

*An examination of Wright College, a community college in Chicago, reveals that it has no particular magic formula for transfer success. Wright's strong transfer programs should be recognized as an outgrowth of the college's unique development within a 7-college district. Faculty and administrative commitment to the centrality of the transfer function, combined with student needs and preferences, allows for a continual reinforcement of the primacy of transfer in Wright's institutional identity. Wright's historically-driven image of itself as a "junior college," and its reputation as such in the surrounding communities, have persisted over time and guided the college's priorities and decisionmaking.*

# **The Transfer Treadmill:**

## ***Forging An Institutional Identity In a Multicampus System***

By definition, the comprehensive community college provides diverse educational services. Typically, these include GED preparation, continuing education, literacy and basic education, freshman and sophomore level college courses, vocational and technical courses, occupational training, and ESL programs. A primary challenge for such an institution is to manage this fragmented array of services. Preparing students for transfer to a four-year college is just one of these services, and it appears that the priority of transfer in the institutional missions of most community colleges has diminished over time. As the percentage of students in programs specifically designed to provide occupational training rose from less than one-third of enrollments in the late 1960's to approximately 70 percent by 1980, transfer rates fell drastically. Furthermore, studies of transfer rates have recently shown that only 22 percent of the students who take 12 hours of college credit in community colleges in a given year actually end up transferring within four years. Students in urban community colleges have an average transfer rate of approximately 12.5 percent (Cohen, 1992). This article analyzes the evolution of Wilbur Wright College, one

of the seven City Colleges of Chicago, and how it has managed to maintain a transfer rate of approximately 28 percent—more than twice the average for urban institutions.

### A College With a Mission: Transfer

Wright College is the oldest of Chicago's current group of seven public community colleges. Opened in 1934 in the northwest quadrant of the city, Wright College has been subject to all the forces that have shaped today's multi-missioned comprehensive community college. Its programs include vocational and transfer curricula along with community service, literacy training, and continuing education. However, Wright's institutional identity is not defined by its multiple missions. Instead, Wright has developed a very strongly defined institutional identity—and a strong community reputation—as a transfer-oriented, baccalaureate-preparation college. At Wright College, which serves culturally and economically diverse student populations, the primacy of transfer is expressed succinctly in the college's mission statement:

The mission of Wright College, as a comprehensive community college, is to provide a broad range of educational opportunities presented by faculty primarily devoted to classroom instruction rather than research. Our priority in this mission, as a post-secondary institution, *is the college credit program* with a recognition that other student populations must be served (emphasis added)....

And at Wright College, the "college credit program" is almost completely synonymous with the transfer function.

Wright's transfer emphasis is, in large part, a product of its historical development, particularly the evolution of its "ecological niche" within the city and within the seven-college district. That Wright has been able to define itself primarily as a transfer institution contrasts with the experience of its sister colleges within the City Colleges of Chicago district, where national, state, and local efforts to promote the occupational training and community service functions have had more direct effects. Indeed, throughout the past three decades, junior colleges have become increasingly vocational, yet Wright's core institutional identity has been defined and strengthened on the treadmill of transfer.

For the past sixty years, Wright's transfer treadmill has been powered by

these interpenetrating forces: a strong, historically rooted reputation for transfer; a transfer-oriented curriculum; faculty and administrative commitment to transfer; stable or growing enrollments; and a "transfer ready" community. Wright's transfer emphasis has been recreated year after year, as administrators, faculty, and students pour their energies into strengthening that part of the institutional mission that has shaped the college's identity. History has molded Wright into a transfer-oriented college, and that identity is sustained through a continual reinforcement of the value and centrality of transfer to the mission of the college. The treadmill metaphor is particularly appropriate since Wright's success has evolved, not from path-breaking innovations, but from unique circumstances coupled with an unwavering dedication to the traditions upon which junior colleges were first founded. For Wright, the treadmill does not imply a lack of change, but the experience and will to prioritize change efforts.

### **The Historical Roots of Wright's Transfer Identity**

The persistence of the transfer identity that characterizes Wright's evolution can be attributed, in part, to its position within a multicollege district. Indeed, Wright's structural development and institutional identity are intimately interwoven with the development and fate of its sister colleges, its relationships with them, and its ties to the district office.

Its status as the oldest and most established college in a growing and expanding district has provided Wright with the leverage to resist pressures that have led to a decline of the transfer function in community colleges generally. While community colleges locally and nationally were shifting from primarily a junior college mission to a comprehensive, highly vocationalized mission, Wright College remained almost wholly unaffected. In part this was due to the college's role as "first among equals" within the city colleges system, as a provider of many of the district's chief administrators, as the last of the city colleges to receive a new facility, and as an upwardly mobile community's alternative to the nearby teacher's college. These factors have constrained the district from forcing new educational missions on the college with the same fervor it did with the other city colleges, and have kept the college's administration and faculty focused on the transfer mission of the institution.

As the oldest of the city colleges, Wright has enjoyed a position of primacy among its sister institutions. Before the junior college system broke

away in 1966 from the Chicago Public Schools and became the City Colleges of Chicago, Wright administration and staff provided leadership in new and innovative activities undertaken by the system, from the American Council on Education's national critical thinking experiment in the early 1950's and the development of the country's first degree-granting TV college in 1957, to the college's work to provide higher education to Chicago police and fire department recruits and to the large numbers of returning veterans after World War II. When the junior college system received its own administrative component within the public school system in 1956, Peter Masiko, the social sciences chairperson and then campus head at Wright, became its first executive dean. His office was located at Wright until the new district was formed. When in 1966, an independent community college district was formed (The City Colleges of Chicago), many of its leaders had also begun their careers at Wright College and, like their predecessors, treated their "home" college favorably. Oscar Shabat, the first chancellor, also served previously as a Wright campus head and social sciences chair. Over the next decade and a half, Shabat took the city colleges through a period of greatest growth and movement toward comprehensiveness—expanding the number of campuses and broadening the range of services to include more unconventional and technical educational programs. However, he also allowed Wright to concentrate on its transfer function while many of the other city colleges were encouraged to develop occupational programs such as auto mechanics, tool and die, printing, and electronics. In short, preferential treatment by the district leadership coupled with physical and geographic circumstances enabled Wright College's transfer programs to prosper.

Thus, during its first 30 years, most of Wright's involvement in innovation and its reputation for leadership in the system were tied to its junior college mission of providing quality baccalaureate transfer education. And its nationally renowned alumni, including a Supreme Court Justice and United Nations Ambassador (Arthur Goldberg), a Nobel Prize-winning chemist (Herbert Brown), Hollywood stars (Kim Novak, Dennis Franz), and current Chicago Police Superintendent (Matt Rodriguez), provided the type of fuel used by faculty and administrators to attest to the college's successes in this role.

The Wright College of today, including its relative transfer success, was largely shaped by a peculiar combination of powerful leadership and resource constraints. One such constraint was the size, location, and condition of

Wright's facilities. Up to the point when the junior college system became the City Colleges of Chicago in 1966, Wright had the finest facility among the district's colleges: three buildings were owned outright by the new district and the other five were housed in parts of public high schools. The change to independent district status brought a pressing physical plant need, since the colleges had been using shared high schools space, and their accreditation was jeopardized by the inadequate physical facilities. Wright, however, was the only campus that remained in its original facility—a building first designed as a junior high school but converted to a junior college facility in the 1930s. As part of a multicampus system, it was the only building owned by the city colleges not requiring major rehabilitation, and the central administration therefore did not consider Wright a priority in its plans for system-wide expansion. When the district began a massive building campaign, Wright found itself at the bottom of the list. The old campus building was well-maintained, but totally inadequate to house the technical equipment used in occupational programs. There was simply no room for machine shops, auto repair facilities, or other technical programs. Additionally, its being surrounded by two suburban college districts that had varied allied health and manufacturing programs further constrained Wright's expansion into these areas; the Illinois Community College Board, the governing agency for Illinois' public community college system, established a policy prohibiting approval of new occupational and vocational programs in areas already served by nearby community colleges offering such programs.

When Chancellor Shabat retired in the early 1980s, his successor, Salvatore Rotella, another former Wright faculty member, pushed the career and training focus of the district even harder, but concentrated his efforts on those campuses located in minority areas and on his new flagship campus, Loop College (soon to be renamed Harold Washington College following the death of Chicago's first African-American mayor). Rotella expanded his idea of creating technical institutes that offered both credit and noncredit programs and deemphasized the district's efforts to coordinate transfer education centrally. Rotella discontinued district-wide meetings of department chairs and academic administrators, eliminated curriculum improvement grants, and made each of the district's then eight colleges responsible for managing its own academic programs. The district's movement toward decentralized management further supported Wright's transfer focus. Left with the authority to set its own program priorities, the college administration actively pursued for-

mal articulation of its transfer programs with four-year colleges and universities and began reforming its curriculum to match Wright course requirements with those at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, the state's premier public university. Local planning also began for a new Wright campus with little initial attention devoted to facilities for occupational programs.

Funding issues also played a key role in Wright's current predilection for transfer programs. State reimbursement rates for vocational programs have been, on average, twice as high as credit hour enrollment reimbursements for transfer education. These reimbursement calculations were often used by the colleges to generate income in order to pay for buildings, equipment, and overhead expenses. That Wright's building was fully owned by the district lessened the pressure to generate more income by encouraging occupational enrollments. Wright has also regularly maintained the city colleges' highest average class size allowable under the faculty union contract to augment lesser state reimbursement rates paid for transfer credit hours.

### **Supporting Transfer Culturally and Structurally**

Wright's incapacity to expand contributed greatly to the transfer-oriented academic culture that now permeates the institution. A strong, unionized faculty loyal to the junior college mission, and an inability to grow physically restricted the diversification of programs that occurred on other campuses. The college's unique history and character have been incorporated by faculty and administrators into a clearly defined campus culture. Their pride in the college's success as a transfer institution perpetuates enthusiasm for and commitment to that very goal. Faculty and administrative morale is, to a large extent, based on the staff's assessment of Wright College as a very successful institution, both in the district and among the state's 48 public community colleges. Wright's model for writing across the curriculum, its exemplary curriculum assessment program, and its comprehensive developmental education program all serve as benchmarks for the district. Both the college and the district's leadership praise the faculty and administration at public events and in monthly Board of Trustees meetings, all of which intensifies the pride felt by the staff for their college. Campus administrative and faculty leadership have little problem motivating most of their colleagues to work hard on campus initiatives, not only for the benefit of Wright's students, but for the benefit of maintaining bragging rights as "the jewel in the crown" and "the Harvard of the City Colleges." The recent move of Wright's credit division

to their new, architecturally innovative campus in 1994 has bolstered their reputational pride even further. While the campus was designed with state-of-the-art computer technology and laboratories, little effort was made to expand occupational programs or resources. A new environmental technology program was offset by the loss of low-enrollment programs in secretarial sciences and electronics.

The college's administration and faculty have established the primacy of the transfer function in Wright's organizational structure and institutional planning. Coordination of goals often revolves around the notion that transfer is primary to the effectiveness of the college. The college's history has allowed for the development of a symbiotic relationship between faculty and administration based on a shared consensus about the desire for quality transfer programs. As a result, a normative climate within the organization places transfer as central to the interpretation of decisions and actions. A key feature of this relationship is the power of faculty in shaping institutional norms and practices. College-wide committees propose and review curriculum changes, select outstanding teachers, review and recommend faculty travel requests and sabbaticals, and determine in-service activities. Departments have major responsibility for assessment, hiring recommendations, and faculty evaluation (including post-tenure review). Shared governance is part of the college president's management credo, and such a practice continues a Wright tradition of faculty empowerment.

Simply, straightforwardly, bigger than life, the most outstanding thing about this place is that departments function as professional organizations. They function as people really concerned about the management of curriculum.... It's a much more developed sense of faculty taking responsibility for the academic management of their courses, curricula and learning environments.... And there is also...an integration by the administration of their power and the power that the faculty naturally have by being closer to curriculum issues, to work together on joint projects.

—Wright administrator, a former faculty member, union activist, and district-wide faculty senate officer

The college's most recent accreditation visit, during which Wright received an unqualified full ten-year accreditation, highlighted the college's

commitment to open lines of communication, teamwork, and participatory planning.

The two chief academic officers (the Vice President for Faculty and Instruction and the Dean of Instruction) have regularly been drawn from the Arts and Sciences faculty. Career/occupational education has only recently received its own administrator, primarily as a response to the national School-to-Work initiative jointly sponsored by the Departments of Education and Labor. Most of Wright's emphasis in this area has been directed to the Workforce Development Center located at the old campus in the Adult/Continuing Education division of the college.

The college's shared governance structure involves the Faculty Council (primarily made up of arts and sciences faculty), the Academic Affairs Committee (department representatives and the dean of instruction), the department chairs (14 arts and sciences areas and 5 career/vocational departments), and the Administrative Council. The Vice President for Faculty and Instruction chairs monthly meetings of the department chairs and administrative council, and the dominant voices heard throughout these meetings are those of the arts and sciences faculty and administration. Of Wright's 140+ full-time faculty, fewer than 30 are from occupational and vocational areas.

At present, the college's principal planning efforts center on refining its college-wide assessment plan, reforming general education, and devising measures of institutional effectiveness. These efforts, while institution-wide, have concentrated on the transfer program. For example, the college's general education reform has dominated the agenda in each of the last three years' Faculty Development Week programs. A massive state-wide curriculum reform project, the Illinois Articulation Initiative, continues to occupy faculty and administrative time.

### **The Influence of Community on Institutional Identity**

"You can't fool yourself. You have to serve your community if you're a community college."

—English professor, Wright College

A final factor influencing Wright's self-definition as a transfer institution is the northwest side community Wright serves, an area with a stable population and people who desire the services of community colleges.

Chicago has always been a city of ethnic neighborhoods, each living in

minimally peaceful coexistence with those surrounding it. The northwest side is no exception; Polish and Irish residents of the wards immediately adjacent to the campus mix uneasily with Koreans to the east, Latinos to the southeast, and African-Americans to the south. Blue collar ethnics, municipal employees bound to the city by strict residency laws, recent immigrants—some with degrees from foreign universities—and the urban poor, these are the upwardly mobile constituencies of Wright College. This population has kept Wright healthy in enrollments at a time when other colleges in the district have experienced declines. Census data show that, unlike many other parts of Chicago, the areas from which Wright draws its students have not declined in total population. In 1980, over 2340 city residents from the northwest side were paying out-of-district fees to attend Wright's nearest suburban competitor. Such an environment provides for the college a "cushion of enrollments" against which to define an identity. A college with a continuous influx of students has the luxury of defining its programs and priorities relatively free from outside constraints. A college without this enrollment stability becomes pressured by budget needs when enrollments decline.

"Save your money to go somewhere better later... that's what the whole purpose of this school is—so you don't have to spend thousands and thousands of dollars for your basic courses when you can get them here."

—Wright College student

A large number, though not a majority, of students who enroll at Wright tend to be those with previous orientations toward university and senior colleges. Students continually praise Wright for its usefulness as a stepping stone to further education and the attainment of a bachelor's degree. They come to Wright because they've heard that it's a good place to prepare themselves for a university, to accumulate credits inexpensively, and to give themselves time to decide on a major or career before transferring. Wright's image as a junior college with a transfer mission is fully compatible with the needs of the students and potential students in the community Wright serves. Upon enrollment, students are asked to declare their intent, and the most frequently checked category is "transfer," with 47 percent of the credit students declaring transfer as their intent in the Fall of 1995.

The children of blue-collar ethnics are often the first in their families to attend college, and the affordability and accessibility of a college like Wright

enable these children to get their start in college while still living at home. Until recently, Chicago municipal employees received tuition waivers to attend Wright and the other city colleges. As the nearest city college to the concentrations of city workers living in the more affluent Edgebrook and Jefferson Park neighborhoods, Wright is frequently the college of choice for police, firefighters, city hall staff, and their children. Wright's extensive English as a Second Language and developmental education programs offer transfer program springboards for immigrants and underprepared degree seekers. The area's local public university, Northeastern Illinois University (formerly Chicago Teachers' College), is a more costly alternative for this population; Wright's history and reputation have allowed it to compete effectively for degree-seeking students. And the opening of Wright's new campus in 1994, complete with state-of-the-art science labs and more than 600 open access computers, has positioned the college well in the continuing competition for new degree-seeking students.

Residents of Chicago's northwest side certainly do not have a monopoly on the desire to transfer. However, it is no secret that Wright College, while serving a multiethnic, multiracial student population, is located in a very white middle-class part of the city. The average household income for northwest side residents is approximately \$34,700 in a city with an overall mean household income of \$34,682. Less than 40 percent of Chicago's population is white, whereas Northwest Side neighborhoods are, on average, nearly 90 percent white. Chicago's poverty rate is approximately 21.6 percent, yet poverty on the Northwest Side is much lower at 7 percent. The poverty rate in the specific neighborhoods where most Wright students live is closer to 12 percent.

In this environment, it's reasonable to assume that the residents of the northwest side have suffered less and benefited more from the historical and current impact of racism and discrimination and poverty in Chicago than have other populations throughout the city. Such factors as quality of elementary and high school education, access to home ownership, stable family incomes, and relatively safe neighborhoods provide the foundation from which Wright College can continue student progress. One social science professor put it this way:

It is easy to criticize the other branches of the city colleges for their lack of success and that's unfair because you can only teach what walks

through your doors. And if students come into your school from neighborhoods and families that are disorganized, dysfunctional, impoverished, and the like, no school can fix that. The public schools surely do not, and the community colleges have even less of a chance. So the fact that the northwest side of Chicago has always sent reasonably well-prepared, reasonably disciplined children, reasonably well-nourished children, reasonably motivated children, and there's great variations within that, to the college. The fact that the neighborhood has always said you can go to Wright because it's a good alternative. It's even a good fallback position if you flunk out. The fact that you had this kind of general community support has made all the difference. In fact it **is** the difference. We may be good here, and I think we are, but we're not miracle workers. This is not a magic show. So we can't take stones and transform them into scholars. You've gotta have something reasonable. So I think the neighborhood's been crucial.

These ecological circumstances provide a solid foundation for a continual reinforcement of Wright's transfer mission. The transfer-oriented, reasonably well-prepared students that Wright attracts reinforce its transfer role by validating the very reputation and status that first attracted them to the college. In that sense, Wright's reputation is self-perpetuating, and Wright not only serves its community, the community serves Wright College.

Wright's stability and historical embeddedness in the northwest side community put it in a favorable position to benefit the students of lower socioeconomic status who seek the college's services. Wright's strong transfer program and accompanying reputation have for decades attracted lower and working class students who desire upward mobility. More recently, the neighborhoods from which Wright draws most of its students have extended farther east and south as residents of the predominantly Latino Logan Square and Humboldt Park neighborhoods enroll in large numbers. Also, in light of the overall characteristics of the northwest side, it is important to recognize the marked heterogeneity of the actual student body. Of the eleven zip codes from which Wright students are drawn most heavily, three are areas in which one-third to one-half of the households have incomes below \$15,000 annually, and 22 to 33 percent of the population is below the poverty line.

### The Road Ahead

For Wright and colleges like it, the road ahead is not yet fully paved. As long as the college faculty remains primarily arts and sciences, those trained in transfer education will remain Wright's principal mission. On the other hand, if Wright is to remain competitive as a transfer college, the content of the transfer focus may be facing some significant alterations. One of the primary challenges will certainly be the effective reorientation of transfer programs to suit both a changing labor market and a shifting of patterns in higher education. Community college leaders will need to take the lead in detecting and predicting the ways in which their institutions can prepare students for entry into the growing sectors of the economy, such as health and computer technology, while opening up, rather than cutting off, opportunities for transfer to four-year degrees in these fields.

Wright College is now eagerly developing links with those senior colleges and universities in the Chicago area that are open to the idea of extending formal transfer opportunities to occupational students. This has been done already with the environmental technology students as well as with criminal justice and occupational therapy assistant students. These types of partnerships and agreements allow Wright to continue to emphasize transfer as a favorable option, even within its more occupationally-g geared degree programs. So as Wright's physical plant grows, and new campus facilities allow the offering of more technical programs on site—such as environmental technology—transfer will continue to remain the top priority. Strictly terminal vocational education will hopefully become a thing of the past, as the concept of vocational education broadens to include both a general education core and the flexibility to include avenues toward college transfer.

Another critical issue for the college is how it copes with the increase in the proportion of part-time lecturers. As the district attempts to cut operating costs by replacing retiring full-time faculty with part-time lecturers until a district ratio of 70-30 full-time to part-time faculty is achieved, the dwindling numbers of full-time faculty at Wright pose a serious threat to a transfer process that has traditionally rested heavily on the relationship between student needs and desires and the time, preferences, and networks of a full-time, liberal arts-oriented faculty. A reduction in the numbers of these full-time faculty not only weakens a transfer-focused institutional culture, but also demands increased administrative oversight and support for quality instruction.

In addition, community colleges that aspire to transfer success must wrestle with tough choices in terms of identifying the key student populations the college wishes to serve. It is clear that Wright's success in transfer relates directly to the characteristics of the students seeking the college's services. An abundance of transfer-oriented students with adequate levels of academic preparation and a family background sufficiently removed from the constraints of poverty fuels the college's transfer identity. However, community colleges must recognize that the choice to concentrate energies on this student population can lead to a neglect of other populations. Wright retains its comprehensiveness of mission even though it emphasizes one population over others. Not all colleges are able to do this, and selection bias should not be mistaken for and lauded as transfer success.

Relatedly, when success is measured in terms of transfer, the other functions of the college are not likely to be scrutinized for their failures or recognized for their accomplishments. Often, transfer demands are at odds with the functions of teaching literacy skills, job training, and outreach. Hopefully, community colleges will ultimately learn how to structure the various missions of the college from a tension-ridden contradiction into a mutually compatible synthesis. Comprehensive community colleges attempt to be everything for everyone. In this environment, however, the cold, hard realities suggest that trying to fulfill a multiplicity of different tasks decreases the likelihood that any one task will be accomplished with any degree of excellence. Increasing the effectiveness of any one mission is likely to entail tough choices about those the college will serve and not serve.

### *Suggested Readings*

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