



RESEARCH BRIEFS

Understanding Transfer Supports and Initiatives in Developmental Education at Two-Year Institutions

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Summary

Developmental, or remedial, education has been found to present multiple barriers to two-year student success. These courses often prolong students' time toward transfer to four-year institutions by stalling students' progress toward achieving their academic and vocational goals. Using data from interviews with eight transfer professionals across the U.S. and its territories, this study investigated relationships between transfer support services and developmental education courses at two-year schools. More specifically, it sought to understand how transfer planning and advising are embedded within classroom content and how course activities support students' transfer. Findings reveal that transfer is often unconsidered in developmental course planning and that several factors, including resource and staff limitations and academic freedom, impact how, and the extent to which, transfer is included in developmental courses.

Background

Each year, millions of students enroll in open-access two-year colleges with the hope of earning skills, training, and most importantly, a degree that will allow them to pursue their goals, including transferring to a four-year institution. Frequently though, many students are deemed by their educational institutions to be academically unprepared for credit-bearing coursework in math and English and are subsequently required to enroll in developmental education, or remedial, courses (Boylan & Bonham, 2007). In particular, the educational attainment of systematically minoritized students may be most at stake, as Black, Latinx, and low-income students are often disproportionately placed into developmental courses (CAPR, 2022). Developmental education can present multiple challenges to student pathways and progress, as few students persist through this sequence of coursework and into entry-level, or gatekeeper, courses often due to the increased time that developmental courses add to their degree plans (Bailey et al., 2010). Subsequently, prolonged academic pathways can have implications for students' transfer to four-year



institutions. While many students beginning higher education at a two-year college intend to transfer and complete bachelor's degrees, few students complete this goal (Shapiro et al., 2018). Nationally representative longitudinal data underscore that this is especially apparent among students enrolled in developmental coursework: Findings from a cohort of students beginning higher education in 2012 revealed that nine percent of community college entrants who enrolled in any remedial courses completed a bachelor's degree, while 16% of their peers who did not enroll in any developmental courses achieved the same goal (CAPR, 2022).

Research Questions

While existing research and data indicate that placement into developmental education can negatively impact transfer to four-year institutions (Crisp & Delgado, 2014), more research is needed to understand how classroom instruction and transfer support are related and work together to promote progress toward transfer. As such, in this study, I used the following question to guide my inquiry:

1. How are transfer-related supports and services embedded into developmental courses at two-year schools?

Methods

To answer the research question, I drew upon existing research from the National Study of Transfer Student Initiatives (NSTSI), developed by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The NSTSI is a multi-methods project that examined the availability and structure of transfer student services, programs, and initiatives at community colleges and four-year institutions across the U.S. and its associated territories. As a part of the larger project, members of the research team conducted individual interviews with 30 survey participants (which included 22 individuals from four-year institutions and eight from two-year institutions) from January to July 2022 to further understand transfer services on their specific campuses. In this particular brief, I focus on data and findings from the interviews with the eight professionals at from two-year institutions across the U.S. and its territories. In these conversations, we discussed transfer support services and the structure of developmental coursework at the participants' institutions. The roles of the interviewees included: academic deans, program directors (e.g., of transfer and first-year experience offices) and coordinators, provosts and associate provosts/vice presidents of academic affairs, registrars, and vice presidents of student engagement. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, were semi-structured, and conducted over Zoom. The research team used Dedoose software to code the interview transcripts and identify themes among the data.

Findings

Based on the interviews, many institutions in our sample did not embedding transfer supports into developmental education courses. Academic freedom and state and institutional policies were described as challenges to incorporating transfer planning and discussions into these courses and related activities. I explored these themes and topics in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

Lack of Integration of Transfer Supports in Developmental Courses

Several participants indicated that they were not currently and had not considered embedding transfer supports into developmental education. As an academic dean from a technical college in Washington shared: "No, [transfer supports are] not included. That is a really cool idea." A provost at a community college in a U.S. territory agreed: "I'd say in the developmental courses, there's not a lot of discussion of transfer." They added that transfer conversations instead tend to happen in the student success skills seminar required for degree-seeking students. Additionally, resource constraints, including limited staffing and budgets, impacted faculty and administrators' time and ability to determine how to embed transfer exploration into courses. Faculty noted that they devoted their time to prioritized planning for academic content, as the academic dean in Washington shared, "Right now, all of our conversations between me and the one-man faculty have been about where to put what algebra in the math prerequisites."

Some participants also noted that transfer supports and services are available to all students, regardless of the courses and academic programs they are enrolled in; while these initiatives are open to all, they are not explicitly tailored to or designed for helping students enrolled in developmental education navigate and make progress toward transfer. A director of transfer services at a Maryland community college noted, "I don't know if it's specific to developmental courses, but pre-pandemic, we did have transfer workshops that were available for students...No matter if you're taking developmental courses or not, those particular students would be able to gain more information about transfer, in general."

Developmental Education as a Pathway Toward Transfer

While transfer-related supports or discussions were not available or considered in remedial courses at most of the institutions in our study, some interviewees expressed that the mere offering and design of developmental education was a means of supporting and facilitating transfer. According to a vice president of instruction at a community college in Texas, students in remedial courses are "put on a pathway" and "reminded throughout the process, depending on where

they're going, 'This is your path. This is what you're on and you're moving in that direction. If [transfer] is what you pick, that's a possibility.'" Institutional reforms to developmental coursework, including co-requisite courses (in which students take college-level math or English along with an academic support course), helped to promote this college's goal of "get[ting] them out of remedial as fast as possible and most efficiently as possible that they might be successful. That is the objective of what's in the remedial." As such, the focus of developmental coursework then is "more focused on getting them college ready so that they can be successful in the path and not necessarily focusing on transfer," according to our interviewee.

Academic Freedom Influencing Integration of Transfer Support in Courses

Participants also spoke about the flexibility and autonomy that instructors have over what relevant topics are covered in their developmental courses. Ultimately, academic freedom enables instructors to determine whether they include discussions about and transfer support services in their courses. A provost at a community college in Tennessee indicated that instructors in developmental courses are encouraged to invite advisors to their class meetings to speak to their students, but they also shared "I don't think there's anything specific in there that other than bringing in our professional advisor, that there's any other connections made there, unless it's just by instructor." An academic coordinator at a Texas community college expressed similar thoughts, noting that they send emails to faculty to encourage them to incorporate transfer planning and introduction to transfer support services in their courses. Ultimately, however, instructors have the discretion to implement these conversations in their classroom, and the coordinator expressed that they did not "think that [faculty] actually have conversations about transfer." Some instructors do discuss transfer with students in remedial courses, but such interactions are often introduced by faculty who also serve as advisors, according to an academic dean at a community college in North Carolina. As such, any discussion about transfer in developmental education courses is likely "being brought together for individual instructors and their conversations with the students."

Conclusion

In sum, results from this study indicate that transfer support services, transfer planning, and developmental education are often not integrated at two-year institutions. While participants described connections between developmental education and transfer, particularly considering remedial coursework as a means for promoting student progress, institutional supports for planning and coordinating successful transfer

often operate separately from developmental classroom spaces. Several factors impact this lack of connection, including insufficient staff, resource constraints, and faculty autonomy over content and delivery. Ultimately, strengthening the incorporation of transfer into developmental course content and activities may be one way to provide students with information about transfer (Schudde et al., 2021) while also strengthening student engagement, including student and faculty interactions and effort, which have been found to be positively related to students' plans to transfer (Hartman et al., 2021; Wood & Palmer, 2016).

Based on these findings, some specific recommendations for practice include:

- Providing instructors with training and information about academic advising and transfer: If instructors are provided with information about these services, they can relay this to students and encourage them to use college support services. In addition, if developmental education courses can be taught by instructors who also teach college-level courses, this may help faculty to better track students' progress (including toward transfer) and sustain their relationships with students.
- Using reforms to developmental education, such as the implementation of co-requisite models, as an opportunity to start discussions with colleagues about embedding transfer planning and support courses: Staff and faculty should also consider the impacts these reforms will have on planning for and student progress toward transfer. Organizing formal working groups could be a way to help strengthen cross-functional planning and coordination across the college to help support students' transfer goals.
- Centering equity within transfer planning: While data from this study did not reveal these participants connections or reflections on this point, it is important to reiterate that systematically minoritized students have been found to be disproportionately placed into developmental courses. As such, equity should be centered within transfer planning in these courses. Instructors may consider what they know about their students, including demographics, their engagement across campus, the challenges they face, and strengths they possess. Further, faculty and administrators should reflect upon how their pedagogy and interactions with students address inequalities and challenges that students face and how this engagement builds upon students' intersecting identities.

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