Discussion of
“Improving Student Transfer at CUNY”
Working Group on Transfer and Articulation
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Discussant
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*An earlier version of this discussion was presented at the December 14, 2010 meeting of the University Faculty Senate.
I have been asked by the Executive Committee of the University Faculty Senate to comment on the report titled “Improving Student Transfer at CUNY,” (“Report”) issued October 5, 2010. The Report was authored by Julia Wrigley on behalf of the Working Group on Transfer and Articulation established by Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost Alexandra Logue. This Report brings attention to a significant issue for CUNY and to that end should be commended. CUNY, like any other university system, can do a better job of developing articulation agreements, communicating clearly to community college students the requirements and implications of individual curriculum choices, and reviewing transcripts of transfer students. However, several recommendations made in the Report are not supported by the data contained in the Report.

Thus I think that the most important step is to reconsider what the important issues are and what data might be useful in addressing these important issues. I believe the critical issue is whether our system serves our transfer students well and how we can improve the way that our system is structured to further aid transfer student success. A reasonable measure of how students are served would relate to graduation rates and no data is examined about differences in completion rates between transfer students and students who remain at one Senior college for their entire career. Data that has been evaluated in some other settings indicates no significant difference in success measured by graduation rates between transfer students and native students. This would suggest that our system is serving our students’ needs reasonably well.

Three recommendations are of particular concern:

1) General education requirements should be standardized in terms of number of credits and division into broad curricular areas.
2) **CUNY should establish disciplinary groups that identify the five 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) **Create mechanisms for accepting legitimate academic courses for credit even when a receiving college does not have a match for the course.**

These recommendations have significant implications for curriculum decisions at individual colleges. What are the reasons for these recommendations? A review of the Report suggests that they are: 1) “excess” cost to students, 2) particular information about individual courses at particular colleges, and 3) three focus groups that comprised students who “… had already acquired more than 120 credits but had not graduated.”

Let me discuss each of these reasons in turn. The Report (p. 18) estimates “…the total cost of excess credits to be $72.5 million.” $4.1 million is closer to the actual cost, if we limit ourselves to the impact of CUNY students transferring within CUNY, which is the focus of this Report. I reached the conclusion that the actual cost to CUNY students is closer to $4.1 million rather than $72.6 million by first eliminating categories that had nothing to do with intra-CUNY transfer. The first to be eliminated was "First Time Freshmen"; this category is comprised of students who never transfer. The second of these categories to be eliminated are "Transfer from other CC with Degree"; "Transfer from other CC without a Degree"; "Other Transfers from Outside CUNY"; "Transfers from Unknown Sources"; and "Students of Unknown Sources" because they did not involve CUNY students transferring to another CUNY college. The third category to be eliminated is "Internal Transfers" because it does not reflect students transferring from one CUNY college to another CUNY college. An internal transfer is a transfer within the same CUNY Comprehensive college.
The above adjustments reduce the "excess" cost to $20,829,500. I then made an assumption: if a freshman on average accumulated seven "excess" credits which could not be related in any way to a transfer credit problem, then a transfer student should be allowed half of that, or 3.5 credits, to account for whatever caused the freshman to accumulate extra credits. Adjusting the CUNY transfer categories for this assumption reduces the total cost to $13,483,837.

What do we mean by "cost"? We are not talking about the opportunity cost of the lost income from taking longer to graduate. If lost income was the concern, then this Report should have addressed graduation rates given that only two Senior colleges have six year freshmen graduation rates above 50%. No, the cost referred to in the Report is tuition dollars. CUNY tuition policy does not charge for an extra course once a student is full-time. Therefore, full-time students are not charged for "excess" credits. Only part-time students are charged by the course. In the fall of 2009, 30.3% of CUNY undergraduate students at Senior colleges were part-time. Multiplying $13,483,837 by .303 reduces the "excess" cost to $4,085,603.

While one might disagree with my assumption or argue that a group I excluded should have been included, the assertion that the cost of "excess" credits to CUNY students is $72.6 million is greatly overstated. In fact, the manner in which the estimate of costs of “excess” credits was calculated brings into question the overall purpose of the proposed policy change. Is the purpose 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 answers to these two questions are confounded in both the Report and the proposed policy changes.
If there are issues with particular courses at particular colleges, these should be fixed. Improve the TIPPS on-line information system, by all means. However, the three recommendations highlighted above are not needed to address this problem.

Then there are the focus groups. To better understand why there is variation in the number of “excess” credits across CUNY colleges, three focus groups of transfer students were interviewed. The following quote from the Report is reflective of the student’s comments:

“Students were asked about their views on how they had generated excess credits. They provided a range of answers, including having changed majors and needing to take more courses to bring up their GPA’s. A number of students said that they took extra courses so they could maintain full-time status to remain eligible for their parents’ health insurance or to receive financial aid, leading them, in the words of one student, to ‘just stick classes in.’”

“…One thing that came across strongly, though, was that these students had not acquired these credits through a simple desire to explore academic byways. (emphasis added) When they changed majors, it was usually because they had trouble meeting requirements—especially math requirements—in their first ones. They sometimes got stuck, trying repeatedly to pass a particular required course. They noted that once they had a lot of credits, it was especially hard to raise their GPA’s. These students had demonstrated a high level of persistence (as shown by their accumulating so many credits) but also were not able to find and follow efficient academic pathways.” (pp. 19 and 21)

This is a truly amazing amount of information gleaned from a mere three focus groups. One could easily conclude that our transfer students change majors because they cannot do math, take “excess” credits because they need to raise their GPA and do not have “…a simple desire to explore academic byways.” I understand why it is so important to reach a conclusion that all credits are “excess” credits and no credits are taken because a student, exposed to new ideas and different perspectives, changes her mind. The Report strongly suggests that all our transfer students change
majors because they cannot succeed at their initial choice! This is not our experience and it demeans our transfer students. However, once you acknowledge that “excess” credits might arise because of new or expanded interests by transfer students, the study’s conclusions collapse. The Report does not attempt to control or account for the existence of intellectual growth or curiosity among our transfer students. The inability or unwillingness of the Report to control for intellectual growth and academic curiosity is a severe limitation which undercuts any recommendations the Report proffers.

There is an even bigger problem here. Look closely at what the focus group students say, and then contrast what they say with the conclusions the Report attempts to draw. The Report recommends standardizing the number of general credits, creating pathways to majors, and giving credit for courses that do not exist. But these recommendations do not resolve—indeed they do not even address—the problem of the student who needs full-time status to maintain insurance, to receive financial aid, or to raise his GPA. Will the recommendations help the student who is having difficulty "...meeting (major) requirements - especially math requirements - in their first ones."? I do not think so; the recommendations will have no effect on the issues commonly raised by the transfer student focus groups.

What about the students who "... could not get the courses they needed when they needed them."

The recommendations are as likely to exacerbate rather than mitigate this problem.

The recommendations will reduce the number of required general education courses but not the total number of credits. Required general education courses tend to be frequently offered. Reduce general education courses and students will perforce take other courses less frequently offered.

The recommendation is as likely to make scheduling for particular students more challenging.
I computed the required number of general education requirements, including languages, for each of the Senior and Comprehensive colleges. Where there was a difference by program within a college I used the higher number. I then computed the average number of requirements and the individual college deviation from that average. I also examined the average 4-year transfer graduation rate for each of the colleges. I used the 4-year transfer graduation data for students transferring in 2005 to correspond as closely as possible to the “excess” cost data in the Appendix to the Report. I computed the average 4-year transfer graduation rate and the individual college deviation from the average. The correlation between the differences in required general education credits and 4-year transfer graduation rates for these two series is .47. This means that higher general education requirements are associated with higher graduation rates and lower general education requirements are associated with lower graduation rates. We all understand that correlation is not causality. The three recommendations the UFS Executive Committee and I find so troubling will, if enacted, dilute the general education requirements currently in place. Will the transfer graduation rate also decline as a result? A lower 4-year transfer student graduation rate will be a very expensive result, both to the individual student and to CUNY.

Smother transfer processes and reduced costs to CUNY and CUNY students are important issues worthy of our very serious attention. However, as is often the case when policy questions are not precisely posed, policy changes run the very high risk of not achieving any important goals. If the primary focus is smoothing transfers, 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). If the primary focus is reducing “excess” credits, it also falls short because – as we outline above – it ignores the major sources of “excess” credits.
In conclusion, we find no evidence in this Report that justifies the acceptance of the recommendations that:

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

- CUNY should establish disciplinary groups that identify the five 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.

- Create mechanisms for accepting legitimate academic courses for credit even when a receiving college does not have a match for the course.

These are curriculum issues best left to the faculty to decide. There is nothing in this Report that would warrant challenging that long standing faculty prerogative.
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<th>Baccalaureate Graduates</th>
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<th>Excess Credits</th>
<th>FTEs</th>
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