
Regional

Transfers a game changer in higher education

In time past the vast majority of college students stayed in the school they initially entered. However, that trend is changing rapidly and that may prove a disruptive force for colleges and universities – as well as a challenge for students both academically and financially.

According to a study titled “Transfer and Mobility,” just published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the research arm of the National Student Clearinghouse, about 3.6 million students entered college for the first time in the fall of 2008. During the following six years they transferred 2.4 million times. These and other data by this not-for-profit organization that partners with academic institutions to provide valuable statistics, is more than trivial and has many implications.

The first and most obvious effect is on public colleges and universities. With states funding those institutions based on how well they perform when it comes to graduation rates, the consequences can be damaging. In other words, some of those institutions may be doing well from a pedagogical viewpoint but the retention rate, lowered by students transferring, may, misleadingly, cast them in a bad light.

In the past we used to see transfers only from community and technical colleges to four-year colleges after obtaining an associate’s degree. Now we see more fluidity with people transferring not only earlier, but even from public to private institutions, something almost unheard of 20 years ago. To make things even more complicated, about half of transfer students who started college in the fall of 2008 switched colleges more

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than once. And more than one third of them transferred during the summer.

This behavior represents a challenge for the students, as well as the institutions. To begin with, most institutions (particularly private ones) decide which credits are transferable and which ones are not, sometimes through previous arrangements between the institutions concerned or statewide agreements or mandates. When those agreements do not exist those students make take much longer to graduate and in potentially greater financial debt.

About 20 percent of the students who begin their careers at community and technical colleges (that represents more than half of the college student population in this country) transfer to a four-year public institution. In many cases those students are not well prepared for that transition. Although some community colleges do a good job teaching students, that is not always the case. In fact, many students who expect to eventually get a baccalaureate degree often begin at a community college under the impression that those colleges are cheaper (which is true most of the time) and easier academically (which is sometimes true).

Of the more surprising data in the center’s report is that about 50 percent of transfers do so from public, four-

year institutions, while more than 40 percent of transfer students move from four-year private institutions to a community college, which again emphasizes the perception that the community colleges are cheaper and easier.

Further, many students in four-year institutions (whether public or private) take summer courses in community colleges just trying to graduate faster, in a phenomenon now known as “summer swirl.” This is a big headache not only for academic advisers trying to keep track of students and their requirements to graduate, but also for college administrators who are trying to increase retention rates for the “all important” national rankings.

A sizable number of transfers from community colleges fail at four-year institutions, decreasing the retention and graduation rates even further. To make things even more complicated, nearly a quarter of those transfer students make it across state lines, which means that the differential curricula are more likely to be more pronounced which, in turn, means that these students will spend more time and money graduating from college.

These problems not only affect four-year institutions, but also community colleges themselves. According to the report nearly a quarter of the students who started at a community college transferred to a four-year institution within six years (which is the time yardstick usually applied to measure whether or not students are graduating). Yet, only one in eight of those transfer students earned a certificate or an associate’s degree first, down from one in five three years ago. What that means is that

regardless of the quality of instruction, this bigger drop-out rate also penalizes community colleges.

One proposal made by the National Student Clearinghouse to streamline these transfer processes is developing an automated data-transfer system. Something that some colleges and universities are doing to improve their graduation rates is to actively pursue those students who are shy just a few courses to graduate and offer them the possibility to do so. Although this approach has met with some success, most postsecondary institutions have yet to try it, in part because of the lack of vision, in part because they have not figured out how to develop a follow-up process that allows finding and convincing those students to attend their schools.

What is more concerning from a global perspective is the fact that last year only 55 percent of all college students had earned degrees or certificates within six years, a small decline from the previous year. Again, more people who enter college not only do not graduate but also carry a bigger debt without a tangible result to show for it.

Therefore, this is not only a statistical or political problem for colleges and universities, but also a societal problem that requires a more creative and innovative approach to increasing retention and graduation rates. We owe this to all parties involved.

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