



***Pursuing Higher Education Access and Achievement:
Case Studies in the Development of
“Transfer-Going” Cultures¹***

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In today's technology driven economy, where skills gained via higher education are the baseline for gainful employment, people of color, newly arriving immigrants, individuals with disabilities, second-language learners, and others are significantly less well-represented in our nation's four-year colleges and universities. This is especially true for those wishing to enter highly- or moderately-selective colleges and universities. The impact of low participation marginalizes individuals, placing them at the edge of civic and economic prosperity.

Many reasons have been identified to account for low college participation rates. Individuals may lack the necessary educational preparation for college because of poor high school performance; possess insufficient financial resources, and/or lack the support of a “college-going” ethos that provides a network of people and resources reinforcing students' participation in higher education. But there are structural impediments as well. While this country has developed an elaborate and well-regarded higher education infrastructure, opportunities for participation in highly- or moderately-selective colleges and universities are especially low for individuals who are members of the groups delineated above.

To address these impediments, America has created an extensive network of community colleges. Developed at the beginning of the 20th Century, these two-year institutions represent an egalitarian initiative offering college education to wider circles of individuals who might not otherwise have the resources (financial or social) to obtain a higher education degree. As a result of community colleges' open admissions policies, low fees, comprehensive curricula, and geographic availability, these institutions address many of the barriers that have traditionally prevented some students from entering higher education. Their “democratizing” of higher education has proven to be enormously successful in providing access to virtually any individual who might benefit.

This remarkable success is not without criticism, however. While community colleges provide *access* to college for many marginalized groups, the transfer *output* has been questioned. The exact proportion of community college students who transfer to a four-year institution is constantly debated, but it seems generally agreed that only about half of those students attending a community college (and who express a desire to earn the baccalaureate degree) are successful in doing so (Department of Education, 2003). Not surprisingly, transfer to four-year *selective* institutions also is low. This is worrisome because much of America's leadership is prepared at these institutions.

A “Transfer-Going” Model

What are the causes of the disjuncture between community colleges and highly selective four-year institutions? What are the structural failures in our higher education system preventing many more students from making a successful transition from a two-year to four-year institution? One often argued position is that the bridge between community colleges and highly-selective institutions is in need of repair. Without a strong link, the egalitarian promise of the community college and the access to leadership embodied in the baccalaureate degree cannot be sustained. But a bridge is a necessary but insufficient condition for greater transfer success. It also must be recognized that the gulf dividing two-year and four-year institutions is a result of often startling differences between the academic cultures of these institutions.

Difference and diversity are a hallmark of American postsecondary education. Thus, it should come as no particular shock that two-year 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. While community colleges and four-year institutions are devoted to student achievement, each side looks to the other, not with suspicion, but rather with disinterest, often de-valuing a collective approach toward the greater student transfer success. Yet these 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 policy makers trying to accommodate an increasingly large number of students who want to attend college.

It is our position that differing worldviews are at least one of the reasons for low transfer rates. Nearly two decades ago, Richardson and Bender observed this essential inter-institutional tension:

...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 behavior 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 (Richardson & Bender, 1987, p. 21).

The solution is the creation of a “common culture” – one that embraces the strengths of both systems, yet minimizes the provincialism that often undercuts inter-institutional cooperation; a common culture that is focused on a single metric: increasing the number of students that transfer from a community to a four-year institution and who earn the baccalaureate degree.

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In an attempt to build a common culture in service to student transfer success, a “transfer-going” model was created. This model is designed to address the structural impediments that prevent greater student transfer success by building upon the common strengths of two-year and four-year institutions. The transfer-going model described here is an extension of a model discussed previously (see Handel and Herrera, 2003) and it is based on programmatic initiatives of Paredes, Bermeo, Peterson, and Herrera (2000) and the work of researchers interested in the influence of academic culture on student performance (see, in particular, Richardson and Bender, 1987). Moreover, the model relies heavily on the research literature concerning “college-going” cultures, which has documented the importance of the high school context in the preparation of students for college (see, for example, McDonough 1997). High schools that support an ethos of college-going via high academic expectations and college-preparatory curriculum are more effective in focusing student expectations toward higher education goals. It is predicted, then, that the transfer policies and practices of community colleges and selective four-year institutions that link the success of their institutions to student transfer and completion of the baccalaureate degree are more likely to see increases in overall transfer rates.

With this approach, the strength of transfer-going on any given campus is assessed using a set of variables that collectively represent a campus’ overall transfer infrastructure and its commitment to student transfer success. For community colleges, the presence of a transfer-going culture is reflected by the presence of a viable transfer center, counselors trained specifically to address transfer issues, honors programs, four-year campus visit programs, full-time articulation officers, and, perhaps most importantly, an administration committed to building linkages with four-year institutions that close the gap between the academic cultures that each institution represents. In the end, they are institutions where transfer is seen as an expectation rather than a privilege.

Four-year institutions also have significant obligations. Campuses most successful in attracting and graduating transfer students have well-developed transfer outreach programs, transfer orientation programs, transfer centers (often staffed with counselors skilled in advising community college students), and transfer-themed housing options or, at least, housing options that appeal to upper-division students. An especially effective trend is the development of “summer bridge programs,” often in partnership with local community colleges, that provide students with opportunities to sharpen study skills, assess and improve basic skills, participate in research projects, and obtain academic advice from counselors *prior* to official enrollment in the fall term. More elaborate summer programs recruit students in the summer prior to their enrollment in the community college (see Case Study 1). Engaging students at this very early stage helps students’ get off to a strong start academically, while providing early and sustained contact with four-year institutions.

The essence of these programs and activities – the critical elements and ethos of a transfer-going culture – has been crystallized by Paredes, et. al. (2000) after extensive discussions with community college faculty, administrators, students and others:

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- Establish transfer to a four-year institution as a high institutional priority;
- Ensure that transfer is perceived by students as expected and attainable;
- Offer a rigorous curriculum for all students that includes writing, critical thinking, mathematics, and the sciences;
- Provide high quality instruction, including innovative and research-based pedagogies;
- Develop intensive academic support programs based on models of “academic excellence” (e.g., academic counseling, peer tutoring, and reciprocal learning techniques);
- Create an environment of belonging in which students feel stimulated to achieve at high academic levels; and
- Establish strong community and family linkages that foster intellectual stimulating, secure, and culturally rich environments for students on and off campus.

Points of Intervention

In implementing this model, three points of intervention are critical for student success. These intervention points involve the participation of two-year and four-year faculty and student service professionals in specific and coordinated ways:

- 1) Interaction with students no later than the first term at a community college to develop an academic plan of action for successful transfer. Academic preparation is, of course, essential for all students to succeed in college. But making the transition from a community college to a four-year institution in the middle of one’s academic career is a difficult one, especially for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Sustained intervention is the key; by faculty and staff at community colleges and four-year transfer destinations.
- 2) On-going commitment of faculty from two-year and four-year institutions working in partnership to identify the essential academic preparation needed to help students make the transition from a community college to a four-year institution. This work must also include close and on-going consultation to assure that community college and four-year curricula are properly articulated so that an understandable pathway for students is created.
- 3) Intervention of counselors and other student support personnel at two-year and four-year institutions, who are the critical gatekeepers of information about transfer. They must be well versed in the complexities of the transfer process. This requires regular professional development activities that bring these

constituencies together to discuss transfer and the ways in which they can – in partnership – assist students.

The following three case studies demonstrate how these three types of interventions have been implemented and describe concrete strategies that can be applied universally to improve transfer and degree completion rates.

Case Study 1: Student Intensive Transfer Experience (SITE)

“I never believed I could attend a place like UCLA. Participating in SITE not only provided me the opportunity to experience the campus, but it was the first time anyone believed in me, provided me support, and motivated me to continue which helped me gain the confidence to try harder. I have just been admitted to UCLA, and I am so excited for my future as a doctor!”

Student Participant

SITE is a six-day residential academic program for educationally disadvantaged students. The goal of this program is to motivate and prepare first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented community college students to transfer to a four-year institution. The program introduces students to the rigors of university life and provides students with the necessary academic tools to develop a successful transfer plan.

SITE administrators identify and invite students to attend the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) for an intensive one-week stay during the summer. The program consists of students who have just graduated from high school, as well as students who have been at the community college for one or more years, but who have not decided on a college or major. Students are identified through presentations at high schools, community agencies, and community colleges.

Students participate in a variety of academic workshops, designed to prepare them for success at the community college and the four-year institution. During SITE, students participate in activities, such as:

- Writing workshops conducted by UC faculty to strengthen composition skills and introduce writing across the curriculum, journal writing and research tips.
- Close peer mentoring by UCLA students who transferred from a community college with similar backgrounds and who are now excelling at UCLA.
- Interactive workshops on developing an educational plan to transfer to a four-year university.
- Attending a lecture, conducted by a university professor, to gain skills in time management, note taking, and building relationships with college instructors.

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- Discussions with counselors from local community colleges to learn how to use their time efficiently at a community college and making effective use of campus services.
- Participating in major and career selection workshops.
- Learning about the importance of graduate and professional schools from current students and mentors.
- Meeting with University of California staff to gain knowledge about each of the University's eight undergraduate campuses.

Community college counselors play an important role in identifying students from their institutions or from feeder high schools to participate in SITE and by providing a contact for students to refer to when they enroll at their institution.

Follow up with the students once they leave the Summer Program is critical. A series of "SITE Saturday Academies" have been designed and scheduled throughout the academic year to provide students with on-going information, motivation, and advice. These events provide students with sustained opportunities to interact with UCLA faculty, staff, and students who have experiences similar to theirs, as well as to participate in a variety of workshops developed to meet their needs regarding transfer.

Case Study 2: Engaging Faculty and Revising Curriculum

"Particularly important has been the contact with the UCLA faculty, especially in composition, science, and social science. Through this contact, we have gained a greater understanding of what is required in the various disciplines at the university..."

Community College Faculty Representative

Most efforts to prepare students for transfer have focused on working directly with students, often in partnership with community college counselors and staff. The UCLA Center for Community College Partnerships is focused on collaborating with community college leadership and faculty. This approach puts UCLA faculty and staff into direct working relationships with the faculty, counselors, administrators, and learning center directors at local Los Angeles-area community colleges.

In the summer of 2003, the Los Angeles Community College District/UCLA Consortium was developed with the nine colleges of the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) and UCLA. The Consortium's primary mission was to increase the visibility of UCLA by providing peer mentors at community college and by engaging faculty in a discussion of transfer. Faculty were convened from two-year and four-year institutions to review curriculum and rethink pedagogy, and, along with senior administrators, develop a campus infrastructure that provides the counseling

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and tutorial support necessary to couple high expectations with high levels of support. The ultimate purpose of the Consortium was to develop a rigorous transfer-focused academic culture at each of the partner community colleges to increase the transfer rates of students who have not had access to coursework, counseling, and an academic culture that would make them competitive for admission to highly selective four-year institutions.

One of the primary principles underlying the Consortium is implementing strategies for academic acceleration rather than remediation. According to Koski and Levin (1998), remedial courses typically involve drills and repetition that focus on building only lower-level skills. Koski and Levin contend that this remedial approach does not foster a student's ability to transfer skills to content areas. They argue that the best practices, those that have greater gains in terms of student achievement and persistence, utilize methods designed to *accelerate* students' progress rather than *remedy* their deficiencies.

A key aspect of the Consortium is the *Faculty Discipline Dialogues*. UCLA and community college faculty in the social sciences, mathematics, physical and biological sciences, and English participate in dialogues designed to discuss best practices in both curriculum and pedagogy. These discussions center on engaging faculty in the transfer process, to help them become more active in assisting students through the transition from a two- year to a four- year institution. These faculty discussions have led to several innovative initiatives, including a faculty exchange between UCLA and East Los Angeles College focusing on effective teaching practices for English Composition; the development of an enriched English composition course at West Los Angeles College that provides students with a UCLA student mentor, borrowing privileges at UCLA's undergraduate library, and priority consideration for admission to SITE; the creation of a program to employ UCLA math doctoral students as community college tutors or part-time faculty; the development of "Conversations on Composition," a seminar that includes the participation of community college faculty, drawn from many disciplines, to share syllabi and teaching practices for composition courses; and the establishment of "linked courses," that allow students to strengthen their English composition skills by writing about issues within a specific content area (e.g., U.S. History). The common focus for all of these initiatives is faculty overcoming institutional, curricular, and pedagogical barriers to building a transfer culture.

Another important aspect of the Consortium is the Academic Support Working Group, which includes the Directors of Learning Centers, English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) faculty, administrators of academic support programs, and the UCLA Academic Advancement Program (AAP) tutorial staff. These professionals participate in a series of "Tutorial Dialogues" to discuss tutorial theory, pedagogy, training, and practice regarding the ways in which instruction and tutoring should work together to enhance transfer.

The work of the Consortium has implications for the development of curriculum and teaching that is focused on assisting students, especially those from

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underrepresented groups, to become prepared for and transfer to highly selective colleges and universities. The Consortium's key findings regarding curriculum and pedagogy include the following:

- Ensure that a rigorous academic curriculum is available to all students and that students are encouraged to graduate from the community college by completing an Associate in Arts degree, vocational certificate, or transfer program; and by demonstrating, at minimum, strong academic skills in writing, critical thinking, and mathematics/quantitative reasoning.
- Provide high quality instruction, including innovative and research-based pedagogies for addressing issues such as student under-preparation in key academic skills necessary for transfer (e.g., writing and mathematics).
- Develop and maintain intensive academic support programs based on academic excellence models that include high-quality academic counseling, peer tutoring, and reciprocal learning techniques.

Case Study 3: Counselor Professional Development

As we have already noted, many students entering a community college indicate a desire to transfer, yet many fewer actually accomplish this goal. To facilitate transfer, students need expert counseling by professionals trained in the intricacies of transfer. There is no adequate substitute for this type of personal, face-to-face interaction. In turn, these professionals need to interact with outreach officers from the four-year institutions to discuss entrance requirements, financial aid, and other issues essential to students wishing to transfer. However, opportunities for such training and interaction are rare. Most academic counseling programs do not focus on transfer academic advising and opportunities for professional development usually center on high school advising issues.

To address the specific needs of community college counselors and to enhance dialogue among counselors and four-year outreach officers, the University of California, in close partnership with the California Community Colleges, developed the *Ensuring Transfer Success* (ETS) Counselor Institutes. These Institutes are designed for community college transfer staff and faculty who are involved in preparing transfer students for admission to the University of California, including academic counselors and transfer center directors.

The focus of these Institutes is on student academic preparation. That is, a dialogue among instructors and participants concerning the educational preparation of students for transfer, not the institutional priorities of community colleges and four-year institutions. This does not mean that there is complete unanimity in how best to prepare students, but it does ensure that the deliberations are centered on student academic needs.

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ETS faculty address both Universitywide admissions issues, such as UC eligibility requirements, and UC campus-specific issues, such as selection requirements and major preparation. While the main focus of the ETS curriculum is on the preparation of students from an academic perspective, over the past decade, the curriculum has expanded to include issues that directly affect the unique concerns of transfer students. These topics include financial aid, four-year campus support services for transfer and re-entry students, and career opportunities. ETS staff expanded the curriculum at the request of Institute participants who wanted a more complete picture of the transfer process and a more substantive treatment of the variables that impact transfer student academic preparation and performance.

The instructional model for the ETS Institutes is a simple one: Create a place for dialogue among colleagues, not a one-way lecture (often the practice at many large conferences). To this end, the ETS instructional program relies primarily on small group discussion, creating a seminar-like atmosphere where there is substantive engagement with Institute participants regarding student preparation and best practices relating to transfer. Within this seminar format, ETS faculty spend considerable time preparing extensive case studies of prospective transfer applicants (based on real transfer student experiences). These case studies are used in small group sessions to help community college participants understand how UC staff evaluate transfer applicants during the admissions process. Moreover, ETS instructional staff have developed separate curricula for new and veteran counselors, understanding well that the informational needs of new counselors may be different from more experienced professionals who have advised transfer students for many years. Finally, a series of publications have been developed based on these discussions. These publications have proved vital in advising students for transfer to UC campuses and are distributed free of charge to counselors, faculty, and prospective student via a website that is regularly updated.

The ETS Counselor Institutes have been in existence for over 10 years. They remain extraordinarily popular – multiple venues across California are regularly sold out. Even more importantly, Institute participants often come from every one of California's 109 community colleges. In a 2001 review of the program, it was discovered that 70% of the participating community colleges sent at least four counselors from their campuses, revealing that while Institute participants appreciate the information that is distributed at ETS, they most value the honest dialogue and exchange among colleagues (Handel and Flores, 2001).

Case Study Lessons: Programmatic Imperatives

It is our belief that the philosophy that serves as the foundation for the transfer-going model is a universal one reflecting sentiments that all educational institutions share; namely, a desire to provide all students, especially those coming from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, with an opportunity to prepare for and earn a college degree. Programmatically, this plays out in several ways:

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1. All students regardless of background or circumstance have the ability to earn a college degree and this must be at the core of programs and services that seek to implement the transfer-going model.
2. Faculty and administrators from all educational segments are the essential change-agents in providing wider access to higher education and, as a result, must be allowed to work with, and be rewarded for, the development of programs that serve the needs of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Proper assessments that pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses are essential to provide an accurate starting point for student success. Without an unvarnished understanding of the academic needs of students, program interventions will rarely be effective.
4. In partnership with the assessment of student academic skills, academic program planning is essential in maximizing student success, especially since students from disadvantaged backgrounds often come from homes in which there is no history of college-going and their need for accurate and on-going advising is critical.
5. As students transition from one institution to another, the “handover” must be carefully planned, explicitly guided, and rigorously evaluated. There is no shortage of students wishing to earn a four-year degree, but we lose thousands in the transition between community college and the four-year institution. Part of the power of the transfer-going model is that planning for this transition is initiated from the very first day the student begins at a community college (and often many months prior if they are able to participate in SITE or other summer preparatory programs).

Final Words

Opening the gate of higher education without concomitant programs to assist those that enter is a wasteful approach that undercuts the very essence of the academy. Thus, the transfer-going model is concerned with higher education access *and* achievement. Moreover, it empowers students to take charge of their education and expands their vision of academic success by encouraging goals beyond the baccalaureate (such as graduate/professional school). The model also draws attention to the importance of connecting community colleges and four-year institutions more centrally in the success of their students by employing an academic culture that is compatible with the goals of both institutions. Whatever its virtues, however, the success of the transfer-going model is measured along a single metric: the transfer and degree completion of students who would not otherwise have been able to achieve their higher education dreams.

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