

Perceived Barriers to Articulation: Institutional Characteristics

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It has been generally acknowledged that a number of obstacles, or barriers, exist in the articulation process. Based on literature review, student characteristics as well as institutional characteristics may act as barriers. This paper focuses on institutional characteristics. The changed mission of the community college and a lack of standardization of curricula between two-year and four-year institutions of higher education have been identified as barriers to articulation. Suggested reforms are described.

INDEX TERMS: articulation; barriers; junior college; transfer student

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“Perhaps the most critical question in the sociology of education is whether it is what a student brings to school or what schools do to students that explains ultimate educational achievement”.¹ In the process of articulation, especially from the two-year to four-year institution, there are both student characteristics, as well as institutional and curricular characteristics, that influence various outcomes.

The low percentage of students who successfully transferred from two-year colleges into four-year baccalaureate degree programs throughout the 1970s created a stimulus for research that has taken place throughout the last two decades. Educators throughout the country took seriously the data indicating that, although transfer rates had begun to decline during the 1960s, by the late 1970s the national transfer rate had reached a low point of 25% or less.¹⁻⁴

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In the earlier days of the community college, during the 1950s, when they were still called “junior colleges”, the student transfer rates were approximately 50%. What might be the reason for a continual decline in transfer rates over the years? Researchers have addressed this question with another question: “What is the relative impact of initial attendance at community colleges versus initial attendance at senior institutions on baccalaureate attainment?”⁵

Three different national longitudinal surveys, initiated in the early 1970s, “found that, on the average, 70% of four-year college entrants received a baccalaureate degree when followed up four to fourteen years later, whereas only 26% of public two-year college entrants reached the same destination.”^{2,3} Kevin Dougherty, an educator in favor of collegiate reform, reiterates what other researchers have concluded: “There really is a baccalaureate gap, and it is only partially explained by the different characteristics of the two student bodies. Even when these differences are controlled, students entering community colleges with the hope of receiving a bachelor’s degree are 11% to 19% less likely to do so than comparable students entering four-year colleges.”³

With over five million undergraduate students attending community colleges in the 1990s, it became more urgent to seek out the causes of this problem.⁶ The body of research is in agreement. Student characteristics such as academic skills, socioeconomic factors, social integration, and emotional strengths are often predictors of success (or failure) in persistence toward attaining the baccalaureate degree. However, characteristics due to the nature of the institution (institutional and curricular characteristics) also act as barriers to articulation.

INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Institutional characteristics are defined as those characteristics rooted in the organization, governance, history, and mission of the higher education system. Both two-year institutions and four-year baccalaureate degree institutions present their own barriers to articulation. However, critics as well as advocates of the community colleges agree that the changed mission of the community college is largely responsible for the perceived barriers to articulation and the general decline in transfer rate and subsequent graduation. This situation is explored briefly prior to consideration of specific barriers.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES: CHANGE IN MISSION

An open-door policy in higher education had been well established by the time U.S. veterans returned home following the end of World War II. The G.I. Bill of Rights was passed, providing funding for their education. A sharp rise in enrollments in community colleges followed.

“In 1947, the philosophy of open access was further advanced by the Truman Commission on Higher Education, which strongly advocated education for all and established the basic functions of community colleges—providing proper education for all the people of the community without regard to race, sex, religion, color, geographical location, or financial status.”⁷

Originally called junior colleges and intended to function primarily as two-year academic pre-transfer institutions, community colleges were considered a “point of entry into the hierarchy of U.S. higher education”.⁴ Junior colleges also offered postsecondary education up to a terminal associate degree.

Democratizing sentiments in society, such as those evidenced in the Truman Commission on Higher Education, demanded greater accessibility to education for all. As a result, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, two-year colleges took on a comprehensive focus, offering a variety of programs, including academic, general education, as well as vocational education. Their name was changed to ‘community college’, and the increased access to higher education that they offered became known as the ‘community college movement’. Between 1950 and 1970 enrollments increased by 750%.⁴

As these colleges became increasingly comprehensive in nature, with an emphasis on vocational programs, their academically oriented pre-transfer curricula decreased. The needs of a diverse and unselected student population were diverting the two-year college from its original mission. Even community college advocates admit that during the late 1960s and 1970s, known as ‘transition years’ for the community college, these schools relaxed their pre-transfer function, leaving the setting of standards up to the post-transfer institution.⁴ A lack of good counseling left students, who had initially intended to transfer, to inform themselves of the criteria of the post-transfer institution and to plan accordingly. By the late 1970s the transfer rate was slightly less than 25%.

“While the removal of academic, economic, social, and geographical barriers serves to democratize higher education, it also poses a dilemma: the problem of providing open access with quality.”⁷ For the last two decades, many educators researching this issue have been critical of the community college, claiming that it actually hinders students from transferring to four-year colleges. They associate the change in mission from ‘academic’ to ‘comprehensive’ with a perceived decrease in quality of education.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

A number of institutional barriers have been identified. Because they exist independently of student characteristics, and are attributable to the nature of the institution, they are responsible for what Dougherty refers to as the “negative institutional effect”.^{2,3} For brevity, a few selected barriers and suggested reforms are discussed.

Community colleges: barriers and suggested reforms

Lack of academic quality

“In many community colleges, programs ostensibly designed to prepare students for eventual transfer to four-year colleges have become essentially open-door programs with virtually no entry or exit requirements. Consequently, transfer courses are often not up to university standards of instruction.”² Some researchers propose that faculty do not maintain high academic expectations for their students, that they grade relative to the class norm, and assign fewer difficult readings and essay exams than university faculty members.

Solutions include suggestions such as: improving pre-transfer academic preparation by familiarizing community college instructors of the university’s academic expectations, increasing academic expectations of students, and pre-testing students to determine if they are academically prepared to enroll in courses that will transfer to a four-year school.

Lack of transfer advising

Studies suggest that transfer aspirants receive minimal advice and encouragement, and that community college counselors are often uninformed about transfer courses.³

Solutions include suggestions such as: establishing centers at the community college with specific transfer information, clearly labeling transfer courses, and establishing more interaction between student and advisor to assess the student’s progress in transfer courses. Gallego also suggests certain interventions, such as additional mentoring by counselors for remedial students who have transfer as a goal.⁸

Four-year colleges/universities: barriers and suggested reforms

Loss of credits

Because of the selective admission policies of four-year colleges/universities, students who wish to transfer to baccalaureate degree programs often lose credits in the process. Lower division credits may not be recognized by four-year institutions. Dougherty cites a recent study in which 58% of community college students from nine urban universities across the country reported losing credits in transferring, with 29% losing ten credits or more.² Four-year colleges often are reluctant to accept technical credits from an occupational or vocational program (Associate of Applied Science degree), essentially because there are no comparable courses in their own curricula.

The ‘capstone’ or ‘inverted’ program has been suggested as a solution for the technical school graduate who desires to articulate. The concept of the capstone initiative involves the acceptance of technical credits by the four-year institution, while allowing the student to complete general education credits in the last two years of upper-division education. It has also been suggested that four-year institutions increase their flexibility in acceptance of credits,

and, in fact, increase their overall receptiveness to the ever-growing numbers of nontraditional students.

Lack of established common course numbering or course equivalence. Four-year institutions have been known to deny credit earned in a community college course, although the course content has been comparable to one of their courses. Claiming that the course belongs in their upper division curriculum and has been taken out of sequence, or that the content does not meet their criteria, they require that the course be repeated. This is a common situation, for example, with business courses.

The following anecdotal information gleaned from two interviews initiated during the course of personal research, confirms this barrier. In one case, a state legislator related the story of a student who had taken an accounting class at a community college. In the process of articulating, the post-transfer institution required that the course be repeated in its upper-division. The student agreed. However, when he entered the classroom, he found the same instructor teaching this class. The instructor, recognizing him, stated: "You don't have to be here. You have already taken this course".

A similar situation was described by the president of a local technical institute. He referred to these barriers as "turf issues", indicating that faculty at different institutions are apprehensive of encroachment on what they consider to be their domain. Apparently, job security is a concern, because the technical college president remarked: "the perfect solution would be that everyone transfers and everyone keeps their jobs".

A legislative mandate requiring common course numbering or the clear labeling of equivalent courses has been suggested as a means of ensuring that "transfer courses indeed parallel university courses in credit hours, course sequencing, and prerequisites".³ This solution involves, not only four-year college administrators, but community and technical college administrators, as well as state policymakers (including Board of Higher Education administrators and state legislators) working together to meet the needs of students by facilitating articulation.

Recent initiatives, known as 'dual admission' or 'joint admission' programs have been implemented between two- and four-year colleges across the country. According to Cohen: "One of the most powerful aids to transfer is a set of inter-institutional agreements erected program-by-program so that students who want to obtain bachelor's degrees in certain fields are encouraged to begin at the local community college, with the assurance that the curricula articulate and that a place in the university's junior class will be available to them".⁶

For the 30% to 40% baccalaureate aspirants attending community/technical colleges, these initiatives will provide an alternative and less expensive route to attaining the baccalaureate degree.^{2,3}

CONCLUSIONS

Students entering higher education bring with them individual strengths and weaknesses. Student characteristics, such as academic skills, social integration, as well as emotional strengths, are often predictors of success, or failure when these strengths are found lacking. In addition, the socioeconomic background of a student may influence academic achievement.

Institutional and curricular characteristics, independent of student characteristics, may also present barriers to academic achievement. Referred to as a 'negative institutional effect', both two-year and four-year baccalaureate degree institutions present their own barriers, particularly for the articulating student.

The changed mission of the community college, from 'academic' to 'comprehensive', may be responsible for barriers encountered in the articulation process. At the community college level a perceived lack of academic quality and transfer advising has been cited as barriers. The consensus of research indicates that just as able and motivated students will not necessarily be hindered by the community college experience, neither will academically or socially disadvantaged students be likely to find the institutional assistance they may need in order to negotiate transfer and progress to the baccalaureate degree.

At the four-year baccalaureate degree post-transfer level, selectivity and lack of standardized curricula between the two- and four-year institutions are cited as perceived barriers. This has often resulted in a significant loss of credits for the articulating student.

Reforms include establishing course equivalence and common course numbering between the two systems of higher education. Initiatives, such as 'dual or joint admission' or 'capstone' programs have been either suggested or instituted in many states. However, all reforms involve the common thread of increased communication and cooperation among state legislatures, faculty at all levels of higher education, and students in order to facilitate the articulation process.

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