Response to

*Discussion of ‘Improving Student Transfer at CUNY,’ by the Working Group on Transfer and Articulation, Julia Wrigley, Ph.D.*
*Associate University Provost*

January 19, 2011
The January 5, 2011, document entitled *Discussion of ‘Improving Student Transfer at CUNY’* (hereafter referred to as the “Discussion”), by Dr. Terrence Martell, Vice Chair of the University Faculty Senate, has rendered a service to the faculty and to the University community. This document offers a close reading of the transfer report, an interpretation of the evidence presented therein, and an analysis of the relationship of that evidence to the policy proposals advanced. We are grateful to the UFS and to its executive committee for creating an opportunity to discuss the challenges associated with transfer at CUNY and to propose solutions. These proposals are potentially far-reaching and deserve nothing less than the careful public discussion that the UFS has fostered. At the same time, we would like to respond both to some of the Discussion’s analysis of the evidence and some of the conclusions it draws.

The Discussion has correctly identified the three major recommendations of the transfer report:

1. **General education should be standardized in terms of number of credits and division into broad curricular areas.**

2. **CUNY should establish disciplinary groups that identify the most common courses taken as pathways into the major and should insure that students who take these courses receive full credit for them as entry-level major courses or as prerequisites for such courses.**

3. **CUNY should create mechanisms for accepting legitimate academic courses for credit even when a receiving college does not have a match for the course.**

After reviewing the evidence presented in the transfer report, the Discussion dismisses all of it, concluding that “we find no evidence … that justifies the acceptance” of the recommendations. Based on the following points, we contend that the Discussion has insufficient basis for these conclusions:

1. **The Discussion affords too little weight to the seriousness of the problems with transfer at CUNY—problems that are fully documented in the report.**

We strongly encourage readers to access the full report, which is available at [www.cuny.edu/academiccouncil](http://www.cuny.edu/academiccouncil). To begin with one serious difficulty that our research uncovered: Three quarters of the students who transfer from associate to baccalaureate degrees at CUNY do so before completing the associate degree, subjecting them to the vagaries of CUNY’s system of awarding credit based on course equivalency. This system does not serve our students well. The Working Group on Transfer & Articulation reached this conclusion after more than 18 months of research encompassing information-gathering from students, faculty, transfer counselors at both community and senior colleges, analysis of the equivalencies stored in the TIPPS system, audits of transcripts, and data analysis. We found striking evidence that “CUNY colleges tend to offer transfer credit based on how close a match a college’s course is to one that their own college offers” (p. 8) leading to wide variation in the percentage of courses the colleges designate not transferable. The problem is pervasive, but particularly acute with foreign language courses. In thousands of cases, language courses have been denied.
transfer credit, not because they lack rigor but because CUNY colleges are specialized to some degree in their foreign language offerings. Still another common problem with CUNY’s course-matching approach is disparate evaluation of the same course by receiving colleges. The report (pp. 8-13) documents these inconsistencies and summarizes the vivid testimony we heard about how these uncertainties hamstring prospective transfer students as they attempt to plan their curricula. We found that these uncertainties arise as well in other transfer patterns—including lateral transfer between associate and baccalaureate programs and movement from baccalaureate to associate programs—and therefore affect significant numbers of students. Our analysis shows that existing board policy guaranteeing credit for work completed in the associate program safeguards a shrinking percentage of our students and that AAS students are particularly disadvantaged (pp 13-15).

It is to address these systemic problems that we have proposed a systemic solution: to set general education requirements into a common group of broad curricular areas chosen by a panel consisting of faculty, students, and academic administrators. Faculty would choose the courses from their college that belong in each area, and all colleges would be required to accept all validated courses in those areas from any other CUNY college as meeting area requirements, without further evaluation of those credits.

In addition to its analyses of the problems associated with CUNY’s course-matching approach to articulation, the Working Group devoted considerable time to trying to understand each college’s general education requirements. Like the Discussion, we found this to be a challenging task, and we can only begin to imagine the difficulties that our students and their advisors encounter when they attempt to comprehend the requirements with time and other pressures on them. By setting the number of general education credits as well as the disciplinary areas, we hope to make degree requirements much more transparent for all.

The Discussion asserts that “these policy changes will fall short since they ignore many of the drivers of transfer problems (e.g. advising; students changing their minds; the AAS degree)” (p 6). On the contrary: Simplification of general education requirements as outlined above will ease the burdens on our beleaguered advising corps and insure that the general education credits completed by AAS students count as they should for the growing number of students transferring from AAS programs. Of course, no policy can prevent students from changing their minds about their major. College is indeed an opportunity for students to find themselves intellectually. We believe, however, that adopting a shared, CUNY-wide, general education framework can reduce some of the associated stress.

2. The Discussion’s review of the evidence focuses unduly on an analysis of excess credits and gives short shift to the extensive non-quantitative evidence cited above and throughout the report.

The Discussion classifies the evidence into three categories: 1) ‘excess’ cost to students, 2) “particular information about individual courses at particular colleges,” and 3) evidence from three focus groups (p. 2). This classification ignores much of the evidence presented in the report— evidence from testimony, analysis of equivalencies and credit requirements, analysis of board requirements, and extensive data analysis on topics other than credits. In particular, the report’s documentation of a pattern of inconsistent
evaluations of courses is dismissed in two sentences: “If there are issues with particular courses at particular colleges, these should be fixed. Improve the TIPPS on-line information system by all means” (p. 4). TIPPS serves its purpose well: recording the one-to-one equivalencies among the more than 35,000 courses stored in the database. Its purpose—identifying when courses are equivalent, i.e., when they match—is itself the problem.

3. **The Discussion selectively cites the findings in the report associated with three focus groups.**

These focus groups were held in order to understand why students take more credits than required for the baccalaureate degree. The groups comprised both native and transfer students who had completed more than 120 credits, with no degree in hand. The discussions were rich, suggesting an array of reasons for high credit totals. Some of these are cited by the *Discussion*: change of major, often because of difficulty in meeting major requirements such as math; the need to take extra courses to raise GPA; and the need to maintain full-time status to remain eligible for their parents’ health insurance or their own financial aid. The *Discussion* appears to find it difficult to believe that none of the participants cited intellectual curiosity as a reason for taking extra credits. Distressing as this might be, we are not able to report on conversations that did not occur, and we have no reason to believe that the focus groups are unrepresentative.

What we can do, however, is describe more fully the discussions that did in fact take place in the focus groups. This passage from the report (not cited or mentioned by the *Discussion*) is particularly evocative:

> Transfer students were particularly likely to express confusion and frustration over their degree paths. One student who had transferred from one senior college to another found that he had to take extra courses because the general education areas of the two colleges did not match. Two students who transferred from the same college with AAS degrees said they had not realized how many general education courses would await them and said they felt that they had almost started over. They said they had not understood the difference between the AAS and AS degrees. A math student said that his department was very particular about the transfer credits it accepted and really only trusted the courses offered at one of the other senior college. Students who felt they had to retake courses said they found the experience very discouraging. Almost all the students with large numbers of excess credits had experienced difficulties of one type or another, but it was the transfer students who most often seemed to suffer from high levels of confusion about requirements and their academic pathways. At one focus group a college adviser joined the group and tried to help several transfer students clarify what they still needed to do. The advisor himself had difficulty understanding some issues and brought in a second adviser. (pp. 20-21)

This is precisely the sort of confusion (buttressed by the rest of the report) that our proposals are intended to remedy.
4. **The Discussion** focuses its critique on the analysis of excess credits, while paying little attention to the rest of the report. Its own analysis of students’ excess credits, however, suffers from a number of difficulties.

The *Discussion* argues that our estimate of $72 million for the cost of excess credits for a single graduating class of baccalaureate recipients is inflated. We believe that, if anything, the analysis underestimates the number of excess credits earned by CUNY students. We reached the figure in a straightforward way. We totaled the number of credits in excess of 120 earned by all members of the graduating class. If a student’s degree program required more than 120 credits, we calculated the credits above those required for that program. We then converted the excess to annual FTEs. By multiplying this figure by the per-FTE operating cost for each college, we reached the estimate of $72 million.

We present the excess credits generated by the graduates of each college, with graduates divided into various categories, including native students and various types of transfer students (e.g., those CUNY students transferring with and without associate degrees). The table makes it clear that excess credits are a problem for most CUNY graduates, transfer and non-transfer, with certain types of transfer students, including AAS students, being particularly disadvantaged.

We argue that these so-called excess credits would be reduced, both for transfer and for native students, if general education requirements were simplified and clear pathways to the major established. The *Discussion* asks (p. 3), “Is the purpose [of the proposed policy change] to smooth the process of transfer among CUNY Colleges (the stated goal)? Or is it to reduce the number of ‘excess’ credits taken by all CUNY students?” The answer is: both. As we point out (p. 18), these credits have a cost, both for students and for CUNY—a cost that must be weighed carefully, particularly in this economy.

For readers interested in the technical details, here are some additional comments on the analysis and the *Discussion*’s critique:

- *The Discussion* confuses the cost of excess credits with tuition. Our analysis represents the operating cost of excess credits, only a portion of which (less than half) is funded by tuition. Taxpayers foot the bill for most of the balance.

- Consequently it is not legitimate to eliminate from the analysis (as the *Discussion* does) the cost of excess credits accumulated by full-time students. Although these students do not pay additional tuition for their extra credits, these credits are not cost-free. Students are also, though, more likely to run out of financial aid eligibility if they take excess credits.

- By simplifying general education requirements, extra coursework will be reduced for all students, not just those transferring from CUNY’s community colleges to bachelor programs. It is therefore not legitimate to count, as the *Discussion* does, as $0 the cost of excess credits for first-time freshmen, transfers from non-CUNY colleges, students from unknown sources and students moving from associate to baccalaureate degree programs within the same college.
• In one important respect our estimate is conservative: we do not count the cost of excess credits compiled by the majority of our students who unfortunately do not complete a degree.

• Our report presents the data in terms of average excess credits. For example, the 17,634 students who completed a baccalaureate during the 2008-09 academic year earned an average of 9 excess credits. Nine credits may not sound like a major problem, until we consider the distribution underlying this mean. About 6,200 students had completed 130 or more credits at graduation, and about 3,400 had completed 140 or more—or at least 20 excess credits. For most students, this represents at least a year’s time in school. These extra credits delay students’ graduation and their entry into their careers or into graduate education. Every extra semester of attendance also increases the risk that students will not make it to graduation, as family pressures or economic problems may lead them to withdraw even when far along in their programs.

• Of course, intellectual curiosity and exploration are to be encouraged. Some number of credits above 120 can be understood in these terms. However, there is plenty of room for intellectual exploration within the existing framework of distribution requirements and electives. Our goal is to create more freedom for curiosity and experimentation within the 120 degree limit and to minimize the number of credits exceeding that total.

• Our report focuses not on the total cost of excess credits but on the substantial variation across colleges. This variation suggests that institutional factors play a role in the accumulation of excess credits.

5. The Discussion states that CUNY’s transfer system is serving our students’ needs “reasonably well,” incorrectly claiming as support that the graduation rates of transfer students differ little from those of students who remain at the same institution throughout their career (so-called “natives”).

We are convinced that the graduation rates of all CUNY students would rise if degree requirements were simplified in the manner we propose. Be that as it may, the evidence does not support the Discussion’s assertion that the needs of transfer students are being met. Transfer students do well in terms of graduation rates because, for any student, transfer or native, the longer a student has been in college, the more likely it is that a student will graduate. Thus, in looking at the probability of transfer versus freshmen students graduating, some students in the transfer group who are unlikely to graduate have already left college and thus those who are left are more likely to graduate.

6. The Discussion argues that “the recommendations will reduce the number of required general education courses but not the total number of credits” required for the baccalaureate degree, making it harder for students to get the courses they need and reducing the graduation rate of transfer students. We disagree.

The Discussion reports a positive correlation of .47 between the number of general education credits required in CUNY’s baccalaureate colleges and the graduation rate of
transfer students: The colleges with higher requirements also have higher graduation rates. On the basis of this correlation the Discussion states that reducing the requirements could lead to lower graduation rates—“a very expensive result, both to the individual student and to CUNY” (p. 6).

The causal links between general education credits and graduation rates are complex. Many factors—both academic and nonacademic—influence graduation. The literature shows that academic preparation is paramount. Therefore, pre-transfer grades would be expected to be a far better predictor of transfer graduation rates than the number of general education credits required for graduation from the senior college. Not surprisingly, then, we have found a correlation of .72 between pre-transfer GPA and transfer graduation rates from the CUNY’s baccalaureate programs.

The Discussion’s reported correlation between general education credits and graduation rates (.47) is thus difficult to interpret. Of likely significance is the fact that several of the colleges with higher general education requirements (Baruch, Hunter, CSI) also attract relatively well-prepared transfer students and also have better than average transfer graduation rates.

It should also be noted that with a simplified general education framework, all students will have more choice in the courses they take, and therefore be less likely to have to wait until particular courses or sequences of courses are offered, which can result in a delay in graduation.

For these reasons we strongly believe that the most likely outcome of reducing and streamlining general education requirements is an overall increase in the mean graduation rate for transfers and other students, rather than a decrease.

Again, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss the challenges associated with transfer at CUNY and to suggest solutions. We are grateful for the occasion, prompted by the Discussion, to reiterate and clarify our key findings and proposals. Our review of the experience of transfer students shows that they face confusing pathways and inconsistent evaluations of their credits. CUNY could do a great deal to remove these barriers to their success and it could help all students by clarifying and simplifying the curriculum.