Thelma Malle and Edward G. Martin

Meaningful Links with Receiving Institutions:
Their Development and Maintenance

Meaningful links in transfer policies are those that allow a "seamless" transition between the sending and receiving institutions. This article briefly describes the development of transfer policies at Kingsborough Community College and the City University of New York, and presents a six-part cyclical articulation process that may prove useful for other community colleges in their attempts to evaluate and develop their own links with receiving institutions.

Introduction

The poet W. B. Yeats wrote, "In dreams begins responsibility." Students who come to community colleges have dreams for their lives and careers; as faculty or administrators, we are responsible not only for the education and skills preparation of our students while they are within our charge, but also for providing the most seamless path for the continuance of their education after they leave us. This is especially true at Kingsborough, where the majority of our graduating students (over 75 percent in 1994) transfer to four-year schools. Using Arthur Cohen's definition of transfer, 21 percent of all entering students transfer to a University's bachelor's level school. We have, therefore, attempted to develop and maintain college-wide mechanisms and procedures that develop new links with appropriate institutions and continually review existing ones.

In this article, we describe the events that have shaped the current articulation and transfer policies of Kingsborough Community College, a member institu-

tion of the City University of New York (CUNY)—a large urban university serving 200,000 students, and comprised of twenty separate institutions: three graduate schools, 11 four-year colleges, and six community colleges. We then present an articulation process that may prove useful in evaluating links that other community colleges have developed with their receiving institutions.

Brief History

The City University of New York grew from eight individual colleges (one graduate school, four senior colleges, and three community colleges) that had been chartered over the past 150 years. This "merger" of distinct entities in 1961 into one system has raised issues of autonomy related to the articulation process that require some degree of centralization for their resolution.

Prior to 1970, Kingsborough students took a prescribed set of courses, which included a significant general education component. Articulation within CUNY was fairly straightforward—a student who graduated with an AA or AS degree experienced little difficulty when transferring to any of the senior colleges.

In 1970, CUNY implemented an open admissions policy that guaranteed enrollment within the university for any student holding a high school diploma or its equivalent, regardless of the level of secondary school preparation. Placement at the community college or senior college level was based on each student's high school achievement. CUNY's enrollment increased greatly. However, many students required remediation in basic skills. Some had never studied a foreign language, college preparatory mathematics, or traditional laboratory science. The senior colleges expressed doubts about student preparedness for transfer. As a result, in 1973, the Board of Higher Education formulated a policy that formalized the transfer of credit for AS and AA students. This policy required that students be granted a minimum of 64 credits toward a baccalaureate degree and be required to complete only the difference in credits between 64 and the total credits required.

In 1978, responding to continued concerns of CUNY faculty and administrators in many of the community and senior colleges, the board established a Freshman Skills Assessment program (FSA), which added the requirement that students demonstrate basic competency in mathematics, reading, and writing, before entering their junior year. For community college students,

successful completion of the associate degree was no longer the sole criterion for transfer. In 1985, the CUNY Board of Trustees revisited the articulation issue and adopted a more comprehensive policy (see Table 1 for excerpts).

Table 1

Excerpts from the 1985 CUNY Board of Trustees Policy on the Transfer of Liberal Arts and Sciences Courses

- All [CUNY] Community College Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS) degree recipients shall be accepted as matriculated students at a senior college of [CUNY].
- These students [shall] be given priority for transfer over non-university students seeking transfer and...they be granted a minimum of 64 credits toward a baccalaureate degree and be required to complete only the difference in credits required.
- All Liberal Arts [and Science] courses taken in one [CUNY] college be considered transferable, with full credit, to each college of The City University; and that full credit be granted for these courses in all departments and programs; and be recognized for the fulfillment of degree requirements.
- A maximum of 68 lower level (freshman and sophomore) credits be transferred from one college to another unless the senior college determines that it wishes to grant additional credit and that no more than 64 credits be required above the Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degrees in order to fulfill the requirements for a baccalaureate degree.
- In order to maintain academic standards and to insure a higher degree of probable achievement, all community college students be required to pass all three Freshman Skills Assessment Tests, prior to transferring to a senior college.

More importantly, the policy:
- required meetings between faculty and administrative staff of the various college disciplines in bothj two- and four-year colleges to review syllabi, examinations, papers, entrance and exit criteria.

- created a vehicle for periodic and systematic compliance audits.
- established an articulation advisement unit at each college.
- created a course transfer guide that listed every community college course with its equivalent at each senior college. The course equivalency guide is now computerized, on-line, and updated when courses are modified, added, or deleted.

Almost ten years later, in 1994, the University's Council of Presidents reviewed and reaffirmed the 1985 policy. The University is currently establishing a process by which the transfer of credit can be better monitored.

Kingsborough's Articulation Efforts

Prior to the 1973 board policy, the president of Kingsborough encouraged the initiation of several articulation meetings with other colleges, both within and outside CUNY. Kingsborough faculty met with their counterparts in senior colleges to effect the transfer of credits. As a result, various liberal arts, sciences, and business disciplines were successfully articulated even before the board mandated formalized articulation.

As early as 1974, articulation with private colleges became the next step on the agenda. The AA and AS degrees in math and traditional sciences, as well as selected AAS programs, were accepted for transfer by the major universities in the New York area, and included provisions for scholarships in the record. These early agreements were ultimately expanded to include most occupational programs. A typical agreement appears in Table 2.

Table 2
Typical Articulation Agreement

On completion of the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, and Associate of Applied Science degrees at Kingsborough Community College, students will be eligible to transfer to College "X." Students will be awarded a minimum of 64 credits and will receive credits based on course equivalencies as outlined in the relevant documents on file.

These Kingsborough graduates will be candidates for the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees with majors as specified in the relevant documents on file. This agreement is effective as of [Month/Day/Year] and will be subject to review on [Month/Day/Year+2].

President	President
Kingsborough Community College	College "X"

Note: This cover page would be followed by the details of program and/or course correspondence, including information on conditions under which scholarships will be awarded.

As of 1996, Kingsborough has more than 25 standing articulation agreements with private and public universities and technical colleges as close as two miles and as far away as 400. The historical developments in CUNY and the initiatives of Kingsborough over the past quarter century have taught us much about creating and maintaining successful articulation links.

Creating and Maintaining the Articulation Cycle

Although many of the processes involved in developing and maintaining successful articulation links take place concurrently, they can be viewed as a set of related actions that occur as part of an ongoing cyclical process, as identified as follows:

- Performing an Ongoing Needs Assessment
- Contacting the Receiving Institution
- Developing (or Revisiting) an Articulation Agreement
- Advising Students
- Monitoring Compliance
- Updating and Reviewing the Link

Within this framework, one must emphasize the importance of developing and maintaining an institutional structure for the success of any articulation effort.

Structure for Success

At Kingsborough, we have found that, although faculty and administrators participate in the process, responsibility for articulation must be part of the portfolio of a single administrator. This person must be conversant with current institutional goals and obligations, be able to enlist the support of faculty, and have the authority to negotiate transfer agreements with either

institution. In addition, there should be a transfer office, such as the "advisement unit" mentioned in the CUNY Board's 1985 resolution, managed by someone who disseminates articulation and transfer information to students, faculty (including department chairs), and other staff. This office can also sponsor an annual Transfer Day—an important additional campus event to which receiving institutions are invited to meet with potential students and key staff members.

There should also be an online database containing transfer information, including course and program equivalencies, as well as available scholarships and financial aid data. Within this database, which is accessible, perhaps through a Local Area Network, to students, advisors, faculty, and administrators, articulation agreements should be categorized by institution and major, and provide search capabilities by individual courses.

Ongoing Needs Assessment

Not all articulations are necessarily desirable, nor of equal value to students. Clearly, the time, effort, and personnel that can be applied to maintaining or developing articulation links are limited. Like any other scarce resource, they must be expended carefully to maximize their effectiveness. We have found that it is important to evaluate and, where needed, prioritize articulation efforts with a quick pseudo-cost/benefit analysis—in this case, anticipated effort compared with how many students are likely to transfer to the receiving institution over the next few years. This likelihood factor is a reflection of student preference, which is then adjusted by the realities of financial and geographic considerations. Clearly, fewer students will attend a college or university that is far from their current homes, or beyond their financial means. For this first cut, the factors of student preference for existing programs and location provide immediate clues to our need to develop or maintain an articulation link.

Some programs have created internal surveys of student intent, to gather data about the number of majors graduating from Kingsborough and their preferences for transfer or employment. Basically, students are asked, "Where do you plan to go?" and "What do you plan to do?" These data are gathered fairly easily through a simple student survey (as in Figure 1) distributed in class, returned to a departmental office, and then summarized in a spreadsheet or database program. We have also developed surveys of student success that look at the experiences of recent graduates. These surveys are

distributed when graduates return to pick up their diplomas or are mailed to them at home. At times, we receive performance data about our graduates from some of their receiving schools. We will discuss this aspect below. Our Office of Institutional Research is another valuable source of graduate data for use in the articulation needs assessment. For example, one statistic supplied by this office is an analysis, within each degree, of students who plan to: work only, attend school only, work and attend school, or neither. Another report tracks how many students transfer to: senior colleges within our university (CUNY), within our state university system (SUNY), or to private colleges.

Figure 1
Student Survey

Kingsborough Community College - Department "X"
Student Survey - Transfer and Career Planning

Name:_____   ID#:____-_____-_____   Fall 19XX
        Last   First

Major: ° ACC   ° BA   ° MM   ° FM
Expected Graduation: _____/_____
                        Month/Yr
What are your plans after graduating from Kingsborough? (Check all that apply):

° I plan to transfer to a 4-year school:
   1st Choice:_____   2nd Choice:_____
   Expected major:_____

° I plan to work: ° Full-time   ° Part-time
Type of job:_____

Other comments:

Whereas the first level of needs assessment looked at the institutions students have chosen to transfer to, the second level should focus on the specific receiving institution. Before you invest time and effort in creating/revisiting its link, you should obtain answers to these questions:

- How well do the educational/career goals of the receiving institution match (or still match) those of your college?
- How marketable are its graduates?
- What is the professional and educational standing of the institution?
- Does the institution offer uncommon or innovative programs leading to a bachelor's degree that is useful to our students?

The goal is to gain some confidence that the institution to which you plan to send (or continue to send) students will provide them with the best opportunities for their education and careers. If you are not comfortable that the institution offers something of value to your students, you should not be seeking to send more students there. All of these factors help us determine the need to develop, or revisit, an articulation link and assign a priority for its completion.

Initiation of Contact

Once it has been determined that a new articulation is desirable, it is important to reach out to representatives of the receiving institution to ascertain its interest. In some cases, administrators at the receiving institution itself may have initiated the contact. In this instance, you can still apply your criteria to determine if it is worthwhile to pursue the request.

Step One. Although e-mail and letters are certainly possible, we have found that personal contact is the most effective way to establish strong connections with receiving institutions. Policies and personnel can change overnight; maintaining at least a telephone connection will help to cement relationships and avert miscommunication among institutions.

Step Two. The next step is to arrange a campus visit whenever geographical location permits, and invite a few administrators and faculty to an initial meeting to get acquainted and to begin to look for commonalities and strengths on which to build a link. We have found that it is important to talk face-to-face in initial contacts. Allowing institutional representatives, especially teaching faculty, to see your campus first-hand and meet some of the

faculty and administrators provides much more insight into your programs than a brochure or catalog. Direct meetings also reduce the potential for faculty resistance to the proposals that will follow.

Step Three. This initial meeting can be followed up by the traditional exchange of paperwork as needed: program requirements, course syllabi, and so on. The registrar of the receiving institution should be involved in this process, or at least informed of its progress. After all, it is within this office that credits are usually evaluated, and the best articulation agreement can fall apart without the support of the Registrar's office.

Developing or Renegotiating the Agreement

The theoretical goal for any agreement should be a "seamless" transition for students in which all credits are accepted within the degree, much as the CUNY Board Resolution of 1973 stipulated. Such an approach provides a number of benefits:

- It increases the likelihood of student transfer by offering a cohesive course of study and eliminating redundant courses
- It minimizes the time needed to complete a bachelor's degree by eliminating loss of credits or the need to repeat courses or validate prior learning
- It minimizes the expense that would be incurred by the student in taking additional courses

In reality, creating such a seamless transition is not always possible. We have found, at times, that some senior colleges have specific requirements imposed by their accreditation agencies. These requirements may prevent some courses from being transferred without validation exams or may necessitate the completion of more advanced courses. In other instances, students may have to complete prerequisites that were not part of their community college experience.

It is important, therefore, to compare your curriculum with that of the receiving institution, identifying their commonalities and differences. When a complete transfer of the degree is not possible, it is helpful to work toward an articulation of clusters of courses. A group of several courses within your curriculum might, as a package, be equivalent to a set in the receiving institution. Identifying sets of these clusters may result in a close match, with only

one or two courses not fitting into the required list. In these instances, blanket credit might be granted. At the very lowest level, it may be necessary to develop a course-by-course correspondence (as in the 1985 CUNY Transfer Guide) where all matching courses translate into an appropriate course at the receiving institution.

Another barrier to transfer that must be explored early in the articulation process is the availability of financial assistance for students. It is also important to determine the approximate annual cost to your transfer students, which will give you a clearer indication of how many students will be able to take advantage of the transfer.

Monitoring and Advisement

Once an articulation agreement is in place, two processes must occur to ensure its success: students must be advised, and implementation must be monitored.

Student Advisement

Without appropriate student advisement, articulation agreements are almost worthless. Students must be informed, the earlier in their community college careers the better, of the degree opportunities and scholarship eligibility offered by the receiving institution. Here are some suggestions:

- Have student advisors discuss available transfer agreements with students, allowing the students to make the most of their community college experience by taking those courses that will complete their Associate degree and, at the same time, provide for the smoothest transfer to their intended school.
- Prepare and make available fact sheets that suggest alternative course options for receiving institutions that are appropriate for each major.
- Send letters to qualified students advising them of available scholarships.

In short, why bother investing in articulation if you are not willing to encourage students to take advantage of the agreement?

Compliance Monitoring

In the same way that annual medical checkups are useful for maintaining

one's health, systematic monitoring of articulation compliance will help keep institutional links vital and focused. It is important to receive feedback from three separate sources: the receiving institution, the transferred students, and an unbiased random sample.

- The receiving institution can provide progress reports of transferred students. Many colleges have computerized lists that are mailed back to the sending school showing the cumulative record of all transfer students. These data will indicate how successfully you have linked the two programs.
- Your own graduates can be surveyed to gain information about transfer of credit, satisfaction with the match between the upper and lower-level programs, and general information about the extent to which the agreement has been honored. Such surveys can be done six months after graduation, and on a longitudinal basis in one or two-year increments. The longer-term surveys might also gather data regarding the career success of your graduates in various programs.
- A small random sample of transfer student records can be evaluated each year to ensure that the articulation agreement is being upheld.

Updating and Review

Articulation agreements are only valuable if they are current. That is, they must be reviewed and reaffirmed on a regular basis. Such plans should be included in the articulation agreement, as in the sample shown in Figure 1. This process can be calendarized, with the most important agreements scheduled for regular review every five years.

Such reviews are necessary because academic programs are dynamic. Although there is a basic body of knowledge in most disciplines, the methods of presentation, emphasis, and integration of new information result in the periodic reorganization of courses of study. In addition, changes in personnel or institutional focus can alter an articulation's interpretation or its relevancy.

This review of an existing link, essential to assure the continuation of successful student transfers, can follow the cyclical steps outlined in this article, starting again with an updated needs assessment and renewed contact. Such steps also afford two faculty groups (whose members might have changed) the opportunity to renew acquaintances and exchange new curricular information.

Of course, fundamental curricular changes, such as the introduction of a core or substantial changes in course content, need not wait for a five-year review. It is wise to maintain a viable link and to communicate intentions of new program development or curriculum adjustments in either institution to its linked "partner." In this age of the information superhighway, it is easy enough to place the changes on a home page for review by other institutions, or to e-mail or fax the proposed changes to individual sites.

Regular review of articulation links also allows institutions to develop follow-up collaborations, which extend the success of the educational merger. We have created jointly-registered programs, developed courses in concert with receiving schools, and established programs in which students are assured entry into a specific upper-level institution upon completion of their degree.

Conclusion

It is clear that maintaining close ties with receiving institutions benefits students as well as the linked organizations. The accuracy and timeliness of data concerning curricula and student progress allow both schools to better evaluate the effectiveness of their courses and plan for future changes. Receiving institutions can better plan course offerings by knowing, in advance, the number of students who plan to transfer (as estimated by the sending institutions). The guarantee of a current and closely-monitored articulation agreement also encourages higher rates of transfer. Sending institutions can increase student recruitment and retention by providing the student the additional incentive for completing an associate degree of a seamless transition that is updated regularly to maintain relevance to the receiving school and the current job market. Students benefit from a course of study that is kept current and in synch from the time they enter the associate degree program until they complete their bachelor's degree.