TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS SERIES

State Policy and Its Impact on Collaboration to Promote Transfer in Minnesota

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Education policy has increasingly utilized collaboration as a critical mechanism for improving educational outcomes by encouraging alignment along the K-16 pipeline, making transfer processes more efficient and cost-effective, and striving to align education credentials with workforce demands. However, there is extensive variation in the degree to which policies promote or inhibit collaboration between colleges and universities. In this Data Note, we present a case in which state level higher education policy has evolved over time to increasingly encourage colleges and universities to work together to improve transfer outcomes.

This Data Note examines findings gathered from the state of Minnesota for our High-Performing Transfer Partnerships (HPTP) study, which focuses on institutional partnerships between community colleges and baccalaureate-degree granting universities that promote more equitable transfer outcomes for underserved student populations. This data set consists of interviews with 88 faculty, staff, and students across four community colleges and two bachelor's granting institutions that who have partnerships with each other.

BACKGROUND ON MINNESOTA TRANSFER POLICY

Transfer has been a legislative priority for Minnesota for a long time. From at least the early 1990's, legislative bodies have been paying attention to transfer and their policies appear to have had both direct and indirect impacts on collaboration pertaining to the student transfer process. Recognizing that the focus on transfer processes is ubiquitous across many states, what is important about Minnesota's approach is this state's creation of

transfer policies that seem to promote collaboration between colleges and universities. Legislation introduced by the Minnesota state legislature in 1991 directed postsecondary systems to improve their transfer policies to address the needs of a growing number of transfer students, and to develop procedures for sharing information about transfer student progress. By 1994, representatives from all four public higher education systems (i.e., Minnesota Community Colleges, Minnesota Technical Colleges, Minnesota State Universities, and University of Minnesota) had worked together to create the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum that outlined not only the expected goals and student competencies in the lower-division general education curriculum package that would be recognized at all public institutions, but also the structure that would support and maintain this curriculum, and key steps and timelines for implementation across all four public higher education systems. More specifically, they established a Transfer Oversight Committee to monitor implementation of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, as well as discipline-based Articulation Councils comprised of faculty who

would communicate across systems to keep curriculum requirements updated. As noted in the original document, "The councils' purpose is to help build the essential base of knowledge, understanding, trust, and mutual respect that supports equitable treatment of students who transfer" (Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, 1994, p.16).

Shortly thereafter in 1995, all public two-year colleges and four-year universities in Minnesota, with the exception of the University of Minnesota, were merged into one centralized higher education system, called the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU). As a two-year campus leader described, "We are part of a bunch of sister institutions…That's the reason for having the collective of all these schools; they're two- and four-year colleges…That's supposed to ease transfer because we use the same policies." By 1999, a higher education network was created in a major metropolitan area between the main bachelors' degree-granting institution and 10 nearby community and technical colleges within the MnSCU system, called the Metro Alliance. As stated in a press release at the time, the formation of the alliance was intended to expand access to programs and services across all member campuses, and was directly attributed to the direction of the state Legislature (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 1999).

Although a number of improvements and updates were made to transfer within MnSCU in subsequent years, including the development of several online tools to facilitate course transfer, the transfer process still appeared to be cumbersome. In 2010, the Office of the Legislative Auditor and the system office, in coordination with both student associations, conducted two different studies of transfer within MnSCU and discovered numerous inefficiencies in the transfer process. As a result, the 2010 Higher Education Bill introduced legislation that required MnSCU to improve credit transfer between institutions within the system. The Smart Transfer Plan was developed in response and focused on addressing five main areas: Course Outlines, Degree Audit Reporting Systems (DARS) and Course Equivalencies, Appeals, Compliance and Communication about Transfer, and Training. Although the legislature did not require collaboration, they did encourage the development of

working groups of "affected faculty, staff, students, and administrators representing institutions and academic and technical disciplines in the system to work on issues and barriers to credit transfer" (2010 Higher Education Policy Bill). According to one community college administrator who we interviewed for the HPTP study, the establishment of these work groups led to a greater focus on the student transfer experience across the system. A follow-up survey was conducted in 2013 with both student associations, and found improvements in all areas of transfer.

In more recent years, the state has expanded its focus to include baccalaureate degree completion. In 2014, higher education legislation required the MnSCU system to develop a plan "to implement multi-campus articulation agreements that lead to baccalaureate degree completion" for students who had completed certain associates degrees within the system (2014 Minnesota Session Laws). The following year, the MnSCU system was also required to develop new "transfer pathways" from associate degrees to baccalaureate degree programs. Additionally, they were encouraged to develop a plan for new bachelor of applied science (BAS) degree programs for certain high-demand career fields, with the goal of facilitating transfer pathways for students with associate of applied science (AAS) degrees (2015 Minnesota Session Laws).

IMPACT OF POLICY ON COLLABORATION

Initial findings from our HPTP study suggest that this consistent and long-standing focus on transfer at the state system level has shaped the ways that college and university administrators, faculty, and staff work together toward this common goal.

At the point of our data collection, colleges and universities within MnSCU (which since 2016 has been renamed "Minnesota State") were in the midst of implementing the transfer pathways mandate. They started by piloting pathways for four majors in 2016, and were developing pathways for up to an additional 30 of the most frequently chosen majors, to be implemented

by Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. Many interviewees at both the community colleges and universities in our study discussed the impact that this process had on collaboration between their institutions.

Although various forms of partnerships had already been in place for several decades, the recent mandate to create transfer pathways has increased the focus on partnering in order to simplify the transfer process. In particular, there has been widespread participation in statewide committees that are working to create these transfer pathways. Many of these work groups consist of faculty in discipline-based clusters. One community college faculty member noted that in prior years they would hold similar meetings to discuss articulation agreements, but would only include representatives from two-year colleges. Since the goal has shifted to transfer pathways however, the interactions between community college and university faculty have increased. When asked about collaboration, this faculty member recalls:

> *How much do we collaborate? I would say so far not a ton, but there's so much interest in doing that. These discipline meetings I think are the vehicle to get that started. It's kind of exciting. Prior to that, about 10 years before, the system office itself would host one of these things, except...it was just for the two year [institutions]... Well, what we decided in Chemistry, and I know that Biology decided the same, is "Let's not separate the twos from the fours. Why would we do that?" We want more connections between two [year colleges] and the four [years], so let's not just stick with the twos.*

The system-wide focus on collaboration to improve transfer has also led to changes in institutional practice, particularly in advising. For example, an increasing number of institutions are partnering to make transfer more seamless by placing staff from different institutions in one physical location, in essence handing student from one institution to the next, as described by a community college administrator:

> *Rather than such a stretch to see [transfer] happening, you just go down the hall to make it happen. You talk to the person you've been talking to all along, and she says, "Here, you just go down the hall, and okay, you've got everything lined up." And then she passes the baton to the person who advises at that institution. They pick it up...and [students] don't feel like there's any disjoint or any gaps, and it's just smooth for them.*

The 2015 directive to bring high-demand baccalaureate degree programs to various community colleges has necessitated the development of more intentional partnerships as well. The institutions we visited had recently created a dual admission-dual enrollment program in nursing and were in the process of designing one for dental hygiene. The development of these new programs has required a higher degree of coordination between faculty to create a cohesive curriculum, as well as staff to provide tailored advising and support services to help students navigate progression from the first part of the program to the next.

A majority of the faculty and administrators we interviewed expressed excitement and optimism about developing deeper and more meaningful partnerships across institutions. Several people believed that the transfer pathways mandate would create more opportunities to partner in the future, because many more degree programs would eventually line up across the system. When asked about the emphasis on partnerships with local community colleges, a university administrator responded,

> *I'd say [the focus on partnerships] has been consistent. It's always been there. It's always been a primary source of students for our programs across the university. I would say, if anything, in the last recent two to three years, it's only increased as we've had our state legislature mandate that state institutions work together more seamlessly for that.*

IMPACT OF COLLABORATION ON INSTITUTIONS

Several changes in transfer-related outcomes, as well as faculty and staff relations, can be associated with the increase in collaboration and partnerships between the Minnesota State colleges and universities that we visited.

Awareness of the transfer experience

One criticism of institutional responses to transfer barriers is that many faculty and staff are unaware of the issues that transfer students face, and therefore are less likely to see how they can contribute to making transfer work. Tobolowski and Cox (2012) document this limited and inconsistent understanding of transfer students at the university level in particular. However, some institutional actors at community colleges may have inaccurate perceptions about the transfer process as well – oftentimes around the ways that program requirements do or do not fit together across colleges and universities. An initial finding from the current study suggests that the collaboration between community colleges and universities we observed has led to greater faculty and staff awareness of student experience with transfer. Faculty from several different community colleges described positive outcomes such as the following:

> I think the really good thing that's been happening is a lot of our folks have participated in those statewide committees working on those transfer pathways, so the faculty, in particular, but also our deans and staff are really getting a very different picture of how that all fits together and getting a better appreciation for the experience that a student has at a two-year institution.

Improved faculty relations across institutions

Interviewees also referred to the cultural gaps and academic elitism that are sometimes present between faculty at community colleges and baccalaureate-granting universities (Senie, 2016). Specifically, a number of faculty at the university level felt that the collaboration had helped to dismantle stereotypes that their colleagues had about the academic credentials of community college faculty. One professor observed,

> I have heard many times when, now, because of the transfer pathways that we're going through, it required that the university and community colleges get together and decide this pathway. Many of [our faculty] have come back and said, "Boy, those community college faculty are very good. So many of them have PhDs too!"

Some community college faculty also noticed an improvement in the working relationship between faculty across institution types, stating:

> We were also required to have a bunch of discipline meetings, so that across the state, people can come weigh in and discuss. It ended up being really, really nice. It kind of broke down a bunch of the…"walls" between the two years and the four years.

Program Quality

Arguably, positive interactions and relationships between institutional actors across colleges and universities in the system are likely to make the work of developing academic and programmatic partnerships easier and more likely to succeed. Administrators at all the institutions we visited attested to the critical importance of relationships in improving and maintaining high program quality and functioning. As one person reflected,

> So many of the university faculty tend to be so in tune with their research… that some of them don't think of it as a responsibility to get out and schmooze with other people, and that's exactly how the partnerships work. When you see the faculty members from [our institution] that actually have connections with the community college faculty, those are the programs that work the best.

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Financial disincentives and state funding formulas were cited as a primary barrier to effective transfer partnerships, which supports previous findings on institutional collaboration (Bragg & Russman, 2007; Fann, 2013). Numerous people we spoke to explained that the Minnesota State system encouraged greater collaboration between colleges and universities, but then offered stories about how the higher education funding formula provided limited incentive to do so. A university administrator shared, "It always comes down to money, right? All of our entities are reliant upon state subsidy and there is a financial model. If they created a financial model that rewarded partnerships, then I think that would entice people to be better partners." Although these administrators were very committed to the idea that partnerships were good for students, one person remarked, "when so much of it seems to be financially-driven versus student-driven, that changes the dynamic of the partnership that you can have."

The logistics of navigating partnerships is another obstacle that was prevalent in our findings. One staff member, who oversees partnerships at her institution indicated that her institution would benefit from receiving more direction from the system about how to structure partnerships. "I would like to have some direction. For finances, for example, I would like to have a specific model and not as much freedom," suggesting that a lack of structure can lead to confusion when negotiating contracts for student services fees, tuition, and other cost-sharing situations. Another person felt it would be helpful for the system to develop positions that specifically focused on partnerships, which would be housed through the system office and could provide more continuity and guidance to partnership administrators at the institution level.

CONCLUSION

These comments about direction and structure are being made in a state context where partnerships continue to evolve, with generally positive reactions to recent legislative policies regarding transfer and baccalaureate degree completion. Although mandates are sometimes viewed less favorably than other types of policies, one community college faculty administrator describes the impact of recent policy change on transfer reform in this way:

> If we can keep the momentum going, that will be a really good place for collaborations to spring from I think. There was resistance to this whole transfer pathway thing as you might imagine. Anytime that something is new and mandated...it was a mandate, which in a way made it easier. Anytime there was a push back I'd say, "Hey, it's the law now. We don't have a choice, it's not our administrators, it's not the system, it's the legislature...That actually made it easier in a way...But the nice thing is it pretty quickly...turned from a grumbling, "Well, how come we have to do this?" to, "Oh, look at this, now we're meeting these people and coming up with, sharing ideas"...So that's been nice.

With respect to the concept of partnerships, this legislation could be viewed as a tool that has both directly and indirectly promoted collaboration – the first step to developing effective and longstanding partnerships.

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