SECOND CHANCE, Not Second Class
A Blueprint for Community-College Transfer

BY STEPHEN J. HANDEL

"We don't need to recruit transfer students so much as we need to serve them."
—Admissions director at a large flagship university

While American community colleges are highly regarded for providing access to higher education for many students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, many of those students never make significant progress in earning a baccalaureate degree. In order to do so, they must successfully transfer to a four-year institution. For decades, policymakers and educators have been concerned about the low numbers who make that transition successfully. A 2003 U.S. Department of Education report notes that only about half of the community-college students who indicate a desire to transfer to a four-year institution eventually succeed. An earlier report from the

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American Council on Education pegged the transfer rate at about a quarter of potential students. The number of students “lost” in the transfer process represents both a waste of individual talent and a failure of America’s higher-education establishment.

The inexorable demographic challenges this country faces require that we do a better job of building the transfer bridge for at least two reasons. First, the number of high-school graduates whom colleges and universities will need to educate without appreciably greater resources will grow significantly throughout this decade. Second, community colleges disproportionately enroll students from groups that have been underrepresented in higher education and that are poised to grow dramatically in the next two decades.

Community-college leaders are quick to point out that the number of students admitted to four-year institutions is out of their hands—that they are judged on a metric they do not control. The heartening news is that four-year institutions are beginning to take their responsibility for the success of the transfer function more seriously.

In a widely reported initiative, for example, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and eight highly selective institutions, including Amherst College and Cornell University, are devoting more than $27 million to increase the number of low- and moderate-income community-college students who transfer to those institutions. Meanwhile, two influential public institutions, the Universities of Wisconsin-Madison and Virginia, also have announced plans to increase the number of community-college students they enroll. Further, in light of the on-going debate about the extent to which high-achieving but poor students have access to the country’s best colleges and universities, several blue-chip institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford Universities are taking a hard look at community-college students as a way of diversifying their enrollments.

I applaud this interest in community-college transfer and hope that it is sustained. But the existing efforts still are limited. Over the next three years the University of Wisconsin-Madison projects enrolling about 150 additional community-college transfers. Over the next four years the institutions participating in the Cooke initiative expect to enroll 1,100 more of these transfers, and the additional number admitted by any one of the nation’s other elite institutions is probably measured in mere tens of students. So as laudable as these initiatives are, the combined effort will affect a very small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of potential transfer students.

What we need are additional strategies that help more institutions enroll far more students from community colleges. Fortunately, recent efforts by some of California’s four-year institutions, working in partnership with community colleges, show us how to gain traction on this front. These efforts increase the transfer of community-college students in ways that are cost-effective and relatively easy to implement.

THE CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

California’s commitment to transfer has a 100-year history, full of stops and starts, wise pronouncements about the centrality of transfer, dozens of reports, and an uneven record of success. The state’s statutorily mandated reliance on transfer began in 1960 with the California Master Plan for Higher Education, which delineated a transfer path for community-college students who wished to earn a baccalaureate degree at a campus of the state’s two public four-year systems, the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU).

The number of community-college students transferring to UC oscillated throughout the next three decades. While the master plan assisted many students in earning a degree that they might have never considered within reach, the total number of transfer students always lagged far behind freshman enrollment and, more importantly, never achieved a sustained growth curve in spite of significant increases in the number of community colleges. (From 1965 to 1995, the state built 50 new community colleges and increased enrollment from 459,000 students in 1965 to 758,000 students by the mid-1990s).

Despite the self-evident virtues of opening the doors of higher education to all who can benefit, community colleges have long been the poor stepchildren of American higher education. They are funded less well than four-year institutions and are often forced to compete with the K-12 sector—and even one another—for scarce resources. Moreover, there is an awkward, often-acknowledged ambivalence among four-year faculty toward the mission of community colleges. While expressing great respect for the work of community-college faculty because they educate students who often lack essential academic skills and preparation, many four-year faculty remain suspicious of the rigor of the community-college curriculum and the apparent lack of an academic culture on these campuses.

But in 1994, after emerging from a severe recession, California was in relatively good financial shape to support growth in higher education. The timing was fortuitous. The California Department of Finance projected that the number of high-school graduates would surge well into the 21st century, and the state needed to accommodate thousands of new college students. Community colleges were viewed as the
segment that could best accommodate this growth.

At the same time, the University of California Regents passed a controversial measure to ban the use of race/ethnicity as a criterion for admitting students. While the regents’ decision had the greatest impact on freshman admission at the system’s universities, it influenced community-college admissions as well. Casting about for ways to maintain student diversity on UC campuses, university leaders began to look seriously at community colleges as a way of preparing students for a UC education. Since students from underrepresented groups (defined in California as African-American, Latino/Chicano-American, and American-Indian students) were far more likely to enter higher education at a community college, there was a surge of interest in strengthening transfer.

This interest culminated in the signing in 1997 of an historic “Memorandum of Understanding” by then-UC President Richard Atkinson and California Community College Chancellor Thomas Nussbaum—a commitment to work together to strengthen the transfer process. What made this agreement especially noteworthy was the fact that UC pledged publicly to increase its enrollment of California community-college students by 33 percent (later raised to 50 percent) by the end of the 2005-06 academic year. In turn, California’s community colleges agreed to increase the total number of “transfer-ready” students they prepared.

TRANSFER SUCCESS

The MOU’s goals were ambitious, requiring UC to enroll 15,300 community-college transfer students by 2005-06. A 50-percent increase in transfer enrollment meant that the university’s campuses needed to absorb six percent more transfer students each year between 1998-99 and 2005-06—that’s seven consecutive years, a target never before hit by the institution. More remarkable, one of the nation’s most highly selective institutions had pledged to increase significantly its commitment to enroll those who did not fit the model of a “traditional” student and who were not as likely to have benefited from a rigorous high-school education.

But the agreement has largely succeeded, in spite of periodic and significant state budget cuts to higher education. Since 1998-99 (the academic year in which the partnership agreement was implemented), full-year enrollment of transfer students from California’s community colleges has increased 33 percent (see Figure 1). In 2005-06, UC enrolled more than 13,500 transfer students from California community colleges, its largest transfer class since the adoption of the master plan.

This growth has not been confined to the less-selective UC campuses. At UC’s most competitive campuses—Berkeley, UCLA, and San Diego—there has been a steady increase in the number of transfers, with the greatest percentage increases occurring at the San Diego and Los Angeles campuses (see Figure 2).

And the effects on student diversity have been what UC had hoped for (in spite of a ban on affirmative action). From 1998 to 2005, students from underrepresented groups increased an average of nine percent per year in the UC system, while the annual overall increase in enrollment for community-college transfer students at California four-year campuses during the same period was four percent. During this period, enrollment of African American, Chicano, and Latino students grew 64 percent, 75 percent, and 63 percent respectively. (Enrollment of American Indian students, however, declined, although preliminary full-year data for 2005-06 show an increase.)

FIGURE 1. ENROLLMENT OF CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY- COLLEGE STUDENTS AT ALL UC CAMPUSES 1998-99 TO 2005-06

Source: University of California, Office of the President.
For the first time, proportional growth of transfer students became a greater source of diversity than freshmen for UC's undergraduate population. From 1998 to 2005, the growth in enrollment of underrepresented transfer students from California community colleges outpaced the growth in enrollment of underrepresented minority freshmen, 66 versus 48 percent (see Figure 3).

**The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Transfer**

Clearly, the transfer mission can work. In California, analysis of a decade's labor has produced seven "habits" that have a positive effect on community-college students' transferring to, and ultimately succeeding in, four-year institutions.

- **Insist on Academic Preparation**

  The research literature, including recent studies conducted by the Department of Education on both freshman and transfer students (see Clifford Adelman in the July/August 2007 issue of Change), makes it inescapably clear that academic preparation is the single most important determinant of student success. Fortunately, for many years the faculty senates at UC and the community-colleges have paid close attention to the type and number of courses that community-college students should complete prior to transfer.

  They have insisted that students be prepared, first, in English composition and quantitative reasoning. Skills in these areas influence student success across the curriculum, regardless of major. To be eligible to attend UC, a transfer student must complete two courses in composition and at least one in quantitative reasoning. UC faculty review community-college composition courses to assure that there is a substantial writing component, and they will accept for transfer only those quantitative-reasoning courses whose prerequisite is intermediate algebra or higher.

  When these requirements were phased in during the early 1990s, there was concern that many students would be unable to fulfill them. Indeed, some community-college counselors predicted that the math requirement would depress the number of transfers from underrepresented groups. As it turns out, the enrollment of transfer students from underrepresented groups has never been higher.

  UC faculty also believed that community-college students could best prepare themselves by completing prerequisites for their intended majors. Students entering community colleges are generally told to complete general-education courses first. But while general-education courses will always be part of the course mix, getting students focused on a major early buys them curricular coherence and continuity and focuses their interest and commitment. This is espe-
cially important for students who do not come from college-going families and who, as a result, may lose themselves (and time) in the smorgasbord of most general-education curricula.

**Communicate First Things First**

Outreach programs designed to increase the number of transfers must identify the most salient concerns of prospective students and respond to them in a sustained way. In the language of media experts, “staying on message” is particularly important when attempting to reach constituencies who are unfamiliar with or even hostile to the idea of transferring to an elite, highly selective college or university.

Unfortunately, rather than paying attention to their greatest concerns, institutions are apt to give students information about the mechanics of transfer (whether a particular campus enrolls transfers, how many and at what level, the courses that will and will not transfer, whether a student can attend part-time, and so on). All of this information is important, but it is beside the point when students first consider this important educational transition. In directing their attention first to the minutia of the transfer process, students are likely to see that transition as a nearly impossible obstacle course.

What, then, are students’ main concerns regarding transfer? Overwhelmingly, they center on academic ability and college costs. Many prospective transfer students worry that they may not possess the academic skills needed to complete upper-division work successfully—not an unreasonable concern, especially since many students attend community colleges because they did not excel academically in high school. Another major concern—particularly of students who come from families with little experience with higher education—is the cost of college. Many significantly overestimate four-year college costs. So when they contemplate transferring, students are hit with a one-two punch that discourages many of them from working toward that goal.

To simplify the transfer message and address concerns about academic ability and college costs, UC’s outreach messages to prospective students have emphasized the following:

**Community-college students who meet UC’s eligibility and selection criteria perform just as well as UC’s regular students in upper-division courses.**

A persistent view is that transfer students are less well qualified to earn the baccalaureate degree than students who began initially at the four-year institution. And studies do show that students beginning at a community college are 11 percent to 19 percent less likely to earn that degree, even when such variables as student background, ability, high-school record, and aspirations are held constant.

Yet data from highly selective institutions suggest that after transfer, community-college students have levels of achievement equal to, and often exceeding, those of traditional students. The strong performance of these students often surprises prospective students, their families, and others and provides a powerful outreach message.

**Financial aid to attend college is available for all students, in the form of need-based grants, merit scholarships, loans, and employment.**

Individuals who come from non-college-going families, and hence have little help in applying for financial aid, generally find the process confusing and discouraging. Moreover, students from low-income backgrounds are apt to see educational loans as a risky investment, especially if they are unsure of their academic abilities. UC’s message to prospective transfer students (and to their parents and counselors) stresses the availability of financial aid and the importance of a long-term investment in education.

Any Madison Avenue intern knows that even the best-designed commercial is ineffective if only a few people see it or if many see it only once. UC’s message that community-college students have the academic chops to transfer successfully and that there is sufficient aid to help them achieve their educational goals has been emphasized in a variety of media, formats, and languages. It is pitched repeatedly to a variety of groups: prospective students, families, and high-school and community-college counselors.

**Support Community-College Counselors**

When the Memorandum of Understanding between the University of California and the California Community College systems was signed, it quickly became apparent that traditional outreach tactics (e.g., college fairs, mass mailings) would be insufficient to meet the new enrollment targets. A new approach was needed that would reach far greater numbers of prospective students persuasively and cost effectively.

UC administrators decided to focus the system’s transfer outreach on community-college counselors and transfer-center directors. This has required the university to work more closely with these individuals than ever before and to invest in professional-development conferences and resources specifically geared to the needs of community-college counselors. Such an initiative is unique in California and perhaps nationally. While a number of organizations offer professional development...
for high-school counselors, almost nothing is available for community-college staff.

One successful professional-development effort of the university system has been the Ensuring Transfer Success Counselor Institutes, co-sponsored by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office. These institutes are offered in a seminar format, providing counselors and UC outreach representatives with an opportunity to interact. The sessions provide in-depth analysis of the transfer issues that are of greatest concern to counselors (and by extension prospective students) and reference materials and resources that are available year-round for counselors and students.

Over a six-year period, attendance at these events grew by more than 250 percent. Over 90 percent of California community colleges have sent at least one representative, and more than half have sent at least six representatives. Most astonishingly, more than one-third of the community colleges in California have sent at least 10 representatives, revealing the high level of perceived need for this type of activity.

*Implement Articulation Policies that Help Most Students Most of the Time (Or: The Quest for Perfect Articulation is a Fool’s Game)*

Articulation agreements describe how the courses students complete at a community college will transfer to a four-year college or university. This information is vital for prospective transfer students, since it ensures (or should) that the courses they complete will prepare them for the upper-division demands they will face after transferring. But the creation of articulation agreements is labor-intensive, requiring faculty at community colleges and four-year institutions to agree upon what constitutes appropriate academic preparation and to review hundreds of courses yearly.

Given the complexity of most state higher-education systems, resources to develop complete course articulation among all community colleges and four-year institutions are almost never available. (Keeping track of existing articulation agreements alone is a bookkeeping nightmare. In California, the number of course-to-course agreements among public postsecondary institutions is estimated at well over 100,000.) And articulation is a contentious issue: Policymakers argue that seamless transfer means 100 percent transferability of all courses with no loss of credit, but community-college faculty rarely warm to the notion of revising their courses to meet a generic threshold of acceptability.

These competing interests can lead to bad policy. For example, some states have adopted common course numbering systems to rationalize the articulation process. But faculty are wary of such arrangements, arguing that insufficient review of course content is built into these systems, leaving transfer students unprepared for upper-division work at four-year institutions. At the same time, faculty oversight at both the transferring and admitting institutions, however critical to articulation, is often slow and cumbersome.

UC and the community colleges have adopted an approach that answers the persistent call for greater efficiency while maintaining sufficient faculty oversight of course content and preparation. The California articulation model has three components. First, a statewide general-education curriculum was developed (awkwardly named the Intersegmental General Education Curriculum or “IGETC”). Students who complete the curriculum at a California community college have met the general-education requirements at any public postsecondary education institution in California.

Four-year faculty approve the IGETC course list.

Second, as noted earlier, students considering transfer to UC are advised to focus on prerequisites in their intended major. This approach simplifies articulation by reducing the need for direct course-to-course articulation agreements. Instead, four-year institutions can develop major-specific articulation agreements. For example, a student majoring in psychology should learn statistics. Under an articulation agreement presented as a package of courses in the major, this competency could be obtained by means of a traditional methods course in psychology or an introductory statistics course (typically offered by a math department).

Third, California invested in a statewide database that contains all course-articulation agreements among UC, the California State University System, and community colleges. The ASSIST (www.ASSIST.org) database makes it easy for students to obtain information about how courses at a community college will transfer to UC and CSU campuses.

*Admit Community-College Applicants First*

Community-college applicants, unlike students attending four-year colleges who wish to transfer to other institutions, have no way to earn the baccalaureate degree if a four-year institution does not admit them. As a matter of policy, it seems misplaced to give priority to applicants from four-year institutions, who already have the opportunity to complete the baccalaureate degree, rather than to community-college applicants, who do not. But this is precisely what community-college students are up against when they apply to most four-year institutions.
UC, however, gives first priority to students applying from a California community college. Nearly 90 percent of transfers to UC come from a California community college. This is one of the most persuasive outreach messages that UC conveys to community-college students.

- **Set Transfer Targets for Students at Community College**

A public commitment to transfer requires an equally public measure of accountability. The agreement between the systems required that UC establish goals for the admission of community-college students. Previously, transfer students were included as part of the institution’s overall undergraduate enrollment targets. Typically, four-year institutions consider transfer students seriously only when they miss their freshman enrollment goals. But making transfer students backfill for inadequate freshman recruitment belies institutional claims that they have a serious commitment to transfer.

Some enrollment managers argue that generating independent freshman and transfer enrollment targets is not realistic because it reduces the institution’s freedom in developing an undergraduate class. But freshman and transfer students are distinct populations, demanding different things from the curriculum, student services, and student housing. At UC, the establishment of specific transfer targets served as a powerful motivator to address transfer-student needs in the enrollment-management process.

- **Establish a “Transfer-Going” Culture**

In California, data indicate that students are more likely to transfer to UC if they attend community colleges that have developed a culture of promoting transfer. Patricia McDonough and other researchers have documented the importance of the high-school context in priming students for college. High schools that support an ethos of college-going by means of high academic expectations and college-preparatory curricula are more effective in focusing student ambitions on higher education. In the same vein, it has been argued that community colleges and four-year institutions whose missions include a commitment to transfer-student access and success are more likely to see increases in transfer rates.

For community colleges, the presence of a campus culture that promotes transfer is indicated by a viable transfer center, counselors trained specifically to address transfer issues, honors programs, four-year campus visitation programs, full-time articulation officers, and (perhaps most importantly) an administration committed to building links with four-year institutions that close the gap between the academic cultures of the institutions.

Creating a supportive culture is also the responsibility of four-year colleges and universities. UC campuses that have been successful in attracting and graduating transfer students have developed initiatives such as transfer-orientation programs, transfer centers (often staffed with counselors skilled in advising community-college students), and transfer-themed housing options. An especially effective strategy, practiced with special success by UCLA and UC Irvine, is the summer bridge program, often offered in partnership with local community colleges. This provides students with opportunities to attend seminars in their areas of interest, participate in research, sharpen their study skills, and obtain advice from counselors regarding academic planning and financial aid prior to official enrollment in the fall term.

**Finding the Money**

These initiatives are not free, but neither are they prohibitively expensive. Strengthening academic preparation, considering transfer applicants first in admissions, setting transfer goals, and making a public commitment to increasing the number of transfers require more political than financial capital. Other recommendations—such as expanding the number of articulation agreements, creating a transfer-promoting culture, and providing professional development for community-college staff members assigned to assist transfers—require ad-
ditional dollars, but they do not cost as much as one might predict.

Developing articulation agreements is somebody’s job within most colleges and universities and is thus a fixed cost. Professional development also requires resources, but much of the cost can be covered through fees paid by participants. The development of a culture that supports transfer sounds expensive, and for a campus that has invested nothing in services for transfer students, it probably is. Still, it is an investment worth making. All California’s community colleges have initiated “transfer centers,” where information and services relating to student transfer are located. Such a resource has proven enormously helpful to prospective students, as well as to outreach representatives from four-year institutions, since it creates a place where a culture of transfer is supported.

**FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT SECOND CHANCES**

Some will argue that definitive evidence is not available to verify the effectiveness of the initiatives described here. There is no question that assessing public policy is messy. But perhaps there are lessons to be learned when these initiatives are scaled back or eliminated entirely.

In 2003, California was mired in one of the worst economic recessions in its history. With a budget deficit of more than $20 billion, all facets of state government faced significant cuts. Higher education was hit especially hard, since it is one of the few budget line items not protected statutorily (unlike prisons and K-12 education, for example).

Consequently, the state budget in 2002-03 and 2003-04 cut UC’s systemwide transfer initiatives by 50 percent. UC campuses scaled back outreach services, eliminated professional-development programs, reduced the articulation of courses and programs, and suspended campus-based initiatives to promote transferring. In 2003-04, the enrollment of transfer students at UC dropped to 12,580 from 12,780 the year before—the first decline in transfer-enrollment after five years of increases averaging almost six percent per year. Fortunately, the California economy—and the higher-education budget—rebouded, and enrollment of transfers in 2004-05 and 2005-06 surpassed 13,000 students, a new record.

The transfer-related policies and programs implemented in the late 1990s and early 2000s have had a significant and beneficial impact on the transfer rate in California. This is not to extol the farsightedness of California in supporting transfer (that history is uneven) but rather to emphasize that a commitment to transfer, demonstrated by the implementation of sustained policies and programs focusing on community-college students, can be adopted by other states and higher-education systems in a cost-effective and student-centered manner. 

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**Resources**


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