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Who Decides on Transfer Credit?

April 21, 2011

A longstanding complaint of students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions is that the 2+2 model quickly turns into 2+3 or 2+4 or 2+dropping out, when many of the credits earned before transfer are rejected or can't fulfill key requirements. At the City University of New York, an administration plan to deal with this issue has many professors at four-year institutions saying that their rights to guard curricular quality are being endangered.

The system's central administration [proposed](#) in January the creation of a common general education framework across its all of its two- and four-year colleges, which would cause many institutions to significantly trim their [current requirements](#), some of which require as many as 60 credits. The system has also proposed a brand-new, overarching transfer agreement that would guarantee that liberal arts and sciences courses taken for credit at any CUNY institutions be accepted for credit by any other CUNY institutions, even if an equivalent course exists at the transfer institution.

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As the majority of community college students within the system transfer to a senior college before having earned an associate degree, many of their community college credits are considered elective credits by senior colleges and add to their overall credit total without helping them progress toward their degree requirements. In other words, some students earn more than 120 credits but still cannot graduate.

The comprehensive reform efforts, including the trimming and standardization of general education requirements, that CUNY is pursuing are similar to efforts [made within](#) the State University of New York system two years ago and those currently being [pursued between](#) the California Community Colleges and the California State University System. Many higher education experts have commented in recent years that two- and four-year institutions should strive to make the transfer process easier and more seamless. For instance, the Education Department issued a [series of suggestions](#) last month for governors and other state leaders to help colleges in their respective states increase their completion rates. One of the "key strategies" the agency recommends is establishing statewide policies that govern the transfer of credit and "developing common lower-division, postsecondary general education curricula accepted by all public two and four-year institutions."

CUNY faculty at both two- and four-year institutions appear united in their frustration over the "top-down" method in which the system administration has sought these changes, arguing it threatens their autonomy and traditional control over curriculum. However, they are divided as to whether such changes are in the best interest of the system and its students — a conflict that says as much about the diversity of CUNY as it does about the vast differences of opinion regarding the recent nationwide push for more college graduates.

Faculty leaders at four-year institutions generally agree that the general education changes would dilute the quality of baccalaureate degrees. Of course, to some community college faculty members, the idea that giving more credit to their courses would dilute quality comes across like a slap at their institutions. Faculty senates at six of the senior colleges within the CUNY system have in recent weeks passed [resolutions](#) to condemn the planned changes. None of the faculty senates at CUNY's community colleges have taken such a stand.

General Education Tug of War

Sandi E. Cooper, chair of the system-wide University Faculty Senate and a history professor at the College of Staten Island, said she believes

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the broad changes being proposed by CUNY's central administration are a "transparent attempt to ensure faster graduation" and that while "citing student complaints about the problems of transfer," it is "proposing a cure that threatens the entire validity of the four-year degree."

The administration has proposed a [general education model](#) in which all two- and four-year institutions would hold 36 credits — with courses distributed across disciplines — in common; then, each college would be able to designate up to six additional credits for the general education requirement that are specific to its institution. Cooper argues that asking colleges to trim their general education requirements, some of which currently consist of more than 42 credits, "dilutes quality" and the "rich range" of disciplines students may encounter in their higher education.

"An administration which pays for ads on the sides of buses, for billboards and for all manner of commercials demonstrating its commitment to quality, is now asking its baccalaureate institutions to bend to the limited educational attainments of transfer students who may have barely touched the menu of course work," Cooper wrote in an e-mail to *Inside Higher Ed*. "What should be eliminated? Languages? Lab science? History? Courses that are too tough — math?"

Cooper's University Faculty Senate, which is dominated by representatives from the system's four-year institutions, passed something of a [compromise resolution](#) on general education last week. It argues for a 30-credit base for general education at all CUNY institutions, plus at least an additional 16 credits to be determined by each individual college. Still, the vote on this resolution did not win the approval of some two-year faculty, who saw the stipulation of 16 credits as giving the senior colleges more than their fair share of curricular control.

"My thinking was, at the time, that this isn't about whether we prefer the 36 + 6 model or the 30 + 16 model," explained Katherine Conway, head of a caucus of community college representatives to the University Faculty Senate and a business management professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College, about her opposition to the resolution. "We just need to come to an agreement about what the core actually is, and I don't think we've done that.... I don't think this [common general education core] threatens the quality of baccalaureate degrees, but is the right number of [base] credits 36? I don't know."

Other community college faculty, however, are not as troubled by giving over control of a significant portion of the general education requirement to their colleagues at senior institutions, if only because they would rather students have a larger overall requirement.

"More is better," said Emily Tai, a representative on the University Faculty Senate's executive committee and a history professor at Queensborough Community College, of the general education requirement. "We want to expose them to enough so they can decide what they like."

Officials from CUNY's central administration defend the 36 + 6 plan for general education. Alexandra W. Logue, executive chancellor and university provost of the system, argued that the 42-total-credit requirement is "on the high side for good public universities around the country." She also deflected faculty claims that the system's administration was dictating curricular matter to them, and that the administration's approach would dilute baccalaureate degree quality.

"Education quality is not a function of what's in a general education curriculum," said Logue, adding that faculty will be part of a task force the system's administration is forming this spring to try to settle what should be a part of this proposed common framework.

One-Size-Fits-All Transfer

On the matter of the system's proposed overarching transfer policy, which Cooper and other four-year faculty [view as a separate matter](#) from

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reforming the general education requirement, the University Faculty Senate unanimously passed a [resolution](#) last week suggesting that the system's transfer problems may be remedied more effectively by measures other than blanket acceptance of all liberal arts and sciences credits. It suggests, for example, strengthening "curricular counseling for students" and improving technology to link college course catalogs and make transcripts readily available to advising faculty.

Many four-year faculty members are worried by the administration's effort to push through a transfer agreement in conjunction with a common general education requirement.

"It just hasn't been explained clearly enough," said Dean Savage, a representative on the University Faculty Senate and a sociology professor at Queens College, a four-year institution. "There just hasn't been a persuasive case between [this] transfer [change] and a common framework for general education."

Cooper said she will continue to pressure the system's administration to "modify the language" of its proposal to separate the matters.

Logue, however, defended the coupling of the changes, arguing that students need both aspects to be reformed to ease transfer within the system. She added that CUNY has "tried a number of different resolutions to try and address this [transfer] problem" before, but that none of them has worked in isolation.

Still, as with their response to the system administration's general education plan, community college faculty are not always in agreement with their colleagues at four-year institutions.

"We've always felt that our students who want to transfer to four-year colleges bump up against walls on their way there and that there's always been a kind of barrier there that they didn't expect to face," said Sally Mettler, a representative to the University Faculty Senate and a humanities professor at LaGuardia Community College. "And it always comes down to the un-discussed and unspoken issue that some professor thinks that the courses they've taken [at a community college] are not up to the level of what they would have to take at a four-year college and don't deserve equivalency."

Mettler added, though, that she has concerns that the reforms being pushed by the system's central administration discourage students from earning associate degrees. She worries that some of these reforms could "undercut existing programs" for the sake of a larger baccalaureate degree completion goal. And she said she thinks that some community college faculty have not entirely written off the system administration's plan because of historical tensions between them and their four-year colleagues.

"I think some two-year faculty are willing to get behind the administration on this one because they think it will finally advantage their students in a way that they've always been disadvantaged," Mettler said. "After years of getting the bad end of things, it looks tempting to support this.... Still, that can be something you can live to regret."

— David Moltz

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[Time for a Transformational Vision](#)

Posted by [Cliff Adelman](#) , Senior Associate at Institute for Higher Education Policy on April 21, 2011 at 9:00am EDT

The credit/course argument in transfer policy has been going on since the Jurassic Age of U.S. higher education, sometimes striking one as squabbles of back-office accountants, not likely to go away soon, and completely missing the whole point of vertical qualifications: the direct demonstration of the knowledge and skills students have acquired.

The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) issued in January, and now moving forward with projects in two regional accrediting bodies (the Western Association of Colleges and Schools and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association) and a consortium of private institutions under the aegis of the Council for Independent Colleges, puts a transformational spin on an otherwise dead-end debate that has no bearing on what students understand of the criteria for vertical movement in our system. That is, instead of credits, the DQP offers a nested set of discrete competencies, with challenge levels ratcheted up from associate's level to bachelor's to master's. Institutions, groups of institutions, and whole systems can adopt the form of the DQP as they wish, adding to, restructuring, or modifying the original illustrative document, but in all cases selecting, validating, and making public a sample of assignments and assessments that elicit student performances documenting attainment.

Put a version of the DQP in place, and you have something with teeth because meeting its performance criteria---not how many credits you have earned or in which courses--- determines whether you earn a degree at each level. And it can as easily---and with more confidence---be used to determine the point at which a student is eligible to move from an associate's-level program to a bachelor's level program.

To be sure, there are challenges in implementing a DQP-type system, e.g. even after consensus on student learning outcomes, identifying a variety of assignments and assessments faculty currently use or have tweaked as qualifying tasks, validating those tasks, developing a recording system for student attainment of, let us say 29 competencies at the associate's level, 42 at the bachelor's level, etc. that faculty agree will provide adequate evidence. But that's part of the challenge of the next decade's work on this transformational process. For a lot of reasons---effective transfer among them---it's worth the effort.

 Posted by [Greg](#) on April 21, 2011 at 10:15am EDT

Is this really an external transfer problem? I would bet that an internal transfer from the undeclared to Business would lose about half their credits. The college of the undeclared seems to be the largest college anymore. Or how about a Phys Ed major transferring to Business after one or two years? Used to be the average student changed majors 3 times and there was nothing seamless about those either. Students go into transfer programs, or college for that matter, for all the wrong reasons and with little thought or planning. Why reward them for floundering? But not the others that are internal? If we are going to have a cookie cutter approach, then why go to college?

Greg

 Posted by [Chris](#) on April 21, 2011 at 10:45am EDT

CUNY can't even straighten out transfer credit within its own system? When I was an undergrad in Arizona I could pick up a course catalog and see exactly how any community college course would count at any of the state's 4-year institutions. Not everything counted, but it was clear and unambiguous, despite the community colleges being run entirely separately from the 4-year schools.

[need not be that hard](#)

Posted by [bradley bleck](#) , English instructor at Spokane Falls CC on April 21, 2011 at 11:30am EDT

I wasn't involved in the process, but the state of Washington has long had a direct transfer agreement for students earning an AA at any one of the state's community colleges. What this means is that the general education requirements of the first two years have been fulfilled but unless there is a specific agreement to that affect, students may or may not be ready to enter the college of engineering or whatever. We do have some agreements of that sort.

However, when a student transfers without the AA, the four-year makes the call on what does and does not transfer. It may take some wrangling, but it's really not THAT hard to get done. Is CUNY

going to value courses taught by GA/TAs more than CC faculty with 10, 15, 20 years of experience? I should hope not. I was a lousy teacher as a TA, and I suspect most of us were far from what we are now in that respect.

Common Core makes sense

Posted by [Chair in Texas](#), Chair Communications at Alamo Colleges on April 21, 2011 at 12:45pm EDT

If we're really about student success a common core curriculum makes sense. This is one of the concepts that Texas got right (out of so many wrong). The transfer core allows community college students to transfer effectively with 60 hours of credit, instead of retaking courses needlessly. University Professors should also know that the common core will strengthen the lower-division curricula, not water down the upper-division because such a core demands that classes follow objectives.

Posted by [Judith](#) on April 21, 2011 at 1:00pm EDT

Massachusetts, too, has a clear and rational community college to four-year state school policy. . . . If you think CUNY is a mess, SUNY can't get it together either.

This has always been an unnecessary problem

Posted by [Gregg L. DesElms](#) on April 21, 2011 at 4:15pm EDT

Among my biggest irritations with higher education is the state of both transfer credits, and the transfer of finished degrees into higher-level degree programs. Regionally-accredited schools have always been the biggest offenders when it comes to turning-up their noses at course credits and degrees transferred from other schools. Some of them, as this article clearly shows, reject the transfer credits and degrees from other schools even when said schools are also regionally-accredited.

Worse, it happens, as this article describes, even when all schools involved are part of the same system, accredited by the very same regional accreditor! It's unbelievable; and it's the epitome of arrogance. I'll even add that it's a racket, to boot, because everyone knows that a large (but, admittedly, not the largest, in most cases) underlying motivation of the receiving/rejecting school is to sell the transfer student the receiving school's version of courses which said transfer student has already taken at the transferred-from school... obviously so that the receiving school can make money on said courses.

The problem worsens, further, when the transferring course credits and/or degrees are from a school which is, indeed, accredited by an agency approved by the US Department of Education (USDE) and/or the USDE-sanctioned Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (in the same way as the regional accreditors are also approved); but the USDE- and/or CHEA-approved agency which has accredited the school from which these transfer credits or degrees is one of the "national" (as opposed to "regional") accreditors.

Regionally-accredited schools have always felt (actually, "claimed" is a far more accurate word) that nationally-accredited schools were sub-standard (even when same could be incontrovertibly shown to be untrue), and so have a long and ugly history of summarily rejecting credits and degrees from such schools with impunity.

The credit transfer and acceptance of finished degrees situation, then, is (and has long been) a mess. And this whole business, as described in this Inside Higher Ed article, of coming-up with a 30 to 36 semester credit hour core of lower division general education (LDGE) courses to which the receiving school could then add its own LDGE to top-up the total to 42 to 45 semester credit hours of LDGE (obviously so that it can still make some money on the transferring student's lower-division coursework) is both ridiculous and outrageous. It's actually close to criminal, truth be told.

Most importantly, though, it's unnecessary... or at least it WOULD be if the goal of pretty much universal credit transferability and degree acceptability were the reality that the very notion of accreditation promised in the first place!

The victims, of course, are the students, most of whom don't really understand accreditation (in fact, from my observation, most of them don't really even understand LDGE, or divisions, or the parts of a bachelors degree, or how it's constructed, or what a major/minor actually is, or what a semester credit hour actually is, etc., etc.), and so they don't know how to truly and deftly navigate the system, or rationally and effectively argue their case with the receiving/rejecting school for acceptance of their transfer credits and/or degrees. And, yes, such arguments, when made by someone who actually

knows how the system's supposed to work, can be -- and often are -- won.

So the poor kids being victimized by this system just end-up grinning and bearing it, taking it lying down (or sometimes, tragically, just dropping-out rather than figuring it out), while the schools -- which are likely already grossly overcharging them for tuition -- effectively separate them from their money like a mugger on the street.

It's shameful and unconscionable; and I've never really understood why at least SOME regionally-accredited schools haven't been investigated not merely for antitrust violations, but downright racketeering, as well. What higher education really needs is a good RICO conviction or two to slap some sense into it! Of course, such would be a ridiculous notion in real life, and I'm not actually advocating for it (er... well... you know... maybe a little); but the hypothetical of it at least helps make my point.

Accreditation is about standards; and if that actually MEANS anything, and if accreditation, indeed, ensures said standards, then the LDGE coursework of one regionally-accredited (and I would argue, also, nationally-accredited, but let's just keep this discussion simple, for the moment, and stick with regionally-accredited) school should be fully and facially acceptable in transfer to any other regionally-accredited school. And that should be the end of it.

CHEA's "Higher Education Transfer Alliance" (HETA) was created precisely so that that seemingly-foreign (to most schools) notion could be presented, considered, vetted, and maybe even -- heaven forbid -- widely implemented across not just regionally-accredited schools, but nationally- and programmatically-accredited ones, too; and then maybe -- just maybe -- any and all coursework credits and/or finished degrees, as long as they're from schools accredited by a USDE- and/or CHEA-approved agency (and by that I mean ANY such agency, whether it's a "national" or "regional" accreditor... but at the very LEAST, if it's the latter) would be equally transferable.

Transferability, after all, has allegedly always been among the chief goals of accreditation, in the first place... er... well... that, and also ensuring the school's minimally-high and academically-rigorous overall standards, its financial stability, the quality of its faculty and staff, and the suitability of its programs for federal student loan funding.

Every person in America should, if desired, be able to avail himself/herself of this country's typically comparatively inexpensive community and/or junior college system as a means of completing his/her first two (freshman and sophomore) years of what will ultimately be a four-year bachelors degree.

Some community and/or junior colleges are literally ten or more times less expensive than the freshman and sophomore years of a typical four-year university bachelors degree program; and, so, completing half of a bachelors degree at a less-expensive community or junior college can considerably lower the overall cost of said degree. Such savings could help a student to rely less on (or perhaps not even use at all) federally-backed student loans which can result in crippling -- sometimes even lifelong -- debt that can never be discharged in bankruptcy if ever such discharge were needed during the unpredictable course of his/her life.

Most importantly, though, every one of those persons who save sometimes HUGE amounts of money by completing their freshman and sophomore years at a community or junior college should be able to then COUNT ON the two-year associates degree therefrom being acceptable, ON ITS FACE, as the first half of a four-year bachelors degree; thereby allowing them to enter said bachelors degree as a full junior. Or, similarly, such students should be able to count on the course credits from an unfinished associates degree being facially acceptable toward however much of the lower division they may be applied.

That they cannot, in many cases, so count is an absolute tragedy. It's unconscionable. Shame on our system for this egregiousness.

I believe in accreditation. I'm not one of those diploma/degree-millish nutjobs out there so decrying the system that they call for accreditation's elimination just because it's arguably dysfunctional; and, in its place, advocate the broad acceptance of unaccredited transfer credits and degrees as long as, by a preponderance of whatever wacky things they consider evidence thereof, said "credits" and/or "degrees" are credible and academically rigorous.

Accreditation eliminates the admissions officer at the transfer credit or degree-receiving school from even having to figure out any of that nonsense. It ensures, among other things, that said admissions officer can, as easily as looking it up in a book (or taking 30 seconds to search for it in either or both of the USDE and/or CHEA online databases), determine whether or not incoming transfer credits or degrees are worthy of acceptance.

If admissions officers had to do their own assessment of the quality of every incoming transfer credit and/or degree, then even small schools would need an entire skyscraper full of them in order for there to have been adequate and appropriate due diligence. It is, therefore, impractical to even try to operate a higher educational system without the standards ensured by accreditation (or some other equivalent form of educational quality assurance framework such as that found in the UK, most of the EU, Australia, South Africa, and other nations which have an observably functional and effective standard and culture of educational accountability).

However, when individual schools -- or, worse, an unholy cabal of them -- in antitrust-law-breaking and racketeering-like fashion, just up and arrogantly and defiantly thumb their noses at one of accreditation's most useful purposes (that being the assurance of credit transferability, and finished degree acceptance), then what's the darned point?

I'm serious now: Some heads need to roll over this!

[sigh] But, of course, I know none ever will... not, at least, in MY lifetime... nor, likely, thereafter.

And that really IS tragic.

Gregg L. DesElms
Napa, California USA
gregg at greggdeselms dot com

It's not just CUNY that has hit snags, but it's getting better

Posted by [Richard Hezel](#) at Hezel Associates on April 21, 2011 at 6:00pm EDT
Most state higher ed systems lack a unified end-to-end articulation and transfer policy and the appropriate practices to accompany them. (See our recent report on Promising Practices in Statewide Articulation and Transfer Systems, www.wiche.edu/stas). Excellent practices with unified GEC and course numbering are evident (e.g., Florida), and Arizona has done a good job demonstrating that its statewide 2-to-4-yr articulation and transfer system has saved the state and students frustration and tuition cost. It's heartening to see that states are making some progress, but sad to see the extraordinary loss of valuable faculty time reinventing the wheel in approvals of each program and course transferred--over and over again.

Unpersuaded by 4-year Standards

Posted by [Larry Steele](#) on April 21, 2011 at 8:00pm EDT
As an adjunct within the Colorado Community College system, I have two observations to make. Colorado has a level of transferability, with individual course titles receiving "guaranteed transfer" status. In order for a history course qualify for guaranteed transfer, the course must require at least twenty (20) percent of the grade be attributable to writing assignments. Even with graduate assistants and graders, many Colorado 4-year institutions have far lower expectations for student performance. I am not persuaded that the "standards" of our more exulted colleagues, is better for students, our disciplines, or society -- only better for their bottom line.

CUNY need not reinvent the wheel

Posted by [Dr. Carrie B. Kisker](#), Director at Center for the Study of Community Colleges on April 22, 2011 at 1:30pm EDT
CUNY is not the only system (or state) wrangling with these difficult issues, and may be able to learn much from the experiences of others in creating curricular and policy structures that better support student transfer and articulation.

The Center for the Study of Community Colleges has recently documented how 4 states have implemented transfer associate degrees, effectively balancing institutional autonomy/freedom with greater efficiency, student centeredness, and the common good.

Examples of how faculty and administrators in Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington have successfully worked through these sticky transfer and articulation issues can be found in the full report at www.centerforcommunitycolleges.org.

It's not apples and apples

Posted by [E. Kuhn-Osius](#), Chair, Undergraduate Course of Study Committee at Hunter College, CUNY on April 25, 2011 at 4:00am EDT

The unacknowledged problem with the new policy is that the individual colleges within CUNY are quite different in character (and quality). The CUNY central administration exerted quite a bit of energy to remove remediation from senior colleges and there are differential admissions requirements for senior and community colleges. It goes without saying that the quality of HS graduates in New York City is extremely diverse. Why go through all the trouble to differentiate institutions when in the end all classes count the same, a policy bought and paid for with a serious weakening of expectations for students from senior colleges? CUNY is negating its extensive efforts in the past of ensuring the high quality of some of its flagship institutions, which are much older institutions than the comparatively recent CUNY system imposed on them.

[A bit of a push-back](#)

Posted by [Asst Prof in Texas](#), History on April 25, 2011 at 1:15pm EDT

I have to disagree on the value and efficacy of a "Common Core", or "Core Curriculum", or whatever we decide to call it. If we truly are dedicated to giving our students a holistic educational experience, rather than simply helping them accumulate "chits" to be cashed in for a credential, then shouldn't we want to exercise greater gate-keeping over what constitutes their education?

The notion that a "course is a course", and is thus the same anywhere and everywhere is not the case. If an institution wants to ensure that the actual educational content be maintained to the standards of that institution, then how can we expect them to blanketly accept transfer courses from institutions that may not meet that standard?

This is, to push back against my colleague from Communications above, one of the great tragedies of the Texas desire for uniformity in the lower divisions of the degree. The uniqueness of the institutional experience used to mean something, but has now been replaced by a push for, as a commentor above put it, a "cookie-cutter".

