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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the issues that have led to the "balkanization" of higher education, in that community colleges, colleges, and universities often have very different standards, transfer policies, and degree requirements. Students who complete programs at community colleges and who wish to go on to a baccalaureate degree are often forced to retake many of the courses they took at the "lower level." It argues that if higher education is to effectively serve students, educators need to create an educational system that is seamless and which allows a natural progression from one level to the next. The paper advocates the need for more effective institutional cooperation, more universal articulation agreements, and an end to academic elitism that considers community colleges and their students to be inferior to four-year colleges and universities. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

THE SEAMLESS FLOW

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Abstract

For far too long, higher education has allowed itself to be balkanized. Students who complete programs at community colleges and who wish to go on to get a bacalleaureate degree are often penalized and must retake some, if not all, of the courses they took at the "lower levels." If we are to really serve students, as our customers, we must provide an educational system that is seamless and one which allows a natural progression from one level to another. This paper will examine some of the reasons why the current system exists and suggest some remedies.

The Seamless Flow - The Time Has Come

Higher education has allowed, for too long a time, a "balkanization" of curricula. Students are permitted, even encouraged, to enroll in programs that don't lead to further education. Education has been seen as discrete units rather than as rungs of a ladder. Rather than looking education (and training) as a process, we have encouraged, and been allowed, to develop "discrete" programs in isolation from others and without any notion of progressive attainment.

The average person will change careers five times in a lifetime. Yet, under our current system, most, if not all of the education or training that they achieved for one career will be found worthless or useless if they try to "ladder" it into another career. Yet we have encouraged the notion of a career as a "ladder." One starts at the bottom and climb the following rings of the ladder presumably to an apex or top rung. Of course not all people wish to climb the ladder, some simply wish to move sideways onto another ladder and that is also an issue that needs to be considered.

Why has higher education been so loathe to conceptualize itself as a seamless flow and allow for laddered curricula? Certainly the situation is not as problematic in the liberal arts as it is in the pre-professional and professional (career) areas. Community and junior colleges (albeit the junior colleges mostly) were conceived for the purpose of providing the first two years of a liberal arts curriculum. The associate degrees that were awarded were not usually seen as ends within themselves. The community college option is viable for many liberal arts students.

In some states, it has become institutionalized. California, for example, requires its students, with rare exceptions, to start at community colleges and then transfer on.

Many jurisdictions have articulation agreements in place. Articulation agreements to be "top down." The university or receiving institution specifies which courses they will give credit for and which they won't. This has meant, in most instances, that the university is really driving the content of the associate degree rather than the community college. The general education function of the associate degree, rather than be an entity within itself, has become subverted to an "articulation agreement." Institutional autonomy is limited and the community college is subservient to the university. Of course, therein lies the problem - which university? Not all universities within a given state will have the same requirements for graduation. Therefore, a community college may have to work with many. In doing so, they may lose their own identities. Even the transfer from one community college to another within a given jurisdiction may be fraught with difficulties. Institutional autonomy has led, in many cases, to academic chaos for students who need or wish to transfer even at the same level. Too many masters to serve may mean that no one is served particularly well.

The situation however muddy it is with liberal arts degrees becomes even more confusing and problematic with pre-professional and professional degrees. Students who enter the community college often have degree aspirations yet most will not be successful in completing degrees. The situation with transfer in professional and pre-professional degrees is fraught with even

more difficulty and institutional barriers than the liberal arts. Block transfer, where a total credential transfers as a block of credits (i.e. credit for the first two years of a degree program) has not yet been achieved in most fields. Students in career programs who transfer on to baccalaureate institutions often face a very chaotic situations where some of the courses transfer to one institution but not to another.

The time has come to create a seamless flow. Curriculum can no longer be seen as the province of the university. Collaborative efforts need to be encouraged. Students entering community colleges to take academic, career and/or vocational courses and programs want to believe that their efforts will not be wasted. Students enter community colleges rather than four year institutions for a variety of reasons including: geographic accessibility, cheaper, not having the grades to enter university directly, uncertainty about career goals, needing remedial education, being the first in their family to start college, not having a high school diploma, etc. While most will not complete a baccalaureate degree, many aspire to complete a degree. Acnieving a degree and acquiring job related skills are what motivate people to engage in higher education. Most will face some insurmountable institutional barriers in accomplishing their dreams if they begin their education careers at a community or junior college.

A "seamless flow" of certificate, associate degree, and degree, where all courses and levels "laddered" into one another, would be ideal. Government tends to promote this idea, employers want it, the public wants it; yet it has not happened. There are

institutional barriers that have prevented it from happening. And these are most notable in the "career" rather than the academic area. Hidden in these barriers are sometimes notions of what the purpose of a university degree is. Perhaps the fact that it is generally easier to transfer within the liberal arts masks a discussion of what the purpose of a university education is and what a curriculum is and should be. If the purpose of a university education is an exposure to the arts and sciences, without specific career preparation than it could be that transfer will be easier to achieve. However, that is not what the general public seems to want. Enrollment in purely liberal arts colleges is generally declining.

Examples of positive collaboration do exist. Some states have moved to bridge this gap; Florida and California being notable among them. In these states, almost all students start at the community college and transfer from them. These states have well-articulated transfer agreements and students tend to know, in advance, which courses will transfer and which won't. However, these states are rare and agreements tend to involve only publicly supported institutions.

When the collaborative system works, it works exceeding well. For example, a student could complete a four year degree in business management, liberal arts, criminal justice, without losing any credit for their lower level courses. The best examples of these kinds of programs tend to be found in institutions which offer both two and four year programs (such as university colleges). Although examples of positive systems exist, they are far from perfect or too numerous. Even within the

same institution, there can be barriers to transfer from two to four year programs. It is not uncommon to have two different departments (one for the two year program and one for the four year program) and to make students reapply to go on to a baccalaureate degree. This is not a seamless flow, even though it may be at the same institution.

Bender (1991) makes the point that while governments may need to step in to assure transferability; this is not the desired route. Bender suggests that the key to successful transfer arrangements is in a collegial, faculty-to-faculty role. Richardson (1993) suggests that faculty have an important role to play in laddering and transfer. Faculty from both the community college and baccalaureate institution should be more involved in the transfer process and setting up common courses and curricula. However, this does not allow for the notion of institutional autonomy and the perception of community college students as somehow inadequate although they do just as well, if not better, than "native" students.

Prager (1993) and others have long felt that one of the barriers to successful completion of degree programs for students who began their careers at the community colleges was the lack of articulation agreements between colleges and universities. Students at community colleges, especially in career or vocational programs, often meet with loss of credit when transferring to universities. University colleges are best set up to deal with this given that they offer two and four year programs. However, turf battles have meant that this, has not, in many cases been accomplished.

Students who complete a credential at a community college before transferring are more likely to complete the baccalaureate degree. Yet many chose to transfer without completing the college credential. If a "laddered" system was in place, where there was a form of "block transfer," worked out (as it is in California), more students would complete their studies at community colleges before transferring. This certainly is an incentive to government to push for laddered curricula since community college costs are far lower than university costs.

Accreditation institutions (in the form of licensure and registration agencies) tend to want laddered programs. Where this has occurred, and nursing is a good example, there is far more likely to be laddering than not. The National League for Nursing has already set guidelines and issued policy statements on laddering. (Ignash, 1992). Sometimes, however, an accrediting agency has the opposite effect. Social work is a good example. While there are many two year social or human service programs, a student who wishes to transfer their courses into a Bachelor of Social Work degree will often find it very difficult. The problem here may lie not with the receiving institution but with the accrediting regulations of the professional association.

Students who most often start their careers at the community college are people for whom time is important. They tend to be older, more mature, part-time and commuter students who know what they want to do. Time is important for them. They start programs not sure if they will be able to continue for a degree but the notion of being able to is very important.

Whether or not a student will have to repeat courses, lose credit, or be part of the seamless flow, depends on the state and the individual institution. Where students have a choice of transferring institutions, they are likely to pick the one that offers them the "best deal," i.e. the most credits.

Employers want to be able to send employees back to school to upgrade their qualifications. Since often they are paying for the tuition; they desire a system that rewards achievement. To make students trying to upgrade their qualifications to a baccalaureate degree re-take courses they have had simply because they don't transfer tends to offend employers.

A real barrier to laddering is academic elitism. Universities have traditionally looked down their noses at community colleges; claiming that the community college is "work oriented." University faculty tend to see their roles as research; they typically discount that research can occur at the community college. University faculty, with rare exceptions, see students as fundamentally different at the community college. Sometimes they even see community college instruction as the kind of "instruction given to masses of somewhat immature minds," (Goodnow, 1925 cited in Ignash, 1992). This view, sadly out of touch with the real world, continues to persist today. Somehow the nature of the community college student and instructor is perceived as being different enough that it does not warrant consideration by the university as being worthy.

Notions of institutional autonomy and transfer arrangements can serve to either bridge the gap to a seamless flow or to make it harder to accomplish. Universities are used to being in

control of their own destiny; to create articulation arrangements that suit them. Four year institutions dominate decisions about transfer and are unlikely to relinquish their control unless forced to do so by state mandate. (Ignash, 1992,).

Even in those states where the system is conceptualized as seamless, there are still barriers to laddering. Pennsylvania is a good example where the state system maintains two year branch campuses in some communities. However, this has not always mean that laddering will occur painlessly. The same problems tend to arise; programs are offered in a two year format at some campuses but not others; students have to sometimes reapply to go on for a four year degree, etc. Nor is a branch campus a guarantee that the program itself will be considered "ladderable." Some programs simply are considered too vocational to be worthy of a degree. This may be an issue for example in some of the trades areas, it has been allowed to become an issue in the technology area which increasingly is requiring a baccalaureate degree.

Another barrier to laddering is the lack of common numbering of courses and common courses for levels. (Ratcliff and Jones, 1991). One of the barriers to effective laddering is the fact that students will have to transfer between institutions that have different "core general education" requirements. And, this, in turn, is a result of institutional autonomy. Community colleges create their own programs with their own requirements to be a cohesive whole, the universities do not necessarily recognize them. Ignash (1992) points out that this unequal balance of power has had negative consequences for community colleges. Chief among them has been the community college's inability to set their own

curriculum since it has to offer courses that are acceptable for transfer by a particular university department.Then too, there is not one set of requirements for all institutions within the country. Each state tends to set its own, and there may be great variability within institutions within the same state.

Community colleges have tended to have been criticized for the low number of their students who transfer and succeed in getting a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 1992). Critics have tended to focus more on what the community college hasn't done to prepare its students for third and fourth year work then on what the baccalaureate institution hasn't done to make transfer easy. Most students want to transfer; the barriers they face in having their credits "count," makes it difficult for them to achieve their goal. It is far too easy for the university to point fingers at the community college's "supposed lack of preparation," than it is for the university to admit its elitism.

Cohen (1989) points out that one of the widely held misconceptions about the reason that community college students do not go on to transfer is that the colleges emphasize certain occupational programs which do not carry transfer credit. This would be true for some of the vocational programs. However, in the career areas, there are many examples of programs that have exit points at both the two and four year levels (such as human services, business, nursing, etc) where in some instances the programs are laddered and sometimes considered terminal.

Cohen (1992), as well as others, points to a need to have statewide agreements where a student who completes a two year credential is automatically guaranteed admission to the university

with no loss of credit. If governments were to set aside funds to make this happen, we would see more of this happening. In states where this has been the case, California, New Jersey, Florida, and Illinois are examples, transfer rates have increased.

Ignash (1993) points out that there is tremendous variability by state of what kind of courses transfer and what kind don't. My own experience has taught me that sometimes repackaging a course, renaming, or renumbering it, has a distinct impact on its transferability. She points out that courses that are considered transferable by the less research oriented baccalaureate institutions are often not considered as transferable by the more prestigious research institutions. What the course is called can have a great impact on its acceptability as being a legitimate transfer course. So, for that matter, can which department auspices it is offered on. An example of this is that courses offered under a psychology rubric very often get transfer where the same course, offered under a human service rubric is denied transfer. The curriculum could be the same.

Gelin, (1993), points out that (at least in British Columbia), the number of students who complete a two year program of studies in the academic area before transferring is not very high. Part of the reason is that students who complete the credential do not receive preferential treatment from the university in transferring. In fact, they often run into the opposite; some of the courses they took at the community college may not transfer to the university at all. This is a fairly common situation; it is not unique to British Columbia.

Other than financial pressures, there seems to be little internal pressure on the baccalaureate institution to allow for laddering and block transfer. Faculty often do not seem themselves as part of a total institutionalization; they see their loyalties to the discipline. And this may mitigate against block transfer where faculty at the community college are not seen as having the necessary disciplinary expertise.

A Call to Action

What is needed is an "articulated" system. This means, to some degree, the loss of a value - institutional autonomy. However, today, where government funding priorities have meant the loss of autonomy, and where tuition and lost time from work have major impact on student's lives, this may not be too big a price to pay.

We need to stop seeing our educational world in terms of dichotomies - community college or universities, associate or baccalaureate degrees. Rather, we need to be able to envision education as a "seamless flow." Certainly this is starting; many school districts have articulated agreements with college districts where capable students may take college courses while still in high school. The concept needs to be expanded. What we are talking about is the democratization of education. We need to see the education enterprise not in terms of levels of a hierarchy but as one of continual progress.

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