Institutional Responses to Barriers to the Transfer Process

Eboni M. Zamani

Community colleges are often viewed as bridging the gap in baccalaureate degree attainment for many students. Following the 1970s decline, the transfer rate has remained low during the 1980s and 1990s, ranging between 20 and 25 percent. The literature suggests that community colleges can reinforce their position in the educational pipeline by emphasizing transfer within their home institutions (Palmer, 1987; Prager, 1992). Recent legislation and foundation activities support collaborations and partnerships between institutional two- and four-year institutions as a means of enhancing the transfer rate. One way that community colleges have sought to augment transfer rates, address barriers, and better facilitate transition between the two tiers has been through the development of transfer centers and institutes.

Barriers to Transfer

Many community college students intend to transfer to four-year colleges and universities; however, only 22 percent successfully do so (McCormick and Carroll, 1997). For the last two decades, studies examining the transfer function have revealed that the proportion of two-year students actually transferring is deficient and that differential rates of transfer exist between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Of particular concern is the low college-going rate among high school graduates of racially and ethnically diverse heritage (Stewart, 1988). Low-income and non-Asian minority students have lower transfer and program completion rates, compared with their white counterparts from families with higher annual income (Bender, 1991; Brint and Karabel, 1989; Cohen, 1988; Richardson and Skinner, 1992). Furthermore,
research results suggest that collegians who begin postsecondary education at two-year institutions are less likely to earn baccalaureate degrees, particularly African American and Hispanic community college students (Dougherty, 1992; Pascarella and others, 1998; Pincus and Archer, 1989; Velez, 1985).

There are various explanations as to why the progress of community college students may stagnate and how transfer to four-year institutions has been hindered. The lack of financial resources is one of many barriers facing community college students who are attending, persisting, and, in some cases, ultimately transferring to four-year institutions (McDonough, 1997). Student aid has shifted so that fewer grant dollars are awarded, whereas federal student loans have increased. Students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at a disadvantage, as the costs associated with higher education may prohibit even the most talented two-year students from successfully transferring into a baccalaureate degree program (Stewart, 1988). In addition, Stewart suggests that the lack of academic preparation of many entering community college students often serves to discourage their aspirations.

Although student financial background and academic readiness for college-level work may act against some students, institutional factors also place hurdles in the path of students desiring to transfer to four-year institutions. For example, undergraduate retention and matriculation are often affected by institutional characteristics, such as campus climate and culture. The installation of transfer centers is an institutional response that can address academic preparation for baccalaureate programs through encouraging two- and four-year institutional relationships and underscoring the importance of collegiate culture.

Dougherty (1994) asserts that the transfer function within community colleges is ineffective due to an influx of underprepared students, coupled with a less collegiate environment and culture. Unlike four-year institutions that primarily enroll traditional-aged students, who then reside in campus dormitories, the community college culture is nonresidential. Two-year students at commuter campuses are typically on campus less often than are students at four-year institutions because of work responsibilities; they attempt fewer credit hours and they interact with faculty members less as a result of residing away from the college (Rice, 1990). It is estimated that residential students are 43 percent more likely to persist and complete degree requirements than are commuter students (Velez, 1985). Hence, establishing alternate learning communities at the two-year level may help increase the likelihood of student matriculation.

Related to the relative amount of transfer activity are student characteristics and educational aspirations. Students within each type of institution who aspire to baccalaureate degrees or higher were up to three times as likely to transfer than those not expecting to complete a bachelor's degree (McCormick and Carroll, 1997). It has been noted in the literature that private four-year colleges and universities may afford more opportunities to gain entrance for those who fall short of meeting admissions standards at public universities (Glass and Bunn, 1998).
In addition to institutional type, poor student transitions between two- and four-year institutions often reflect a lack of student-college fit. The institutional environment is an important factor in the rate of student transfer and success in earning a bachelor's degree. More specifically, students of color may perceive homogenous institutional environments to be noninclusive and lacking a commitment to fostering cultural pluralism, multicultural curriculum, and campus diversity (Haralson, 1996). With a greater number of underrepresented African American and Hispanic students attending community colleges, institutional policies and programs intended to encourage inclusion and invigorate minority student transfer in particular are imperative.

Addressing Emerging Problems: Transfer Center Outgrowth

The transfer process increases educational opportunity and access beyond two-year institutions; however, paradoxically, it also immobilizes many students, as policies related to the movement of students between community colleges and four-year colleges/universities are inconsistent or nonexistent. For example, there has been considerable growth in the rate of transfer to senior institutions among community college students enrolled in professional and vocational-technical programs (Bender, 1990; Cohen and Brawer, 1996; Dougherty, 1992). Likewise, roughly three-fourths of all vocational-technical students desire baccalaureate degrees (Dougherty, 1992; Hunter and Sheldon, 1980). However, the transferability of career and vocational courses is problematic for those intending to earn baccalaureate degrees, since the articulation of such course credits is inconsistent between two- and four-year institutions (Keener, 1994).

According to Tobolowsky (1998), articulation has become increasingly complex and is no longer a vertical process, as multidirectional student movement calls for a range of transfer services. Cohen and Brawer (1996) describe the back-and-forth movement of college students as being illustrative of articulation agreements that coordinate course offerings, formalize admissions requirements in correspondence to programs of study, and simplify transfer planning. Articulation encompasses (1) formal, legally binding agreements, (2) state system transfer policies, and (3) voluntary arrangements between two- and four-year colleges (Cohen, 1988). Emphasis on articulation and transfer are of paramount concern, as previous levels of cooperation among sectors have not moved more students—African American and Hispanic, in particular—through the educational pipeline.

Facilitating Policy and Programmatic Changes

To address some of the recurring challenges to the transfer process, the State of California revised its higher education master plan in 1985. The Master Plan for Higher Education in California reflected legislation (AB 1725) that was passed to reform coordination with the community college system.
Moreover, Senate Bill 121 was signed in 1991, establishing that California community colleges, the University of California system, and the California State University system are jointly accountable for instituting a solid transfer function and for placing emphasis on raising the rate of transfer among historically underrepresented students (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1996).

In response to Senate Bill 121, California Community Colleges and the University of California produced an official memorandum of understanding that reiterates the shared responsibility of each party to provide access and opportunities to those with transfer intentions and baccalaureate degree aspirations (Nussbaum, 1997). Delineated in the memorandum are nine target areas: (1) to improve articulation agreements by initiating the California Articulation Number System (CANS systemwide course sequencing), (2) to use ASSIST (Articulation System Stimulating Interinstitutional Student Transfer) as the official statewide repository for articulation information and data, (3) to reinvigorate transfer center partnerships, (4) to enhance transfer alliances to ensure a seamless transition for students, (5) to increase additional part-time attendance options at the University of California in order to meet the needs of part-time transfer students, (6) to develop a baccalaureate financial aid package that meets transfer students’ needs for degree completion at four-year institutions, (7) to heighten outreach activities in an effort to recruit and attract students seeking transfer, (8) to monitor and evaluate transfer activities through additional data collection and information exchange, and (9) to enhance cooperative admissions programs that involve eligible high school graduates who would like the option of attending a community college and later transferring to the University of California (Nussbaum, 1997).

Acknowledging the importance of collaborative efforts between two- and four-year institutions of higher learning, the Ford Foundation gave a grant to the National Center for Educational Alliances, formerly the National Center for Urban Partnerships. In 1991, the center was established to manage the Ford Foundation’s Urban Partnership Program, which originated in response to the growing number of underprepared, underrepresented, low-income students with degree aspirations extending beyond the community college level (McGrath and Van Buskirk, 1998). The Urban Community College Transfer Opportunities Grant created sixteen urban site partnerships, including the Bronx, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Phoenix. Administered in the early 1990s, the grant brought about the development of transfer centers to address issues surrounding articulation. Additionally, transfer centers prioritized support services to meet transfer-track student needs and enhance transitions between tiers for the transfer population.

Affiliated with the National Center for Urban Partnerships, the Memphis Center for Urban Partnerships (MCUP) comprises the University of Memphis,
LeMoyne-Owen College, Shelby State Community College, and Memphis City Schools, which have unified to build pathways for increasing access and academic achievement for at-risk students. More specifically, the MCUP targets increasing college attendance and completion rates among African American students in response to high secondary attrition rates, poverty, and low college enrollment. MCUP has been effective in creating change in the community that is consistent with its mission.

The African American Scholars Program (AASP) helps students from Frayser and Westside High School who are attending Shelby State Community College transfer to four-year colleges and universities. The goal of AASP is to make the transition from high school to college and from a two-year to a four-year college smoother. This has been accomplished through partial funds received from the Ford Foundation to create an African American Transfer Center. The center assists with career planning, provides academic counseling, and hosts retention and academic skills workshops and motivational guest lectures (Memphis Center for Urban Partnerships, Feb. 2001). As a result of the educational service components, students have an increased responsiveness and understanding of skills necessary for college success. Finally, although the Ford Foundation urban partnership grant was awarded to several cities, there is little literature examining the majority of affected states with regard to program activities and effectiveness. Nevertheless, each of the National Center for Educational Alliances cities has made use of Ford Foundation grant dollars to aid inner-city students in overcoming the hurdles associated with being from a disenfranchised group by devising strategies to improve student learning and subsequent educational success.

**Successful Programs Addressing Student Transfer**

Community colleges primarily face the difficulty of determining how to best facilitate student transfer to senior-level postsecondary institutions. Although national transfer rates could stand much improvement, there has been inventiveness on the part of some two- and four-year institutions to collaborate in promoting and encouraging the transition between tiers, particularly for underrepresented students. In response to some of the challenges associated with transfer and articulation, the following section of this chapter highlights programmatic efforts and policy initiatives that speak to student progression from two- to four-year colleges.

Current literature examining transfer provides statistics that indicate the small percentage of transfer-track students who actually earn associate’s degrees, the smaller number of students who transfer to four-year institutions, and the even smaller number who persist toward the bachelor's degree (Bender, 1991; Brint and Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; McCormick and Carroll, 1997). As a result, there is a need for two- and four-year colleges to work in partnership to create and optimize transfer opportunities.
One program that has met the challenge is the Summer Scholars Transfer Institute (SSTI). Created in 1993, SSTI is a team approach involving Santa Ana College, numerous Los Angeles community colleges, and the University of California at Irvine to provide intervention for underrepresented students (McGrath and Van Buskirk, 1998). Sponsored by the National Center for Educational Alliances, the program focuses on assisting low-income students—predominantly African American and Hispanic students—at urban community colleges.

Students taking part in the program are undecided as to whether they intend to continue beyond their two-year institutions. Students are required to hold a minimum GPA of 2.0, meet eligibility for Freshman Composition, and have taken fewer than 30 credit units. Unique by design, SSTI works with roughly 150 first-generation students annually, during the summer months. This eleven-day residential program is designed to blend institutional cultures of the participating colleges while structuring condensed academic courses and social support systems to ensure success (McGrath and Van Buskirk, 1998). Students have the option to take one of five courses that are 3 credit hours each. The initial class meeting is scheduled one month prior to the start of the institute, at which time students receive an overview of the course by the instructor and substantial reading and writing assignments. Students attend class during the daytime for the eleven days and participate in study groups throughout the evening and late-night hours. A university faculty member and a community college counselor lead courses, with teaching assistants being assigned to assist in communication between students and staff members.

McGrath and Van Buskirk’s qualitative examination (1998) of the SSTI provides rich description and anecdotal commentaries, indicating the effectiveness of this approach. The authors report that from 1993 to 1998 the number of underrepresented students transferring to the University of California from Santa Ana College doubled, moving Santa Ana College from 44th to 9th place statewide for the number of Hispanic transfer students to the University of California system. In addition, 95 percent of all students have successfully completed the general education course taken under the auspices of SSTI, in contrast with the 60 percent who complete it on campus.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education provided funding to twenty-five community colleges to operate minority transfer centers. Each center has a director at the helm to oversee all activities that include developing articulation agreements with four-year institutions. It is estimated that over twenty-five thousand students are served by these minority transfer centers annually. As a result of these efforts, transfer rates for African American and Hispanic community college students increased by 12.7 and 38.6 percent, respectively, from 1990 to 1994. In addition, there was a 61.3 percent increase during the same period in transfers of Hispanic community college
students to private institutions. Participating centers reported an increase of 3.4 percent in total community college student transfers (Illinois Community College Board, 1996).

Oakton Community College in Illinois has a high percentage of first-generation college students, many of whom are considering further education. Every semester, approximately 65 percent of Oakton’s students enroll in courses with the intention of transferring to a senior-level college or university. As one of the twenty-five colleges that received a grant from the Illinois Board of Higher Education to establish a transfer center, Oakton offers workshops, plans campus visits to four-year institutions, and advises students regarding course of study, financial aid, and scholarships (Oakton Community College, 1997).

The University of California at Davis, in conjunction with the Los Rios Community College District, funded a transfer opportunity program with nine Northern California community colleges to extend outreach efforts and transfer services. In a related program, the Los Rios Community College transfer centers sponsored a College Transfer Day to inform students of transfer issues and to allow them to discuss admissions concerns and programs of study with university representatives (Case, 1999). The University of California at Davis has also worked closely with the California Community Colleges to offer early academic outreach programs at elementary, middle, and secondary schools in seventeen school districts. The aim of the program is to give school officials, teachers, parents, and, most of all, students information regarding college preparation and transfer readiness. Other efforts by the UC system and California Community Colleges that are making significant contributions to the improvement of the transfer process include the Math, Engineering, Science Achievement/California Community College Program (MESA/CCCP)—a transfer support program for nontraditional students in the sciences, faculty-to-faculty articulation dialogues, a transfer student recruitment campaign on the Web, and Ensuring Transfer Success Counselor Institutes (ETSCI) (Case, 1999).

The transfer center at Glendale Community College (GCC) combined forces with seven other Los Angeles community colleges in writing a grant to receive funding from the Office of the Chancellor to underwrite the airfare for students’ campus visits to the University of San Francisco, San Francisco State University, UC Berkeley, and UC Davis. Like other community colleges that are interested in boosting transfer, the transfer center at Glendale held Transfer Day Fairs in addition to having outreach advisors from UCLA join the center staff to host an orientation and reception for Glendale students accepted to UCLA (Glendale Community College, 1998). As a result of the wide array of transfer services provided by the center, Glendale Community College ranks second among the top transfer institutions sending students to UCLA, with 52 percent of the GCC applicants gaining admission.
Conclusions and Recommendations for Enhancing Transfer

As flaws in the transfer process have been identified, innovative programs and policies to revive the transfer function within community colleges have been implemented. University and community college partnerships have facilitated smooth transitions through research, articulation arrangements, and campus programming—such as SSTI, transfer fairs, and four-year campus visits.

Community colleges must continue to strive to be forerunners at recognizing impediments to student progression and successful transfer. This responsibility should not lie solely with the two-year sector, as often the blame for lack of success in the transfer process is placed on community colleges. Two- and four-year institutions must be responsive and aggressive in addressing the role of transfer in producing upward mobility. Academic support professionals at community colleges and senior institutions can address challenges to the transfer function by instituting on-site transfer centers, establishing cooperative admissions agreements, extending outreach activities, clarifying articulation agreements, hosting transfer informational sessions, conducting four-year campus tours, and creating innovative approaches to academic skills acquisition. Newer approaches that have developed include the consideration of redefining student success, services to assist reverse transfer student concerns, and orientation programs that convey how to make the transition from an open to a selective system of admissions in an effort to curb transfer shock (Cejda, 1997; Laanan, 1996; Townsend, 2000).

With affirmative action under attack, the transfer function should be considered one means of recruiting and admitting diverse students (Zamani, forthcoming). Thus, colleges and universities can use the transfer function to reposition themselves to more wholly represent their respective communities and reach parity with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, and social class standing.

References

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EBONI M. ZAMANI is assistant professor of higher education administration at West Virginia University.