

# Increasing higher education access and success using new pathways to the baccalaureate: The emergence of a transfer-affirming culture

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*The purpose of this paper is threefold. The first is to highlight the importance of the U.S. community college model and, in particular, the transfer mission of these institutions in providing a pathway to the baccalaureate degree for students from underserved groups. The second is to summarize the findings from a recent College Board–sponsored project that examined the importance of four-year colleges and universities in strengthening the transfer pathway between two-year, public community colleges and four-year institutions (Handel, 2011). The final aim – building on the insights from the College Board study – is to discuss an emerging theoretical framework that identifies “academic culture” at two- and four-year institutions as an important factor in describing and explaining the effectiveness of the transfer pathway, especially for students from underserved groups.*

## The American Community College and the Transfer Pathway

The American public community college is receiving unprecedented attention as a model to help address predicted workforce shortages in the coming decade and, simultaneously, to expand its role in serving the postsecondary needs of students from underserved groups who will make up an increasingly larger slice of the U.S. population (Carnevale and Rose, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, and Kienzl, 2009; Reindl, 2007). This is true in other countries as well. Education and political leaders in Western Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa view the community college model as a powerful strategy for workforce and economic development (Abue, 2002). It is a tall order. But the expectations for these two-year institutions have always been high, as reflected in their multiple missions and the diversity of students that these institutions serve (Cohen and Brawer, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Community colleges were born in the Progressive Era of early 20th-century America and their subsequent growth has been phenomenal (Cohen and Brawer, 2008). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are 1,167 of these institutions across the United States, enrolling 44 percent of all undergraduate students

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<sup>2</sup>. Throughout this paper, I will use “community college” and “two-year institution” interchangeably.

(AACC, 2011). Public community colleges are the largest U.S. higher (tertiary) education segment and the reasons for the popularity of these institutions are clear. First, they are open admission, allowing almost any individual with a high school (secondary school) diploma (or its equivalent) to enrol in classes. Second, community colleges are the least expensive higher education option. The average tuition and fees at these institutions are only one-third of the amount a student would pay at a public, four-year college or university (AACC, 2009). Finally, community colleges are convenient geographically. It is estimated that a community college is within driving distance of 90 percent of the U. S. population (College Board, 2008).

One of the central missions of community colleges is to provide an avenue of access to the baccalaureate degree. This mission was designed to provide two years of lower division, or “general education,” to students, who would then transfer to a four-year college or university and complete the baccalaureate degree. The fundamental elements of the transfer process have not changed in over 100 years and, indeed, the process is more popular than ever. According to several surveys, at least 50 percent and perhaps as many as 75 percent of all entering community college students wish to transfer from a community college to a four-year college or university (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2006; Horn, 2009; Provasnik and Planty, 2008).

Access to the baccalaureate degree, along with community colleges’ low cost and open admission policies, have made these institutions especially attractive to students from a variety of underserved groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, students who are the first in their family to go to college, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Of all undergraduates enrolled in U.S. higher education, community colleges enrol 56 percent of Native Americans, 52 percent of Hispanics, 46 percent of African Americans and 44 percent of first-generation students (AACC, 2011). Often referred to as “democracy’s colleges,” from the very beginning these institutions were seen as the starting point to the baccalaureate degree for students who might not otherwise have access to postsecondary education.

In spite of its importance as an open door to college and the four-year degree, the transfer pathway has never operated at full potential. Although transfer rate definitions vary widely (see Handel, 2008), most experts believe that only a small portion of community colleges students, perhaps one in four, actually transfer to a four-year college or university (Cohen and Sanchez, 1997; Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006). Some critics argue that the low transfer rate is due to insufficient preparation at the community college. While research indicates that students who begin at a community college are less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree compared to their four-year institution peers, it is equally clear that students who successfully transfer to a four-year college or university are as likely to earn a bachelor’s degree as those who begin at a four-year institution (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Most recently, Bowen and his colleagues (2009) reported that students who transfer to a four-year institution are, in fact, likely to do better than “home-grown” students attending four-year institutions (see also Melguizo and Dowd, 2009). These results are not confined to nonselective or moderately selective four-year institutions, but have been documented at highly selective institutions as well (University of California, 2002).

What these results imply is that challenges to the transfer process may not be the result (primarily) of an inadequate pedagogy or curriculum at two- or four-year institutions, but rather the result of ineffective transfer mechanics that link these two types of institutions. Moreover, data show that most of the individuals who transfer from a community college to a four-year institution are likely to be traditional-age students from middle- or upper-class families who possess strong academic preparation and who hold determined aspirations to earn a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006; Melguizo and Dowd, 2009; Wellman, 2002). At issue, then, is not that well-prepared students excel at community colleges — indeed, their success supports the viability of the community college transfer mission. Rather, these students do not represent the demographic profile of individuals who community colleges pride themselves in serving, namely students from low-income backgrounds and other underserved groups.

### **The Role of Four-Year Colleges and Universities in Transfer**

Although the efficiency of the transfer process has garnered the attention of researchers for many decades, much of their work is focused on the challenges facing two-year institutions rather than that of four-year colleges and universities (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001). Clark's seminal study (1960) concluded that community colleges "cooled" students' ambitions away from transfer and the baccalaureate degree and toward vocational training. This modest but influential study generated a flurry of research and commentary, including several large-scale works, most prominently, *The Contradictory College* (Dougherty, 1994) and *The Diverted Dream* (Brint and Karabel, 1989). To this day, the pivotal dialectic continues to be whether community colleges "democratize" higher education or simply divert less-able students from four-year institutions. While this remains a fair question, open to empirical inquiry and debate, it has failed to generate much research focusing on the factors at four-year institutions that support or detract from the transfer process.

To begin to redress this imbalance, the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives sponsored a project investigating the role of four-year colleges and universities in the transfer process (Handel, 2011). Twenty-three higher education leaders were interviewed at 12 four-year institutions that are known for their commitment to community college transfer students. These individuals were selected because of their expertise in one or more facets of institutional administration, including outreach and recruitment, admission and enrolment, financial aid, and student and academic affairs. Their institutions include public and private colleges and universities, public flagships and smaller institutions, and highly selective and moderately selective universities. In most instances, each institution enrolls a sizable portion of transfer students, at least 50 percent of whom are from community colleges.

Interviewees were sent in advance a list of questions to be addressed during the interview. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Comments from each of the four-year institution leaders were coded into five domains: leadership and commitment, outreach and academic preparation, admission and enrolment, financial aid, and student and academic affairs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Financial aid is not discussed in this paper due to space limitations.

Presented below are the central findings in each domain. (Complete recommendations, along with a list of the individuals who participated in the project, can be found at: <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges/improving-student-transfer-community-colleges-four-year-institutions>)

## **Leadership and Commitment**

Higher education leaders, regardless of their position or area of responsibility, unanimously agreed that four-year institutions must make a strategic, as opposed to a tactical, commitment to serving the needs of transfer students from community colleges. Without a long-term, strategic commitment, these leaders argue, an institution's enrolment of transfer students may be nothing more than a process designed to enrol students as backfill for an otherwise unsuccessful freshman recruitment season. As one leader remarked, "I think at some institutions there's a serious orientation toward transfer students to balance the ledgers" (Handel, 2011, p. 8).

These leaders also emphasized that a strategic commitment would require a four-year institution to evaluate all aspects of its operations, including recruitment, admission, and student and academic affairs, to determine if the campus is aligned with the needs of transfer students. This alignment should apply not only to the curriculum, but also to auxiliary operations (e.g., student housing) and extracurricular programs.

## **Outreach and Preparation**

Higher education leaders recommend that four-year institutions provide increased guidance to prospective transfer students — as early as the students' first term in the *community college*. Moreover, this guidance should focus primarily on academic preparation and planning. Research indicates that academic preparation is the most important variable predicting degree completion for first-time college students (Adelman, 2006). And this appears to be true for transfer students as well. Research by Moore, Shulock and Offenstein (2009) reveals that successful completion of college-level math and English is pivotal to community college students' transfer and attainment of the four-year degree. Higher education leaders interviewed for the College Board study echo this advice and, in addition, recommend that students focus their attention on completing premajor requirements over general education courses, especially for majors in the natural and physical sciences. Without completing the appropriate prerequisites, leaders warn, a student may meet the minimum requirements for transfer, but be unable to enrol in courses that apply to his or her major after transfer.

Institution leaders also recommend that four-year colleges and universities maintain a sustained presence on community college campuses. One strategy is to send recruitment staff to community college campuses on a regular basis. Establishing such a presence on two-year college campuses permits four-year institution representatives to better address students' questions about course selection and other issues (financial aid, housing, etc.). Leaders also recommend that four-year institutions establish strong links with community

college counsellors so that they are up-to-date regarding the introduction of new academic programs as well as changes to current curricular offerings.

## Admission and Enrolment

The result of preparing students well academically is that they transfer to four-year institutions ready to begin their majors, say higher education leaders. This has benefits for both the students and the institutions. For the students, they are prepared for the rigors of the upper-division curriculum and, as a result, are more likely to make steady progress to the degree. For the receiving institutions, well-prepared students are less likely to repeat courses or be required to complete additional lower-division courses. Institutional leaders stress, however, that four-year colleges and universities must create transparent transfer credit policies so that students are never in doubt about how their courses will transfer to a four-year institution.

In addition to aligning course work across two- and four-year institutions, two additional policy instruments were mentioned. The first was a recommendation that four-year institutions establish transfer student enrolment targets that are separate from freshman targets, thus providing an admissions office with an explicit incentive to identify and recruit transfer students. The second was a recommendation that four-year institutions grant community college transfer applicants preference in the admission process over transfer applicants from other four-year institutions. Given that community college students cannot earn the baccalaureate degree without transferring, the needs of these students — all things being equal — are more compelling than those of students at four-year institutions who could, in theory, earn the degree at their current institutions.

## Student and Academic Affairs

The biggest challenge facing four-year institutions as they work to increase their transfer student population, say higher education leaders, is in accommodating transfer student needs within an academic culture that is calibrated largely to the requirements of first-time students. This neglect is based on a mistaken assumption that transfer students do not need guidance or support in adapting to the four-year institution. As one student affairs leader emphasized: “We need to debunk the myth that once a student is in higher education, they know what they’re doing.” He adds that transfer students also believe that they are experienced enough to handle the transition – and many are. But he reminds higher education leaders: “Don’t assume that just because transfer students don’t *want* something, that they don’t *need* it” (Handel, 2011, p. 23).

The transition facing transfer students is sometimes a radical one. Community colleges do not operate precisely like four-year institutions (and vice versa). There are similarities, of course, but also significant differences that complicate the transfer pathway for students (Handel, 2009). For example, community colleges are generally smaller and almost always less expensive than four-year institutions. Community colleges offer part-time enrolment, while four-year institutions are likely to insist on full-time engagement. Lacking on-campus housing, most community college students commute to school, while students in four-year institutions are far more likely to live on or near campus. The vast majority of two-year

institutions are on a semester system, while some four-year institutions are on a much shorter quarter system.

To address these transitional issues, higher education leaders at four-year institutions recommend a variety of activities to encourage transfer students to engage in the campus community. These include orientation programs geared to the needs of this special constituency; on- or near-campus housing for transfers that allow them to stay better connected with campus life; and transfer centres that serve as safe havens for students to become integrated into the entire campus community.

### **An Emerging Theoretical Framework**

One of the overarching themes of our interviews with four-year institution leaders is that transfer students enter a four-year college or university that is often considerably different than the two-year institution they just left. On top of this, changing schools in the middle of one's academic career is hardly ever advised for students attending four-year institutions, yet we ask this of community college students, many of whom come to college with little knowledge about the process. A variety of researchers (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987) have shown that students who bond quickly and well with their new environment are more likely to succeed. But if they do not, as one student affairs leader remarked, "Transfer students are like Alice in Wonderland [at a four-year campus]. They go from one place to another and have no clue about the culture of the institution" (Handel, 2011, p. 23).

Transfer students are saddled with an additional burden. Not only must they learn the culture of the four-year institution having just become accustomed to the culture of the community college — they must also deal with the fact that in many instances there is little communication among community colleges and four-year institutions. As noted earlier, community colleges and highly selective four-year institutions differ a great deal. They were established in different centuries, built for the needs of different groups of students and possess fundamentally different missions (Cohen and Kisker, 2010). For example, community college faculty lay much of their collective pride on the fact that they are open admission institutions, taking all applicants who might benefit from their curricula and instruction. Many faculty in four-year institutions, on the other hand, focus their work on recruiting students with specific academic preparation and talent and, as a result, develop admission criteria to craft a class that best meets the mission of their institutions.

These two viewpoints — egalitarian and elitist, respectively — see higher education very differently. To be sure, the mission of each type of institution is valid, but they often can work at cross-purposes with regard to transfer. Regardless of their differences in outlook, however, both types of institutions are inextricably linked because students attending a community college must transfer to a four-year institution to earn the baccalaureate degree. Thus, the ways in which community colleges and four-year institutions work with one another has profound consequences for student success and for education policymakers trying to accommodate an increasingly large number of students who want to attend college. This signals the need to take a closer look at the institutional cultures of two- and

four-year institutions and assess how these cultures support — or detract — from the transfer process.

The need to bridge the academic cultures of two- and four-year institutions is not a new idea. Nearly three decades ago, Richardson and Bender (1984) documented this essential inter-institutional tension in their analysis of the transfer process in urban community colleges:

... improving opportunities for ... transfer students involves helping them to adjust to two different kinds of institutions, each with its own set of values and assumptions ... there is a lack of understanding among community colleges and universities of the differences between their cultures. ... Accompanying this lack of understanding is an absence of respect for the differences in attitudes and behaviour that these cultures produce. As a result, neither does as much as it could to help students understand or adjust to the other's culture (p. 21).

They concluded that enhancing the success of transfer students must include helping them adjust from one kind of institution to another, “each with its own set of values and basic assumptions.”

Richardson and Bender's insights, as well as those of other education practitioners (Dougherty, 1994; Handel and Herrera, 2003, 2006; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano, 2011), highlight the need to identify programs and services that create a positive “transfer culture” and, in doing so, help students navigate the pathway between the community college and the four-year institution. Two theoretical frameworks may be especially effective in advancing this idea.

## Transfer Capital

To analyze the impact of academic culture in transfer, attention has focused on the characteristics of high school culture that support college-going. McDonough's research (1997) is especially apropos (see also McGrath and Van Buskirk, 1990). Working from a perspective grounded in sociological theories of status groups and organizational theories of decision making, McDonough's research indicates that high schools supporting an ethos of college going via high academic expectations and college-preparatory curriculum are more effective in focusing student expectations toward higher education goals. For McDonough, the quality of a student's education is dependent on the student's “cultural capital” or “the property that middle- and upper-class families transmit to their offspring, which substitutes for or supplements the transmission of economic capital as a means of maintaining class status” (p. 6). McDonough believes that the children of middle- and upper-class parents are more likely to attend college because their parents have had experience with higher education, understand its cultural and economic value, and transmit this knowledge and insight to their children.

How can the concept of cultural capital support an analysis of transfer culture? Given that students attending community colleges are often those least likely to possess the information that is necessary to make the transition to a four-year institution, the

responsibility falls to two- and four-year institutions to fill the gap; that is, to provide the essential cultural capital that they lack. Yet the transfer process may require more than just generalized college knowledge. If two- and four-year institutions represent distinct and sometimes oppositional academic cultures, as I argue here, then students must possess specific kinds of knowledge and insight to traverse the two- to four-year institutional chasm.

Extending ideas of social capital to the transfer process, Laanan and his colleagues have delineated “transfer student capital,” as the means by which students negotiate the transfer process. (Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston, 2010, p. 177). They describe transfer student capital as the accumulation of knowledge and skills that are essential and unique to the transfer process. For example, transfer students are faced with an extremely challenging task of preparing themselves academically for a four-year institution. Unlike freshmen students, who are required to complete a largely standardized series of courses and admission tests (e.g., SAT®), transfer students must prepare for several possible four-year institutions, all of which may require different requirements for the same major. Moreover, these students also must gain access to and become conversant with course and program articulation agreements, sometimes for multiple institutions, to determine how much credit a four-year institution will grant to them for the courses they complete at a community college. Again, this will likely be different from one four-year institution to the next.

### Critical Race Theory

Although originally developed as a framework in critical legal studies, Solórzano (2000) and others (see Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano, 2011) have extended the critical race theory (CRT) to specific issues in education. As the name implies, the CRT framework sees race and racism as an essential part of the American education experience, arguing that improvement can only be achieved after there is an appreciation of the historical context within which policy and practice have been developed. Within Solórzano’s conception, there are at least three tenets that place transfer in a historical and contemporary context helpful to researchers analyzing the sometimes conflicting cultures of two- and four-year institutions: (1) the intersection of race and racism in education, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, and (3) the importance of students’ experiential knowledge.

The first tenet, the intersection of race and racism, was first applied to an analysis of transfer by Jain and her colleagues (2011). They argue that transfer is a “racialized phenomenon” because of its failure in meeting the educational needs of students from underrepresented groups. Despite the fact that these students constitute the majority of enrollments in community colleges, they are less likely to transfer and earn a four-year degree compared to white and Asian American students. This achievement gap holds up, they note, even when other variables, such as academic preparation, are held constant.

The second tenet, challenge to the dominant ideology, provides an opportunity to see transfer not simply as a community college responsibility (as it is currently viewed), but one that includes four-year institutions as full partners in the process. Although four-year colleges and universities were instrumental in helping to establish community colleges in the last century, their relationship to community colleges has always been an unequal one



(Beach, 2011; Eaton, 1994). For example, four-year institutions indirectly control the community college curriculum since these institutions have the power to accept or reject course credit that a student wants to apply to a bachelor's degree. Moreover, some four-year institutions have used the open access mission of community colleges as a means of justifying their selective admission policies (Brint and Karabel, 1989).

Finally, the third tenet honours the individual experiences that students bring to college. Although many students from underserved groups may not possess specific “transfer student capital,” they nonetheless bring other types of capital —familial, linguistic and aspirational — that, if leveraged appropriately, can help advance student success. For example, many Hispanic students prefer community colleges to four-year institutions. The geographic convenience of these institutions allows them to stay closer to their families and peers. This familial strength can be an advantage that two- and four-year institution leaders may use to assist students (Villalpando and Solórzano, 2005).

### A Transfer-Affirming Culture

Building on McDonough's (1997) insights regarding the influence of high school culture on students' academic achievement and applying the theoretical concepts of transfer student capital (Laanan, et al., 2010) and the critical race theory (Jain, et al., 2011), we are left with a rich foundation of thought with which to describe the transfer process and the impact of academic culture upon it. With this foundation in mind, the elements of a “transfer-affirming” culture can be delineated. As highlighted by education leaders interviewed for the College Board project (2011), such a culture is, at its core, an institutional commitment by two- and four-year institutions to provide the resources necessary for students to transfer and earn the baccalaureate degree. More specifically, a transfer-affirming culture:

- Envisions transfer as a shared responsibility between community colleges and four-year institutions;
- Views transfer and attainment of the bachelor's degree as expected and attainable;
- Offers curricula and academic support services that make transfer and degree completion possible;
- Leverages the social capital that students bring to college in service to their educational goals; and
- Includes transfer as an essential element of an institution's mission and strategic vision.

Understanding that the effectiveness of the current transfer process is dependent, at least in part, on the institutional structures of community colleges and four-year institutions brings several advantages. First, it removes the stigma that often is applied to community college students who are often seen as “at risk” for academic failure. When we understand that two- and four-year institutions are important contributors to the transfer capital necessary for

student success, as well as for creating cultures that see transfer as expected and attainable, the potentialities of community college students are better realized. Second, establishing a transfer-affirming climate obligates two- and four-year institutions to see transfer as a shared responsibility such that student failure at any point along the transfer pathway should alert higher education leaders about possible barriers emanating from one or both of their institutions. Finally, the transfer-affirming culture provides a framework for researchers to investigate the optimal structures that may advance student achievement and, in doing so, may identify programs, services and policies that support this essential academic pathway.

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