The Community College Transfer Problem

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by RONALD ROACH

Boosting student transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions is a matter of getting all the right policies and programs in place.

Dr. Cheryl Blanco, vice president for special projects at the Southern Regional Education Board, says work force demands have spurred states to more effectively link two- and four-year schools.

Once a high school dropout, Hamilton Cunningham beat the odds in navigating the transition from earning a GED, serving in the U.S. Air Force, and attending community college to enrolling at Howard University in fall 2007 as a sophomore where he is now a Truman Scholar and a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation undergraduate transfer scholarship recipient. Cunningham, who is Black, credits participation in the Leadership Academy, a Black male-oriented academic support program at Georgia Perimeter Community College where he attended, for guidance from program mentors who motivated him to consider transferring to a four-year institution.

“It was the exposure to teachers at Georgia Perimeter and the mentors in the Leadership Academy that got me thinking I could go on and continue my education,” says Cunningham, an economics major in his junior year who plans to attend graduate school.

While Cunningham’s story, and others similar to his, endorse the community college role in expanding the pool of bachelor’s degree earners, it also points to why two-year institutions may need to strengthen their student support programs to increase overall degree completion and transfer rates. As first-generation college attendees, capable students, such as Cunningham, benefit substantially from extensive counseling and guidance programs, often making the difference in whether they persist, graduate, and transfer to four-year schools.

Nearly 60 percent of students entering four-year institutions earn a bachelor’s degree in six years, but only 31 percent of public community college students go on to complete either an associate or a bachelor’s degree in six years, according to U.S. Education Department data. With community colleges typically lagging in degree completion rates in comparison to four-year institutions, educators and administrators at community colleges can be expected to seek federal help aimed at student support stemming from the Obama administration’s announced commitment to spur higher rates of degree completion across U.S. higher education.

A Clear Path

While states have developed statewide programs to ease student transition from two-year to four-year schools, the U.S. Department of Education has reported that only 26 percent of U.S. community college students transfer to four-year institutions. In California, researchers Dr. Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore found that only 15 percent of Black students, compared to 18 percent of Hispanic, 27 percent of White and 33 percent of Asian American students, earn a certificate or degree, transferred to a four-year institution or achieved a combination of successful outcomes within six years of enrolling in a California community college.
Making community colleges work effectively has meant that policymakers have sought to better integrate the community college with K-12 school systems and state four-year colleges and universities. Dr. Cheryl Blanco, the vice president for special projects at the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in Atlanta, says the growing effort by states to create tighter linkages between their community colleges and four-year schools has evolved partly because state officials anticipate their work forces will require a greater number of four-year degree earners. Aside from expected growth in the Hispanic student population, states will not see enough population increases among other groups entering four-year schools as first-time students to meet work force demands, according to Blanco.

“We have enough data to show that there will be fewer students coming through the pipeline simply because of the demographics. I think colleges and universities are realizing that they may not have the same pool to draw from and so they’re reaching out to community colleges more,” Blanco says.

Dr. Dave Spence, the president of the SREB, says the movement toward easing the path from community colleges to four-year institutions is in a formative stage though most states have articulation agreements between their two-year and four-year schools.

“There’s got to be a transfer path there, a transfer path that enables students to reach the baccalaureate degree if they do the right thing. And right now it’s tough to know what the right things are to do and if you do them they have to be credible for obtaining the baccalaureate degree. I don’t think the situation is good at all in transfer,” Spence says.

Spence cites Florida as a national leader in aligning the community college curriculums to fit with those of the senior colleges and universities. “Let’s say you need 120 hours for a baccalaureate degree. You take 60 at the community college; you know exactly what those 60 hours are and you know with assurance that after you take them and pass them you will be accepted to a senior university … Florida is the only state I know at least in law has that in place,” he says. “(SREB does) try to find ways to help states improve transfer. That’s a tougher nut because most states think they’re very fine,” Spence says.

**Keeping Students on Track**

While states and their higher education systems have taken on the task of aligning the academic paths between community colleges and public four-year institutions, there’s also been considerable activity in the last decade to establish support programs and policies in the states aimed at boosting student success. The community college student success movement has attracted myriad foundations, such as the Lumina Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, that support a range of programs administered through organizations, such as the SREB, and by academic entities, such as the Community College Leadership Program (CCLP) at The University of Texas at Austin.

For students from low-income backgrounds and underrepresented minority groups the student success movement has been a crucial development. Community college professionals and many others commonly note that the need for students to undertake remedial, or developmental, education has long proved a stumbling block in their efforts to complete degrees and certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions. They also say it’s critical for community college systems to have in place precollege outreach programs to inform students of what they need to be successful in college.

“It is confirmed in the literature as well as in experience that institutions that have a very deliberate program of precollege introduction and a very intensely engaging program as the students are matriculating through the community college tend to graduate at higher rates and transfer on to the upper division. Void of those very intentional programs the results will be what you see with those low transfer rates,” says Dr. Brenda Simmons, a National Council of Black American Affairs (NCBAA) board member and a former Florida community college administrator. The NCBAA is an affiliate of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Whether students have the goal of going on to four-year schools, “the gatekeepers for our students are the developmental education programs,” Simmons says.
“When you research the literature about African-American students who enter community colleges and have to go into developmental education courses, these students tend to go through what we call ‘that revolving door’ because it takes so long to get through those courses. And then after they’ve spent all of that time and energy and they don’t have any college credit yet, it’s somewhat discouraging,” she adds.

In addition to the transfer and articulation agreement projects, Spence says SREB collaborates with states on student success programs because making the community college more effective requires a multi-level intervention in state policymaking as well as at individual community colleges. “We do a lot of work in college readiness with states through the Gates Foundation … You’ve got to get students more ready, and, with the community colleges helping these kids take the right courses and succeeding, that will have a good effect on transfer rates,” he adds.

**Progress Over Time**

Married scholars, Dr. Byron McClenney and Dr. Kay McClenney, have contributed significantly to the CCLP at UT-Austin. This past decade the couple helped expand the Texas-based program by launching a leading national community college student survey project and helping establish the Achieving the Dream project as one of the national partners.

Founded in 2001, the community college student engagement survey has included the experiences of nearly a million community college students in 49 states at 800 different community colleges.

“All of that work is to help colleges to use data to understand student experiences better and therefore to better understand where they, the colleges, are performing well,” says Kay McClenney, who is the Community College Survey of Student Engagement director at the CCLP.

Achieving the Dream, one of the largest community college student success programs in the United States, brings to the fore best practices in developmental education courses such that they can motivate students to persist in their schooling rather than allow them to grow frustrated.

Since its launch in 2005, 82 institutions in 15 states have joined the Achieving the Dream program. While individual schools, such as Achieving the Dream participants, are reporting progress in student persistence, it will likely take years before such progress can be translated into significant improvements in national community college graduation and transfer numbers, Kay McClenney cautions.

“The bottom line is that we know enough; we know enough now to make a serious difference in the percentage of our students who are successful, and we need to be doing more of what we know,” she says.

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