

Transfer Degree Guarantee Program: Recruitment, Retention, Financial Aid, Transfer, and Graduation

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Abstract The article describes a statewide transfer degree guarantee program specifically targeted for two-year community college students to increase retention and graduation rates at both the associate and bachelor's degree level. It was initiated by legislative action and is implemented by a state higher education board in accordance with approved policies and procedures. The program encourages students to complete a prescribed two-year associate degree which guarantees that one of the state's public colleges will accept the courses and credits to be applied toward a bachelor's degree. The article describes targeted activities for recruiting, retaining, and graduating transfer students at institutions of higher education offering bachelor's degrees. In a competitive job market with increasing costs for a bachelor's degree, a community college provides students with an appropriate opportunity to initiate their college careers in a cost-effective environment.

Keywords Community College, Associate Degree, Two-Year College Degree, Transfer Degree Guarantee

1. Introduction

Community colleges in the United States are receiving more public attention in recent months. President Obama called for increased spending to help rebuild community college facilities as a part of the centerpiece for his higher education agenda[1]. This announcement occurred one year after the first White House Summit on Community Colleges which highlighted the role community colleges perform in the United States higher education system[2]. These events, combined with the Report of the National Commission on Community Colleges[3], emphasize the importance of community colleges within the overall higher education system:

Community colleges are indispensable to the future of America. As this nation confronts international economic competition, threats to the stability of the middle class, dramatic demographic changes, and the need to reinvigorate our schools and communities, these colleges must play a central role in crafting national solutions.[3], para. 2.

This increased focus also is evident at the regional, state, and local levels. State governments, higher education boards, state colleges and universities, public leaders and interested parents are organizing systems to support the functions that two-year colleges perform within the greater higher education community. This renewed interest is highlighting a multitude of related problems and creative solutions

regarding the needs of students who attend two-year institutions of higher education, faculty who teach there, and administrators who manage these higher education enterprises. In a number of states, policies and procedures have been developed so that two-year institutions can continue to reduce the overall cost of higher education, increase the number of state citizens pursuing and obtaining bachelor's degrees, and encourage a higher percentage of minority citizens to acquire college-level skills and competencies. Many policy changes and enhanced programs are emerging with the goal of assuring that transfer students with associate degrees from state two-year institutions will have a reasonable chance of transitioning and succeeding at four-year degree-offering institutions. Among many issues, there is an intense focus on the transferability of courses and credits from associate degree granting institutions to bachelor's degree granting institutions. "Perhaps the most important conclusion is that reforms must be ambitious and concerned with the entire student experience at college, including opportunities to transfer to four-year colleges,"[4], p. B10.

Thus, this article will describe Louisiana's programs, policies, and guidelines associated with the Louisiana Transfer Degree Guarantee for Community College Students [5], focusing on students who desire to transfer from a traditional two-year college to a four-year public college with their earned credits guaranteed to transfer. Further, this descriptive case study describes a management system for recruiting, retaining, and graduating successful transfer students at four-year institutions.

2. Background

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Two-year institutions comprise approximately 38.3% of the total higher education institutions in the United States including 1,000 public two-year institutions, 85 private two-year non-profit institutions, and 636 private two-year for-profit institutions within the total United States higher education institutions[6]. Among the total 7.5 million students enrolled in higher education institutions, two-year institutions register 36.2% of the minority student population and, overall, 39.4% of all public higher education students[7]. In a recent College Board report, the primary goal is to “increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds who hold an associate degree or higher to 55 percent by the year 2025 in order to make America the leader in educational attainment in the world”[8], (p. ii). In turn, this process is more likely to increase the number of individuals who successfully will transfer from two-year colleges to four-year colleges and complete bachelor’s degrees. In an earlier report[3], it was estimated that about “half of all baccalaureate degree recipients have attended community colleges prior to earning their degrees” (p. 2). Thus, this degree completion goal likely will increase, if students attending two-year institutions of higher education graduate with associate degrees.

One significant factor contributing to the increasing numbers of students attending community colleges is that the average tuition and fees at public two-year institutions is \$2,285 compared with \$6,695 for public four-year institutions[9]. In Louisiana, the average annual tuition and fees at its public two-year institutions is \$1,849 compared to \$4,282 at its public four-year institutions[10] for a 43.2% savings for the student attending a two-year college. Depending on the state, the two-year tuition expense at community colleges represents approximately 10% to 75% of the public four-year tuition costs, a significant savings to students and their families[11]. T. Bailey[4] succinctly summarized the tuition issue in a recent article by stating that “the availability of low-cost, local, open access community colleges is therefore crucial (p. B10).”

Further, within U.S. higher education institutions, 48% of enrolled students at two-year institutions are receiving a financial aid package averaging \$3,400[12]. Thus, the typical financial aid package buys considerably more student instruction at two-year colleges. It is not surprising that one author[13] reported that there have been increasing numbers of first-time students attending two-year schools with an 8.3 percent increase between 2008 and 2009 alone. The author suggested that this change is a possible reflection of a sluggish economy motivating students who are seeking lower tuition costs among higher education institutional options.

In Louisiana, approximately 44% of the new first-year college students in 2010 were enrolled in two-year schools, an increase of 20% from 2000[14]. Recently, 71,150 higher education students enrolled in Louisiana’s public two-year institutions and another 6,143 students enrolled in the state’s private two-year for-profit institutions, in total comprised approximately 31% of the total population of higher education students in Louisiana[15]. Further, the proportion

of Louisiana’s total minority student enrollment at public two-year institutions is now 44.4% of the total enrollment [16].

The freshman student retention rate at Louisiana four-year institutions is 73.1 % [17]. In contrast, less than half or 48.6% of all Louisiana students at public two-year institutions are retained at the same institution for their second year. T. Bailey[4] highlights the national statistics: “...fewer than two-fifths of students who start in community colleges go on to complete a degree or certificate within six years” and further, “community colleges must find a way to increase completion rates without restricting access” (p. B10). Even worse, among a study of 11 of Louisiana’s public two-year institutions in 2011, using a beginning 2004 cohort of students, only 11.75% of the students were eventually awarded associate degrees[18]. These statistics became an impetus for action and intervention by the Louisiana Legislature, Louisiana Board of Regents, and state higher education leadership to develop a better coordinated system of retention, graduation, transfer, and degree completion.

The loss of students with the potential to graduate with at least an associate degree is critically important in Louisiana which is ranked 45 out of 50 with only 22.4% of the state’s citizens holding a bachelor’s degree[19]. Thus, it was anticipated that a successful incentive and articulation program for two-year college enrollees, who eventually would graduate and transfer to four-year institutions, should improve graduation rates not only at the two-year institutions, but also at the four-year institutions. Accordingly, in 2009, the Louisiana legislature approved a program establishing the development of a statewide transfer associate degree guarantee program to eliminate barriers that prevented students from successfully transferring between and among postsecondary institutions.

The Louisiana Transfer Associate Degree program guarantees: (a) “admission to a Louisiana 4-year public university if the student meets the university’s standards; (b) transfer of all 60 hours and Junior-level standing; (c) completion of the General Education block; and (d) equal opportunity to compete with ‘native’ university students for admission to limited access programs.”[5], para. 4.

The Louisiana Transfer Degree Guarantee (TDG) was developed as a result of sponsored legislation[20] requiring that a statewide transfer associate degree be approved and implemented. The immediate impact of the law was that faculties, colleges, and universities began to work together to develop a common set of courses that would be recognized between and among the public post-secondary institutions of the state[21]. The rationale supporting the change was that the new law would encourage and facilitate student matriculation between two-year and four-year institutions and increase students’ confidence that their courses would be accepted without losing tuition dollars.

This cooperative idea has resulted in a statewide course matrix useful for students, advisors, colleges and universities, and others planning for the future to avoid the duplication and extra expense associated with uncoordinated course

planning and delayed graduation. Previously, there had been numerous attempts at coordinating the transfer of college credit between the state's community colleges and four-year degree granting institutions involving a number of state-wide committees. The results of those efforts, however, were not formerly converted into a working plan, failed to achieve the desired goals, and did little to lower the overall drop-out transition rate between two-year community colleges and four-year traditional colleges. Thus, the consequences from many of these attempts were sometimes a "hit or miss" proposition for students as they attempted to select which courses would successfully be granted degree completion credit.

The TDG program specifies the courses that are required to complete the general education requirements within the first 60 hours of post-secondary coursework while earning either an associate degree of arts or an associate degree of science from the two-year institution. These courses are all lower division credits with students earning junior year status if (a) they obtain a minimum grade of C on all completed coursework and (b) the prescribed curriculum is followed after the transfer is completed to a four-year institution. There is no guarantee, however, that a student will be accepted into their first-choice degree program at the receiving four-year institution. Acceptance is dependent upon grade-point average, recommendations, and whether admission is granted into the specific degree program at the receiving institution. Thus, the four-year degree granting institution has the final approval for acceptance and successful admission and transfer.

The implementation of the TDG program also has provided assistance to counselors and advisors at both the two-year and four-year institutions. A detailed Advisor's Guide provides specific information for both high school and college students participating in the program[22],[23]. The intent of the guide is to provide information regarding entrance requirements, course selection, and frequently asked questions for students needing additional information.

3. Recruitment

There is an ongoing interest in understanding how students who begin their college careers at two-year institutions successfully transfer to and graduate from four-year institutions. The process of identifying and recruiting transfer students increasingly is becoming a more formal and highly organized process at most four-year universities and colleges that are relying on transfer students to maintain or increase their current enrollment numbers. Many Louisiana colleges and universities have designated recruiters who regularly visit two-year community colleges to provide information about their four-year institutions to potential transfer students. Typically, this information includes application materials, degree program guidelines, and transfer scholarship procedures. Also, recruiters recognize that community colleges enroll a significant

number of first-generation and minority students eager to gain access to a four-year institution.

For example, at Louisiana State University (LSU), new student orientation programs are addressing previously identified problems associated with transferring coursework from a two-year institution to the four-year academic curriculum. The minimum college grade point average required of transfer applicants is 2.50. For those transfer student applicants with less than 30 college-level hours, LSU further requires a 3.0 academic GPA and a score of 22 on the ACT. Overall, only a maximum of 60 credit hours can be transferred to the four-year degree program. During the 2010-2011 academic year, from an applicant pool of 2,297 transfer students, 1,442 students were admitted and 854 eventually enrolled at Louisiana State University[24]. The TDG program is providing an impetus for increased interest.

4. Retention

Once admitted to a four-year institution, a number of transfer student support programs are available as a result of the TDG program with emphasis upon increasing student success and retention. In addition to providing documents and a website specifically directed toward transfer students, each semester's orientation program offers an assembly where university officials discuss college regulations and programs associated with student aid, scholarships, and academic programs. The orientation program is based on the recognition that transfer students' needs are different from those of typical first-year students who are oriented in separate programs. Each transfer student also participates in an individualized appointment with a senior college advisor who reviews and evaluates the two-year course transcript to project a specific bachelor's degree plan and course tracking system. Finally, an individualized degree completion plan is prepared with each student, and assistance is provided to help the student select, schedule, and register for courses. The program strongly encourages transfer students to complete all program requirements and curricula associated with their chosen academic degree.

Students also participate in educational workshops regarding academic success, money and time management, residential life options, and contracted auxiliary services. The process concludes with students obtaining identification cards, meal plans, parking passes, and paying for their registration fees. The one-day transfer orientation event is focused on providing information to enhance transfer students' success in the four-year institution. In addition, transfer students are registered in the "Journeys" program, a required non-credit seminar with emphasis on discussion and hands-on activities[25]. The content of this course emphasizes academic goal-setting, problem-solving, and persistence.

5. Financial Aid

One of the emerging needs for transfer students is the lack of financial support available at four-year institutions where most scholarships are identified during the traditional first year of college. At LSU, this problem has been partially resolved by offering a new scholarship program, the "Tiger Transfer Award," initiated during summer 2011. The award requires that transfer students have earned a minimum of 30 credits with a 3.5 GPA. The financial awards and number of participants vary according to the funding available each year.

Paradoxically, this scholarship program serves as a disincentive for community college students to remain at the two-year community college to complete their associate degrees, especially if they fail to complete a bachelor's degree after they transfer to a four-year institution. This scholarship program also may be viewed as a disadvantage to the community college if two-year graduation rates are used to measure institutional success according to the number of student completers of the associate degree.

There are other traditional financial programs available to transfer students: a) scholarships sponsored by senior colleges, b) legislatively-mandated programs for qualified individuals, c) fee exemptions, and d) traditional ROTC scholarship programs for transferring juniors. A new program, the "Pelican Promise," was implemented in Fall 2007 that provides tuition support for transfer students who demonstrate need based on their existing financial resources[26]. Therefore, the TDG program has provided an incentive for institutions of higher education to develop and enhance existing financial support programs.

6. Transfer and Graduation

Pascarella and Terenzini[27] analysed and synthesized research studies comparing graduation rates of (a) students who initially enrolled in a two-year institution before transferring and graduating from a four-year institution versus (b) students who enrolled in and graduated from a four-year institution. Their 1991 synthesis and the post 1990's studies of this question have revealed mixed results because of the limited number of students studied and the out-of-date methods of comparison. However, the results suggest that after two-year students successfully transfer to four-year institutions, they complete their bachelors' degrees in the same time frame as students who started at the four-year institutions. Also, "net of other factors, students who initially enroll in a community college are able to transfer to more academically selective four-year institutions than they could have enrolled in directly out of high school" (p. 592). Additionally, the author stated "this effect was most pronounced for students who came from poor families, who were low in tested ability, or who performed poorly in high school" (p. 593).

Pascarella and Terenzini's[27] summary of the research indicates that "community college students have demonstrated greater gains in openness for both intellectual

and racial-ethnic diversity" (p. 592), compared to their peers who begin at four-year institutions. Also, on a positive note, other results indicate that students who began their college education at a two-year institution were not negatively impacted in their eventual job stability, unemployment rate, or overall job satisfaction.

7. Conclusions

Nationally, higher education management boards and state legislatures are insisting on lowering the cost for obtaining a bachelor degree at four-year institutions and are expecting two-year institutions to be a part of the solution. Also, a growing number of national advisors are recommending that post-secondary school students begin at a two-year community college before transferring to a four-year college. Further, popular news magazines are recommending that students attend community colleges that have articulation agreements with four-year colleges[28]. They point out that many community colleges now have relationships with elite public and private schools which increase students' opportunities for successful transfers to those four-year institutions of higher education.

Consequently, policy makers are developing procedures and agreements to increase the number of two-year enrollees who are retained, transferred, and graduated within their respective state's higher education programs. However, at this juncture, a state-to-state or university-to-university comparison has proven to be difficult due to the endless number of programs, policies, and procedures unique to various states and institutions offering versions of these transfer guarantee programs. As these programs mature and student retention and graduation rates are compared, a long-term success rate can be established regarding the linkage between the transfer degree guarantee program and the student's completion of a bachelor's degree.

As a result of Louisiana's legislation, students and parents expect an increasingly seamless transition between two-year and four-year higher education institutions within the state. The TDG program guidelines are providing an incentive for students and their parents to know with confidence that the credit earned at community colleges will be accepted if students transfer to a four-year institution. The tuition savings resulting from the cost differential between two- and four-year institutions has provided an additional incentive for students and parents. To date, there are 11 participating community colleges and 15 participating colleges who support the program requirements and transfer credit guarantees[21]. At the conclusion of the third year of program operations, the number of students participating has increased in addition to the number of credit offerings from 25 identified courses during the first year to over 200 this past year[22].

Overall, there are many reasons why students at two-year institutions should be encouraged to make the successful transition to a four-year institution, including financial

considerations over a lifetime of employment. J. Brainard[29] illustrated that there is a \$12,485 difference in median annual earnings between those with associate degrees and those with high school degrees. This difference in median annual earnings increases to \$24,294 after earning a bachelor's degree. Thus, there is a growing awareness that students enrolled in two-year community colleges need to successfully transfer to four-year institutions and eventually graduate to increase the financial benefit in their lifetime earnings.

K. Clark and P. Wang's[28] report of the National Commission on Community Colleges states: "Despite a 100-year record of success and productivity, community colleges are largely overlooked in the national discussions about education" (para.1). This view is changing as many of the concerns about transitions between two-year and four-year institutions of higher education are being resolved with better legislation, leadership, policies, procedures, programs, communication, and successful models to emulate.

Also K. Clark and P. Wang[28] write that, "The Louisiana Transfer Degree Guarantee program takes the guesswork out of the transfer process and provides a clear path to successfully transfer from Louisiana community colleges to Louisiana four-year universities. Time and money are saved in the process" (para. 6). Blum[30] reported that the state president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training to the effect that the "policies are in place to help Louisiana community college students graduate more quickly, transfer to universities more efficiently and access more financial aid, despite the increased tuition levels" (p.10A).

In a state that has struggled to educate its citizens, the Louisiana TDG program has provided hope for many students who are financially challenged and/or were not initially qualified for admission to attend a four-year institution after leaving high school. Further, it is anticipated that graduation rates will increase both at the community college level and at the four-year institutions as a result of this TDG program. The overall goal for the citizens of Louisiana is to increase the percentage of individuals with college degrees who are prepared to become productive citizens in the economy.

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