

TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS SERIES

Recognizing Variation: A Typology of Transfer Partnerships



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In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward partnerships between community colleges and four-year universities that focus on improving transfer outcomes. A number of studies have identified important components of these collaborative efforts, yet a clear definition of transfer partnerships remains elusive. This Data Note draws upon qualitative findings from the High-Performing Transfer Partnerships (HPTP) study to describe the variety of transfer partnerships that exist, and examines them through the lens of an organizational model of collaboration.

This Data Note examines data gathered from the HPTP study, which focuses on institutional partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions that promote more equitable transfer outcomes for underserved student populations. The data set for this brief consists of interviews with 201 faculty, staff, and students at seven institutional pairs across three states. (For more information about the study, see Yeh, 2018, January).

WHAT IS A TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP?

A subset of research on transfer between community colleges and four-year universities examines collaboration between these institutions and the kinds of practices that could bolster student transfer as well as completion rates (Dolinsky, Rhodes, & McCambly, 2016; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel, 2011; Kisker, 2007; Miller, 2013; Wilson & Lowry, 2016; Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016; Zamani, 2001). These studies most often describe best case scenarios of collaboration, and thus have provided valuable insights into the types of collaborative practices and policies that can promote successful transfer and completion. But an important underlying question to consider in this work is: are all collaborations considered partnerships? And if not, when does a relationship become a partnership?

The implied assumption in much of the transfer research

is that two institutions are partners if they share students – in other words, a minimum number of students consistently transfer between them. Currently, the only explicit definition of transfer partnership that has emerged from the literature describes it as a “collaboration between one or more community colleges and a bachelor degree-granting institution for the purpose of increasing transfer and baccalaureate attainment for all or for a particular subset of students” (Kisker, 2007, p. 284).

In practice, administrators and practitioners know that collaborations can be enacted through a wide variety of structures and designs, some of which turn out to be more successful than others. In this Data Note we take a deeper look at the meaning of “collaboration” and describe the range of ways that transfer collaboration between community colleges and baccalaureate degree-granting institutions can be implemented. In addition, we draw upon practitioners’ experiences to explore the concept and definition of a “transfer partnership”. We then introduce a framework that describes varying degrees of collaboration, that can potentially be used to build and evaluate collaborative efforts to support transfer.

HOW DO PRACTITIONERS TALK ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS?

One goal of the HPTP study was to learn more about how practitioners defined their transfer collaborations, and in doing

so, paint a clearer picture of what transfer partnerships can look like. In the first phase of our HPTP study, we analyzed institutional pairs that had higher rates of student transfer and completion between them (Meza, Bragg & Blume, 2018, February). While it was important to see the variability in results on transfer rates, this research did not reveal how institutional pairs worked together and whether they had formal partnerships with each other. Through site visits, we qualitatively explored questions about how transfer collaboration works in practice. What we found is that people who worked in the institutional pairs we studied held high standards for what could be called a true “partnership”, and described their institutional relationships along a qualitative continuum. For example, many staff, faculty, and administrators discussed the difference between “just having an articulation agreement” versus working collaboratively toward shared transfer goals. A senior-level administrator at a four-year institution reflected:

In my previous experience, when I was thinking about what our partnerships were, they probably really weren't partnerships. It was happenstance, there was no intention behind it. This has become very intentional, from which programs we offer to locations, to timing . . . I think intent may be actually the difference between what makes it a partnership or just two schools kind of working together.

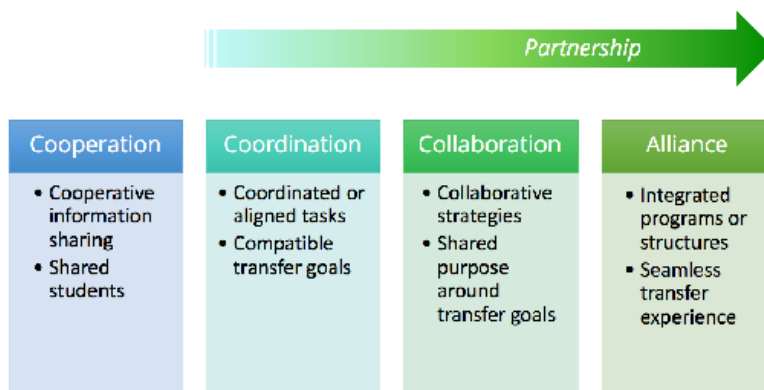
A TYPOLOGY OF TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

In order to better understand the variation in collaborative practices that we were seeing in our site visits, we drew upon a model of organizational alliance-building. We find Bailey and Koney's (2000) work on multi-organizational strategic alliances to be a useful framework for understanding the multitude of ways that transfer partnerships can be

structured. They describe a continuum of interactions which moves from cooperation at the most basic level, to coordination, collaboration, and ends with coadunation at the highest level of organizational integration. Based on our study findings, we adapted this model and applied it to our examination of transfer collaboration between institutional pairs. The first three levels in our continuum correspond to Bailey and Koney's first three levels of strategic alliances. However, we describe the highest level of partnership as an alliance rather than coadunation, because coadunation did not emerge as a phenomenon in our findings. The levels in our adapted framework are described below.

- Cooperation:** Institutions share information with each other to facilitate student transfer between them.
- Coordination:** Institutions align some of their activities or sponsor particular events in order to support student transfer from one institution to the next.
- Collaboration:** Institutions collaborate to develop common strategies, policies, and/or systems to actively promote student transfer from one institution to the next.
- Alliance:** Institutions integrate some of their procedures to new programs or structures that create a seamless transfer experience from one institution to the next.

Overall, study participants drew a distinction between working together versus engaging in a partnership. Simply exchanging students or having articulation agreements did not constitute a true partnership, in their view. Instead, partnerships required intentional investment, strategic planning, equal commitment, a balance of power, and shared goals. Therefore, the diagram below suggests that the first level on the continuum is not actually a partnership.



In the following table, we share some examples from our findings that illustrate collaborative processes at each level along the continuum. Based on our previous analysis of transfer partnership literature (see Yeh, 2018, January), we divide these processes into three areas: institutional culture, policies, and practices.

Examples of Collaborative Transfer Practices

	Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration	Alliance
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions share information with each other when needed. • Geographic proximity or habit is main motivation for students to transfer to the ‘partner’ institution. • An inequity or lack of respect is often felt in the relationship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolated pockets of staff or faculty communicate with each other on certain tasks. • Student transfer between some programs may be smooth, but others may be very difficult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presidents meet together occasionally to discuss common transfer goals • Staff at both institutions are invested in working with the other, although not consistently across campus. • Students may be able to access some services and resources at the partner institution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear messaging from president about importance of the partnership. • Transfer to the partner institution feels seamless to students, regardless of program or major. • Both partners feel it is a win-win relationship
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course articulation information is posted on a website for others to see. • Basic information sharing is available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions work together primarily to coordinate formal state-level articulation agreements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional program-specific articulation agreements have been created with the partner institution, beyond state-mandated requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal, cobranded 2+2 programs (or similar) have been created with the partner institution.
Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual staff may or may not communicate with their counterpart. • Advisors direct students to look online for information about the partner institution. • Institutions send students back and forth to each other using passive recruitment strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some staff & faculty occasionally communicate with their counterparts at the partner institution to refer students or ask a question. • Advisors occasionally communicate with each other if there is a problem. • There is some deliberate effort to send and recruit students to/from the particular partner institution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple staff & faculty work closely with their counterparts at the partner institution and communicate regularly to support students’ transfer process. • Advisors visit partner institution on a regular basis for pre-advising. • Institutions may have university centers, co-located courses, or co-located degrees. • Some deans and/or faculty work closely with their counterparts on improving program pathways and curricular alignment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institution may have a position or person who focuses specifically on partnerships. • Institution may have shared staff or use a co-advisor model. • Advising staff from both institutions may meet with each other periodically to share updates. • May offer formal co-branded transfer program where students can access resources (services, housing, etc.) at both institutions.

The purpose of this framework is to provide a more nuanced perspective on transfer partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions than we have found thus far in the published literature on transfer. As illustrated by this table, there are numerous areas in which institutions can work with each other, and they can fall in multiple places on the continuum. For example, an institutional pair may fall into the *coordination* level with respect to their policies, but their leadership may be operating at the *alliance* level. Future CCRI research will explore these different areas in greater depth, in order to present more specific examples of institutional collaborative efforts at each level of the framework.

We believe that institutional leaders and practitioners could find this framework useful for examining multiple facets of the collaborative relationships that they may be engaged in, and to inform future efforts to strengthen their partnerships. Through CCRI's future work on pathways implementation and other grants, we will be drawing on this important new knowledge to help to advance transfer partnerships nationwide.

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Review the Transfer Partnerships Data Note series [here](#) or: <http://www.uw.edu/ccri/research/transfer/>

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