The Role of Feeder Community Colleges

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By providing students' initial experiences in higher education, community colleges play a critical role in the success of transfer students. Characterized by special programs and interventions targeted to specific populations as well as general services common to the needs of many students, community colleges serve a wide array of audiences, of which transfer students are but one facet. This chapter will examine the nature of students who attend community colleges and the policies, practices, and services that affect their transfer experience and success in four-year institutions.

**Community College Students**

Comprehensive community colleges are guided by a mission focused on providing accessible and affordable higher education for citizens whose educational goals include earning credentials (e.g., certificates, associate and bachelor's degrees), retraining to update skills or prepare for career change, and supporting personal transitions through learning. Because of their open admission status, community colleges often attract students with provisional or vague educational goals; with academic characteristics that deter them from the admissions' standards of four-year institutions; and life experiences that lead them to be cautious about higher education and their prospects for success in college. Choosing strategies to support students' transfer goals depends to a great extent on knowledge of three student attributes: (a) goal clarity and focus, (b) academic preparation, and (c) personal context for higher education.

**Goal Clarity and Focus**

Community colleges typically ask students their educational goals during the admissions process, including their intention to transfer. Depending on their reasons for entering higher education through the community college, students present with different kinds and degrees of goal clarity. Their ability to articulate their goals may be further limited by their understanding of the terrain and language of higher education and of the majors they consider. While it is important for community colleges to gather information about students' goals upon entry, it is equally important not to take them at face value. The selection of programs, courses, and support services can best support students' transfer goals if the community college personnel check to ensure that students understand the implications of the goals they have declared.

For example, students who chose community colleges for financial, rather than academic, reasons may tend to focus on their ultimate goal of a baccalaureate degree without much consideration of their path through the community college to achieve transfer. Will they plan to earn an associate degree as an intermediate step or simply accumulate transferable credits until they can afford to transfer? They are more likely to use the curriculum for their baccalaureate degree as the basis for choosing courses at the community college but may not see the need for academic advising prior to transfer. These students often see their community college experience as so transitional that they
do not attend to their preparation beyond the accumulation of credits. In doing so, students may aspire to a C or better to ensure transferability, and fail to maintain, much less develop, the academic skills that will ensure their admission and success at the four-year institution. Key practices in admission and advising discussed later in this chapter can mitigate the limited vision of these students with respect to their choices.

On the other hand, students who enter community colleges for academic reasons tend to be more tentative in articulating educational goals, not at all certain that their goals are achievable. Many of these students must take a number of developmental courses before taking college-level courses that lead to either transfer or a two-year degree or certificate. Their focus is on advancing to college-level courses, with less attention given to the longer-term goal. These students often have difficulty with motivation to persist, largely because there is no ultimate purpose that drive them. Depending on their success in early courses, those who do have a longer-term goal in mind may continually question it. (e.g., Do I have the time and money to earn a nursing degree if it is taking me three terms to complete developmental English? Maybe I should just get a phlebotomy certificate so I can get a job.) The pressures of time and money are real and may be given too much currency in academic decision making if students do not have adequate information or support.

Students also enter community colleges for reasons that are less willing to express. Some feel pressure to remain eligible for their parents’ insurance and have no particular commitment to an educational outcome. Others may choose college as a default, preferring it to finding a job entering the military, or working for the family business. Still others are urged by their families to attend college to use its social services with little interest or focus on educational goals. These other shadow motivations may lead students to enroll in community colleges and, when prompted by the institution, to arbitrarily declare an educational goal.

Academic Preparation

It is common for community colleges to place more than half of their entering students in developmental courses (Bailey, 2008). In many cases, these are students whose high school performance was marginal, and community college was the only option to pursue in higher education. If students often complain that they do not feel like they are in college since the majority of their time is spent in remedial course work in math, reading, and composition. Depending on the academic policies of the institutions, however, marginal students may continue to take some college-level courses even though they may not be prepared to succeed. In some colleges, departments are reluctant to impose prerequisites for introductory courses, in part to remain competitive for enrollment and in part to provide “real” college experiences for new students. Students who need additional skills development for college-level courses may also be good candidates for eventual transfer to four-year institution, but they will need assistance to sustain them both at the community college and after transfer. Beyond the immediate challenges of academic deficiencies, students may fit that they have consumed their financial aid eligibility on preparatory courses and have insufficient resources remaining to complete a college-level program.

In other cases, students are reverse transfers coming to the community college after having initially enrolled at a four-year institution. Reasons for reverse transfer include failure to succeed academically at the four-year institution, a poor social fit or homesickness, family situations that make it essential to return home, lack of self-management and decision-making skills, and unanticipated financial constraints that require the student to attend a less costly college.

Other attributes affect a student’s academic capacity and can challenge the institution to maintain its academic standards while serving the interests of the student. As open-door institutions, community colleges accept students with a broad range of disabilities, including physical
learning, and emotional. Only students who declare and document their disabilities are eligible for accommodations to level the playing field in courses and compensate for perceptual or processing difficulties. These accommodations constitute an unfunded mandate by the Americans with Disabilities Act and may strain the resources of the institution and the capacities of the faculty to adapt instruction or assessment. Many other students are affected by disabilities that influence their class performance but are not eligible for appropriate intervention. The scope and complexity of disabilities presents challenges across the institution for those working to guide and support the educational goals of this student population.

Context for College

Many community college students are first-generation college students whose families have little or no experience with higher education and who are not equipped to help their students understand the demands and nature of college. Beyond knowing the language and metrics of college, first-generation students often have difficulty envisioning themselves as college students and shaping an identity that can sustain them to transfer and beyond. A number of these students may be part-time, and therefore at greater risk for persistence (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Still others require financial assistance and find the process of obtaining it daunting, the language of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other forms unintelligible. First-generation students, more than others, may be nonnative English speakers and may be the only English speaker in the family. This may pose yet another hurdle in academic processes if students are asked to miss class to serve as an interpreter for medical, legal, or business affairs by family members who need their help and who have little understanding of the demands of the student’s college experience. These students often find themselves filling multiple roles that fragment their ability to be a student and reinforce their emerging sense of themselves having academic potential.

Strategies, Policies, and Practices

Many strategies currently exist that impact transfer student success and retention. While the design and implementation of these strategies will differ according to colleges’ cultures, resources, and state frameworks within which they operate, all community colleges may have some element of each of these in their policies and practices. National and institutional initiatives are described herein that not all colleges may have, or even be eligible for. Nonetheless, understanding them may encourage colleges to seek connections with these initiatives or to explore ways in which they can be incorporated into the institution.

Students’ transfer experiences are affected by a variety of institutional policies and practices, including internal procedures and those related to interinstitutional collaboration, or lack thereof. In this section, a number of policies and practices are identified, and both policy makers and practitioners are encouraged to examine the extent to which both their colleges and the relationships they have established with other institutions facilitate, impede, or are irrelevant to transfer.

The term irrelevant has been purposely introduced since it is the authors’ contention that there are many assumptions about what promotes transfer that research has not supported. Thus, personnel may be spending a good deal of time and energy developing policies and practices that make no difference either to students or the relationships between institutions. This is not a good use of resources, and some ideas about transfer that have rarely been questioned would benefit from being challenged. Indeed, one of the most problematic aspects of researching transfer is to find empirical studies that evaluate the efficacy and utility of transfer policies and practices.
literature is not encouraging with respect to finding a body of research about transfer interventions and services. With this caveat in mind, the commonly accepted good practices to facilitate transfer are discussed below and questions are posed that institutions will need to address in order to examine and improve the ways in which student transfer is encouraged. These practices are divided into two broad groups: (a) those that touch students directly and (b) those that address work that must be done within or between institutions.

Policies and Initiatives That Touch Students

Orientation. Community colleges are devoting significant attention to orientation as an integral part of a corps of services to promote student success. The focus of orientation is typically on the community college itself, with perhaps but a passing reference to transfer as one of the outcomes for which students may wish to prepare themselves and the importance of finding and registering for classes that facilitate transfer.

A number of receiving institutions have begun to offer orientation programs specific for incoming transfer students, using on-campus, online, and hybrid approaches. What is not clear, however, is whether these programs are comprehensive orientations that include topics such as getting to know the campus and various student services, the co-curricular and social aspects of institutional life, and adjusting to the new college or whether they are confined to the business of advising and registration.

The most novel, and least offered, type of program is a community college orientation targeted to students who intend to transfer. Such an event might best be presented as a separate act from the more general community college orientation and scheduled for students who have reached a modest threshold of progress toward completing college-level courses. If large numbers of students are transferring to a particular receiving institution, a separate session or breakout could be scheduled for them, with representatives from the receiving school both designing and delivering parts of the program. Because transferring is complicated, a new concept for many recent immigrants, laden with anecdotal and usually erroneous information, including parents and other important family members is probably a wise idea.

Advising. Transfer students need advising from two perspectives—the college they are transferring from and the one they are transferring to. This chapter concentrates on the role of the college, but we recognize that many of the issues and questions posed are germane when the college is sending or receiving transfer students. In fact, the same institution may be in both categories because transfer to the community college has become a prominent component of transfer swirl behavior now characterizing postsecondary students.

Advising is a complex process. Often institutions are zealous to deliver everything they think a student needs to know right away, but this is rarely, if ever, a good practice. First, there is so much information a student can absorb at once. Second, some critical items of advising information cannot be provided until a student has moved through earlier phases of college work. Students change their majors and their minds about where to transfer, so that even the most current information delivered at one point in time may no longer be accurate later. Finally, institutions themselves change curricula, admission requirements, and other aspects of transfer. Even the student stays with the first major and institution of choice, advising information may need to be updated and revised.

How an institution organizes and staffs for transfer advising is yet another piece of the puzzle to be considered. Does the institution require advising or offer it on a voluntary basis? Is advising required and/or encouraged at key points during a student's tenure at the institution (e.g., entry, after completion of a specific number of credits) or on a more casual timetable? Is
a separate corps of transfer advisors who are specifically trained or are advisors generalists? Are advisors attached to a college or department within a university or housed in a centralized advising center? Is advising information available online, in print, in person, or in some combination? Who is responsible for updating information and training advisors? What is the role of faculty in the advising process?

Kerr, King, and Grites (2004) summarize the most common recommendations for improved transfer advising under four broad categories: (a) enhanced communications, (b) establishment of transfer centers, (c) orientation programs, and (d) extending opportunities available to native students at four-year institutions to transfer students.

**College success courses.** Frequently referred to as first-year seminars or extended orientation seminars, these classes are typically designed for and targeted to new first-year students. Recently, some schools have begun to offer courses for both incoming and outgoing transfer students. For example, St. Philip's College in Texas designed a college orientation course specifically for students planning to transfer. As described in its application for a 2009 National Institution for the Study of Transfer Students Successful Transfer Enhancement Programs (STEP) award, the College designated one of its mandatory student development courses specifically for transfer students. The class had the same components as the traditional course but also included university guest speakers, two campus tours, and class assignments related to transferring, such as a transfer portfolio.

**Provision of transfer information.** The Internet, web pages, and electronic access to information have dramatically changed the way students learn about colleges and universities. Receiving institutions that realize they enroll significant numbers of transfer students and care about them now have web pages devoted specifically to this population. Even if links take transfer students to the same information accessed by native students, the fact that they get to the information through what appears to be a transfer-specific portal lends credibility to the material and demonstrates the institution thinks about transfer students.

Many institutions now provide not only general information about transferring but also course equivalency guides that enable an individual or advisor to determine how a given community college course will transfer to the receiving institution. Ideally, the information will indicate whether the course meets a general education or major requirement or is an elective. Building and maintaining these systems can be time consuming and complicated, particularly in large universities whose colleges and departments treat the same course differently from one another. UseSelect, formerly the Course Applicability System (CAS), permits individuals to view course equivalency and program requirement information for participating colleges. Some state projects, such as the Illinois Articulation Initiative, have online capabilities that permit equivalency checking for selected courses and institutions. And many receiving institutions create transfer guides and course equivalency for sending institutions where there are enough transfer students to warrant the effort.

For the purpose of this chapter, the key question is: What is the role of community colleges in providing transfer information? In an ideal world, advisors and faculty in the community college will know transfer eligibility and admission requirements as well as which courses transfer where and how. In reality, however, it is unrealistic to expect advisors and faculty to keep current on the intricacies of admission and course requirements at institutions other than their own. Thus, it is probably more appropriate to place the responsibility on the receiving institution to make clear its transfer admission standards and course requirements and, when there is sufficient mobility between institutions, course equivalencies. Several online programs and sites have been noted above that provide course equivalency information. The clear message to students planning to transfer must be, "Check with the institution to which you will be, or are thinking of, transferring. The receiving college makes decisions about course transferability, not the community college." To more visibly link the two- and four-year institutions, many community colleges provide office space for
key colleges and universities in their area. Staff and advisors from the four-year institutions offer a presence and continuous source of information and support to students in the community college who are preparing to transfer.

Policies and Initiatives Within and Between Institutions

Course alignments to ensure transferability. The more alike courses are at two- and four-year institutions, the greater likelihood that the community college course will transfer smoothly. While this seems to be a common sense statement, the complexities of the real world make course alignments more difficult to achieve than it would appear. Faculty are notoriously protective of their courses, sometimes believing that only “my” or “my department’s” course includes appropriate content, standards, rigor, assignments, grading practices, lab or other experiences, and pedagogy. From this narrow perspective, courses that purport to be equivalent but vary on any of these attributes cannot possibly provide students with the requisite knowledge and skills and, therefore, should not transfer, even if credits are awarded as free electives.

But aligning courses is difficult even when faculty across sectors do trust and respect one another. For example, in urban environments with many institutions, course differences may make it problematic for one community college to design a course that meets varied and different expectations at different transfer institutions. Rarely will there be adequate enrollment to enable the community college to offer variations of a course, each section targeted to the needs of a different transfer institution. And even if the critical mass of students were present and the community college understood the differing expectations, students themselves continually change their minds about where they will transfer, so that a course that perfectly matches a course at the expected transfer school may not work should the student actually go elsewhere.

Yet a third primary barrier for smooth course alignments is the ever-changing curriculum that marks many courses. This may be particularly true in the sciences, where even introductory general education courses change as new discoveries are made. Thus, to keep abreast of course revisions at multiple schools and then continually reshape the community college’s course to keep up is simply not possible.

Some states have attempted to address the concern about course alignments through common course numbering systems or system or statewide course catalogs. In Florida, for example, it is assumed that American Government is a comparable course throughout Florida community colleges and universities. In Illinois, Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) faculty panels have developed course descriptions for lower-division, general education courses. Panels review course syllabi from participating institutions to verify that the institution’s course adequately matches the IAI course. Intended to assure comparability and smooth transfer, the jury is still out on whether this goal has been achieved.

Articulation agreements. These arrangements refer to formal agreements, even contracts, between institutions that spell out courses and/or programs that will transfer from the community college to the four-year institution. They may be general; for example, specifying that students who earn an associate degree in liberal arts and have a stipulated grade point average will be admitted to the receiving institution as a junior. Rarely is admission to a specific program guaranteed, however. A more prescriptive articulation agreement might list courses the student takes at the community college and their equivalency to receiving institution courses, perhaps even guaranteeing admission to a specific major if the GPA is attained. Some articulation agreements focus on courses, while others are at the program level. Some are bilateral arrangements between two institutions; others are at the state or system level.
Three key observations can be summarized about articulation agreements. First, they are often promoted and lauded as vehicles to facilitate transfer. State policy makers, institutional leaders, and advocates for higher rates of degree attainment seem to agree that creation of articulation agreements will positively affect transfer. Indeed, creating the document is sometimes presented as an end unto itself, without consideration given to two other important aspects of articulation agreements, noted below.

Secondly, studies fail to show whether differences in transfer rates or degree attainment are related to the presence or absence of articulation agreements (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006; Goldrich-Rab & Roksa, 2008; Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Roksa & Keith, 2008). Only Goldhaber, Gross, and DeBurgomaster (2008) reported some positive associations between state policies and transfer rates and suggest more study is needed. The zeal for creating articulation agreements seems unmatched by concrete evidence they are effective at least as measured by transfer rates or degree attainment. They may make a difference in two unexplored ways, however. The first is to give credibility to the community college as a partner in the pathway to the baccalaureate because individuals may perceive the agreement as an indicator of quality and legitimacy. The second is that agreements may improve the efficiency of transfer by directing potential transfer students to the courses most likely to transfer.

The last observation is that articulation agreements are costly to create and maintain. There is no research that documents the cost of articulation agreements in metrics of staff time and opportunity taken away from other, perhaps more useful, endeavors. From the authors’ experience, it may take many hours spread over months to finalize a document and, despite excellent intentions, revisiting agreements to assure they are still current rarely occurs.

*Dual admission agreements.* A variation of articulation agreements, these arrangements enable a student to be officially admitted both to the community college and the four-year institution at the same time, thereby assuring the student of transfer provided certain requirements are met. And therein lies the rub. Requirements may be a minimum grade point average, available space in the student’s desired major, specified grades in prerequisite courses, and more. As with articulation agreements, there is little research on the efficacy of dual admission agreements. Nor is it known how many students participate in them or the number who have experienced a smoother transfer as a result.

*Tuition guarantees.* Some institutions and states are guaranteeing tuition rates for transfer students to reduce uncertainty about college costs and to encourage students to move steadily through higher education. A variety of restrictions may apply, including time limits, full-time status, and adjusting the tuition rate should a student drop out and later return. Tuition guarantees are a relatively new phenomenon in higher education, and research has yet to be conducted on the impact on transfer.

Clearly, there are a variety of institutional policies and practices that general wisdom assumes facilitate transfer. A good deal of attention and energy is being devoted to them at community colleges across the country. As with so many initiatives aimed at increasing student success, gathering and analyzing empirical evidence about their impact lag behind the bandwagon of implementation. Therefore, two more good practices are encouraged to be employed along with each initiative: (a) assessing effectiveness and (b) having the courage to terminate programs whose costs consistently outweigh the benefits.
Institutional and National Initiatives

Snapshot descriptions of a number of national and institutional initiatives to improve student success and transfer are presented in this section. While this monograph is focused on transferring students who do not succeed at the community college, they will not be able to transfer successfully. And even if they do gain admittance to a four-year college or university, the likelihood of earning a degree is surely diminished if their academic record and ability to enact the role student at the community college are wanting.

The descriptions provided below cannot do justice to the richness, variety, and challenge within each initiative. Consequently, this section is viewed as an annotated listing of initiatives with references to primary web resources for more information, rather than as stand-alone explications that will give the reader more than a passing acquaintance with the opportunity. Before moving forward, some cautions are offered. The first is that the landscape for student success initiatives is shifting rapidly. Driven by dramatic changes in the economy, the 2009 American Graduate Initiative emphasizes increasing the number of citizens who earn college degrees, including associate degrees. At the same time, traditional majors no longer guarantee jobs in today’s labor market. New occupations, especially in the area of green jobs, are emerging but not yet clarified, making difficult for institutions to respond to these market demands.

The second caveat is that despite substantial efforts, most colleges have not yet figured out how to make significant improvements in student success, especially in remedial mathematics and, to a somewhat lesser extent, remedial English. Lastly, community colleges are beginning the process of, but are rarely experienced at, collecting, analyzing, and using data about the effectiveness of strategies intended to improve student success. As a result, institutions are still in the early stage of understanding whether an intervention that should work, actually does.

Institutional Strategies

As previously noted, student success at the community college is important for success in transfer to baccalaureate institutions. The truth is, as much as success strategies are promote there is mixed or little evidence they have significant impact. In part, this is due to a lesson learned about community college students: they do not “do optional” (i.e., if something is not mandatory it is seldom completed or attended). At most colleges, these strategies are offered but not required. Students who are attempting to balance multiple roles of student, employee, and family member and who may be unrealistic about their academic skills are unlikely to take advantage of service even when they are offered at no cost.

Learning communities. As defined by Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2008), learning communities take a variety of curricular approaches, yet share the following characteristics: (a) they intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often focused on a problem or interdisciplinary theme, and (b) they enroll a cohort of students. The intent is to foster connections among students and instructors, to help students connect learning across disciplines, and, at their best, to foster active engagement and reflection. Empirical research about the impact of learning communities is beginning to appear. For example, in a sophisticated and unusual study at Kingsborough Community College (Scriven, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, & Sommo, 2008), students were randomly assigned to learning communities or to stand-alone courses. Early findings showed that program improved students’ sense of integration and involvement in the college; improved learning outcomes while students were in the learning communities, but effects diminished late and moved students more quickly through developmental English. Evidence is mixed about the effects on persistence. Enthusiasm for learning communities continues, although two importa
barriers, evident more through conversations with institutions than in the formal literature, are worth noting: (a) the challenge of recruiting students to enroll in learning communities and (b) the cost of offering large numbers of learning communities, especially where faculty receive reassigned time or other incentives.

Supplemental Instruction (SI). This strategy is often used in high-risk courses with large rates of student failure. An SI leader, frequently a student who has already excelled in the course, sits in on all class sessions and works outside class to provide additional assistance to students through tutoring, group study sessions, and general coaching. Key features of SI are that it (a) is proactive rather than passive (e.g., the SI leader is in the class), (b) is attached to specific classes, (c) builds student support networks, and (d) provides feedback to the instructor (Arendale, 1994). However, the transient nature of the community college population presents challenges in recruiting and maintaining student SI group leaders, causing some community colleges to use tutors rather than students as leaders.

Redesign and reconfiguration of developmental courses. At present, no college has found an effective approach to substantially improving student performance in and progress through developmental course sequences in writing and mathematics, especially mathematics. A significant amount of work is going on, with developmental education being among the key focuses of many Achieving the Dream colleges and often selected as Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) projects by institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Higher Learning Commission (North Central Association) regional accreditation associations, respectively. In 2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation funded a three-year Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) targeted to improving student success in developmental courses and gateway college courses in the discipline. A variety of approaches are being tried across the country, including

- Using technology to augment in-class instruction
- Forming learning communities in which students enroll as a bloc in both developmental and college success and/or general education courses
- Using Supplemental Instruction
- Compressing course schedules to give students more intense exposure over fewer weeks
- Providing refresher workshops for students who have been away from the subject and just need some brushing up before being ready for college-level work
- Offering tutoring or group study sessions
- Crafting assignments that require application to real-world situations

Other strategies. Additional programs or initiatives include (a) the provision of mentors or coaches, linking students with an identified college employee to provide general support and with whom to check in about progress and problems; (b) student organizations or clubs defined for specific baccalaureate majors; (c) undergraduate research projects to connect students with actual research in a discipline; and (d) service-learning to foster active involvement with a community agency and integration of experiences with classroom instruction. The list could be extended.

National Strategies

Achieving the Dream. Achieving the Dream is a national initiative involving slightly more than 100 community colleges in 22 states. Funded originally by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the initiative currently includes multiple funders and partners who oversee and evaluate activities. Specific objectives are to increase the number of students who successfully complete the courses
they take, advance from remedial to credit-bearing courses, register for and successfully complete gatekeeper courses, and enroll from one semester to the next.

Achieving the Dream is comprehensive and ambitious; it is about institutional transformation. Participants are required to compile and examine their data regarding student success and to disaggregate the data to identify gaps in performance across race or ethnicity and income groups. And they are expected to develop, implement, and evaluate intervention strategies to improve student success. Colleges range from very small, rural institutions with enrollments of fewer than 800 students to multicampus urban institutions with enrollments topping 40,000. Interestingly, common themes and strategies have emerged: a focus on developmental education, especially in mathematics; strengthening orientation programs and advising; reorganizing and augmenting courses through approaches such as Supplemental Instruction and learning communities; and moving from inviting to requiring students to participate in academic and student support activities.

Though transfer was not explicitly included as an Achieving the Dream objective at the outset, more recently participants have acknowledged that transfer is a legitimate and important outcome for successful students. And, perhaps more important, for students to transfer and succeed in baccalaureate programs, they must have met at least some of the Achieving the Dream objectives (e.g., successfully complete courses, advance from remedial to credit-bearing courses, succeed in gatekeeper courses, persist).

**TRIO Programs.** The U.S. Department of Education’s TRIO Programs comprise six different programs, all intended to improve the academic achievements of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Student Support Services (SSS) project within TRIO is specifically targeted to college students. The goal is to increase retention and graduation rates of students in TRIO programs. In keeping with general practice, the term TRIO is used to refer to the postsecondary TRIO SSS projects.

The Department of Education has calculated several TRIO performance rates, most recently from the 2005-2006 performance reports of TRIO grantees (US Department of Education, 2005-2006). Two rates particularly useful to understanding student performance are persistence (i.e., year-to-year persistence of TRIO students from 2004-2005 to 2005-2006) and graduation within three years for community colleges. Rates are based on a cohort of full-time, first-year student participants. Of the 854 institutions for which performance data were calculated, half were community colleges. The average persistence rate among community colleges was 78% and the three-year graduation rate for the 415 two-year colleges that provided data for this analysis was 24.7%. Unfortunately, the TRIO report does not contain data about transfer. For comparative purposes, note the average fall-to-fall persistence rate among Achieving the Dream colleges for all fall 2002 entering, full- and part-time students was 49%. The national graduation rate for two-year institutions for the 2004 cohort of first-time, full-time students was 30.9% (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2004).

Does this mean TRIO programs are effective in helping students to transfer? The question is simple, but the answer is not. Suffice it to say that neither meta-studies evaluating the effectiveness of TRIO programs with large nor studies that employ control or quasi-control groups are present in the literature. Certainly institutions that receive TRIO funds become dependent on them to staff and support offices to work with at-risk students, and TRIO staff may develop close and useful relationships with university colleagues, open TRIO students’ perceptions about whether and where they might transfer, and help students with the transfer process. Especially in this economic climate, losing TRIO funds might well force a community college to reduce, if not terminate, targeted services to TRIO-eligible students.
National Research

Slowly empirical research about transfer is making its way into the higher education literature. A concrete illustration of the growing recognition that research and practice about transfer need to inform one another is the creation of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer at the University of North Texas. The Institute has a multipart mission, including fostering research about transfer and recently created a new Association for the Study of Transfer Students. As the Institute’s director stated, “We can only hope that the transfer phenomenon has become sufficiently important to postsecondary education that research in new and broader areas will be undertaken” (Jacobs, 2004, p. 14).

Foundation-supported programs. Institutional, local, regional, and national foundations may assist community college transfer students by providing a host of support services and academic enrichment programs. While not targeting transfer students specifically, these programs usually focus on high-risk students or students interested in particular majors or types of activities.

Community college foundations and private donors can also be a source for scholarships for students transferring to four-year institutions, though most fund-raising efforts at the community college focus on awards for students while they are at the two-year institution.

The most prominent, and perhaps the only, national foundation that explicitly provides financial assistance for transfer students is the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. In order to expand opportunities for high-achieving, lower-income community college students to attend selective colleges and universities, its Community College Transfer Initiative and Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship Program supports up to 50 community college transfer students annually with awards of as much as $30,000. Community colleges have two roles with respect to foundation-supported programs to help transfer students. The first is to scan the philanthropy landscape and apply for grants to assist students while they are at the community college through academic and other support services and through scholarships. The second is to be aware of scholarships for use at transfer institutions and inform students preparing to transfer about them.

Challenges

Ongoing challenges for community colleges include fostering transfer-friendly environments and preparing students with the knowledge and skills needed to make good choices about transfer institutions and to succeed after transfer. In this section, observations about continuing challenges are offered with the caveat that it would be simplistic to suggest colleges can quickly address them.

- **Taking initiatives to scale.** Promising innovations, such as college success courses, learning communities, and Supplemental Instruction, are often expensive and complicated to schedule and staff for more than a handful of sections.

- **Engaging students.** This challenge is in part a corollary to the first one because research has shown that community college students typically do not enroll in learning communities or take advantage of support services unless it is mandatory. And requiring students to do so frequently conflicts with a cherished philosophical tradition of community colleges: students are adults with multiple roles and must be given the freedom and flexibility to make their own choices, albeit with as much guidance as the college can provide. Moving from a culture of may to a culture of must is both traumatic and expensive, especially in an era when severe financial constraints are limiting what colleges can provide.

- **Improving success at the course level.** This is an essential outcome for students to progress through the community college and transfer. Support and complementary services, such
as advising, orientation sessions, and articulation agreements, are useful but to no avail if students do not successfully complete their courses. Therefore, when an institution is short on resources and must make difficult choices, the priority should be given to those types of assistance that most directly impact course success.

- **Dealing with idiosyncratic transfer policies and practices.** The receiving institution is always the final determinant of what courses transfer and whether they meet general education or major requirements or count only as electives. The inbound institution is also the final determinant of grade point average and other requirements for admission as transfer students and whether transfers enter a specific major or college within a university. Community colleges best serve their students by referring them to receiving institutions for answer to specific questions and not trying to speak on behalf those schools. This is particularly true when the community college is located in a geographic area that offers students many transfer options, because the burden of updating and understanding complex transfer rules at numerous different institutions is heavier than any community college can shoulder.

- **Providing accurate information.** Students, parents, and others who do not work regularly with transfer issues are often confused and frustrated by what seem to be complex and arcane rules regarding the transferability of courses and programs. While community colleges should refer students to receiving institutions to obtain information about the transferability of specific courses, it is also incumbent on community colleges to provide students and parents with basic information about transfer, perhaps in the form of a glossary of terms and/or a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page on the website and as a handout. Because the transfer world is so unfamiliar to so many students and parents, providing information in multiple formats and at multiple times is essential.

Transfer is a common pattern of postsecondary student behavior and is likely to become even more so as students search for affordable college options, enroll in convenient online courses at institutions other than their home colleges, and cope with unexpected changes in financial and other circumstances that prompt them to enroll first at a community college before moving to a baccalaureate-granting institution or to change colleges that do not meet their expectations or satisfy their needs. Preparing students for transfer is an essential part of the mission of community colleges. As should be evident from the discussion above, while colleges embrace this mission, it is not an easy one to fulfill. Strong partnerships, mutual respect, acceptance of credits, and provision of clear information among two- and four-year institutions is of paramount importance. Absent cooperation and the reduction of transfer barriers, intervention by state or even federal legislators to impose transfer mandates is more likely to occur, putting legislators in the place of educators. Thus, strengthening transfer is a goal both to serve students and to retain college academic standards and policies within the academy.

**Conclusion**

The complex nature of community colleges and the variety of pathways that lead students to transfer have prompted many institutions to develop interventions to support transfer students that are responsive rather than proactive. The accretion of services may inadvertently diffuse the resources and effort that might be more effectively channeled to ensure the successful transfer of community college students. The following three key areas of effort can provide a more focused and coherent approach to transfer services.
Alignment Between Two- and Four-Year Institutions

The transition from one institution to the other is best served when students can identify and locate comparable elements and services in both institutions. Where feasible, community colleges should use terminology for services comparable to that of transfer institutions in the area (e.g., admissions rather than enrollment management; advising rather than student support). Beyond this, however, curricular programs must align to facilitate the transfer of credit and accurate advising for students preparing to transfer. While articulation agreements may yield no additional benefit, researching the scope and sequencing of courses is essential if community colleges are to responsibly prepare students to transfer and facilitate the transfer of credit when they do.

Multiple Points of Advising

To accommodate the developing and shifting educational goals of students, it is essential that community colleges provide a variety of advising services that occur at various points in a student’s experience. Rather than assume that students will understand and remember the information relevant to the transfer process that was delivered in orientation, advising should be structured to provide both just-in-time advising related to students’ immediate needs and developmental advising to nudge students to prepare for the next stage in their academic experience. A number of institutions have implemented creative advising programs that include services provided by advisors, faculty, peer mentors, and volunteer coaches to represent the variety of perspectives and purposes that constitute comprehensive advising. And since community college students tend to avoid optional services, many institutions use the number of credit hours earned as the prompt for intrusive advising that is linked to registration. Though case-managed advising would seem ideal for tracking the development and rationale for students’ educational choices, a well-coordinated program that offers a variety of services may be a better fit for the structure and resources of many community colleges.

Assessment of Impact

To most effectively support the transfer of community college students, it is essential to determine the effectiveness of existing services before expanding them or adding other interventions to the mix. Research that examines the relationship between student participation in forms of advising, orientation, and learning communities and the rate of transfer and subsequent academic success can provide the basis for informed decision making and resource allocation. Though it is difficult to grow services to scale in community colleges with diverse student populations, it becomes much easier when data support the impact of services on specific student outcomes.