

THE TRANSFER FUNCTION IN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES:

EVOLVING TO MEET CONSTITUENT NEEDS

Desna L. Wallin, Associate Professor, University of Georgia

Leadership Facilitator, American Association of Community Colleges

Contemporary community colleges are recognized as egalitarian institutions that welcome all students who desire to learn. Open access and affordability are hallmarks. However, such accessibility did not characterize the initial stages of these institutions. The earliest colleges, beginning with the establishment of Joliet Junior College in 1901, were associated with universities and offered lower-division work. In fact, university leaders in the late 19th and early 20th century “wanted the universities to abandon their freshman and sophomore classes and relegate the function of teaching adolescents to a new set of institutions, to be called junior colleges.” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 6) These educators believed that the universities needed to divest themselves of preparatory work and concentrate solely on research and scholarship.

As the demand for higher education increased with the “baby boom generation” as well as returning veterans, junior colleges gradually evolved into comprehensive community colleges. The associate in arts and associate in science degrees, typically associated with the transfer function were supplemented with the associate in applied science degree, intended to be a non-transferable terminal vocational degree which certified that the graduate was competent in specified workplace skills. “This degree represented the junior college’s significant departure from its university roots. In addition to providing geographic access to the first two years of university education, junior colleges (now more frequently called community colleges) began providing the two year vocational degree.” (McKee, 2005, p. 2) The comprehensive community college became an open-access institution, including in its curricula both transfer and vocational/technical degrees, developmental education for those not yet adequately prepared for collegiate work, contracted service to business and industry in preparing and re-tooling workers, skill certifications of

various lengths, and a plethora of community service and general interest non-credit offerings. Further, community colleges became a democratizing force as providers of higher education opportunities to those who had previously been excluded. "Situated as they are between high schools and four-year colleges, community colleges are at the crossroads of social mobility in American society . . . community colleges enroll an increasing proportion of this nation's poor, working-class, and minority students. For these populations in particular, community colleges are often the first step toward acquiring one of our society's most effective, but by no means assured, tickets into the broad middle class: a bachelor's degree." (Shaw & London, 2001, p. 92) The 21st century community college is far different than its founders could have imagined. Nevertheless, through all these permutations of the community college mission, the original transfer function remains a significant component.

This study examines contemporary transfer patterns; explores community college transfer pathways (dual enrollment, early college, virtual colleges); reviews baccalaureate transfer pathways (articulation, university centers, university extension, community college baccalaureate) and concludes with a look to the future.

Contemporary Transfer Patterns

Critics of the community college, particularly those critics concerned with the transfer option (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994), have cited low transfer rates, even of students who indicate a desire to transfer when they enter the community college.

The assumption is that students enter the community college, declare their desire to transfer, and then proceed to take the necessary courses that result in the awarding of an A.A. or A.S. degree. That assumption ignores the fact that many students transfer before completing a degree, many "stop-out" for family or financial reasons and resume their education at a later time, and some decide that they simply cannot afford either the time or the cost entailed in transferring to a four-year institution. In fact, the traditional pattern associated with transfer from the two-year to the four-year institution with an associate degree in hand is no longer the norm.

Townsend (2001, "Redefining the Community College Transfer Mission") suggests that contemporary community college students use a variety of transfer mechanisms to meet their individual needs. Her research indicates at least six distinct transfer patterns: 1) transfer to

a four-year school prior to completing the associate degree; 2) transfer with a non-transfer degree such as an A.A.S. (Associate in Applied Science); 3) transfer from and to the community college in a "swirling pattern", including work at more than one community college interspersed with time at a four-year institution; 4) transfer of dual credit courses earned from the local community college while in high school directly to the four-year college; 5) transfer of community college courses taken during the summer (while a student at a four-year institution); and 6) transfer of community college courses taken concurrently while a student at a four-year college. Thus, many four-year college graduates will have community college courses on their transcripts, while not necessarily possessing an associate degree. Many more students than in the past will also have courses that were once designated as non-transfer and degrees that once were labeled "terminal" as part of their baccalaureate record. Increasingly, four-year institutions are accepting technical courses or degrees in their applied programs, particularly in health care and engineering technology programs. In fact, a new definition of community college transfer education is emerging. Rather than the limited and rigid first two years of a baccalaureate program, "transfer education is developing a de facto definition as those courses that transfer to a four-year college, regardless of the nature of the courses." (Townsend, 2001, "Blurring the Lines," p.63)

These variable transfer patterns suggest that typical ways of measuring transfer success may be suspect. A 2001 study from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics looked at community college transfer rates to four-year institutions using alternative definitions of transfer. These alternative definitions produced stunningly different results and illustrate "the trade-off between restricting the pool of potential transfer students and excluding substantial portions of the initial cohort." (p. xi) For example, one definition included only students who had a declared academic major and were taking courses that lead toward a bachelor's degree. Using this definition, 52% of the students successfully transferred. On the other hand, using a broader definition of those students who simply say that at some point they want to earn a bachelor's degree or higher results in a finding of only 36% who transfer. Thus, in looking at the rate of transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions, "just as any statistic depends on the specific variables used to indicate the underlying concepts, the transfer rate for community college students is sensitive to the specification of potential transfer." (p. xii) Definition is key to understanding transfer rate. Community colleges are providing a number of ways for

students to access the baccalaureate and successfully transition to a four-year institution outside of the traditional 2 + 2, associate to baccalaureate pattern. These options include transfer pathways from high school to community colleges as well as transfer pathways from the community college to four-year colleges. Significantly, a considerable overlap exists between these two pathways, further illustrating the complex and non-linear transfer function.

Transfer Pathways –Community College Models

Any discussion of transfer from community college to the university must begin with secondary/high school preparation. Those students who desire college attendance but are not yet sure of their path would do well to take advantage of the preparatory opportunities available in many high schools. Some variation of these transfer pathways is likely available in the upper levels of most secondary schools.

Bragg (2006) conducted a two-year 50-state study with the primary goal of understanding and documenting academic pathways that help high school students to fulfill their aspirations to attend college. These academic pathways represent “one way of thinking about secondary-to-postsecondary transition opportunities: academic pathways refer to boundary-spanning curricula, instructional and organizational strategies, and meaningful assessments that either link or extend from high school to college, including both two- and four-year institutions.” (p. 6). These transfer pathways include traditional high school programs such as advanced placement and the college-level examination program (CLEP), but also provide newer options such as dual credit/concurrent enrollment programs, early and middle college high schools, and virtual high schools and colleges.

Dual Enrollment

Dual credit and concurrent enrollment programs are common in American high schools and community colleges. They are also available to students who meet certain requirements of four-year institutions. “Dual enrollment programs are collaborative efforts between high schools and colleges in which high school students (usually junior and seniors) are permitted to enroll in college courses. These programs provide students with a challenging academic experience and the opportunity to earn college credit prior to high school graduations. Unlike in other programs such as Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment students take actual college courses with a college syllabus, often on a

college campus, rather than a college-level course intended to be taken by high school students.” (Karp, et al., 2007, p. 1) In dual credit programs, students receive both high school and college credit for successful completion of college-level courses; in concurrent enrollment, students are permitted to take college-level courses but may not receive high school credit. Dual credit programs provide incentives for students to begin their collegiate studies while in high school; to complete an associate degree in a shorter period of time; to gain the confidence and ability to succeed in transferring on to a four-year institution, and to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

Early College

Early and middle college programs offer opportunities for students to earn a high school diploma and an associate of arts degree (or sufficient college credits to enter a liberal arts program at a four-year institution) in a period of 5 years. Like the dual credit option, the early or middle college concept prepares students for collegiate level work and provides incentives to perform at high levels while reducing the time and expense to achieve a college degree.

Virtual College

Finally, distance learning and virtual colleges are expanding exponentially in response to demands for online learning. Instruction is delivered remotely through internet-based college courses. Such opportunities are particularly important to rural students and allow them to accrue college credits from their home base while still in high school or at their local community college. With such online opportunities growing rapidly, this academic pathway provides another option for students to transfer after accumulating sufficient credits to be admitted as a junior at a four-year institution.

Transfer Pathways – Baccalaureate Models

Community colleges have a long history of evolving and changing to meet the needs of their communities. As education requirements have increased for many occupations, the community college plays an increasingly important role as the broker between high school and the four-year college or university. Community colleges, with regular outreach to their constituencies, are ideally placed to encourage and assist students to move beyond the community college to a baccalaureate degree. Some community colleges have added structural components to further the aspirations of community college

students to consider transfer. Honors programs have encouraged like-minded students to band together and work in a challenging academic environment. Some community colleges have added residence halls, which help in the acculturation of students to the four-year experience they might encounter when they transfer. These additions and amenities may provide further access to transfer pathways (Townsend, 2007).

Much like the transfer pathways from the high school to the community college, there are a number of transfer pathways from the community college to the four-year institution or university. Floyd (2005) suggests four baccalaureate delivery models or transfer paths from community colleges to four-year institutions: articulation agreements, university centers, university extension, and the community college baccalaureate.

Articulation Agreements

Perhaps the most recognized transfer path is that of articulation agreements. "Students in the transfer pipeline have the opportunity to complete their general education requirements by participating in formalized articulation agreements and then transferring to the four year institution of choice." (Laanan, 2001, p.11) Thus, articulation agreements play a critical role in providing access to the baccalaureate. However, articulation can be complex and difficult to navigate. Zamani (2001) suggests that the "transfer process increases educational opportunity and access beyond two-year institutions; however, paradoxically, it also immobilizes many students, as policies related to the movement of students between community colleges and four-year colleges/universities are inconsistent or nonexistent." (p. 17) Further, he argues that students most disadvantaged by these inconsistent and unfriendly systems are those without the time, knowledge, and financial wherewithal to negotiate the complexity of the process. Indeed, the importance of improved articulation and transfer is "of paramount concern, as previous levels of cooperation among sectors have not moved more students – African American and Hispanic, in particular – through the educational pipeline." (Zamani, 2001, p. 17)

This is particularly true in vocational and technical areas. Brint and Karabel (1989) maintain that in the vocationalization of community colleges, the ability to transfer has been severely limited "with potentially serious consequences for the life chances of its students." (p. 13) Yet traditional vocational programs are no longer considered to

be dead-end, terminal programs. While vocational credits are not necessarily intended to transfer, many students are choosing to enroll in two-year vocational programs with the intent of transferring to four-year state colleges or private colleges with whom the community college has programmatic articulation. Bragg (2001) has observed that in these applied baccalaureate programs, "transfer is often facilitated through inverted or upside-down degree plans that ensure that technical course work at the two-year level is sequenced with substantial academic course work and more advanced technical courses, frequently referred to as capstone courses, at the university level." (p. 11)

Significant differences in the ease – or difficulty – of transfer exist from one state to another. The transfer of credits between community colleges and four-year institutions has historically been problematic causing frustration, added costs, and delays in achieving the baccalaureate. According to Hughes and Karp (2006), "The disjointed nature of the credit transfer process has its roots in the presence of two higher education systems. In many states, community colleges and universities are separate entities, with their own governing boards and leadership. Thus, communication between the two types of institutions occurs less often than might be ideal." (p. 10) Fortunately, however, some states have made significant progress in streamlining the transfer process. For example, in Illinois, Florida, and California, articulation agreements are clear and requirements that students must meet, course completions, and credit hours are well-established. However, most states resort to a hodge-podge of individual case by case and often course by course agreements between a single community college and a single four-year institution.

While articulation agreements can be very useful to students who wish to transfer and who plan their coursework carefully, they are often not helpful to students who change academic interests or who are unsure of the institution to which they want to transfer. It is also not a practical alternative for those students who are place-bound and who cannot travel or re-locate to the nearest four-year institution.

Further, the associate degree track to the baccalaureate is not the most common pathway that students choose. More often, community college credits are used to fill gaps in degree requirements. Cejda (2000) maintains that "students no longer attend community colleges enroute to the bachelor's degree; they use the community college to complete specific degree requirements," (p. 279) thus further

supporting the idea that the traditional 2 + 2 transfer assumption does not fit contemporary reality or practice.

University Centers

University centers provide access to the baccalaureate by allowing community colleges to partner with one or more senior colleges and universities to deliver baccalaureate degrees locally (Floyd, 2005). These centers may take a variety of forms: the university and community college may share the same space, they may work with a number of universities to operate a consortium with a separate identity, or they may use an online model where upper level coursework is delivered online. The senior institution, in these models, confers the baccalaureate degree; the community college acts as a partner in helping students fulfill their first two years of academic requirements and assist students in accessing the services of the four-year institution. Lorenzo (2005) describes six models of the university center: co-location, enterprise, virtual, integrated, sponsorship, and hybrid, each with distinctive characteristics, but some overlap. The co-location model is that in which the two- and four-year institutions deliver their programs in the same physical location; the enterprise model emphasizes the consorcial approach, with several institutions cooperatively operating a higher-education center, separate from the community college but with the community college as an integral partner. The virtual model is similar to co-located university centers except that the final two years of programming are offered almost entirely online rather than onsite. The integrated model improves upon the co-location model in that the two- and four-year institutions merge programs and related student services. In the sponsorship model the community college takes the lead in developing and operating the center, including recruiting four-year partners, providing funding, and developing facilities. Finally, the hybrid model is an emerging model which combines a university center and appropriate programming with the authority to grant a baccalaureate. While there are many issues in the university center model associated with governance, curriculum, faculty, and budget, variations on the joint-use university center have become increasingly popular and can be an effective model for providing access to the baccalaureate.

University Extension

Universities, particularly land-grant colleges and universities have historically extended baccalaureate education through off-campus and extension centers. Current models include variations on the two-year

branch campus of the university as well as independent community colleges and nearby universities with aligned or merged governance structures. Floyd (2005) describes the university extension model as "similar to the university center model in that baccalaureate courses are offered at a campus other than the main or largest campus of a university. However, in the university extension model, the campus where these courses are offered is formally part of the university." (p. 36) However structured and governed, a major responsibility of these extension campuses is to prepare students for transfer to the sponsoring university.

| *Community College Baccalaureate*

The community college baccalaureate is perhaps the most controversial of the pathways. In contrast to the university extension or university center models, the community college actually confers the baccalaureate, rather than working in partnership with a university to confer the degree. It has been suggested that the "the community college baccalaureate potentially represents the next major shift in purpose of the comprehensive community college in America."(McKee, 2001, p.1) A community college baccalaureate (CCB) is awarded by a community college that has been approved by the appropriate legislative body to award a baccalaureate degree in a specific area. While a few specialty baccalaureate degrees have been awarded by two-year colleges as early as the 1970s, since 2001 the movement for community college baccalaureates has moved forward rapidly. Thirteen states – Florida, Georgia, Texas, Hawaii, Indiana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Vermont, and Washington now offer one or more baccalaureate degrees through a community college. Most of the degrees are BAS – Bachelor of Applied Science or BAT – Bachelor of Applied Technology in such areas as public safety, fire science, veterinary technology, paralegal studies, instrumentation, technology management, radiologic and imaging sciences, and hospitality management. However, there are a number of BS and BA degrees as well in business, energy management, architectural engineering, secondary education (particularly math and science), elementary education, early childhood education, bilingual education, aviation management, dental hygiene, and nursing. The movement toward community colleges awarding baccalaureate degrees in high-demand areas has also flourished in Canada with twenty-three institutions offering baccalaureate degrees (B. Hagan, 2007, Community College Baccalaureate Association, personal communication).

Those opposed to a community college awarding a baccalaureate argue that it is a form of "mission creep" that will distance the community college from its purpose of serving the community with open access and low cost. They fear that "a new preoccupation with the baccalaureate will divert colleges from their access and equity mission." (Skolnik, 2001, p. 7) Farnsworth (2006) expresses the possibility that developmental education, a critical component of the community college access function will be de-emphasized with the addition of higher-end academic work. Other concerns exist surrounding the qualifications of faculty, the workload distinctions between two-year and four-year faculty, and the negative consequences to the culture of the institution if a two-tier faculty structure develops (Townsend & Ignash, 2003; NACCTEP Policy Brief, 2005). Funding issues must be considered as well as questions of the acceptability of a community college baccalaureate – it may be considered a "second-class" bachelor's degree. The degree is too new to determine how graduate programs will look at the community college baccalaureate degree if a student wants to enter master's or doctoral work. Finally, accreditation issues will have to be resolved.

Those who support the awarding of the baccalaureate insist that the community college is continuing its commitment to meeting community and workforce needs. Increasingly, a baccalaureate degree is important in acquiring a living-wage job in a post-industrial economy. In fact, as cited by Shaw and London (2001) there is a strong relationship between years of education and wages; further, the baccalaureate has maintained or increased its earning potential when compared with sub-baccalaureate education. Some would posit that the college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the entry card into rewarding and well-compensated employment (Walker, 2006). Walker (2001) argues that expanding the mission of the community college to offering the baccalaureate "is a logical step since the community college can provide the degree to more learners, at convenient locations, in a more learner-centered environment, and at a greatly reduced cost to the learner and the state." (p. 18) A National Association of Community College Teacher Education Programs policy brief (2005), cites the American Association of Colleges and Universities statement: "The rationale for community colleges to add baccalaureate degrees to their offerings can be explained from both a societal perspective and an institutional perspective. From a societal perspective, a key factor is meeting the need for a baccalaureate educated workforce. Insofar as community college students experience barriers which limit baccalaureate attainment, the opportunity for them to complete their baccalaureate at the community college could likely increase their income and the

contributions to society.” (p. 1) Adding baccalaureate degrees in high-demand areas, particularly in teaching and nursing, among others specific to a geographic area, demonstrates responsiveness to community workforce needs. These degrees represent a broader effort on the part of some community colleges to develop programs that respond to state workforce needs and improve access to the baccalaureate for those who are place-bound because of career and family commitments and for those who cannot afford the costs of the traditional baccalaureate at a four-year college or university (Townsend and Ignash, 2003).

Looking to the Future

While nearly half of the nation’s first time college freshmen enroll at community colleges, the demographics of that group is changing. Community colleges have always welcomed students of all ages, backgrounds, and preparation and consequently community college students are generally older than their four-year college peers. More recently, however, the largest segment of the community college population is the traditional college age of 18-24, with the average age dropping in recent years (Handel, 2007). Thus, the transfer market is very large and growing from both segments of the community college population.

American community colleges have evolved through the past century to meet the needs of their communities. As entry job requirements become higher, as the job market becomes more competitive, and as the need for the baccalaureate degree increases, the role of the community college in preparing students to transfer and succeed in obtaining a bachelor’s degree will be increasingly important. True to their ability to adapt and adjust to the changing global environment, community colleges will continue to develop and provide creative and supportive pathways to the baccalaureate.

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