

Smooth Transfer

A Once Mundane Administrative Issue Re-emerges as a Key Tool for Equity

FRANCESCA B. PURCELL

Undergraduate transfer is a messy and too-often frustrating part of college for faculty, staff and, above all, the students themselves. Students are discouraged by unclear and complicated curriculum requirements. Faculty are reluctant to accept courses from another institution and question the preparedness of transfer students. And advisors are diverted from assisting students by the administrative minutia of course equivalencies and articulation agreements. As a result, transfer is often perceived merely as a bothersome technical procedure and so it is devalued.

Yet transfer is a growing and increasingly complex trend across the country that has serious equity implications. A report released this past February by the U.S. Department of Education found that nearly 60 percent of students from the high school class of 1992 attended more than one college and, of this group, 35 percent crossed state lines in the process. Moreover, although the most common type of transfer continues to be the vertical move from community or junior colleges to bachelor's degree-granting institutions, increasing numbers of students are transferring laterally to institutions at the same level or reversing direction and transferring from a university back to a community college. Some students find themselves caught in a "swirl," transferring credits from one institution to the next without much direction.

This article focuses on vertical transfer from community colleges to senior institutions because community college students still constitute the majority of transfer students and because community colleges play a crucial access role for students underrepresented in higher education. Community colleges are lauded for their financial affordability, geographical accessibility, and open admissions policies which attract students who may not have otherwise considered higher education. National studies indicate that low-income students, first-generation college students, African-Americans and Latinos enroll in two-year colleges at higher rates than their higher-income and white counterparts.

Indeed, underrepresented students stand to gain the most from improved transfer. As Jane Wellman at the Institute for Higher Education Policy observes: "Improving the effectiveness of two-four transfer will be the key to national progress in closing the gap among racial groups in degree attainment—and it will affect far more students than affirmative action policy." Although many students from underrepresented groups arrive at college despite the odds and look forward to eventually earning a bachelor's degree as a critical first

step toward greater social mobility, the reality is that their chances of doing so are slim.

Half of all undergraduates who start at a community college with the intention of obtaining a bachelor's degree and about one-fourth of those who start with the intention of earning only an associate degree go on to transfer to a four-year institution within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education. These statistics do not take into account the formidable social, financial and educational barriers many community college students bring through the doors or the reality that many students do not go to community college for the purpose of transferring. Nevertheless, the higher education community would have a hard time arguing that community college students are setting and achieving their educational aspirations at optimal levels. Even for those who successfully transfer, not all graduate with a bachelor's degree.

One problem relates to difficulty in transferring credits from a two-year to a four-year institution. To be sure, some credits may not transfer toward a bachelor's degree for legitimate reasons; a course may not apply to the program of study at the four-year institution or may have been completed so far in the past that the content is no longer relevant, or the student might have earned a failing grade. But in many cases, four-year institutions require transfer students to take additional courses to meet specific institutional requirements or do not count a student's credits toward their major. Whatever the reasons, the unfortunate result is that transfer students who earn a bachelor's degree take approximately 7 percent more credits than students who attended only one school, according to Education Department analyst Cliff Adelman. Extra course-taking costs time and money for the transfer student, as well as the institution and relevant funding agencies. (In addition, research published by Vanderbilt University higher education professor William R. Doyle in the May/June 2006 issue of *Change* magazine suggests that transfer students who have all their credits accepted are about twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree in six years as those who only have some credits accepted.)

Community college students can transfer successfully, earn bachelor's degrees and succeed. But it's easy to get pushed off the pathway. A 2004 report by the American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities found that transfer students face barriers in perceptions, practices and policies. For example, some four-year institutions question the quality of courses offered

at two-year institutions or the academic preparedness of incoming transfer students. Community college transfer students often find that their new schools are not as adept in supporting students who work full-time and raise children. And at the system and state levels, policies and incentives are often inadequate and inconsistent.

A regional online transfer system could alleviate the confusion and stress that students and their advisors routinely face when trying to determine how course credits would be applied at a transfer institution.

The New England states have reason to be attuned to the benefits and obstacles associated with transfer, because both the number and the proportion of students enrolled in the region's 62 community and "junior" colleges are on the rise. The number of New England community college students rose from 161,660 in 1998 to 190,018 in 2004, representing an 18 percent increase, while the proportion of all undergraduates enrolled in the region's two-year institutions rose from 24 percent to 28 percent. With tuition and costs of living rising, this trend is likely to continue.

The six states share some approaches to transfer. For example, all implement articulation agreements wherein community college students who successfully graduate from a particular program with their associate degree will either be automatically admitted to a four-year "receiving" institution or assured that all their credits will transfer. For example, Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass., has articulation agreements with more than 20 colleges and universities in New England, including private institutions such as Bryant University in Rhode Island and Unity College in Maine. A student graduating from Bristol with an associate degree in environmental science, for example, will be admitted with junior standing to Unity College's bachelor's program in environmental science.

Most of the states have also instituted statewide policies mandating that such transfer agreements are uniform and widespread. The 35-year-old nonprofit New England Transfer Association provides professional training and development opportunities for individuals who directly assist students in the transfer process. In the business of transfer, it is essential to stay updated on curricula and programs that are continually in flux.

Several New England states have responded to transfer issues with more cutting-edge strategies. In Vermont, all grades earned from any public higher education institution appear on a single transcript and count toward the student's final grade point average. This arrangement relieves students of the nuisance of forwarding transcripts (a frequent transfer impediment) and more broadly, connotes a confidence in the comparability of course

quality across the system's institutions.

Maine, recognizing that the majority of community college students transfer prior to earning a degree, uses an online course equivalency system whereby a student can enter the courses he or she completed at the community college and then easily determine how these courses would be applied to degrees at Maine's public four-year institutions.

Massachusetts is one of the few states in the country to attach a financial incentive to transfer. The state's community college students who graduate from certain programs with a 3.0 grade point average or higher are entitled to a 33 percent reduction in their tuition at a public state college or the University of Massachusetts.

While all these initiatives are valuable in smoothing the transfer process, there remains room for improvement within states and across the region. A regional online transfer course equivalency system could alleviate the confusion and stress that students and their advisors routinely face when trying to determine how course credits would be applied at a transfer institution. Such a system would be especially helpful for those students who cross state lines. Ongoing regional collaboration among faculty and institutional leaders would greatly assuage the misperceptions and miscommunications that often accompany the transfer process. Reliable follow-up data from the four-year colleges could help dispel the myth that students who transferred in from community colleges do not perform as well.

Though students who transfer from community colleges earn bachelor's degrees at rates similar to classmates who begin college at four-year institutions, many community college students don't stay long enough to transfer. Many states are now exploring ways to encourage community college students to earn 20 credits during their first year in order to gain enough momentum to complete their bachelor's degrees at rates comparable to their four-year counterparts. As most students transfer prior to attaining an associate degree, systematic efforts should be made to keep them moving toward a four-year degree.

These are just a few of the practices and policies that could improve transfer rates for community college students to bachelor's-degree granting institutions. Transfer will continue to grow and become increasingly complicated. Although often viewed as a tangential issue, transfer cuts to the center of any institution's work, raising concerns about the quality and comparability of its courses and its ability to educate a diversity of students. Transfer is a crucial pathway toward a bachelor's degree especially for underrepresented students. Yet, because of cumbersome transfer strategies, many of the students who can least afford to go without a bachelor's degree are pushed to the sidelines of higher education.

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Community College Graduation Rates

New England's Community Colleges Serve as Gateways to Opportunity. ... But Could They Be More Successful?

New England's 43 community and technical colleges enroll nearly 200,000 students. More than their four-year counterparts, these institutions educate New England's "underserved" students including low-income and first-generation students and students of color. They are the "open door" institutions for our high school dropouts, GED-earners, underprepared high school graduates, low-wage workers and adult learners seeking "retraining" or taking a class or two for a job promotion.

Community college graduation rates vary widely depending in large part upon an institution's student clientele, with urban institutions generally posting the lowest rates.

Many community college students "stop-in" and "stop-out" of their college programs. The reasons for this are well-documented. Some face significant work or family demands that derail their education plans. Some are simply not prepared academically for the work. In addition, a student who begins at a community college but transfers to another institution before earning an associate degree is mischaracterized by the data as a non-completer.

Nonetheless, a growing number of economists, policy leaders and others believe that the success of these gateway institutions can no longer be measured by the number of students entering the gate, but rather by how many graduate. Community colleges, regardless of their populations, can be more successful, they say. For evidence, they point to institutions such as New York City's LaGuardia Community College whose First-Year Academies for incoming students and teaching methods that engage and challenge a diverse array of students have been specially recognized by the MetLife Foundation for improving outcomes for low-income, first generation, immigrant and working students.

With support from the MELMAC Education Foundation, Maine's York County Community College next fall will launch a comprehensive effort to reduce attrition among students—especially in the first year when the risk of dropping out is high—and improve transfer and graduation rates. The college will implement special advising for high-risk students, supplemental instruction, learning communities, a peer calling program and other innovative strategies in an effort to increase graduation and transfer rates by 4 percent per year through 2010.

Connecticut's Housatonic Community College, meanwhile, was awarded a \$50,000 planning grant to join 35 other

Percentage of Degree-Seeking Full-Time Freshmen who Complete an Associate Degree within Three Years at Community Colleges, 2003-04

Highest Graduation Rates

Washington County Community College	84%
N.H. Community Technical College, Nashua	83%
Northern Maine Technical College	45%
Kennebec Valley Community College	42%
N.H. Community Technical College, Berlin/Laconia	40%
New Hampshire Technical Institute	37%
Eastern Maine Community College	35%
Asnuntuck Community College	32%
Southern Maine Community College	32%
N.H. Community Technical College, Manchester/Stratham	29%

U.S. Average **17%**

Lowest Graduation Rates

Roxbury Community College	4%
Three Rivers Community College	8%
Naugatuck Valley Community College	8%
Norwalk Community College	9%
Cape Cod Community College	10%
Community College of Rhode Island	10%
Massachusetts Bay Community College	11%
Bunker Hill Community College	11%
Manchester Community College	12%
Tunxis Community College	13%
Northwestern Connecticut Community College	13%
Housatonic Community College	13%

Source: The Institute for College Access and Success, www.economicdiversity.org

community colleges nationwide in the "Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count" initiative designed to improve student success. The initiative, funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education, KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, aims to help community colleges understand student experiences and perceptions and seek students' ideas and opinions about how the colleges can better serve their needs.

—Analysis by Jamie E. Scurry, NEBHE director of policy and research.

CC Leader

Community Colleges Go Outside to Fill Key Posts

BARBARA VINIAR

Ask one community college leader if hiring individuals who haven't come through the ranks makes sense, and he will say absolutely not, the cultural adjustment is too difficult. Ask another, and she will say that with the right guidance and orientation, "outsiders" make excellent hires. Ask another, and you'll hear that there is an adequate but underrepresented pool of potential leaders among women and minorities already in community colleges, why go outside?

Half of the nation's nearly 1,000 community college presidents will retire over the next few years, according to some estimates. In addition, the senior administrators who might have been on track to assume these positions are themselves retiring, drying up the pipeline that used to ensure a steady flow of candidates from within, and creating vacancies in critical areas of campus leadership. Filling "the leadership gap" has reached a crisis point for community colleges nationwide.

In the midst of this crisis, some campuses are turning to candidates from business, the military, politics and other non-community college backgrounds. While some community colleges are wary of "outsiders," there are numerous New England examples of leaders who have made the transition successfully.

Military officers receive leadership training and often retire young enough to have a full second career. David Bull retired from the U.S. Air Force as a colonel and is now dean of administration and finance at Quinebaug Community College in Connecticut. He says his responsibilities and challenges are so similar it was like "taking off one uniform and putting on another." As a base civil engineer, Bull was responsible for facilities, capital projects, procurement of maintenance and repair contracts and master planning. He now oversees the college store, facilities, finance, IT, personnel, maintenance and contracting. "The applications are different," says Bull, "but the fundamentals are the same." Bull sees his role as "the leader of a business enterprise that supports the academic community." The MBA he earned while in the military assists him in achieving efficiencies.

"Although the military is a more hierarchical organization, getting the job done in either environment is about team-building and uses the same leadership skills," says Bull. In addition to the rewards of "direct student contact," Bull says he enjoys the "variety and constant challenges" offered by his community college leadership position.

Community college leaders drawn from the corporate sector are most likely to transition within specific fields

like Human Resources, Information Technology and Public Relations. For Richard Hockery, moving from educational software developer to community college IT administration was natural. As CIO of the New Hampshire Community Technical Colleges, Dockery likes "providing access for those without other opportunities." Dennis Moore, assistant to the president and director of public relations and publications at the Community College of Rhode Island, had an extensive PR background at the former Bank of Boston and Roger Williams Medical Center. "PR skills such as writing are easily transferable," says Moore, "enabling an individual to produce quickly in a new environment." Moore says his tenure as chief spokesperson for the bank, addressing layoffs, branch closures and declining profits, and explaining "wrong side" surgeries and disbarred doctors for the hospital, prepared him for "crisis communications" during a difficult year when faculty voted no confidence in CCRI's president, who eventually stepped down. What surprised Moore about community colleges was their complexity and the challenge of dealing with multiple constituencies internally and externally.

Community colleges have difficulty matching corporate salaries to attract skilled employees, but they often offer a more attractive work/life balance, benefits that may include tuition remission for families and an intellectually and culturally stimulating environment. They also offer prospective career-changers an important intangible: the chance to be part of improving students' lives by providing access to higher education and better jobs. David Sykes and Joanne Agnello-Veley, both of Middlesex Community College in Middletown, Conn., were attracted by these advantages.

Sykes's 21 years with the Hartford Insurance Group gave him experience in budget, operations and payroll. He then started his own consulting firm specializing in productivity improvement, HR training and 401(k) educational programs. The broad range of skills made him an excellent candidate for his current position, dean of administration and finance. Although the benefits and regular schedule were attractive after running his own business, "making a visible contribution" was the most important factor in making the switch. Sykes says the biggest adjustment has been to a union environment where it is difficult to reward or penalize individual performance. He has had to become "more of a counselor and coach" in order to motivate his employees. "This is the best job I have held—something new every day," says Sykes.

Agnello-Veley worked for the U.S. Department of Labor, as well as a privately owned utility and a *Fortune 50* company prior to moving to a community college. These diverse experiences gave her the ability “to understand multiple perspectives and to know what works and what doesn’t.” Her biggest challenge as director of human resources at Middlesex has been “to understand and untangle red tape.”

“If an average employee can’t understand a policy, it’s not a good policy,” says Agnello-Veley. She and her husband both left the private sector for state employment to enjoy a better quality of life. “We have rewarding careers in our fields and time with our children,” she says.

Middlesex President Wilfredo Nieves says he “relies on Sykes’s background and sense of balance,” while Agnello-Veley’s “openness to learning and sharing has facilitated dialogue and looking at things differently.”

These individuals represent the more typical “outside” hires. They have entered at a mid-level or senior-level leadership position which can provide them with the community college experience they need to become presidents. It is rarer for someone to move directly into a presidency from other sectors, but there are some whose backgrounds have made the transition possible. Before becoming president of North Shore Community College in Danvers, Mass., Wayne Burton served two terms in the New Hampshire state Legislature, one in a minority leadership position. “My legislative service was far better preparation for being a president than my doctorate in higher education leadership,” he says.



Burton: Legislative background prepared him for community college presidency.

Burton sees important parallels in the skills required in his political and college careers: “First, I had to build consensus among 400 legislators, only 140 of whom were from my party. This was excellent preparation for working with faculty. Second, having an insider’s understanding of the legislative process is an advantage for a public community college leader. Third, running for office is like

being a candidate for the [college] presidency. It’s a grueling process of selling yourself to multiple constituents while keeping your soul intact. And finally,

like a legislator, my job as president is to be visible and helpful.”

Many presidential duties have come naturally for the former politician. Last April, for example, Burton went to Washington, D.C. to lobby for earmarks for the college, provisions in the reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act and a new technical high school North Shore is trying to build in Danvers. But other responsibilities have required more adjustment. Burton says he was least prepared for managing up, or working with board members. Presidents who have come through the ranks may have a network of fellow presidents to call upon when problems arise with boards. For those appointed from outside, board tensions can add stress to an already lonely endeavor.

Katharine Eneguess, president of the New Hampshire Community Technical College, Berlin/Laconia, agrees that an understanding of how the political environment influences public policy is a significant advantage for a community college president. Eneguess spent 16 years specializing in educational policy and community development with the New Hampshire Business and Industry Association, earning her the nickname in the Granite State of “the voice of education.” She is in her current position, she says, “because of the direct connection between community colleges, educational attainment and the future of workforce and economic development.”



Eneguess: Spent 16 years with business and industry group.

The movement of outsiders into community colleges is not without controversy. Some see it as one more attempt to make colleges into businesses. Others fear that the “crisis” is being used as an excuse to hire “good old boys” from business and government networks. But there is a powerful argument for going outside: Our institutional challenges are getting more complex and our leadership jobs are getting harder. We can’t afford to exclude talented individuals with different backgrounds from the pool of people we tap to fulfill our mission.

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