

TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS SERIES



Transfer Partnerships: Lessons to Improve Student Success During and After COVID-19

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Transferring from a community college to a university is a time of uncertainty for students. Leaving a familiar environment to attend another school where everything and everyone is new creates stress. Navigating a college journey that requires cutting ties during COVID-19 is especially daunting, yet this is exactly what we expect transfer students to do. We empathize with these students, and we write this brief to share research on transfer partnerships that focuses on improving transfer student outcomes.

In December 2020, our *New Directions for Community Colleges (NDCC)* issue on “Transfer Partnerships for More Equitable Student Outcomes” (Volume 192) will be released, but we believe current times call for sharing results now (the table of contents appears at the end of this brief so readers can see the full spectrum of themes covered in the volume). We studied baccalaureate completion for students who transfer from community colleges to universities in three states (Colorado, Minnesota, and Ohio), and we also examined policies and practices in Washington, a state demonstrating some of the highest transfer student bachelor’s degree completion in the U.S. An important part of our research is to understand gaps in baccalaureate attainment for racially minoritized and lower-income students relative to White and higher-income students. Disseminating policies and practices that help students succeed in navigating transfer pathways during COVID-19 is important now. In advancing these ideas, we also seek to help improve policies and practices to increase baccalaureate attainment for racially minoritized and low-income transfer students beyond this moment and into the future.

During the COVID-19 crisis, as higher education institutions are working even harder to keep students in college, we urge

them to pay close attention to transfer students. Vulnerable populations may face a lack of access to health care and dire economic circumstances that leave them no choice but to pick work over school. To succeed in college right now, students need resources and support that institutions have limited experience providing, straining their own capacity to respond and survive. During these tumultuous times, it is critical for colleges and universities to stay in touch with how transfer students are doing and what they need to succeed. Any college student could become a transfer student due to the unpredictability of our times. Thus it becomes crucially important for the higher education community to understand students’ rapidly evolving needs and ensure equitable student outcomes are a top priority.

The remainder of this brief presents lessons learned from our research on transfer partnerships and equitable student outcomes that is featured in the forthcoming NDCC volume. We describe observations and insights from our team, and we also invite partners in our research to share their thoughts and actions. We hope the brief provides food for thought on the necessity for higher education to create more equitable transfer partnerships and pathways during and after COVID-19.

RACIAL INEQUITIES IN THE TRANSFER PROCESS

The bachelor's degree completion rate for students who transfer from a community college to a university differs substantially for students of different racial, ethnic, and income groups. Nationally, while almost one in four Asian students and one in five White students complete a bachelor's degree in six years, just one in 10 Hispanic students and about one in 12 African-American students do so (Shapiro et al. 2017, p. 2). Our study of students who transfer between pairs of community colleges and universities within states show significant variation in baccalaureate completion outcomes for students of color. Of the 308 institutional pairs we examined, none showed African-American or Latinx students completing baccalaureate degrees at the same rate as White students (Meza & Blume, Chapter 3). Closing this gap is of paramount importance to making higher education more equitable and successful for students of color. Our research suggests transfer partnerships between community colleges and universities can help address this void.

In addition to examining state-level data, we visited intentionally-partnered community colleges and universities to better understand how they had shaped their transfer policies and practices to enable transfer students to transition and complete their baccalaureate degrees. What we found were strong working relationships that prioritized transfer supports and pathways from start to finish, providing students with the assurance that they are on the right track and the confidence to fulfill their dream of securing a baccalaureate degree.

DATA DISAGGREGATION AND SHARING

Our research on transfer partnerships reinforces the importance of community colleges and universities gathering and sharing disaggregated data with each other. Previous research on transfer has not consistently gathered data on race and ethnicity, leaving gaps in our understanding of how transfer is working for students of color. Our study of how transfer partnerships address systemic gaps in the transfer process for different student groups shows that examining transfer by race and ethnicity is critical to closing equity gaps. In the context of transfer, we find the concept of "racial transfer gaps" first introduced by Martinez-Wenzl and Marquez (2012) and subsequently cited by Crisp and Nunez (2014) to be especially meaningful. Research that does

not include race and ethnicity variables, and therefore takes a color-blind orientation, may produce recommendations that do not enhance or may even diminish the success of students of color. Transfer partnerships that engage in consistent and comprehensive data sharing are able to track student progression and use this information to identify gaps that lead to inequitable student outcomes (Crisp, Potter, Robertson & Carales, Chapter 5). Without the sharing of disaggregated data, institutions may not know who their transfer students are and how they are doing. During COVID-19, this information is especially paramount to the success of transfer students. As we learn more about how economic, social and cultural inequities are exacerbated by COVID-19, we can't help but observe that these inequities are evident for underserved transfer students who seek a baccalaureate. The need to address deeper structural inequities is clear and urgent on all levels moving forward.

TRADITIONAL AND SWIRLING TRANSFER PATTERNS

Using disaggregated data enables institutions to understand how diverse groups of students attend college, including multiple institutions. Without these data, institutions may misinterpret student enrollment patterns, for example missing that students are reverse transferring (from university to community college), lateral transferring (from community college to community college, or university to university), or attending multiple institutions at the same time. Sometimes called "transfer swirl" in the literature, Soler (Chapter 4) shows that these swirling attendance patterns are disproportionately evident among students of color. She encourages institutions to identify their "swirlers" to better understand their patterns of enrollment. Soler suggests institutions that recognize these enrollment patterns may be better positioned to reduce inequities in transfer. This is because they understand who is swirling, including recognizing racially minoritized and low-income students tend to engage in swirling to a greater extent than other student groups, and work strategically to meet their needs. Crisp, Potter, Robertson, and Carales (Chapter 5) also observe that students transfer in many ways, leading them to recommend advising that helps transfer students formulate comprehensive plans to complete their associate's and bachelor's degrees.

During this time of COVID-19 we predict even more students will "swirl" between institutions than we've seen in the past.

With more swirlers, institutions need to pay attention to challenges these students may face in securing financial aid, getting the credits they've earned, understanding the differences in policies and requirements at various institutions, and navigating other barriers to college retention and degree completion. In this time when institutions are themselves uncertain of the best way to operate, it is critical that transfer students know what they need to do to stay enrolled and cross the finish line.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Transformative leadership is needed to form and sustain transfer partnerships that enable students to succeed. By transformative leadership, we mean leadership that centers equity in the educational process wherein leaders persistently seek to close gaps in student outcomes by committing themselves and supporting others in removing structural inequities and making systemic change (Bragg, Chapter 1). Transformative leaders do what is needed and not what is easy to help their institutions, especially during challenging times. Now during COVID-19, this commitment to lead and serve is essential. Centering actions on the principles of truth, transparency, social justice, and democracy positions transformative leaders to help their students succeed.

Spotlighting transformative leadership in one of the transfer partnerships we studied, involving Sinclair Community College (SCC) and University of Dayton (UD) (Collins, Welch, & Thompson, Chapter 7), leaders sought to meet the particular needs of transfer students throughout their entire college journey. By envisioning every aspect of the college experience for transfer students starting at SCC and culminating with their bachelor's degree at UD, leaders were able to integrate campus life, wrap-around services, and financial services into the entire transfer process. Paying close attention to the needs of low-income students and students of color was a deliberate decision of faculty and staff who sought to build transfer pathways to bachelor's degrees. This strategically collaborative approach to transfer serves as an important model now during COVID-19, as well as post-coronavirus.

CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Our research highlighted the dynamic nature of transfer

partnerships, as administrators, staff, and faculty described the many factors that impact the ebb and flow of institutional relationships. During this tumultuous time, transfer partnerships can serve as a much-needed safety net for transfer students. The most committed, long-term transfer partners demonstrate a culture of collaboration where partners make decisions that are student-centered, see their work together as a win-win, and share an equal commitment to the partnership and to transfer student success. Partnerships that have built a culture of collaboration often develop a web of connections between staff and faculty across institutions (Yeh & Wetzstein, 2019). This web of connections is particularly beneficial to transfer students, and is evident in the long-term partnership between Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC) and the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs (UCCS). Their Best Choices program provides straightforward curricular pathways that enable students to clearly and efficiently map their transfer plan from inception to completion of their college experience. The Best Choices program epitomizes a culture of collaboration between campus leaders, faculty and staff that is necessary to support transfer student success. Deliberative actions to build trusting inter-institutional relationships and remove barriers to degree completion are central to the Best Choice program, and will be crucial for all transfer students during these uncertain times (DuVal & Artis, Chapter 8).

SHARED PERSONNEL AND RESOURCES

Our research suggests that strategic transfer partnerships share resources, including people, who can help students achieve baccalaureate completion outcomes. We saw this interaction happening in Minnesota, between Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) and Winona State University (WSU), who share a long history of working together. A key feature of their model includes the operation of co-located campuses, such that WSU-Rochester is located on the RCTC campus in Rochester, MN (Carlsen & Gangeness, Chapter 9). To facilitate a seamless transfer process, the two institutions created the co-branded Path to Purple 2+2 program, demonstrating their shared commitment to transfer student success. Building on this foundation, the institutions also created a shared advisor position, who is employed half-time by each institution. A critical role of this shared advisor is to support students by providing consistent pre- and post-transfer advising and on-going support, enabling uninterrupted movement from one college to the

next and on to graduation. Though a longer-term proposition for institutions who have not begun to share personnel and other resources, our research suggests co-location and resource sharing arrangements can be instrumental to promoting transfer student success. Institutions operating in tandem that know their transfer students on a personal level are bound to be well-positioned to address expected and unexpected urgencies associated with COVID-19, and they are also better positioned to meet the needs of diverse populations of transfer students in the future.

TRIO INTEGRATION

Across the country, many community colleges and universities host TRIO programs, whose primary function is to support the success of low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. In many of the transfer partnerships we visited, we found TRIO programs to be fully integrated with the transfer process in ways that dramatically improved transfer student success. In particular, we found the TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) program at South Seattle College had an extensive and well-established partnership with the SSS program at the University of Washington at Seattle (Sabay & Wiles, Chapter 10). TRIO programs at both institutions work together to provide students with counseling, supplemental instruction, and experiential learning opportunities to promote success toward associate as well as bachelor degree completion. By utilizing established networks, these TRIO programs also maximize their connections to state, regional and national associations that can facilitate a smooth hand-off for transfer students as they move between institutions. In a time when COVID-19 is impacting all aspects of students' lives, established programs like TRIO that are built upon deep relationships, frequent communications and consistent actions are a particularly important resource for meeting the needs of students who are in greatest need. The cross-institutional infrastructure and networks of these programs may also be particularly conducive to rapid responses that can positively impact transfer student persistence and completion.

SYSTEMS LEVEL COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

Although the focus of transfer policy is often on institutional agreements concerning the transfer of credit, states also play a critical role in transfer student success. Now,

systems-level work is more important than ever, as transfer students seek geographically-accessible and economically-feasible pathways to a bachelor's degree. As states face an increasingly complicated future due to COVID-19 as well as the anticipated budget shortfalls associated with the pandemic, it becomes ever so important to consider coordinated responses to meet evolving student needs. Washington state has one of the highest rates of transfer student baccalaureate completion in the nation, and our research highlights policies and practices operating in this state. Despite the success of state-level transfer pathways using the Direct Transfer Agreement (DTA), we are still seeing inequitable outcomes. Disaggregated data show that racially-minoritized and low-income students have lower transfer and baccalaureate completion rates than White students and higher-income students, prompting the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to seek ways to improve the transfer process. Research supported by the SBCTC led to the creation of a vision statement on educational equity and an evidence-based framework featuring equity-mindedness and adaptive leadership. The goal of preparing and supporting "equity-minded champions" is a key component to improving transfer student outcomes. To do this work, SBCTC works with policymakers and practitioners to bring about systems-level change with respect to major-specific degree requirements and direct admission into university-level major degree programs (Wellington-Baker & Hammer, Chapter 6).

MULTIPLE APPROACHES TO TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

For institutional leaders who are unfamiliar with transfer partnerships, some of the first questions they might ask are, "What do transfer partnerships look like? How do they function? How do I get started, especially now in a time when resources are stretched thin?" The good news is that our research across three states and twelve institutions suggests there are multiple ways to implement effective transfer partnerships, with differing levels of commitment that map along a continuum from enhanced communications to deep and long-term collaborations. In describing this continuum, our research points to an interesting finding about designating relationships between two institutions (or institutional pairs) that work with each other. Even though two institutions may have articulation agreements and share (or exchange) students, it does not necessarily

indicate that a transfer partnership exists. Our interviews with community college and university practitioners revealed a common belief that true transfer partnerships require an investment in common goals that support a commitment to “our students” rather than “my students”, and help to balance power between the two institutions (Yeh & Wetzstein, Chapter 2). We concluded that multiple types of collaborative relationships and inter-institutional practices can lead to effective transfer partnerships, and that the most successful and long-standing partnerships are those that strategically adapt to students’ current contexts. During and after the COVID-19 crisis, the colleges and universities that can collaboratively assess and prioritize transfer student needs are the ones that will be best equipped to pursue equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In the days ahead, higher education faces challenges unimaginable before the pandemic. The thorniest of problems cannot be solved working in isolation. Transfer partnerships are critical to supporting transfer students in the successful transition from one institution to another. Partnerships that can create a seamless transfer experience for students offer lessons in how to close equity gaps and improve student outcomes (Amey, Chapter 11). As we consider the best ways to support these transfer students now and into the future, we recommend that institutions create strategic relationships, engage in open and on-Washington.

going communications, and commit to adaptive cultures of collaboration that prioritize success for racially minoritized, first-generation, low-income and other student groups who have traditionally not been well-served by higher education. Transfer partnerships that are responsive to these students’ needs, offering effective yet flexible opportunities and options, will be most helpful. When these students succeed, all college students succeed.

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Transfer Partnerships for More Equitable Outcomes

New Directions for Community Colleges (NDCC) - Volume 192

Debra Bragg, Theresa (Ling) Yeh, Lia Wetzstein & Elizabeth Apple Meza (Eds.)

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Theresa (Ling) Yeh, Lia Wetzstein

This chapter uses qualitative data from a national study on higher performing transfer partnerships to present multiple forms of collaborative relationships between associate-sending and baccalaureate-receiving institutions that contribute to more equitable baccalaureate attainment.

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This chapter discusses what all other chapters in this volume tell us about how higher performing partnerships work to create more equitable transfer policy, practices and outcomes for underserved students.

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

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