



National Office of Community
College Initiatives

Articulation: The Currency of Transfer?

Working Paper 3—Destinations of Choice Initiative: A Reexamination of America's Community Colleges

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Destinations of Choice Initiative

The Destinations of Choice Initiative, sponsored by the College Board’s Community College Advisory Panel (CCAP) and the National Office of Community College Initiatives, is a project examining the strengths and challenges characterizing today’s community colleges. Through public forums and working papers such as this one, the College Board has launched a wide-ranging discussion about the pivotal role of community colleges in American education.

This working paper is not meant to be a definitive statement about the topic it addresses but is rather a work-in-progress designed to invoke a conversation among all educators about the place of community colleges in the twenty-first century United States.

The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily represent the official views or policies of the College Board or CCAP member institutions. The author is also responsible for any errors.

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Articulation: The Currency of Transfer?

Community colleges considered “destinations of choice” have strong partnerships with local high schools and four-year colleges and universities, helping students prepare for the transition from high school to college and from community college to a four-year college or university.

In a previous working paper (*Second Chances Are Good, But First Chances Are Better*) we focused on the high school to community college transition and called on educators to prepare high school students more effectively for their transition to a community college. In this paper we address how well community colleges and four-year institutions connect their academic programs to serve the needs of transfer students.

The Battle Lines

Articulation between community colleges and four-year colleges is always a difficult conversation. When educators from two- and four-year institutions gather to discuss transfer, the transferability of course work—or the lack of it—is the first thing that is blamed. Community college officials complain that four-year institutions are elitist and provincial when they refuse to accept their courses for transfer credit. In turn, four-year institutions argue that because they are granting an undergraduate degree, they have a responsibility to conduct quality control over the courses students bring with them from the community college.

These conversations reflect an imbalance of power between community colleges and four-year institutions. Often community college faculty will argue that oversight on the part of the four-year institution is an excuse that masks a fundamental mistrust of the educational value of community colleges. A few community college faculty have been very direct in pointing this out:

The traditional process of articulation must be rethought. . . .When students must retake courses upon transfer because of poor or absent articulation agreements or, even worse, because of the play of institutional egos, the public interest is not served. As long as individual universities can decide to accept or not accept a course or group of courses, however, students will continue to pay a price that they need not and should not pay. Although community colleges educate the majority of lower-division students in many states, and thus have the greatest experience with the curricula and the needs of students, they and their students are held hostage to university requirements.¹

This debate has been going on for decades. While the importance of program articulation was cited as an important and necessary activity at the beginning of the community college movement—a movement supported in fundamental ways by four-year universities—the actual product of such relationships often reflects interinstitutional suspicion and bureaucratic intransigence.

In this working paper, we use the topic of program articulation to explore the ways in which community colleges are viewed in American education. In the process, we make a few modest recommendations that we believe will strengthen the way community colleges and four-year institutions can work together more productively and, in the process, serve transfer students more effectively.

A Frustrating Process for Everyone

There is one thing that everyone seems to agree on: Transferring credits from a community college to a four-year institution—even under the best of circumstances—is a messy, unpredictable business, leaving students, families, counselors, and others baffled and frustrated.

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The cause is both understandable and maddening. At its core, good articulation ensures that the courses students complete at a community college properly prepare them for upper-division work at the four-year institution. But to assure quality control, faculty at the sending and receiving institutions must come together to monitor and, at times, adjust their respective curricula. This presents two immediate problems: 1) recruiting faculty from two or more institutions to meet in the same room at the same time; and 2) reviewing a staggering number of courses (in California, for example, the number of courses that need to be reviewed annually is around 100,000).

But the problem of transferring credit is more than logistical. If it were only a matter of bookkeeping, accountants could have systematized the process years ago. The problem is sometimes at odds with academic freedom and the right of faculty to decide what constitutes the baccalaureate degree. Control of the curriculum is central to the work of the Academy, and faculty hold on tightly to this prerogative. This is true also of community college faculty, but they are caught in a bind. Community college faculty must develop many of their courses so that they at least resemble the curriculum at four-year institutions; otherwise, their students will be less likely to successfully transfer credits from the community college to a four-year institution.

If collegiality alone exemplified relationships among all members of the higher education community, we would expect that faculty from community colleges and four-year institutions would come together to develop courses and curricula that prepare students for transfer. And, of course, there are some wonderful examples of this occurring throughout the United States. They are the work of conscientious educators at two- and four-year institutions who are committed to helping community college students prepare effectively for transfer and the baccalaureate degree. But such commitment has obvious limits. The single-minded wherewithal of committed educators is hard to sustain when the leaders of such boutique efforts retire or otherwise leave their institutions. We need to build a national cadre of faculty to sustain this work.

The State Rolls In (But It’s Not as Easy as It Looks)

The extent to which courses transfer among higher education institutions is a concern of not only faculty and students but also legislators and policymakers. “Taxpayers should not have to pay for students to repeat courses” is the common refrain from legislators responding to complaints of constituents stuck in the transfer muddle.

To politicians the process sounds so straightforward. Institutions simply need to agree to accept one another’s courses, publicize this information in their catalogs, and make students aware of the importance of this information in planning for transfer. But, as described earlier, the process is a bit more complicated than that. Even a recent report by the U.S. General Accounting Office, which took institutions to task (both two and four year) for their inability to come together in the interests of transfer students, admitted the inherent difficulties in delineating a simple, coherent, and workable plan that addresses the transferability of courses across multiple institutions and states.²

Still, “reforming articulation” is one of the first things that legislators do when introducing bills designed to strengthen transfer. But the result can lead to bad policy—policies that often regulate the external, bookkeeping aspects of articulation (such as creating common course numbers for all public institutions) but that do little to encourage faculty and administrators to work together to align curricula or otherwise consult on a regular basis regarding the ways in which they can best prepare students for transfer. Carol Geary Schneider, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, summarizes the problem well:

Many community college students... [who] want to transfer to a baccalaureate degree program... encounter difficulties in transferring their courses [to the four-year institution]. Sometimes the four-year colleges’ objections are warranted; sometimes they are not. But the discovery of these

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barriers has not led policymakers to ask whether all college students are being fully prepared...Rather, discovering that community college students have “wasted” their college credits, legislators are rushing to the rescue with outraged insistence that colleges should recognize one another’s credits. The result is that public colleges and universities are under considerable pressure to homogenize their academic standards and to recognize courses as essentially equivalent, whether they actually are or not.³

Given the size and complexity of most state higher education systems, lawmakers rarely have at their disposal resources to articulation systems that carefully compare courses among institutions to assure that they are comparable. But calculus is calculus, right? Hence, they turn to the simplest models available, such as common course numbering, which, as Schneider goes on to note, is a policy inclination that treats “college courses as if they are Lego pieces, one interchangeable with another.”⁴

Schneider identifies an important concern. Is calculus taught the same way everywhere? Perhaps, but how do we know? In our well-intentioned goal to provide smooth paths of transfer for students, are we sacrificing student preparation to articulation expediency? What is articulation if not a kind of contract or intellectual promissory note between educators and students? The implicit agreement is that by taking course X at a community college, a student will be prepared to do course Y at the four-year institution. Without that as the basis for our work, then the rest of it is just so much bureaucratic tap dancing.

Several Modest Recommendations

So at the end of the day, we have three main problems nationally:

- Two-year and four-year institution faculty are not talking to one another when it comes to transfer, especially regarding articulation, creating perhaps a climate

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of mistrust, or certainly disinterest, which, of course, only make the job of transfer more difficult for students.

- Into this void, policymakers come sweeping in with solutions designed to support student academic progress. But sometimes those solutions have the unintended consequence of doing more harm than good.
- We may have become distracted from the fundamental purpose of articulation, which is to prepare students for academic success.

These problems undercut students’ ability to transfer. Even as community college and four-year institution administrators wrangle over academic prerogatives, and legislators insert statewide articulation mandates, all publicly justify their actions as serving students’ interests best. But if good intentions were good enough, the transfer rate would be soaring. There is little evidence, however, that efforts thus far have made the transfer process more efficient. There is more to do. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Create a new division of labor among two-year and four-year faculty regarding course review.

As noted earlier, community college and four-year faculty are often at odds with one another regarding the transferability of credit; this is at least partly a reflection of the fact that four-year faculty hold the key to the transfer curriculum. Moreover, efforts to bring two-year and four-year faculty together to align curriculum and discuss transfer is a great idea but largely impractical. And yet faculty should be at the center of this work, and we should develop ways of encouraging their participation and soliciting their subject matter expertise.

With this mind, why not divide the work up, in ways that support the unique mission of community colleges and four-year institutions? Is there a way of

creating a division of academic labor that allows each constituency to have a say in the transferability of courses most germane to their interests?

For example, could we put community college faculty in charge of reviewing and approving the transferability of general education classes? Given that such courses largely support the lower-division transfer mission, it makes sense to put two-year college faculty in charge of this curriculum. Four-year college faculty would remain arbiters of courses that prepare students for a specific major, given their expertise in specific disciplines. In this way, faculty in both segments would have dominion over a set of courses or curricula they could call their own.

2. Assure that statewide articulation proposals focus on student preparation.

Political intrusion into a process that is largely (or should be) academic is rarely recommended. But if public two- and four-year institutions cannot agree on a workable articulation plan, statutory solutions are often imposed. If so, statewide agreements, whether blanket curricula covering lower-division general education requirements (for example) or common course-numbering systems, must be designed to serve the academic needs of students primarily rather than as a means of settling interinstitutional disagreements. Thus, ongoing faculty review of courses must be built into these agreements. North Carolina has developed a “comprehensive articulation agreement” that allows North Carolina community college students who complete an A.A. degree to be admitted to the University of North Carolina system. Moreover, this agreement allows campus academic officers and faculty to review current courses or propose new ones to be included in the library of transferable courses.⁵ Other states with large transfer student enrollments, including California and Florida, have developed similar statewide agreements.⁶ These initiatives are relatively new and it remains to be seen how effective such efforts will be, but appear to be reasonable legislative solutions.⁷

3. Broaden our definition of articulation, seeing it not as an end in itself but as a tool for student success.

The difficulties that students are assumed to have in transferring course work between community colleges and four-year institutions may or may not be a major block to student advancement. What little research is available on this issue is inconsistent at best. While it appears true that community college transfer students end up completing more credits than students who begin at four-year institutions, this does not necessarily mean that community colleges and four-year institutions have articulated their coursework insufficiently or that course articulation is implicated at all. It may simply reflect the fact that transferring in the middle of one’s academic career is an inherently messy process for students.

In our discussions with community college counselors nationally—the constituency perhaps closest to students and their struggles to transfer—they note that a great problem is a lack of planning on the part of students and insufficient advising resources on community college campuses. These counselors emphasized that a great many community college students are first in their family to attend a higher education institution and, as a result, lack the expertise and social capital required to traverse a peculiar academic transition with which even the most experienced students struggle.

All this points to articulation agreements as being necessary but not sufficient to strengthen student transfer. All the time invested in arguing about this topic could be better spent if articulation efforts were conceptualized in a broader context—one that sees articulation as only one part of the transfer puzzle. The other pieces must include resources for planning and advisement, as described below.

4. Invest in Web-based technologies that leverage the advantages of the information revolution in ways that serve students.

The nature of the articulation business will always be complex. The higher education enterprise in America is too big and unwieldy to believe that interrelationships between and among institutions could ever be standardized (if, indeed, standardization is a goal). But the potential of the Internet to manage the bookkeeping aspect of articulation, while also providing significant assistance to students traversing the two-year and four-year institution gap, is significant and largely untapped.

A number of states have developed online articulation systems, including Arizona, California, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, and North Carolina.⁸ Each differs somewhat in design and emphasis, but from a student’s perspective, all are fundamentally the same: They provide students with definitive information about how courses at a community college transfer to a four-year institution. The success of these systems have made it abundantly clear that the Web must be the conveyance not only of articulation information, but of other kinds of information vital to the transfer process.

To do this, we must take the logical next step, which is to begin to build a suite of planning tools and advising resources on the Web that will supplement the counseling students receive on campus. While we should employ practices that have proved effective in advising high school students, our emphasis should be on the development of resources targeted to the unique needs of community college transfer students. For example, given that many students attending community colleges are first in their family to attend postsecondary education, they cannot rely on family and friends to advise them about transferring. Indeed, having very little context for higher education, they often “do know what they do not know.” Even if they are able to see a counselor (an under supported and, in some places, diminishing community college constituency), they will often be unaware of the

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correct questions to ask or the issues to address. Thus, we need to provide them with the “transfer-going” context—in effect, the knowledge and background that middle- and upper-class students take for granted. Moreover, given the ubiquity of the Web (and this generation’s intimate familiarity with the technology it has generated), we need to stream this information to them in ways that are immediate and relentless.

In the end, the only true test of our articulation efforts is the success of students after transfer to a four-year institution. While transfer rates are often used as an outcome, it is the extent to which students earn a degree that measures the academic success of students and the effectiveness of articulation. And how successful are community college students after transfer? That is the subject of a forthcoming working paper.

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NOTES

¹ Martinez, E.J. and Scroggins, B. (1998). “Re-envisioning Partnerships: Practitioners’ Views.” In M. M. Culp and S. R. Helfgot (Eds.), *Life at the Edge of the Wave*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, p. 136.

² United States Government Accounting Office (October 2005). *Transfer Students: Postsecondary Institutions Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation*. Washington, DC: GAO (www.gao.gov/new.items/d0622.pdf).

³ Schnieder, C. G. (2005). “Liberal Education: Slip-Sliding Away?” In R. H. Hersh and J. Merrow (Eds.), *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, pp. 71–72.

⁴ Schnieder (2005), p. 72.

⁵ Additional information about North Carolina’s comprehensive articulation agreement can be found at <http://www.ncccs.cc.nc.us/Articulation/ComprehensiveArticulationAgreement.htm>.

⁶ Ignash, J. M. and Townsend, B. K. (2000). “Evaluating State-Level Articulation Agreements According to Good Practice.” *Community College Review* (Winter). Retrieved March 18, 2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HCZ/is_3_28/ai_72685308/pg_5. Ignash and Townsend cite survey data indicating that 34 states have implemented statewide articulation agreements.

⁷ Information for the California agreement (called the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum) can be found at www.assist.org. Information regarding Florida’s statewide articulation practices can be found at <http://fldoe.org/articulation/pdf/statewide-postsecondary-articulation-manual.pdf>.

⁸ De la Torre, D. (2007). “Where There’s a Web, There’s a Way: Statewide Approaches to Promoting Community College Student Transfer.” *The Journal of College Admission* (#194, Winter 2007).