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ARTICLE

The Influence of Student Development Services in Articulation Agreements

Emily M. Lehning

Articulation agreements are effective tools in providing a seamless transition for students pursuing a degree at institutions of higher learning. It is essential for those involved in developing these functions to identify the developmental needs of the ever-changing population of transfer students. This article reviews the need for responsive partnerships between institutions to assist students in meeting their developmental and educational goals. The article addresses the importance of humanizing the transfer process with the inclusion of student service functions in articulation agreements. A model for practice is described and suggestions for effective student-centered articulation agreements will be offered.

To understand articulation and transfer between two-year and four-year institutions of higher learning, one needs to look no further than an elementary textbook on biology. In the natural environment, organisms of a dissimilar nature can join together in a cooperative relationship to serve one another. This relationship is characterized by the fact that each organism helps the other without compromising his or her own well-being. This phenomenon is classified as a symbiotic relationship that is based on mutualism or the mutually-beneficial partnership between two organisms.

Similarly, in higher education, community or technical colleges and four-year colleges and universities can form symbiotic relationships. This cooperative relationship is facilitated by articulation agreements and provides benefits for both institutions involved. These benefits include helping the community college to accomplish one of its many missions - the transfer of students to higher levels of education. The university receives assistance in combating declining enrollment and persistence among students. One characteristic of our hybrid example of symbiosis that causes it to vary from the natural, biological example is the introduction of a third party to the partnership - the student. Transfer students with their diverse interests, backgrounds, and academic goals receive benefits from the cooperative relationship fostered by articulation agreements to aid in the transfer process.

Articulation agreements are effective tools in providing a seamless education for students pursuing a degree at institutions of higher learning. Articulation agreements are policies, procedures, and standards established between community colleges and universities that provide for the transition of students between the institutions (Mahon, 1994). According to Barry and Barry (1992), the agreements may take on one of three forms: formal and legal policies, state systems, and voluntary agreements. Regardless of the form of the agreement, each features the principles of collaboration, coordination,

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and cooperation. The institutions collaborate through partnerships to seek solutions to the problems students may encounter during transfer. Further, institutions coordinate curriculum and course work for ease in transfer between institutions and cooperate in providing assistance to students.

Definition of the Transfer Student Today

Thirty years ago, transfer students were primarily interested in receiving a baccalaureate degree. The student chose not to enroll initially in a baccalaureate-granting institution, but enrolled in a community college for one or two years after high school, or until he or she completed general education course work (Knoell & Medsker, 1965). According to Knoell (1996), the pool of transfer students has grown to encompass nontraditional students including the unemployed, welfare recipients, women reentering higher education, and other students who possess interests, backgrounds, and educational objectives of a unique nature. Additionally, affirmative action programs have assisted in changing the ethnic, racial, language, and socioeconomic status make-up of the transfer student group. Transfer students include those who have enrolled in academic courses at community colleges and those who have participated in technical school offerings (Forte, 1997). This ever-expanding group must also make room for those who attend part-time or full-time, those who have an associate's degree, and those who have more than twelve credit hours of course work, but no degree.

One or a combination of the characteristics listed above can apply to any transfer student. The variety in background, educational level, socioeconomic status, course load, and family and career demands leads to rich diversity and unique challenges for colleges. These challenges must be addressed in the programs developed and services offered for transfer students in order to promote the success of students.

Unique Challenges Transfer Students Encounter

In addition to the individual differences among students, those who work in student service professions must plan for the academic and social challenges the transfer students will undoubtedly encounter in the transition to the new institution. The challenges a student may experience might occur before, during, or following transfer. Prior to transfer, students may feel additional pressure or anxiety due to the transfer process itself. Being admitted to the four-year institution, securing necessary financial resources, and transferring credits can add to a student's disillusionment with the process of transferring (Mahon, 1994). Furthermore, transfer students may feel they lack the skills to succeed in the new environment, may find the supportive services to be markedly different than their previous institutions, and may harbor unrealistic expectations for academic performance (Graham & Hughes, 1992; Mahon, 1994).

Adjustments that students make following transfer may include adapting to an education system that is larger and more structured than their home institutions, cultural differences inherent to campus climates, strenuous commutes, and changes in family and/or work responsibilities (Dawson & Dell, 1997). Kintzer and Wattenbarger (1985)

and Mahon (1994) suggest additional factors that may contribute to attrition following transfer. Those factors include individual differences among students in relation to their personal motivations, the availability of support services, the advisor-student relationship at the transfer institution, and general concerns about the level of understanding and hospitality they will find in the new environment. Students also may harbor anxiety related to larger class sizes, competition with more students, a higher course workload, and/or physically locating buildings, classrooms, and materials at the transfer institution.

The many adjustments students make to a new institution after transfer partially explain a phenomenon known as transfer shock, generally referred to as a drop in grade point average (GPA) during the semester following a change of colleges (Dawson & Dell, 1997). Diaz (1992) and Dawson and Dell (1997) found that 79% of studies reported transfer shock among community college transfer students. It appears to be a common concern, affecting many students to varying degrees regardless of major, educational level, academic ability, age or geographic location.

Transfer shock is common but not severe. Diaz (1992) found that a majority of transfers experienced GPA changes of one-half of a grade point or less, which most students who proceeded to graduation recovered. Sixty-four percent of transfer students recovered completely or nearly completely and an additional 34% recovered partially. Only students whose GPAs were initially quite low were seriously impacted by transfer shock.

Students who are underprepared for transfer shock may be more likely to become discouraged and abandon their efforts to achieve a four-year degree. Discouragement due to transfer shock is a concern for most administrators since enrollment and retention rates generally are emphasized as measures of an institution's performance. There is little information regarding students who are unable to weather the effects of transfer shock and who drop out before obtaining a four-year degree. Most researchers investigating GPA declines and recoveries include in their subject pools only those students who persist and graduate.

The period of transition to the four-year university environment is a critical time in ascertaining if students will persist to their desired degrees. A student must feel that he or she has found a place in the campus culture. Astin (1977) describes this feeling as institutional fit.

Forte (1997) cites Tinto's model in helping understand the process of transition. Tinto's model is derived from the work of the anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, and of the sociologist, Emile Durkheim. Tinto used the three stages of transition outlined by Van Gennep as a basis for determining the process transfer students must experience to obtain membership in the campus "society." Students must (1) separate from the past; (2) begin to interact with the new group (transition); and (3) become an established member of the group (incorporation).

Tinto also applied Durkheim's research on suicide. Durkheim established that when an individual does not experience incorporation within the society, the individual might withdraw from society and, in extreme cases, end his or her life. Tinto transferred this idea to the campus "society" where students must become integrated into the new campus community through academic and social means. Without that integration, some

students will simply withdraw from the university. King (1993) also found that academic and social integration contributes significantly to persistence.

A Model for Practice

Dawson and Dell (1997) provide an example of an articulation agreement and transfer guide developed by Montana State University-Billings (MSU-Billings) and several community colleges located in the eastern Montana and northern Wyoming region. The cooperative relationship began through the signing of a formal articulation agreement. In addition, faculty in the College of Education and Human Services at MSU-Billings partnered with faculty at the community colleges to create transfer guides for students considering pursuing a degree at the four-year university. The goal of the project was to better prepare students for transfer by reducing the risk of transfer shock, and thus to improve persistence rates of transfer students.

The guide included information about the transfer process for students intending to pursue a baccalaureate degree in education. The guides contained a title page, a letter of welcome from the dean of the college, an introduction to the teacher education program, transfer worksheets, information on admission to the teacher education program, a checklist for admission to teacher education, a transfer student checklist, a description of student support services, answers to frequently asked questions, and a list of frequently dialed telephone numbers.

The transfer guides were not developed to replace the personal contact and advisement students considering transfer would receive. Rather, the guides were meant to enhance the advising process. The transfer guide, coupled with the personal interaction of a representative from the "receiving" institution, helped to distribute information in an early and accurate manner. The increased interaction between faculty and student services staff at both institutions was considered beneficial to the transfer process since the cooperation and permanency of relations between institutions can reassure students.

After the transfer guides had been utilized for five years, a study was conducted to determine if students indeed were better prepared for transfer, resisted the risk of transfer shock, and persisted in their pursuit of a four-year degree. The researchers selected students who began their education at Northwestern Community College (NWC) in Powell, Wyoming and later transferred to MSU-Billings. The study compared one group of students who transferred from NWC prior to the use of transfer guides, a group from NWC who utilized transfer guides, and a third group who transferred from an institution similar to NWC and did not use transfer guides.

The study indicated that all three groups experienced transfer shock. Specifically, all three groups experienced a decline in GPA with a similar amount of decrease between pre-transfer and post-transfer GPA. Thus, transfer students who received information, personal contact, advising, and support during the transfer process were not resistant to this phenomenon.

The study also found that students who persisted were able to recover from transfer shock. Those who stayed at the four-year institution were able to obtain the grade points

to equal or surpass their achievement at the community college.

However, the researchers found that a significant percentage of the student group that utilized transfer guides had graduated or continued to work on their degrees. This research supports the hypothesis that students who transfer between articulated institutions and have the benefit of transfer guides are more likely to persist.

Recommendations – Humanizing the Transfer Process

Eaton (1990) states that institutions of higher learning have two separate ways to handle the transfer function. They may choose the student service approach, which includes counseling, advising, catalog information exchange, and other functions that are student affairs oriented. The alternative is a document model including articulation agreements, course equivalency guides, system-wide regulations, and/or state policy or legislation. To organize a student-centered approach, institutions would combine both of Eaton's models to create articulation agreements that include various student development functions. Students see the document model as a sign of security and permanence in the agreement between the two institutions. The transfer function is humanized by adding the student services component; institutions that focus on individual needs and provide the advising and guidance necessary to help students achieve their academic goals are also promoting student success. These services include help in securing admission to the university, financial assistance, orientation to the new environment, on campus living alternatives, counseling services, academic advising, and transfer guides that assist students in understanding degree requirements and the transfer of credit hours.

Joint Admission

Knoell (1996) advocates possible collaboration between institutions to include joint admission to both the community college and the four-year university. Thus, the transfer process is simplified for students. The awarding of joint admission could encourage students to plan for transfer upon beginning college at the two-year institution, and the early preparation could result in increased information about the university and contact from university representatives. The additional contact could reap benefits of an easier transfer process in the future.

Financial Assistance

Helping transfer students secure financial resources is a high priority since students concerned with having the financial resources to meet the cost of tuition and fees at the four-year university may not be able to perform at optimal levels. This concern may be magnified for students who have relocated to new cities or resigned jobs to pursue their baccalaureate degrees. The institutions can collaborate on the transfer of information regarding financial assistance eligibility. The university can promote scholarship and grant awards specifically for transfer students, as well as other opportunities for financial assistance.

Transfer Orientation

Orientation programs geared to transfer students are excellent ways to introduce the students to their new environment. Students will feel more at ease when they better understand the physical layout of the campus, but a strong orientation must go beyond campus tours. In many cases, the university will be a larger and more complex system, both in physical nature and in the delivery of services. In order for students to understand the services available, they will need to be oriented to the offerings. When planning an orientation program, student development personnel must keep in mind the diversity within the pool of transfer students; programs may need to be held at non-traditional times of day to cater to non-traditional students.

Orientation Courses

Institutions may consider offering orientation courses designed specifically with the unique needs of the transfer student in mind. Many institutions currently offer orientation/first-year experience courses that focus on issues of relevance to traditional age college students. A course of this type with topic areas including academic skills for the success at the "receiving" institution, including learning in larger classes, managing the course workload, and balancing multiple roles. Information on relevant campus and community resources and reflection on the college experience would be helpful in orienting students to campus life.

Residential Life

On-campus living opportunities offer many benefits for transfer students. Some institutions offer a diverse range of options including residential halls, apartments, family housing, and cooperative living arrangements to meet the needs of this diverse group of students. Additionally, living on campus provides a greater opportunity for academic and social integration.

Counseling

Transfer students may also need services provided by the campus counseling center. The diverse group of transfer students may feel additional pressure during the time of transition; may seek assistance in finding balance between school, family, and work; or may want additional help in making social or academic adjustments to the university. The counseling center should be listed as a resource to students during the orientation process.

Advising

Academic advising is significant prior to, during, and after transfer, and advisors can often establish connections with students prior to transfer. This early contact is an

opportunity for students to begin to build a relationship with someone in their new environment. Students can seek advice about academic concerns including the transfer of course work, degree choices, course work load, locations of buildings, course registration, and other issues. The advisor can serve as a source of information with a more human touch than a handbook or transfer guide. When the student arrives on campus, academic advisors can help with scheduling courses, referral to other university services, and initiating the social integration of the student. A smooth transition will be essential to persistence. The advisor may suggest clubs or organizations in which the student would want to become involved. Academic advisors have the unique ability to help facilitate peer advising situations and coordinate academic mentor/mentee relationships for transfer students.

Student services at both two-year and four-year institutions can implement strategies to ease the transition for transfer students, thus reducing the long-term effects of transfer shock on persistence. Student service functions have a profound impact on students in a variety of ways. This area of the university supports students as they seek personal, academic, and professional growth. Students' transitions are made easier by the services provided, whether a transition from a two-year to a four-year institution or in developing competence as a student. Both the "sending" and "receiving" institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to provide students with the tools necessary to succeed. Fortunately, a partnership for the benefit of the student also reaps benefits for both institutions.

Articulation agreements that include student service functions are indeed much like a biological, symbiotic relationship. Both parties are of a different nature and each partner obtains personal gain without sacrificing their own well-being. In fact, this symbiotic relationship based on collaboration, cooperation, and coordination can translate into a much larger story of success for students.

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CAMPUS NOTES

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The Growing Trends of Orientation Web Pages

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The program for the 1999 national conference of the National Orientation Director's Association included a pre-conference session and five interest sessions dealing with the growing use of CD-ROMs, web pages, and other forms of multi-media in orientation. Almost daily we learn about a new web page which offers new opportunities, cheaper services, or easier access to information. The majority of today's students are Internet literate before they reach college. They chat with friends and strangers, conduct research, shop, and "surf." Yet, orientation programs are struggling with how to use this tool to prepare students for their transition to higher education.

A review of a number of web pages (see Appendix A) indicates that several distinct formats have emerged. These can be subdivided into three categories: (a) Basic, (b) Enhanced, and (c) Orientation Online. These formats generally become more extensive in content as they progress from the former to the latter.

The first format, Basic, provides essential information about a school's orientation programs. Web pages that fit this category seem to be Internet versions of the program's traditional mail-out brochure. They provide only the basic details about upcoming orientation sessions such as the dates of on-campus orientation sessions, contact information, registration information, cost of attendance, important phone numbers, orientation expectations, and the ability to e-mail the orientation staff with questions.

The second format, Enhanced, offers much of the same information that the Basic format provides, but goes a step further. By virtue of being Internet based, these pages often provide links to other web sites of interest to students, such as financial aid and housing. Many of these sites include a section with answers to frequently asked questions. They also provide information that normally would not be feasible to include in a mailer, such as student comments on their orientation experiences, virtual campus tours, student handbooks, and pictures of previous orientation events.

While the first two formats take advantage of widespread interest in the Internet, very few web sites are interactive, which is perhaps the Internet's greatest advantage. These web sites provide orientation information but do very little actual orienting.

The third format, Orientation Online, takes advantage of the Internet's interactive nature. This third category of web sites is designed to perform a significant portion of the orientation function. Although these sites cannot provide the personal contact that is so often crucial to the transition process for students, they can provide a way of addressing administrative tasks before classes begin. For example, these sites can be used to register first time students for classes (schedules are reviewed by an academic advisor upon submission), order books, buy parking passes, pay fees, or take care of

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