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Cycles of Improvement: The Texas Transfer Partnership Strategy

This summary is part of the Charles A. Dana Center's "Notes from the Field" series, which highlights examples of innovative mathematics education practices from colleges, universities, and systems.

Background

This brief summarizes the work of the Texas Transfer Partnership Strategy (TPS), a one-year collaborative led by the Charles A. Dana Center that built on the work of the Texas Transfer Alliance, which is a collaborative of universities and community colleges across the state.

For the Transfer Partnership Strategy, 26 institutions were chosen to participate, based on each institution's ability to cooperate at a regional level and prior success with improving student transfer. The goal of the TPS was to improve student transfer and completion outcomes across the Texas higher education landscape.

The Texas Transfer Alliance is supported by the Trellis Foundation. It is part of the larger Tackling Transfer project, a partnership between the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, Sova, and

TAKEAWAYS

- *Using 90-day cycles of work with 30- and 60-day check-ins creates accountability and momentum to tackle complex systemic reform in realistic and manageable ways.*
- *Deploying regional coordinators to facilitate collaboration and communication between community colleges and universities is an effective way to regularly bring key stakeholders together to reflect on current practices, create measurable goals and action plans, and monitor progress.*

HCM Strategists to support states in improving transfer outcomes for community college students seeking transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Along with Texas, Virginia and Minnesota are the other two states involved in this project.

Challenges

Research shows that, at a minimum, 70 percent of Texans who earned a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution in the state took courses at a community college at some point in their academic journey.[1] Ensuring the seamless transfer and applicability of credits upon transfer from a community college to a four-year institution can be challenging. Too often, the disconnects between the two-year and four-year systems regarding what courses "count" present barriers to student persistence and completion of a degree.

To address potential obstacles to student success, the Texas Transfer Alliance helped selected state institutions take an incremental approach to transfer issues through the use of relatively short improvement cycles with small, measurable objectives that over time led to broader systemic improvements, including the development of detailed program maps and the implementation of enhanced advising practices targeted specifically at transfer students.

First introduced at a January 2020 statewide convening of Texas transfer partners, these "90-Day improvement cycles" are effective vehicles for institutional and regional change, strengthening communication between colleges and universities and uncovering—and overcoming—roadblocks. The cycles enable development of meaningful collaborations that lead to coherent pathways for community college students seeking four-year degrees.

> Working on the assumption that complex problems must be broken into smaller, bite sized pieces to effect lasting change, Tackling Transfer partners such as Sova and the Aspen Institute have used 90-day improvement cycles to address the structural barriers faced by transfer students. Focusing on SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based) goals[4] enables institution-al partners to begin improvement work on the most urgent problems faced by transfer students, and then use subsequent 90-day improvement cycles to keep building out the solutions over time.[5]

Solutions

To help institutions plan and implement their transfer work, including the 90-day improvement cycles, the Transfer Partnership Strategy uses a regional coordinator model.[2] Regional coordinators work to strengthen cross-sector communication and collaboration between institutions in the state's participating regions.

The improvement cycles are tailored to meet the specific needs of the 26 distinct partnerships between the two- and four-year institutions in each region. Texas Transfer Alliance partners developed institutional self-assessment and planning tools, and shared them with participating institutions at the January 2020 convening.[3]

After the convening, individual institutions and their regional partners initiated their improvement cycles. Each cycle was an attempt to respond to the conditions "on the ground" at each location. Leaders from the two-year and four-year institutions in each region committed to meet regularly and to develop measurable goals for improving the transferability and applicability of credits among two-year and four-year institutions. Progress was measured every 30 days through each new joint 90-day cycle.

Throughout the Transfer Partnership Strategy process, regional coordinators helped colleges and universities gather data on the most popular transfer programs, using both institutional research and student surveys. Math

prerequisites for the most popular transfer programs in each region were reviewed, and transfer data sheets tailored to institutional partners were created to clearly lay out the appropriate coursework for transfer students to take, depending on their chosen fields of study. Associated program pathway maps for students and advisors were also developed.

The following highlights present promising practices that might serve as models for other regions in the state.

Central Texas Region: Austin Community College and Texas State University

Austin Community College (ACC) and Texas State University (TSU) worked jointly on two consecutive 90-day improvement cycles to identify the top degrees that transfer students pursue, and to review existing program maps to address areas of misalignment and establish clear transfer pathways for advisors and students to follow.

After chairs and faculty at each institution agreed on entry-level math requirements for the most popular programs of study, advisors then received training on how to best guide transfer students into the appropriate mathematics pathway. Advisors are explicitly trained to reach out to students early so students can choose a major before transferring.

Both institutions are also in the process of developing a math requirement chart that should help simplify and streamline the transfer process for both students and advisors by ensuring the math requirements for the top 12 transfer programs in the region are fully aligned.

Due to their successful and effective partnership, ACC and TSU sought and received additional funding from the American Association of Community Colleges to continue and improve on the work started under the Texas Transfer Alliance. Future work will include mapping out additional majors for pathway alignment and implementation and acceptance at both institutions of a dual credit course created by ACC in partnership with the Austin Independent School District following the passage of H.B. 1638 during the 2018 Texas legislative session. The law calls for the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to develop statewide goals for dual credit programs.

North Texas Region: Collin College and the University of Texas at Dallas

The goal for this regional partnership was to provide personalized transfer support to a select group of students jointly identified by Collin College and The University of Texas at Dallas (UT Dallas) as needing personalized transfer support. The first cohort included students with declared majors in engineering or business who had above average grades in gateway courses. The first 90-day cycle tasked both institutions with gathering and analyzing transfer data and meeting in cross-campus teams to plan how to best communicate transfer opportunities to students at the community college—and to support these students with personalized advising during and after their transfer to UT Dallas. The initial target group of more than 100 students was provided personalized admissions advising.

Unfortunately, in the middle of the first 90-day cycle, the massive disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to only six students from the initial cohort of 100 enrolling at UT Dallas for Fall 2020. Those students who were able to enroll were paired with a faculty mentor as well as an academic advisor in an effort to more fully support them at the university. Pairing students with individual faculty mentors made personal relationships easier to maintain as learning shifted to a virtual environment.

After completing the first 90-day cycle, Collin College and UT Dallas agreed to continue collaborating on a second 90-day cycle to monitor the progress of the initial cohort, expand the number of students in future cohorts, and target additional majors to include in future semesters.

Additional support for a consortium of colleges and universities in North Texas, including Collin College and UT Dallas, will be provided through the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's "Project Complete," which offers grants to qualified students who "stopped out" of higher education and allows them to complete their degree in the 2021 academic year.

North Texas Region: North Central Texas College and the University of North Texas

Leaders in the advising departments at North Central Texas College (NCTC) and the University of North Texas (UNT) collaborated on two consecutive 90-day planning cycles that were focused on strategies to reach transfer-minded students early in their college careers. The aim was to help students avoid costly enrollment mistakes such as choosing courses that do not align with their intended degrees at UNT.

In the first 90-day cycle, NCTC implemented a requirement that after completing 30 credit hours, students meet with an advisor to discuss transfer options and the alignment of their coursework to their chosen field of study. NCTC also created an online form for students who were changing majors or withdrawing from NCTC. Completing the form triggered a contact by an advisor to help the student understand the possible additional coursework involved in changing a major or to help the advisor learn why the student was withdrawing.

NCTC also implemented an advising component that required students to meet with an advisor to review UNT course requirements before transferring there. At UNT, the advising department began requiring a preorientation for transfer students who enter UNT with 50 or more credit hours. Advising directors were also tasked with creating common presentations specific to transfer issues to be delivered to advising staff at both NCTC and UNT.

Another result of the communication between the two advising departments has been an increase in the number of reverse transfer credits, leading to an increase in associate degrees being awarded to NCTC students after they complete work at UNT.

Next Steps

Regional coordinators are vital to the Transfer Partnership Strategy, providing structure, coordination, and accountability. They also foster collaboration by meeting regularly with stakeholders to discuss progress, promising practices, and next steps in a given region. The coordinators also collect and highlight data that reveal barriers to successful transfer, and they develop practical, achievable solutions with their regional partners.

According to regional coordinators and project consultants, the best gains across the state were made when regional coordinators brought together stakeholders with the leverage to prioritize the work of improving transfer and applicability within a region. Regional coordinators were most effective when they pushed institutions to create specific, achievable goals and when they implemented 30- and 60-day check-ins as part of the 90-day cycle—resulting in meaningful, incremental change while also creating momentum. Feedback from this initial partnership planning work also supports the need for an independent regional consultant who can ask tough questions and bring a fresh perspective to overcoming real and perceived barriers, and who can share promising strategies that are working across institutions facing similar issues.

The diversity of Texas's higher education institutions across disparate regions in the state makes it impossible to frame a one-size-fits-all solution to improving student transfer success rates. By fostering relationships on a regional level, the Transfer Partnership Strategy has enabled partner institutions who are well-acquainted with the students they serve to create action plans tailored to where the institutions are in the reform process—and to find workable solutions to barriers that exist in their local ecosystems.

Even in the midst of COVID-19 upheavals, these reform efforts were able to maintain momentum and keep the action steps on track because they were targeted interventions that involved small groups making the changes to the systems they deeply know.

"It's not magical," says Alison Kadlec of Sova, referring to the hard work necessary to create better opportunities and success for transfer students. "It matters how you do things and how you support it."

Kadlec says that asking relevant questions in a context of strong institutional supports—and using a continuous improvement approach driven by short-term goals and regular check-ins—creates early wins and the momentum needed to keep the work moving forward.

Endnotes

[1] Jenkins, D. (2013, February). *Texas would benefit by Improving its community college to bachelor's transfer system*. The Community College Research Center. https://www.edtx.org/our-impact-areas/higher-education/texas-student-success-council/tssc_transfer.pdf and National Student Clearinghouse (2015, March). *Snapshot report: Contribution of two-year institutions to four-year completions, 2015*. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SnapshotReport17-2YearContributions.pdf

[2] The origin of the SMART goal mnemonic is generally attributed to Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives. *Management Review*, 70(11), 35–36. For more, see Haughey, D. (2014, December 13). *A brief history of SMART goals*. Project Smart. https://www.projectsmart.co.uk/brief-history-of-smart-goals.php

[3] For more information, see Kadlec, A. (2021, April 15). *Using short-term improvement cycles to accelerate progress on transfer*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/tackling-transfer/using-short-term-improvement-cycles-accelerate-progress-transfer

[4] The Charles A. Dana Center. (2020). *Emerging Solutions #3 - Improving institutional collaboration and student outcomes through the Texas Transfer Alliance*.

[5] The Aspen Institute. *Texas Transfer Alliance*. [Website]. https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/texas-transfer-alliance/

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About the Dana Center

The Charles A. Dana Center develops and scales mathematics and science education innovations to support educators, administrators, and policy makers in creating seamless transitions throughout the K–16 system for all students, especially those who have historically been underserved. We focus in particular on strategies for improving student engagement, motivation, persistence, and achievement.

The Center was founded in 1991 at The University of Texas at Austin. Our staff members have expertise in leadership, literacy, research, program evaluation, mathematics and science education, policy and systemic reform, and services to high-need populations.