

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Making the Transfer Path to a Bachelor's Degree Seamless and Successful: Best Practices

By Chuck Knepfle and Rock McCaskill

Many factors, including free two-year college commitments in states like New York, Tennessee, and Oregon, have led to increases in students attending two-year schools with the ultimate goal of graduating with a bachelor's degree. Bachelor's degree granting institutions should, and arguably have an obligation to, make that transition as seamless as possible. This paper explores best practices around the country for minimizing the barriers for students who transition from two-year to four-year institutions.

There is a lot of research about why and how students make a decision about whether and where to go to college. Factors such as tuition, campus proximity to their home, major, career placement rates, where their friends go, where their parents went, what extracurricular activities are available—the list could go on for pages—are all relevant. As a result, most enrollment management professionals familiarize themselves with, and ensure they understand, the model of college choice as created by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). In their research, Hossler and Gallagher found that students tended to proceed through a three-step process when selecting a college: predisposition (whether or not the student is inclined to attend college based on their past educational experience), search (exploration

of college options), and choice (decisions about where to apply). Perna (2006) expanded on Hossler and Gallagher's work with research on additional factors that go into student college choice decisions. She identified student demographic factors, the resources available to students in their high schools, how and where colleges and universities marketed and recruited, and public policy all as significant contributors to the college choice decision. Importantly, she showed that college choice was not just about where to go to college, but for many high school students, about whether to go to college. Knepfle (2018), using the Department of Education's High School Longitudinal Study (Ingels, *et al.* 2011), added parental expectation of their student's higher education attainment as an additional, statisti-

cally significant factor in where a student chooses to attend college.

So why is understanding the college choice process important to our discussion of transfer student success? Many students, due to where they were born or how much money their parents have, have little choice but to begin their studies at a two-year college.

According to Jenkins and Fink (2016), in their often-cited research about the 2007 incoming group of community college students, approximately 700,000 students begin their higher education career at a two-year college and of those, 80 percent intended to complete a bachelor's degree. However, only 14 percent actually earned a four-year degree within four years, a figure that decreased from 15 percent for students who began in 1998 (U.S. Department of Education 2017).

So what is happening that dissuades the other 86 percent of degree-seeking students from earning their degree? Cost, of course, is a significant factor, but there are others. Many of those other factors are controllable by the institutions themselves. Jenkins and Fink (2016) concluded that transfer student success varied greatly, not primarily by institution type, but rather by the various institutional practices put in place by the administrators at both the two-year and four-year institutions. The rest of this article will explore some of those institutional practices as enrollment managers can play a significant role in moving this needle.

Examples of Successful Efforts

No two-year or four-year college has completely figured out the transfer success model. However, many have found pockets of success, and just about all of them are trying new and innovative programs and initiatives to inch closer to finding parity in the graduation rates of first-time (freshmen) students at four-year institutions and their transfer student peers.

Portland State University/ Portland Community College

Portland State University (PSU 2021), Oregon's most diverse and only urban research university, has an en-

rollment of more than 19,000 undergraduate students, with nearly two-thirds having found their way to the university via the transfer process, mostly from nearby Portland Community College (PCC). While some of its success enrolling transfer students is no doubt a factor of its low cost and central location in Portland, and the accompanying access to thousands of college-age students within a 25-mile radius of campus, the university has also been deliberate and diligent about remaining an attractive option for students looking for their baccalaureate degree.

One key to Portland State's success is that its financial aid programs are almost identical for new first-time students and transfer students. Similar to many four-year public universities, it has a free college program (Four Years Free) for first-year, resident, Pell Grant-eligible students, but unlike many others, it has an identical one (Transfers Finish Free) for transfer students. Students who initially choose community college out of high school are not left out in the cold financially if they later decide to transfer. Importantly, PSU also keeps financial aid criteria the same for both groups of students by using common GPA requirements for both first-year and transfer student scholarships.

PSU also allows students to ease into the transfer process by allowing them to apply as co-enrolled students of both Portland State and PCC. Students apply and are admitted jointly to both institutions, allowing them to choose to take courses at either or both schools. Financial aid and tuition/billing is coordinated closely between the two campuses so that students can focus on classes and not their finances.

Admissions and financial aid programs are not the only ways in which PSU is focused on transfer student success. In 2019, the university launched the Transfer and Returning Student Resource Center, a physical space, staffed with academic counselors that is focused entirely on the transition from other institutions to Portland State. The center serves as a one-stop location for any non-PSU student thinking about transferring, and also for those who recently made the decision to enroll at PSU.

Clemson University/ Tri-County Technical College

Clemson University is a public research institution with a land grant mission in upstate South Carolina. Undergraduate enrollment in fall 2019 was a little more than 20,000 students (Clemson University n.d.). Tri-County Technical College (TCTC) is a two-year public community and technical college located approximately four miles from Clemson. As Clemson expanded its recruitment base throughout the Southeast as well as into the East, Midwest, and beyond, its selectivity also increased. Clemson administrators found that they were turning away more and more qualified applicants simply because the university did not have enough room at the school.

In 2006, Clemson entered into a partnership with TCTC that allowed students to enroll at TCTC with guaranteed transfer admission to Clemson after completing specified minimum academic requirements (typically after one academic year at TCTC). Students enrolled at TCTC through the Bridge to Clemson program must live in residence halls on the Clemson campus. They have access to resources at both campuses, including academic advising. Most importantly, there is an incredibly strong partnership between the advising communities of both campuses that provides degree pathways for the students. This coordination has all but eliminated the loss of academic credits between the two institutions.

In 2019, 754 of Clemson's 1,529 new transfers entered through the bridge program. The total number of students entering Clemson through the bridge program from 2006 to 2019 totaled 6,671 (Clemson University 2020). According to TCTC President Dr. D. Galen DeHay, "Students who meet the Bridge requirements and transfer to Clemson for their sophomore year graduate at approximately the same rate as the traditional Clemson first-year student" (Tri-County Technical College 2019). For comparison, Clemson's first-time, full-time, four-year 2016 graduation rate was 65.3 percent (Clemson University n.d.). According to the Clemson University Office of Institutional Research (Clemson 2021), as of August 2020, 3,363 students who entered through the bridge program had received undergraduate degrees from Clemson University. Another 2,211 were still en-

rolled as degree-seeking undergraduates during the fall of 2020 (Clemson University 2021). Those numbers indicate that 84 percent of all students enrolled at Clemson through the bridge program either graduated or are still pursuing their degrees.

Florida International University/ University of Central Florida/ University of South Florida

Florida International University (FIU), the University of Central Florida (UCF), and the University of South Florida (USF) make up the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities. Those three institutions collectively enroll more than 50,000 transfer students and represent 64 percent of all associate of arts degree students enrolling in four-year schools in the state (Smith 2021). They all have developed extensive, and very successful, transfer and articulation programs over the last couple of decades and have often been cited as models for transfer student success. They are, in most other ways, competitors, but that did not stop them from joining together to apply for and receive a \$1.25 million dollar grant in 2021 from the Helios Education Foundation to expand opportunities for Florida transfer students.

With the grant, over a four-year period, FIU, UCF, and USF aim to put their individual enrollment goals aside and work together to close the transfer graduation and time-to-degree gap currently in place in Florida. Working with the sixteen state college partners, they aim to focus their efforts in three primary areas:

- Reduce the adjustment period for students transferring to a four-year school by creating a "transfer coaching and advising academy focused on Major readiness."
- Design a universal and publicly available course equivalency and sequencing database with a goal of guiding students toward degree pathways that avoid the need to take any extra courses or credits than is minimally necessary.
- Provide student support programs that help retention rates as the student progresses toward graduation (Mauro 2021).

While the interventions outlined may not be unique, voluntarily coordinating and fully cooperating with in-state competitors is. These three schools have documented their commitment to student success as a higher priority than their own institutional enrollment goals.

University System of Georgia eCore

A cooperative arrangement to offer online general education courses exists between 21 colleges and universities of the University System of Georgia (USG). The arrangement known as eCore allows students from across the USG to register and receive credit for the courses at their home institutions. One benefit of the program is that digital textbooks are included at no extra cost to the student. “eCore courses are taught by instructors from USG institutions and are transferable within the USG, as well as to most regionally accredited schools” (University System of Georgia n.d.).

According to an *American Journal of Distance Education* article, “the format is particularly helpful for non-traditional students, who may face greater time or distance constraints due to work or family commitments” (Lee and Combes 2020). An overall course completion rate of 90 percent in FY 2018 provides evidence of one aspect of program success (Lee and Combes 2020).

Other Efforts

In its “Transfer Student Success Programs” report, the Association for Public Land Grant Universities (APLU) (2021) highlights a multitude of exciting and creative success programs targeted to transfer students across the United States. For example, in the California State University system, Sacramento State created a transfer peer coach program that identifies current students who transferred to the university previously and trains them on admissions and academic advising. The students serve as recruiters and advisors for anyone transferring from two-year colleges. Students they work with also participate in the university’s “Through in Two” program that boasts an 80 percent graduation rate within two years of transfer.

Much like the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities, The City University of New York

(CUNY) partners with four local community colleges in what it calls the Bronx Transfer Affinity Group in an effort to improve the transfer process to CUNY. The system also works with the Bronx Opportunity Network, an umbrella group of various community-based organizations in the local area. Where high school students look to their high school guidance counselors, transfer students often reach out to the non-profit and community-based organizations. CUNY has figured out that the community colleges are not the only organizations that counsel prospective transfer students.

Like many schools, Iowa State University has a multitude of articulation agreements with every Iowa community college, but it—like students in Clemson’s bridge program—doubles down on its commitment to those students by providing a myriad of on-campus resources and amenities to prospective transfer students. The community college students receive free transcript exchange, real-time audit information, and access to a host of campus resources while the students are still enrolled at their two-year school.

George Mason University, in collaboration with Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) set its sights on diversity with its ADVANCE program. ADVANCE provides more than 85 different academic curricular pathways to NOVA and has shown improvement in student persistence and graduation rates.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has focused significant effort on recruiting adult transfer students and those with prior military experience. By creating the military student services and the adult and nontraditional student services offices, VCU made the outward and clear signal to nontraditional students where they should enroll to be supported and succeed.

State Governmental Legislation

State governing bodies have also been active in the effort to make transferring from two-year to four-year schools easier and more transparent. For example, in 1994, Alabama passed Legislative Act 94–202, and the AGSC/STARS program was created. This program established requirements aimed at forcing two- and four-year schools to work together to reduce the number

of “wasted” transfer credits for Alabama students, and improve the time-to-bachelor-degree attainment for transfer students.

In Indiana, the Statewide Transfer General Education Core (STGEC) was developed by the public institutions of the state after its legislature and governor passed Senate Enrolled Act 182 in 2012. STGEC enables a student who completes an approved program of general education in one institution to transfer that coursework to any other state school as a block of 30 credit hours toward the general education core requirements.

Most recently, in June 2021 Oregon Senate Bill 233, which mandates common course numbering, became law. With its passing, the state has now mandated that Oregon’s universities and community colleges must adopt common course numbering for introductory and lower-level courses with similar learning outcomes. The bill passed despite opposition from some of the universities who wanted those decisions to remain with the institutions.

Conclusion

What works well at one school may not work at another; students, states, boards of trustees, and faculty are all

different, and an approach to improving transfer student success needs to be carefully considered. Much of what is outlined here is being done at hundreds of schools across the country. What’s important is that schools figure out what works best for them and their students.

In an ideal higher education world, regardless of where students begin their studies, the path to their ultimate educational goal would be the same for everyone. Unfortunately, the data don’t portray that picture. Even worse, the most disadvantaged students tend to begin their higher education journey at institutions that will not ultimately issue their baccalaureate degree (Fry, Richard, and Cilluffo 2019). Those students need enrollment management professionals to have their back; practitioners need to put in place the support networks, policies, financial aid programs, mentoring, articulation, marketing, and personal interactions that are necessary to shepherd our most deserving students through the system. There isn’t one answer; if there were, all institutions would be doing the same thing. It’s up to enrollment managers to figure out what works best in their college or university, in their state, for their students, and then implement, assess, refine, and re-invent until the graduation gap is eliminated.

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