

Effective Community College and Public University Transfer Partnerships in North Carolina

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This study examines the transfer and partnership practices employed by pairs of community colleges and public universities in North Carolina, which were identified in a companion study (Bartek, 2021) as more effective than other colleges in helping transfer students attain bachelor's degrees. Using a framework of transfer and partnership practices from the literature, the study found effective practices among leaders and practitioners at both the university and community college partners, even before the state mandated implementation of the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) in 2014:

- » **Leaders communicate transfer as a priority** through their actions
- » **Leaders focused the institution's attention and resources** on transfer
- » **Practitioners shared transfer as a value** through a culture of care at the community colleges and a welcoming environment at the universities
- » **Practitioners communicated internally** about transfer policies, procedures and outcomes
- » **Advising was customized for transfer**, and often specifically for the institutional partnership, and transfer-specific programs and services are provided by the university.

This study is relevant to university and community college leaders and practitioners aiming to improve bachelor's degree attainment among transfer students, as well as researchers who are engaged in empirically validating the effectiveness of transfer practices through theory and replication.

INTRODUCTION

North Carolina was one of the first states to legislate a Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) between the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and the University of North Carolina (UNC) System in 1997 (Bailey & Jaggars, 2015; Bartek, 2020; Board of Governors of the UNC & Board of Governors of the NCCCS, 2014). With an aim to maintain institutional autonomy in determining transfer policies as well as reduce unintentional penalties for students when they transfer (Joint Committee on Transfer Students, 1987), the purpose of the original agreement was to develop a plan (the CAA) for pre-major credit transfer between institutions, a common course library for NCCCS courses, and accessible academic counseling as students consider transferring between NCCCS and UNC System colleges (Bartek, 2020; Board of Governors of the UNC & Board of Governors of the NCCCS, 2014).

The CAA was revised in 2014 to mandate compliance and further improve the articulation of credit between NCCCS and UNC System colleges, addressing the relatively low transfer-out rates and lower baccalaureate attainment rates of community college students compared to students who start at public universities (UNC System, 2012). Because transfer of credit is a key factor in whether or not community college students attain bachelor's degrees (Monaghan & Atwell, 2015), and a majority (63% of NCCCS transfers; UNC System, 2020) of NCCCS students transferring to UNC universities do so without first attaining transfer degrees (Associate in Arts or Associate in Science), identifying practices that help these students transfer credit and move on to attain bachelor's degrees is critical to improving transfer in North Carolina (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Wyner et al., 2016).

The companion study to this brief (Bartek, 2021) indicates that some effective transfer practices may have been occurring among some NCCCS and UNC System partners, even before the 2014 revision of the CAA. That study found about 35% of NCCCS and UNC System partnerships with 10 or more students who transferred between them in fall 2011 had "higher-than-expected" 4-year baccalaureate attainment rates for these students, meaning their actual rates were higher than predicted after accounting for the characteristics of their students, counties, and institutions through regression analysis. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study was to follow up on these results to discern how and why these pairs were effective in helping their students transfer and attain bachelor's degrees (Bartek, 2020, 2021).

THE PROJECT

This case study seeks to understand effective transfer and partnership practices occurring between community colleges and public universities in North Carolina. After 18 of the strongest partnerships were identified (Bartek, 2021), three NCCCS and UNC system pairs were selected for site visits and qualitative follow-up using screening procedures (see Appendix, Table 1; Yin, 2018).

- **Carteret Community College and UNC Wilmington (UNCW)**
- **Forsyth Technical Community College and Appalachian State University (ASU)**
- **Durham Technical Community College and UNC Chapel Hill (UNC-CH)**

Six focus groups, one at each partner institution, were conducted among staff, faculty, and administrators familiar with transfer practices at their colleges. The interview protocol focused on discerning practices established at the institution prior to the revision of the CAA in 2014. In addition to site visits, transfer policies, resources for students, articulation agreements, baccalaureate degree plans, and marketing materials were also analyzed from the websites of the UNC System, the NCCCS, as well as each partner's website in the selected pairs.

The data from the focus groups were analyzed through a theoretical framework that incorporated a model of effective transfer practices (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Wyner et al., 2016) with Orton & Weick's (1990) theory of loose coupling, which describes the autonomous relationship between community colleges and universities in North Carolina. The framework helped to explain how and why effective NCCCS and UNC System pairs had relationships with one another that provided the "glue" needed to implement effective transfer practices described by Fink and Jenkins (2017) for the success of their transfer students.

EFFECTIVE TRANSFER AND PARTNERSHIP PRACTICES

The results of this case study indicate that the most effective transfer partnerships in North Carolina have the following characteristics:

- » **Leaders Communicate Vision of Transfer as a Priority:** In loosely coupled systems like NCCCS and UNC system partners, vision and the importance of policy goals are communicated not so much by authoritarian directives from leaders through administrative structures but through their continuous communication and actions regarding transfer. The effective partnerships in this study had leaders who held regular meetings focused on transfer, attended transfer events, offered faculty and staff professional development workshops, regularly used data to make the case to improve transfer, and provided the resources to do it, all elements of the Fink and Jenkins (2017) model for effective transfer partnerships. For example, the UNCW Chancellor conducts monthly meetings with key transfer personnel to review transfer applications and statistics on transfer student retention. These meetings, conversations, and data helped demonstrate the need for transfer admissions advisors on community college campuses and helped determine which community college campuses to visit. Their transfer partner in this study, Carteret Community College, also reported focused communication around transfer:

I think part of [the reason it is the focus of the president] is because it takes up a huge part of our student population.... So, you have to focus on it as an institution, and I think that message comes very clearly from all levels, not just our deans and our chairs, but [from the] vice president and president. (Bartek, 2020, p. 73)

This suggests that leaders who wish to make transfer a priority and improve transfer policy implementation on their campuses in North Carolina might do so by having conversations with faculty and staff to help them make sense of the policy, by educating them on the common goals and the shared “visions” of the policy, and by spending time with them wrestling and reconciling the gaps between these goals, the performance of their transfer students, and strategies to help them.

- » **Partners Share Values: “Transfer is What We Do”:** Among the top transfer partners in the study, the community colleges indicated that “transfer is what we do.” For example, at Durham Technical Community College one practitioner reported:

I think it’s just understood. I don’t think it has to be verbalized. It’s like if you take a baseball team to a game to play you expect to win. I mean it’s just understood. We want our students to transfer. (Bartek, 2020, p. 80)

For universities, “transfer receptivity” is one way the shared value of transfer is demonstrated. Transfer receptivity is an indicator of a “transfer affirming” or welcoming culture, where there

is no stigma for having transferred from a community college (Bahr et. al., 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012). For example, in contrast to their experiences with some universities, Carteret Community College described UNCW this way:

UNC Wilmington has always rolled out the red carpet for transfer students. I find it interesting. It's tough to get in as a freshman. It's really tough to get into Wilmington as a freshman...and probably still is as transfer student, but they're very open to talk to the transfer students and to come on [our] campus to make the connections. (Bartek, 2020, p. 75)

Transfer-affirming universities also continue to support transfer students through transfer-focused services and programs to help them move through and on from the university. University supports designed specifically for transfer students include staffed transfer centers with a transfer coordinator, summer bridge programs, transfer-oriented groups, orientation and first-year seminars customized for transfer students, living-learning communities for transfers, transfer-specific clubs, transfer student national honor society, and programs aimed to increase transfer student involvement on campus.

- » **Partners Communicate Well Internally:** Effective transfer partners have effective internal communication systems at their own institutions that help faculty, staff, and students stay current and on the same page regarding transfer processes at their college. Mechanisms include transfer advising committees, transfer admissions teams, transfer newsletters, and transfer advising centers. This implies institutions that want to improve their transfer functions may want to look toward strengthening their own internal communication and training regarding transfer.
- » **Partners Focus Attention on Top Partners:** All three partnership pairs used data to identify their top transfer partners and to strategically use resources to collaborate with them. The university partners monitor performance dashboards and reports to track transfer student success and retention. UNCW uses this data to determine which community college campuses to place their transfer admissions advisors and conduct transfer activities. The Office of Transfer Advising at ASU was formed when data showed large rates of attrition of transfer students. This office provides data about the incoming class every semester to each department and visits with department heads and faculty to review the transfer data and dispel myths about transfer students. The Carteret Community College Advising Committee uses the NCCCS performance measures on transfer outcomes as well as robust year-end reports for program reviews that includes disaggregated retention and success data and uses this data to make sure students are accumulating credits toward their degree and not outside of their degree plans. However, all three of the community college transfer partners found it difficult to generate current and actionable transfer data and relied mainly on their university partners to assist with tracking their students.

Since a majority of students transfer before they complete degrees, in all three cases, questions continually arose about the transfer of credits. This required faculty and staff among each partnership to continually negotiate the transfer of individual courses into specific university programs, especially before 2014 and the implementation of numerous bi-lateral agreements. For example, at Carteret Community College, one participant noted:

It's different, because you don't have this state level working on those relationships, you're doing it yourself... We have to take it, we have to make phone calls, and we have to establish the meetings, make the way, it's just a different way of doing things. (Bartek, 2020, p. 76)

Accordingly, the faculty and staff among the pairs where the university was the community college's top transfer destination (in terms of the numbers of students transferring) had developed close relationships through communities of advising and admissions practice that were integral to the success of their transfer students. Faculty at the community colleges were also focused on ensuring transfer students were learning what they needed to be successful at their top university transfer destinations.

» **Partners Offer Customized Transfer Advising**

Each partner among the effective pairs provided customized transfer advising that maps out a plan for students and helps them transfer to university. Two of the top performing community college partners had switched to an intrusive advising model in the past year where students are required to meet with a specific transfer faculty advisor a minimum number of times per semester. UNCW is an example of a partner who devoted significant resources for transfer advisors to spend regular time on their community college partner's campuses to smooth the pathways between the two:

With the support of implementing these positions, it allows us to meet these transfer students where they are, especially because not all transfer students are 19, 20 years old. Some of them are working full time while taking classes at the community college, with the intent of maybe transferring to a 4-year institution. So, with the convenience of having [a transfer advisor] there, it's really helped us in bridging that gap of communication for us who are here on campus. (Bartek, 2020, p. 77)

FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON PRACTICE & POLICY

The results of this study suggest several steps leaders at community colleges and universities in North Carolina can take to improve transfer-out rates and baccalaureate attainment of community colleges transfer students. By building stronger relationships with their top two or three transfer partners based on their transfer student destinations and enrollments, partners can:

- 1. Cultivate student-centered and welcoming, transfer-receptive, and caring cultures** on each campus through messaging, symbols, and ceremonies celebrating the partnership and transfer students on campus.
- 2. Ensure and strengthen internal structures** for communication, training, and professional development around transfer, such as through campus advising committees and an office dedicated to transfer.
- 3. Universities should share current disaggregated student-level data** with their community college partners each semester so that these partners can track the extent to which community college students from different demographic groups are transferring-out and attaining baccalaureate degrees.
- 4. Ensure resources** (e.g., coordination help and financial stipends), structures (e.g., regular meetings), and mechanisms (e.g., shared communication, such as annual reports and recognitions) are in place to support faculty and staff collaboration on community college course alignment with university programs as well as collaboration on credit transfer and the admissions process.
- 5. Provide transfer advising services**, such as dedicated university advisors on community college campuses, with a focus on transfer between the top partners who help transfer students move in, move through, and graduate from their universities once they are there.

CONCLUSION

This study explains how and why three pairs of community college and university partners in the state of North Carolina achieved better than expected baccalaureate attainment rates for their transfer students, even before the revision of state articulation policy to improve those rates in 2014. The study found that among these pairs, the university partner was the top transfer destination for the community college in terms of transfer productivity (i.e., number of transfer students); the partners employed practices consistent with the Fink and Jenkins (2017) model for effective partnership practices; their internal communication and collaboration related to transfer was strong within their organizations; and their leadership and culture focused resources and attention on transfer. The results were the development of communities of practice and relationships among the partners that compensated for their loose coupling to achieve better outcomes for their transfer students.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Bartek, C. E. S. (2021). *Identifying Effective Community College and Public University Transfer Partnerships In North Carolina*. Raleigh, NC: Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Institutional Characteristics of Partnership Pairs Studied

Variable	UNC-Wilmington & Carteret CC	UNC-Chapel Hill & Durham Tech CC	Appalachian State University & Forsyth Tech CC
Location in North Carolina			
University Partner	Wilmington	Chapel Hill	Boone
Community College Partner	Morehead City	Durham	Winston-Salem
Distance Between Partners (miles)	93.5	16.3	46.0
Degree of Urbanization			
University Partner	Mid-size City	Small City	Distant Town
Community College Partner	Remote Town	Mid-size City	Mid-size City
Institutional Size			
University Partner	Large Four-Year	Large Four-Year	Large Four-Year
Community College Partner	Small Two-Year	Med. Two-Year	Large Two-Year
Program Mix*			
University Partner	Arts & sciences with some graduate programs	Arts & sciences plus professional programs. High graduate coexistence	Professional programs plus arts and sciences. Some graduate programs.
Community College Partner	Mixed transfer/vocational & technical	High transfer rate	Mixed transfer/vocational & technical
Percent Admitted in 2011-12			
University Partner	57	34	68
12-month unduplicated headcount undergraduate enrollment (2011-12)			
University Partner	13,699	19,644	16,744
Community College Partner	2,566	8,106	14,875

**Note.* All of the data listed in the table is from the National Center for Education Statistics.