

# Trustees & Transfer

BY STEPHEN J. HANDEL

Community college trustees are in a unique position to build bridges with four-year institutions and improve graduation rates at all levels.

PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS CHALLENGED AMERICAN educators to increase the college completion rate significantly, vowing that by the year 2020 the United States will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. When this goal is translated into hard numbers, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems estimates that we must produce 8.2 million new associate's and bachelor's degree holders in the next decade — over and above the number we already produce.

While it is naturally assumed that community colleges will be at the forefront in producing associate's degrees, these institutions will also be essential in contributing to the number of students who earn bachelor's degrees. Community colleges will accomplish this by preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions — as they have done for over 100 years.

Community college trustees can play a pivotal role in building bridges with four-year institutions to enrich and improve the transfer pipeline. Indeed, they may be the most effective constituency in bringing two- and four-year institutions together in ways that focus on student success and bypass institutional intransigence.

The intervention of trustees is imperative because the transfer process has never been a reliably productive route to the baccalaureate, especially for students from underserved groups. While there are a variety of transfer rate definitions, careful observers conclude that only about one in four students attending a community college — and who wish to earn a four-year degree — makes a successful transition to a four-year institution. This is not because these students are ill-prepared or unmotivated; studies show that when community college students transfer to four-year institutions, their rates of bachelor degree attainment are similar to those of first-year students.

So what impedes transfer? Experts attribute the failure to transfer successfully to specific barriers that have been erected between two- and four-year institutions. For example, a community college may lack the necessary transferable courses or may invest insufficiently in transfer advising. Similarly, a four-year institution may be unwilling to grant transfer credit for community college courses or may lack adequate financial aid to support transfer students.

Although these and other barriers undercut a smooth-running transfer process, they are symptoms, not causes. At the core is a misperception that community colleges and four-year institutions have different missions and cater to different student constituencies. Thus, leaders at both institutions see little overlap in who they serve. Of course, this leaves transfer students in the middle, unable to advance academically at a community college and powerless to complete the baccalaureate at a four-year institution.

Even when two- and four-year institutional representatives gather to address the transfer process, their well-intentioned efforts often get bogged down over the minutia of transfer, such as transfer

admissions requirements, course transferability, or curriculum alignment. Addressing the prickly mechanics of transfer before each institution has expressed a public commitment to the needs of transfer students undermines the process.

Transfer rates will not improve unless two- and four-year institutions move earnestly toward an understanding of their collective role in serving community college students. And establishing this foundation is the responsibility of education leaders at the highest levels.

Enter the community college trustee. By virtue of their position and the skills they bring to the job, community college trustees are in an excellent position to advance the conversation around transfer for a number of reasons, including:

- **Trustees are regional education leaders.** Trustees care about their communities and want to see them flourish. Many are longtime residents with deep roots in the economic and cultural lives of their regions. Thus, in addition to their devotion to the community college mission, trustees seek a strong K-16 system, knowing that the positive benefits of well-educated students — at whatever level — reverberate positively throughout the region.
- **Trustees bring credibility.** As elected or appointed public officials, trustees, by virtue of their position, have an ethical responsibility that transcends partisan politics and provincialism. Their position warrants consideration and care about what is best for all citizens in the region. Understanding the credibility of the position allows trustees to rise above the sometimes impolite debate that occurs between two- and four-year institutions and focus the conversation on areas of common ground and good will.
- **Trustees possess broad expertise.** An especially effective board of trustees includes members from a variety of professions, bringing with them experience in other fields, such as business, community relations, and philanthropy. This expertise allows trustees to see education in a broader context that views the community college as a component of, and contributor to, the economic, social, and cultural wellbeing of the community.

These are powerful attributes of the job, but trustees are often reluctant to leverage them in service to transfer issues. Many trustees — respecting the legitimate division between oversight and administration — are wary of moving into an area that might be seen as the sole responsibility of the president and the faculty. But this is a too-narrow view of transfer. Of course, it would be an overly involved view for trustees to become involved in negotiating articulation agreements or developing curricula that bridge two- and four-year institutions. Other campus leaders are better trained to do this work. The trustee's role is to provide leadership that will establish a foundation for an effective and long-term transfer process.

Here are suggestions for beginning this important work:

- **Engage your fellow board members in a discussion about the transfer process.** Identify the statewide, regional, and district or campus goals for transfer. (This may already be

a component of your campus or district strategic plan.) What challenges does your district or campus face in meeting this goal? What opportunities are available?

- **Seek out your trustee peers at one or more local four-year institutions.** Your invitation is likely to be well received, because four-year institution leaders also are being asked to increase bachelor's degree completion rates. Although you represent different institutions, you and your four-year institution colleagues speak the same language and shoulder the same kinds of responsibilities. As regional leaders, you will benefit from sharing notes about the advantages and challenges facing higher education in your community.
- **Focus the conversation on the shared advantages of a stronger transfer partnership.** Trustees are well positioned to elevate the conversation in ways that reduce institutional chauvinism, which often derails conversations between two- and four-year institutions. Delineating how your state and region will benefit from a more productive transfer pipeline will keep all parties focused on the collective benefits of this effort.
- **Keep the end game simple.** The goal is to establish common ground on which a stronger transfer process can be built. Do not dwell in details — administrative and faculty leaders on your campus will sort those out. You have neither the time nor the expertise to understand the intricacies of inter-institutional curriculum design or the complexities involved in crafting an effective articulation agreement.
- **Involve your president and academic senate chair from the beginning.** Assure them that your efforts are designed to establish openness, cooperation, and trust among institutions. Emphasize that your intent is not to develop administrative procedures, course-review processes, or anything else that might cause legitimate concern (and unproductive turf battles) among administrative or faculty leaders.

The degree to which trustees become involved in transfer discussions depends, of course, on how well the process is currently operating. In some communities, the transfer system has been on autopilot for years. In other instances, inter-institutional communication between the community college and four-year institution has been sporadic or nonexistent. In either case, however, the ambitious college completion goals set by President Obama require every public college and university to analyze and improve bachelor's degree completion rates.

Community college trustees are not only catalysts for a serious examination of the current transfer progress. They also serve as brokers for a conversation that will lay the groundwork for a more efficient process in the future.



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