would-be community-college transfers from enrolling with appropriate credit."

Having "sorted" myself from a community college to a four-year institution some years ago, I can attest to the difficulties of transfer in a system that is more a gantlet than an educational pathway for academic advancement. Bowen and his colleagues are right. Although transfer students perform well at four-year institutions—verifying the important role that community colleges play in preparing students to make the leap—the route from a community college to a four-year institution has never been a reliably productive route to the B.A., especially for students from underserved groups.

Improving transfer in this country, especially among those students, requires an intimate collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions. That linkage, however, is largely unformed. Although the transfer process has been around since the beginning of the community-college movement more than 100 years ago, relations between two-year and four-year institutions remain to this day furtive, sometimes suspicious, and hardly ever efficient, at least as far as transfer is concerned.

As any community-college leader will readily testify, the prevalent perception among legislators and policy makers is that two-year institutions are chiefly to blame for low transfer rates. Although community colleges have a central role in preparing students for the baccalaureate, it is the four-year institution that admits transfers, awards them credit, and provides financial aid. Transfer works—or not—to the degree that four-year institutions recruit, admit, and serve community-college students.

Not all four-year institutions are oblivious to the richness and diversity that community-college students bring to a campus. E. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, and William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, are among several prominent university leaders who have encouraged other four-year institutions to embrace transfer. Several states, like California, Florida, and New York require their public four-year institutions to admit transfer students in large numbers. Texas and North Carolina, among others, have developed common requirements for lower-division courses (usually taken in the first two

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years of college study and often general-education requirements) that their community-college students may use regardless of the public four-year institution they wish to attend.

Still, the transfer process remains an afterthought at many four-year institutions, as they direct the vast majority of resources toward recruiting, admitting, and enrolling freshmen. Many selective institutions rarely admit more than a handful of transfer students (and even when they do, most are—maddeningly—transfers from other four-year institutions). A study by researchers at the University of Southern California and the University of Arizona estimated that, in the fall of 2002, the median enrollment of transfers at highly selective private institutions was two students. At other elite private institutions, the median enrollment was estimated to be 14 students. Transfer students fared better at selective public institutions, where the median enrollment was estimated at 371 students (hardly a cause for celebration, given both the size and public support of those institutions). It appears that the only time admissions directors get serious about recruiting transfer students is when they fail to meet their freshman-enrollment target. Caught short, they scramble to recruit students from local community colleges. The process is late, haphazard, and disingenuous.

Four-year institutions are not hostile to transfer students—those students are simply not on their radar. Historically, colleges and universities have built their legacies around a four-year curriculum. Admitting students midway into that curriculum is awkward even under the best of circumstances. (Counselors rarely recommend that Ivy League students switch schools midstream.) Moreover, colleges have few incentives to admit students from community colleges. They are harder to recruit because they don't all graduate at the same time, as high-school students do. They are more difficult to advise and prepare academically because lower-division requirements may differ significantly from one four-year institution to another, even for the same major. Finally, transfer students' applications are harder to evaluate because four-year institutions must base their admissions decisions solely on grades earned by those students in specific community-college courses. Yet four-year faculty members are often loath to accept such courses in lieu of their own.

Transfer students may soon have their day, however. President Obama's extraordinary request to commit \$12-billion for community colleges cast a spotlight on them rarely seen in their 100-year history. While the effort died in Congress, the administration continues to view community colleges as the drivers of a re-energized American economy and a response to global competition. Various organizations, including the College Board, have issued enthusiastic endorsements of the community-college mission and the need for a strong transfer process for students from underserved groups.

Such attention has sparked lively interest among a growing number of four-year institutions. But it is hard to say whether that enthusiasm has legs. I've seen that kind of zeal for transfers come and go. It usually represents a short-term response to an enrollment blip rather than a long-term commitment. In regions like the Midwest and Northeast, some four-year institutions are scrambling to fill seats because of a declining high-school graduation rate. In the South and

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West, however, where the high-school graduation rate is exploding, four-year institutions see community colleges as places to park otherwise-admissible freshmen for whom they have no space. Those are reasonable tactical responses, but they have almost nothing to do with serving the needs of community-college students.

Helping four-year institutions develop a long-term, strategic commitment to transfer will require researchers, policy makers, and educators to study transfer from the four-year perspective—something that has almost never been done. What we don't know is startling: How many four-year institutions enroll community-college students? What is the capacity of those institutions to take transfers? What is an optimal mix of freshmen and transfer students on a four-year campus? What kinds of lower-division courses prepare students best for transfer to a four-year institution? What types of student services effectively help transfer students at four-year institutions? How much and what kind of financial aid best meets the needs of students following transfer?

The transfer process will not improve until many more four-year institutions are active partners with community colleges in assuring an efficient route for all students who choose this path. Being good stewards of the baccalaureate degree means providing advice to prospective transfer students about how best to prepare for the upper division; engaging community-college faculty members in good-faith discussions regarding curricula and the transfer of credit; and creating campus communities that embrace transfer students as part of the intellectual life of academe. Some four-year institutions already do that well. Most do not. And they're keeping quiet about it.

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