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TUTORING TRUSTEES

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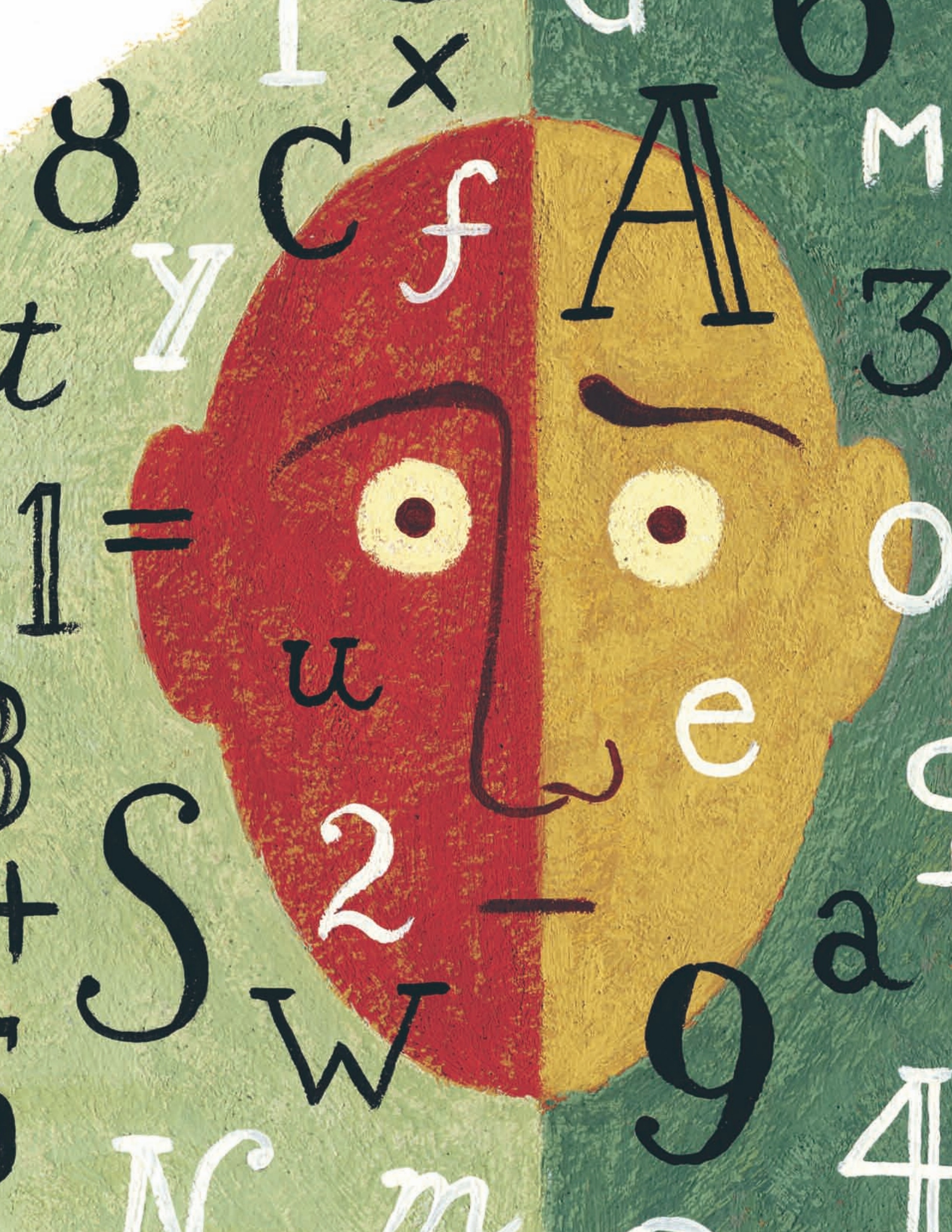
COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES ARE IN AN IMPORTANT POSITION TO ADVANCE THE transfer mission of community colleges. Increasing such efforts is fitting because two-year colleges are becoming the critical starting point for large numbers of students seeking four-year degrees.

The calculus of change is simple enough. The ethnic and racial diversity of the country is in flux. Traditional minority groups that have historically embraced community colleges—Hispanics, African Americans and American Indians—are growing rapidly. For many of those students, the ease with which they are able to transfer from their community college to a four-year institution will be the variable that determines whether they will earn a baccalaureate degree.

The smooth transfer of students from community colleges is an economic imperative. According to the College Board, average tuition and fees at a private four-year institution in 2006–07 is \$22,218, a 5.9 percent increase from the previous year. The corresponding figure for public institutions is \$5,836, a one-year jump of 6.3 percent. Tuition costs at community colleges also increased last year (by 4.1 percent), but attending those institutions is far more affordable (\$2,272). Indeed, the net price for students attending a community college is lower today, when adjusted for inflation, than it was 10 years ago.

As costs rise, students seeking a higher education degree require more financial aid. Total funding for the Pell Grant (the federal government's largest financial aid grant program) is 80 percent higher than it was a decade ago, but the maximum individual student grant meets only 33 percent of the average published price of tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year institutions—down from 42 percent five years ago. In 2006, according to the College Board, the average amount of a Pell Grant fell for the first time in six years.

The Square Root of a 4-Year Degree Is a 2-Year College



As a result of these shifts—demographic changes, increases in the cost of higher education and stagnant financial aid—students seeking a route to the baccalaureate are turning to low-cost, high-value community colleges to leverage their higher education goals.

Nevertheless, the transfer process in the United States has problems. First, we don't transfer nearly as many students as we could. Among students who enroll in community college intending to transition eventually to a four-year institution, about 50 percent succeed—at best.

Second, relations between two-year and four-year institutions have never been especially close. Some community college officials complain that four-year colleges and universities are elitist and provincial, refusing to accept all of their courses for transfer credit. In turn, more than a few four-year institutions argue that community colleges do not prepare their students well for the baccalaureate, a claim that has been rebutted in the research literature.

The concerns represent a chasm of academic cultures and educational missions. Without an appreciation of this fact, it is difficult to build sturdy bridges between two- and four-year institutions.

If meeting the needs of students doesn't compel institutions to address the transfer issue, the federal government could step in. The recently released report from Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's Commission on the Future of Higher Education takes a dim view of higher education's infighting and perceived inefficiency. It is unlikely that government leaders will stand by if institutions don't show steady progress in advancing the transfer mission.

Community college trustees themselves can be catalysts of change, yet many of them have been unmoved to act. They often see themselves primarily as caretakers of their institutions. Working with four-year institutions to strengthen transfer is considered, by some, as outside the scope of their charge.

Such a view is parochial. Herewith, some suggestions for trustees who are willing to take action:

1) Recognize Differences in Academic Mission and Culture

The only way around interinstitutional competition is to rise above it. This may be difficult if you run up against people at four-year institutions who do not understand the community college mission. Some community college officials have chips on their shoulders, as well. In a pitched battle of partisans, no one is likely to win.

2) Document Your Students' Success

Many community colleges measure only the number of students who successfully transfer. How many of your students earn a baccalaureate degree? The inquiry can be an excellent opportunity to begin discussions with colleagues at four-year colleges, which collect and publish these data as part of state and federal reporting requirements. Working together to document the success of students is something that policymakers are eager to see—and perhaps fund.

3) Work Leader-to-Leader

Picking the people you will work with to advance the cause of transfer is critical. Your counterparts at four-year institutions devote significant energy to the oversight of their educational institutions. Your motivations—strengthening American education—are similar. If you seek them out, you are likely to find a sympathetic ear.

4) Build Trust First (Then Worry About Articulation Agreements)

Discussions involving transfer often get mired in the question of transferability of credits from a community college to the four-year institution. There are just too many ways for these discussions to go awry. I've seen otherwise good relationships between institutions break down over the transferability of a single course.

Articulation agreements should be the by-product of stronger relations between two- and four-year institutions, not the mechanism by which such relations are established. Develop policies and programs that make the transfer process smoother for students, while allowing other elements (like the development of articulation agreements) to come together after trust is built. With transfer programs in place, there is an incentive to design curricula at two- and four-year institutions to support specific programmatic goals.

5) Focus on Students, Not Institutions

In California, the community college system and the University of California (UC) were able to sustain rapid growth in student-transfer rates by adopting transfer goals that relate specifically to student academic success. Under a unique partnership agreement developed in the late 1990s, community colleges agreed to prepare a specific number of "transfer-ready" students who have completed appropriate coursework and attained the necessary grade-point average needed to be at least minimally admissible to the UC system. In turn, UC agreed to establish specific transfer-student enrollment targets for each campus, targets separate from those developed for freshman enrollment. The result? Sustained increases in transfer-student enrollment, as well as significant growth in the number of students from underrepresented groups transferring from a community college to a four-year university.

Community college trustees are in a pivotal position to develop strong partnerships with four-year colleges and universities that help students transfer and earn the baccalaureate degree. Your actions have the potential to increase students' educational opportunities by advancing and strengthening the transfer mission.



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