Overview

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Enlarging the Transfer Paradigm:

Practice and Culture in the American Community College

While urban community colleges enroll increasing proportions of minority and low-income students, their transfer rates remain depressingly low. However, there are some urban community colleges where transfer rates exceed the national average by two or three times. Their approaches to transfers encompass both formal bureaucratic elements and informal, cultural aspects of community colleges. In asking individuals from high-transfer urban community colleges to describe a broad range of successful practices, the guest editors of this volume hope to recognize the complexity of transfer and enlarge the terms in which it has traditionally been discussed.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* focuses on student transfer from urban, public community colleges to four-year colleges and universities. On average, the transfer rates from such colleges are depressingly low—roughly twelve and a half percent—yet these are the institutions in which low-income and minority students are increasingly concentrated. As of 1992 approximately 47% of all minority students enrolled in higher education attended community colleges; the comparable figure for whites is only 37%. In the five year span between 1988 and 1993 the percentage of all public community college students who have minority status increased from 22% to 27%. The percentages are significantly higher in urban community colleges; in the institutions described in this issue, the minority population ranges from 34 to 78 percent.

Especially worrisome is the substantial evidence showing that the likelihood of attaining a baccalaureate degree actually diminishes when students of similar background, ability, and aspirations begin their postsecondary education at a community college rather than at a four-year institution. Thus for those who previously have been educationally disenfranchised, the urban community college can be an educational and

social bottleneck. Without serious attention devoted to enhancing transfer—and all the forces and activities which make it possible—educational equity and full participation in the political, cultural and economic life of this country may continue to evade students who seek access to these realms via the urban, public, two-year college.

Some urban community colleges, however, have transfer rates that are appreciably higher than the national average for such institutions. The authors of the articles in this volume are affiliated with such colleges, and write insightfully about transfer related issues at their institutions. While university-based researchers have produced an abundant literature, both supportive and critical, on the transfer function, the goal of this volume is to present "voices from the field": community college faculty, administrators, and staff. We believe that much is to be learned from what they tell us.

The authors' institutions were part of our research project in which eight urban community colleges with high transfer rates were studied ethnographically. We knew at the outset of the study that urban community colleges are as diverse as their four year counterparts, in that they vary in size, governance, organizational structure, ethnic and racial mix, curriculum, pedagogy, history, and mission. We also knew that variations in these factors can produce institutional cultures that are strikingly different. Suspecting that there is more than one way to achieve high transfer rates, and what works in one college may not work in another, we purposefully selected colleges for our study that are quite different from each other. Indeed, the only three characteristics the colleges share is an urban location, high percentages of minority and low-income students, and transfer rates that are roughly twice or more than the national average.

Of course, imaginative and productive practices go on elsewhere as well, and there exist other measures of community college success that have little to do with transfer. For example, many community colleges play a pivotal role in providing employees of local businesses and industries with retraining and skills improvements; non credit adult education classes for senior citizens and those interested in non-degree courses; and ESL courses to improve the literacy rates in areas with high numbers of immigrants. Yet in focusing specifically on urban institutions that have achieved high transfer rates, we hope to gain in-depth knowledge of a particular type of community college that would have been impossible to obtain had we cast a wider net.

A word about calculating transfer rates. The most widely used formula

for calculating transfer rates is that of the Transfer Assembly Project, which has compiled transfer statistics on about one-quarter of all public community colleges. Its formulation is "all students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college-credit units, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at the university [any four year institution] within 4 years after original college entry" (Cohen, 1991). As the developers of the formula were aware, this means of calculating the transfer rate is problematic. Many community college students have previously been enrolled at another postsecondary institution. Also, nearly two-thirds of community college students attend part-time, so that a sizeable minority may take more than four years to transfer. Thus a large number of students who transfer are omitted from the formulation, so that the actual transfer rate may be higher than what is reported. Furthermore, the expense of tracking students who transfer "out of system," that is, to private and/or out of state colleges, is prohibitive, thus further reducing the reported rate. (Anecdotal reports as well as evidence from the few colleges that have more elaborate tracking systems indicate that the number of such transfers is many times lower than "within-system" transfers, and would not raise the transfer rates in any meaningful way.) These problems notwithstanding, in selecting colleges for our study we used data based on this formula for two reasons: it is the basis for the largest database on transfer that currently exists; and it allows comparison across institutions, since many community colleges, even those not participating in the Transfer Assembly Project, compile data using its definition to see how they compare nationally.

What Factors Contribute to High Transfer Rates?

To date, most efforts to understand or improve transfer rates have focused on the formulaic aspects of the process—i.e., if states and institutions implement formal policies and programs conducive to transfer, students can then identify a four-year institution, obtain information regarding transfer requirements, take the correct sequence of courses, and transfer successfully. And, in fact, our own interviews with community college students who have successfully transferred to four-year colleges and universities confirm the importance of such practices. Cohen uses the analogy of trying to reach one's destination on a nonstop flight versus having to change planes along the way: the latter raises the specter of missed connections (for example, not

getting transcripts in on time, getting misinformation regarding transfer regulations, or losing credit hours upon transfer). Breaking down these types of barriers to transfer is indeed critical.

We have asked several of the authors in this volume to address how their institutions have attempted to overcome just such barriers. Thelma Malle and Edward Martin describe how Kingsborough Community College attempts to coordinate transfer policies with the City University of New York, portray the development and maintenance of a successful articulation policy as a cyclical process, rather than a set of unrelated activities. At Kingsborough, this process does not end with signed articulation agreements between the community college and receiving institutions; instead, sustained personal contact is considered an integral part of the process. For example, they advocate regular meetings between faculty at both the sending and receiving institutions, as well as close advisement of students about their needs and aspirations. The use of varied sources of data (e.g., student surveys, a transfer database) allows for consistent monitoring of the process. In short, Kingsborough provides us with an example of an articulation policy that is based on acknowledging and nurturing the interrelationships of people, policies, and institutions.

The interplay between internal policies and external politics is highlighted in the article by Deil and Barshis. Among the seven community colleges that make up the City Colleges of Chicago, Wilbur Wright College is unique in its commitment to and reputation for transfer. At the system level, the college maintained and bolstered its transfer-oriented mission by protecting its niche as the premier transfer college in Chicago, while at the same time cultivating this mission internally through a variety of institutional policies. Having attended to both the external and internal matters, Wright consistently attracts a student body that, demographically speaking, is more likely to transfer than those in the other community colleges in the city.

Keeping the institutional "eye on the prize" of transfer is accomplished with a different strategy at the City College of San Francisco (CCSF). While data collection and dissemination occur to some degree at all community colleges, members of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning employ a particularly comprehensive and far-reaching strategy to focus CCSF's attention on, and commitment to, transfer. The office has attempted to create an institutional planning process that is based on a feedback loop that begins with periodic, wide dissemination of straightforward data to all mem-

bers of the campus community. By using this information as an impetus for reflection and, ultimately, change, CCSF works to create a sense of common purpose designed to overcome the barriers that arise from its large size and diversity in programs and people.

Of course, innovative attempts to strengthen the transfer mission by reforming formal policies and procedures are occurring at many community colleges across the country. However, as important and even critical as these practices may be, by themselves they are not enough. Most take a mechanistic approach that urges the reform of the bureaucratic apparatus. The refinement of bureaucratic procedures and programs, no matter how innovative and clever, is simply insufficient if not informed by a sophisticated understanding of the nonbureaucratic and seemingly irrational aspects of institutional culture and the transfer process. For example, in some subcultures of students, transfer as a means of upward mobility is laden with anxieties about how their relationships with family and friends—and even their own identities—might be altered. For these students, transfer requires not just the mastery of academic skills, the acquisition of knowledge, and the use of abundant and well organized transfer related resources, but the negotiation of what they subjectively experience as a profound and even life-altering cultural disarticulation. Thus several questions arise. Does any quarter in the college recognize this disarticulation as a problem? Does anything in a college's programs, pedagogies or even in the informal, unplanned aspects of its culture help change students' understanding of education and its relationship to their lives? Is any assistance offered that helps students to mediate whatever cultural divides may exist? Does a college's climate—its unspoken assumptions, sentiments and beliefs about knowledge, teaching, students, and learning, or the chemistry between administration, faculty, and students—contribute to the likelihood of students continuing their education? Again and again, students interviewed in our study point to precisely these aspects of institutional culture that are not targeted by formal policy as some of the most pivotal in maintaining their desire and ability to transfer.

Several of the articles in this volume address some of the informal aspects of institutional culture that we believe may contribute to high transfer rates. For example, Dorothy Haecker's journey toward a multicultural curriculum and pedagogy illustrates the importance of becoming what is, in essence, a student of one's own classroom. By becoming intimately familiar with aspects of her students' lives—both internal and external to the classroom—

she is able to develop a curricular and pedagogical strategy that builds on her students' strengths, affirms their interests, and uses these as tools to achieve her own goal of creating literate, confident learners. While formal administrative policies may support her desire to innovate, the alchemy in Haecker's classroom is the result of the informal interaction between herself and her students.

Although the Community College of Philadelphia's Honors Program is a recognized academic unit of the college, Dennis McGrath and Evan Seymour's description of the "lived experience" of the program illustrates the ways in which the interactions between students and faculty (as they make their way through the curriculum) creates a "pocket of connection" that is critical in a large urban community college. The goal of the Honors Program—to initiate students into academic life—is achieved in part through careful planning and close collaboration among participating faculty members. Yet this formal planning is merely the scaffolding that supports the extraordinary exchanges that occur in the classroom. The familiarity and trust between students and faculty that is a prerequisite to the intense academic discourse that occurs in Honors Program classrooms is a result of the sustained contact, in both formal and informal settings, that McGrath and Seymour describe as integral to the program.

Even these aspects of an institution's informal culture that appear to participants as negative can, in fact, have unintended positive effects. Evan Seymour illustrates how institutional conflict—particularly around issues of curricular reform—can inadvertently energize a faculty. Although the Community College of Philadelphia has a long history of conflict both within the faculty and between the faculty and administration, this aspect of organizational culture has helped to crystallize the faculty's sense of mission. By recognizing the legitimacy and uses of conflict, the college has not transformed itself into a well-oiled, smooth-running machine. It has, however, created a culture in which strong beliefs are acted upon. As a result, a relatively large proportion of the faculty feel a sense of ownership and engagement that is missing at many such large urban community colleges.

While authors Roberta Matthews and Gail Mellow are not associated with any of the colleges in our study, they help broaden our perspective on transfer by discussing national trends and policies. External factors, such as accrediting agencies, receiving institutions, national standards, distance learning, and accountability are seen as integral factors in the transfer process.

National trends that affect the internal workings of community colleges, such as the reform of general education, the increasing cost of attending college, and shifts in graduation requirements are also addressed. They suggest that the traditional unidirectional model of transfer from two-year to four-year college misses much of what is happening in contemporary higher education, and should be updated by a more dynamic paradigm that recognizes the complexity of current transfer processes that are more akin to a multidirectional "swirl."

When taken together, the articles in this volume represent an array of practices and factors, both formal and informal, that may contribute to high transfer rates. Our research, as well as the experiences of these authors, suggests that transfer is, after all, but a word for what is a very complex interplay between individuals, organizations, and a host of social forces. With this volume we wish to recognize the complexity of transfer, and enlarge the terms in which it has traditionally been discussed.

Suggested Readings

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