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The academic culture of metropolitan universities may work against the success of community college transfer students in these institutions. University faculty, used to a Darwinian model of faculty success, may treat students according to a similar model. University faculty and administrators need to be alert to academic practices stemming from a survival-of-the-fittest mentality among faculty and students and determine if these are the best practices for all their students, including community college transfers.

Can Community College Transfer Students Survive in Metropolitan Universities?

Community college transfer students are vital to the institutional health of American metropolitan universities. Faced with a low to moderate retention rate of native students, or students who begin their studies in a four-year college, many metropolitan universities need transfer students to fill the spaces vacated by native students who leave. Transfer students from community colleges are likely candidates, particularly if a university seeks to increase its enrollment of minority students, since they are most apt to begin their education at community colleges.

As with native students, community college transfers have to be recruited, enrolled, and retained. However, it is the process of transferring from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities that has received the most attention, particularly for metropolitan institutions. University leaders generally focus on coordinating degree and program requirements with area community colleges so that transfer students do not lose credits when they enter. Little attention has been paid to what happens to the students once they are in the university.

After experiencing an initial "transfer shock" and consequent drop in grade point average, many community college transfers successfully complete their studies and graduate from four-year colleges and universities. However, retention and follow-up

studies provide conflicting evidence about the success rate of these students as compared to native students. According to Art Cohen and Florence Brawer in *The American Community College*, early studies that compared the grades and retention of community college transfer students with those of native students showed that transfer students did less well. More recent studies indicate that the two groups graduate at comparable rates with similar grade point averages. The primary difference is in degree completion time: transfer students take longer than native students to complete their degree.

In *The Academic Crisis of the Community College*, Dennis McGrath and Martin Spear suggest a possible reason why some community college transfer students may be less successful in a university setting than are students who begin their studies in the four-year sector. The authors argue that community college faculty fail to inculcate their students into the cultures of the academic disciplines, thus preparing them inadequately for success in the academic culture of four-year colleges and universities. The community college's emphasis on affective development, sometimes at the expense of cognitive development, has created an academic culture that results in "the weakening of both faculty and student expectations about what counts as rigorous academic work." (p. 54)

Similarly, Richard Richardson, Elizabeth Fisk, and James Okun found in their ethnographic study of a community college district some academic practices that may hinder students who transfer to a four-year college or university. For example, community college instructors tend to break information into small "bits" that students can regurgitate on short-answer tests. This practice, known as "bitting," emanates from faculty's desire to help students succeed but may work against their being able to succeed in universities that expect students to analyze and synthesize material, not merely regurgitate it.

Building upon these authors' ideas, I will offer in this article a different perspective on why community college transfer students sometimes have trouble academically in the university sector. Defining success in college as receiving passing grades in courses and graduating, I suggest that the academic culture of many universities (both research and doctoral granting) is antithetical to the success of many students and in particular, community college transfer students. However, rather than expecting community college transfers to adjust to university academic culture, I will propose that university faculty and administrators need to adjust their perspective on the teaching-learning process. To illustrate my thesis, I will use quotations from interviews of students who transferred from a metropolitan community college to a private, metropolitan university.

A Clash of Cultures?

The academic culture of a university is vastly different from that of a community college, both for faculty and for students. University faculty are expected to contribute to the knowledge base of their discipline through their research. They are also expected to share their disciplinary

knowledge through teaching. Therefore, when they are hired, university faculty are expected to be able to conduct research as well as to teach. If hired in a tenure-track position, they generally have a six-year trial period to prove their ability to be effective researchers and teachers. At the end of that time, the "fittest" faculty, those who were probably capable of conducting research and teaching well upon entry to the university, will receive the reward for their success—tenure. Judged to have been proved unworthy of tenure, less "fit" faculty are released from the university. Robert Boice, in his study of new faculty, suggests that this is a Darwinian model of faculty development: "We expect people with the right stuff to succeed and those without it to fail." (p. 190)

It is not only tenure-track faculty who are expected to succeed on their own. So too are associate tenured professors who want to become full professors. Some faculty, especially at doctoral granting (as opposed to research) universities, manage to gain tenure even though they are marginal researchers or teachers. Insufficiently skilled in research to receive highly positive evaluations from disciplinary peers outside the institution, or lacking in the teaching skills considered appropriate for full professors, these faculty continue as tenured associate professors for most of their careers. Faculty development efforts directed at improving the research and/or teaching skills of these individuals are rarely, if ever, offered, partly because members of this target group would be too embarrassed to attend. After all, they are expected to know how to do research and to teach well. How else could they have received tenure?

Just as university faculty are expected to know how to succeed in research and teaching when they enter the university, so too are university students expected to enter college with the demonstrated ability to succeed academically. This expectation is particularly strong for transfer students who have already had some college. In other words, most university faculty see their teaching role as transmitting knowledge to students who already have the ability to receive it and do not need this ability or talent developed. Implicit in this attitude is what I call a Darwinian model of student success: the academically able or fit will survive and succeed, while the less fit will flunk out. Students who survive the hurdles of courses are marked as successful by having their diploma conferred.

A Darwinian model of student success may manifest itself in several teaching practices. For example, when faculty grade on a curve, only a certain percentage of students can receive a passing grade. The frustration for students is that their ability to pass depends only partly on their own efforts. If an average student has the misfortune to take a course with an exceptionally capable group of students, she may well fail the course. Thus students learn to dislike academically talented students because they raise the passing grade for everyone else.

The Darwinian model of student success also affects students' willingness to help one another. When students are graded on a curve, one individual's success has to be balanced by another's failure in order to achieve a normal distribution of grades. Evaluated on the competitive, norm-referenced grading system rather than a criterion-referenced one,

students quickly realize it is not in their best interest to help others in the course, for they may raise the curve.

This model of student success also puts the full responsibility for academic success on the student. It is up to the individual student, not the faculty or the institution, whether the student succeeds. Perhaps many university faculty hold this position because it reflects how they are treated in the tenure process. When university faculty fail to receive tenure, they, not the institution, are seen as failing. Similarly, the faculty's expectation that students know certain material when they enter a course, and refusing to help them learn it if they don't, may reflect the university's expectation that faculty, upon entry to the institution, and certainly after promotion to associate professor, know how to do research and to teach and should not need any help developing these skills.

In contrast, many community college faculty have come to understand that their students may have academic talent, but it needs to be nurtured and developed. In his book *Achieving Academic Excellence,* Alexander Astin calls this the "talent development" model and advocates it for all colleges and universities. A developmental model of student success views students' success as the result of a collaboration between students and faculty and among students. Teaching that emphasizes development of all students' talent or abilities rather than a sifting out of the less able students encourages collaboration rather than competition, a "we are in this together" rather than a teacher-versus-students or students-versus-students attitude.

The community college places great emphasis on its teaching function.

Community college faculty may be more sympathetic to this perspective because they too are regarded as developing their teaching abilities once at their institution. The community college places great emphasis on its teaching function. Consequently, its faculty are expected only or primarily to teach. Faculty development activities usually focus on teaching skills and techniques. While scholarship is sometimes encouraged, there are no institutional expectations that faculty will contribute to the creation of knowledge. Partly because of the differences in institutional expectations, community college faculty do not undergo the lengthy trial period undergone by university faculty before receiving tenure and do not look to external peers for confirmation of their abilities.

When hired, they are expected to know how to teach, but they also can participate in faculty development activities, sometimes mandatory, sometimes required, to improve their teaching. I know of no mandatory research skills development programs for university faculty nor any mandatory teaching skills development programs either.

Community college faculty may also emphasize cooperation rather than competition among students because the tenure process at community colleges is less competitive than at four-year institutions. If a particular community college has tenure, it is awarded almost automatically to any faculty member who has been at the institution a couple of years and has received good teaching evaluations.

Used to a talent development model in the community college, transfer students are in for a rude awakening when they encounter university classroom practices reflecting the Darwinian model of student success. Expecting cooperation and collaboration with their classmates, they may find competition and conflict. Anticipating support and nurturing from their faculty, they may find indifference or neglect.

As anecdotal evidence of the difficulties community college transfers (as well as other students) may face in a university environment, I present the results of interviews of a small sample of students who transferred from a metropolitan community college to a nearby, private, moderately selective metropolitan university. Of the nine students, six were female and three were white. Thus they were representative of the ethnically/racially diverse students, many of whom are female, that typically attend metropolitan community colleges.

When asked if the university was what they expected and how its students and faculty compared to those at the community college, students were quite candid in their responses. Almost all of the students noted how different the community college was from the university. In particular, they emphasized how competitive university students were in comparison to community college students:

> "Sometimes I don't like it.... Here I really feel bad for the students because there is so much pressure...I wish there was a way where they could help each other....At [the community college] you can learn from everyone's experiences. Students are more encouraged to share in class....[Here] students aren't interested in helping one another." (international female)

> "The younger students are fresh out of high school. They don't have to try as hard.... Maybe that's why they're not interested in helping each other." (white female)

> "[University] students are more competitive. In some ways it's good because it makes you work harder, but it's bad because I don't want to get mixed up in that kind of atmosphere where I always have to watch out for myself, you know, watch my back because if I don't keep up-to-date someone is going to step over me. But whereas at [the community college] I felt good about myself, but when I came to [university] I felt like I was worse off, like I was worse than other students." (international female)

The community college transfer student often praised the university faculty for being "friendly" and "professional" and "helpful." One male Hispanic minority student thought there was more diversity of teaching styles at the university and thought that university faculty "seem[ed] to care more" than did the community college faculty. Another student (international female) said, "I think the caliber of teaching here is higher than at [the community college]. I really have no complaints about the teachers at [the university]."

While generally pleased with the university faculty, several students indicated their frustration with university faculty's expectations that students come to class already able to understand the material:

> "I went to [a university professor] for help and he said it was self-explanatory and that if I couldn't understand it I should get out of his class.... I was so

furious. I never thought a professor could say that to me. I told him he shouldn't be teaching.... That one teacher just kind of threw me off track." (Hispanic female)

"I had a girlfriend whose physics teacher wouldn't answer any algebra-related questions in class. His response was, 'Go learn your algebra and then come back here.'" (white female)

"I never had Shakespeare in high school and so I thought, 'Oh, I want to try this...' So I took this class and it was a big mistake. It seemed like he expected us to understand the book and that was why we were in the class. And for me, I am a student, I want to learn, that is why I am there.... I went up to the teacher and told him I really didn't understand a thing, and the teacher just said, 'Oh, there is a counseling center.'" (Asian female)

"There are [university] teachers who make the exam so difficult that when you read the questions, you don't know what they want.... It was as if the professor didn't want the students to pass." (Hispanic female)

"There's one lady [professor] and she flunked her whole class...I've run into more professors who've failed the whole class.... One professor, she came from Harvard and she thought we should be able to do what she did. We're not Harvard students." (Hispanic female)

Some students also illustrated how students were expected to take care of themselves at the university:

"At [the community college], we'd work things out together. At [the university], it's lecture and you take things home and do it yourself.... They throw all this information at you. Then you have ten pages of notes and you sit at home by yourself, trying to figure it out.... If you missed information, it's up to you to figure it out." (white female)

"There are some teachers [at the university] that make you understand, 'I'm not willing to answer questions—I'm giving you a lecture—take down notes—study on your own.'" (Asian female)

"I wish I had received better advising at the university. My advisor told me what I could take, but didn't tell me I should take the courses in a certain order in order to do well. He left everything up to me." (Hispanic female)

"[This university] is a school you have to rely on yourself to know what to do. That's what I tell all my friends who want to come here.... The lack of communication [about what you have to do] is really bad." (Hispanic female)

As I indicated earlier, only some comments were negative about students' experience at the university. All the students liked aspects of their university experience, and some students were quite pleased with the faculty and the teaching/learning process. However, the quotations provided earlier do indicate that at least some of this university's professors act in ways consistent with what I have called a Darwinian model of student success, and that the university's environment seems to encourage competition rather than cooperation.

Implications for University Administrators and Faculty

If we assume that this metropolitan university's academic culture is not atypical, then what do these interview findings suggest for administrators and faculty of metropolitan universities interested in helping community college transfers succeed? The success of community college transfer students at metropolitan universities depends upon a number of factors. Academic administrators must ensure effective and efficient course and program articulation between community colleges and the university. Also, student affairs administrators must consciously and consistently focus on the financial, social, and psychological needs of community college transfers once they are at the university. I also believe that both senior-level administrators and faculty need to be alert to academic practices stemming from a "survival of the fittest" mentality among faculty and students, and determine if these are the best practices for all their students, including community college transfers.

An institutional culture that expects its faculty to fail or survive on their own without institutional help probably breeds a similar attitude toward students. If university administrators believe that a "survival of the fittest" approach is not conducive to the success of the institution's students, whether transfer or native, then the administrators need to examine their institution's culture.

An important starting place is in the treatment of tenure-track faculty. Administrators should ask "Are tenure-track faculty given assistance in moving toward tenure, or are they expected to survive without any assistance?" "Are there ways the institution or the department could assist tenure-track faculty to develop their research and teaching skills to ensure they will achieve tenure?" Additionally, administrators need to consider if they are setting up some tenure-track faculty to fail by using tenure quotas. Administrators' use of tenure quotas is analogous to faculty's grading by the curve. Some faculty will fail to receive a passing grade, i.e., receive tenure, simply because the quota for tenured faculty has been filled.

Just as administrators need to think about institutional treatment of tenured and tenure-track faculty, faculty need to think about the teaching/learning process and their role in it. Do faculty believe that all or most students can succeed, or that only the intellectually elite should succeed? Do faculty regard their role as winnowing out a certain percentage of students through grading on the curve or as facilitating the academic development of as many students as possible? Do faculty want their students to help one another to learn or do they want them to compete with one another? Answers to these questions will help indicate the prevailing academic culture of the university.

In short, senior-level administrators and faculty need to assess their institution's academic culture and decide if it is what is desired for their faculty and students. If it reflects a Darwinian model of student success, then many students, including those who transfer from the community college, may well be doomed to failure in the metropolitan university.

Suggested Readings

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