

STUDENTS

Clearing the Path for Transfer Students

By Ben Gose | JANUARY 01, 2017

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Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

Joyce Siegel, a volunteer with a mentoring group called Pushy Moms, meets with Julia Pazmino, a LaGuardia Community College student, at a Starbucks in Midtown Manhattan.

Washington State began offering some bachelor's degrees at Everett University Center — a building right on the community college's campus.

Helping Transfer Students

Colleges are simplifying the steps from community college to four-year degree.

- The Transfer



Experience: a Student Perspective ✓ PREMIUM

- Transfer Students Deserve Better Road Maps ✓ PREMIUM

Around the country, community colleges and universities are teaming up to improve the dismal rates of bachelor's-degree completion for community-college students who aim to get B.A.s. They're doing so by removing roadblocks and making the transfer steps easier so that fewer students stall out and abandon their goal.

Bringing the university to the community college — through centers like the one at Everett — is just one such strategy. Others include encouraging collaboration between university and community-college faculty members; guaranteeing admission to a four-year university when a student enters a community college; and automatically signing students up for coordinated course advising by both the community college and the university.

Leaving Washington State University might have been the best thing to ever happen to Aldo Barletta. After struggling in several courses as a bioengineering major, Mr. Barletta made the 300-mile drive back to his parents' home in Arlington, Wash. He switched his focus to mechanical engineering, and began taking classes at nearby **Everett Community College**.

His odds of meeting his original goal of getting a bachelor's were long — fewer than one in seven community-college students who hope to earn a four-year degree actually do so within six years. But Mr. Barletta, who was 20 at the time, thrived — his parents were happy to have him back, and he was inspired by his older classmates. He earned an associate degree in just a year.

As he began to eye a return to Washington State, he was surprised to learn that the university was coming to him. In 2012,

Fueling the efforts is an increasing awareness of the importance of transfer students to four-year colleges and universities, especially less-selective ones. At the **University of Texas at Arlington**, roughly 60 percent of each year's new students are transfers. At Washington State, nearly 80 percent of students earn some transfer credits before they graduate.

"The student bodies of today include an enormous number of transfers," says Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program. "Universities need to focus on their experience and success just as much as they do on the freshman experience."

University Centers

One of the challenges for community-college students is simple logistics — they typically need to relocate to a university setting to earn a bachelor's degree. For two-year college students, many of whom are low-income, the first in their families to attend college, or raising their own families, that relocation can quash hopes for a bachelor's degree.

Seven universities now offer 27 bachelor's degrees at Everett University Center, which means Everett Community College students can stick around and pick up four-year degrees in programs such as business, nursing, and communications without changing their commute and within a familiar setting. Mr. Barletta continued to live at home while finishing his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering through Washington State's Everett program. He now works at an engineering firm in his hometown.

"I got to sleep in as much as I needed, and I could stay late at night at the college, knowing that it wouldn't be a real trek to get back home," says Mr. Barletta. "It was a really good situation."

Joe Graber, chairman of Everett Community College's engineering department, says the college has more than doubled the number of engineering courses it offers to meet demand from students who start at Everett and hope to continue on the same campus at Washington State. Meanwhile, the program's transfer profile has shifted — formerly about 60 percent of Everett's engineering graduates went on to the University of Washington, in Seattle. Now 60 percent are choosing Washington State's Everett program, and avoiding what can be a grueling 30-mile, 90-minute commute to the UW campus.

Those who finish through Washington State's Everett program find a welcoming local job market. Boeing's main plant is in Everett, and a number of nearby suppliers are also hiring engineers.

"It's really rewarding to have a student who comes here with eighth-grade math skills, and might spend four years with us to get to point where they can transfer, and then spends two more years here at WSU," Mr. Graber says. "Then they go out and find a job."

Guaranteed Admission

Roughly 1,000 new students at five community colleges in Texas will start the 2017 fall semester with a nice boost of confidence — they will have already been admitted to **Texas A&M University**'s College of Engineering.

At two **Blinn College** campuses near A&M's College Station campus, and four additional community colleges in Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, and Houston, the students will be admitted to the community college and A&M Engineering at the same time. The engineering "academies" allow the students to spend the first two years at the community college, and then finish their degrees at A&M. Even while at the community college, the students will take one course each semester from a visiting A&M instructor. They'll also make regular bus trips to College Station for campus tours, a football game, and an engineering career fair; A&M hopes to reduce the "transfer shock" some community-college students encounter during their first semester at a university.

Counselors at the community colleges and A&M work together to make sure students take courses that will transfer and apply toward their major. A&M estimates that the typical student can save \$45,000 over his or her college career by starting at the academy rather than enrolling as a freshman at College Station. Savings include the cheaper tuition at community colleges, reduced travel, and the free housing that many community-college students enjoy by continuing to live with their parents.

"Our primary goal with the academies is to expand access to an A&M engineering degree, and to increase the affordability of the degree," says Jackie Perez, director of the academies.

A&M has been adding academies since the program's 2013 launch at Blinn's Bryan campus; a seventh academy, at **Alamo Colleges** in San Antonio, will open in 2018. The academies are part of the A&M system's "25 by 25" goal — increasing the number of engineering students on its campuses, including the community-college academies, from 18,169 at present to 25,000 by 2025. Most of the academies are supported by a five-year, \$5-million grant from Chevron, which hopes to diversify its engineering work force. In the fall semesters of 2015 and 2016, more than 45 percent of the entering students at academies supported by Chevron were black or Hispanic.

Austin Community College will start its academy in the fall of 2017. The reduced cost of a bachelor's degree is only one benefit, says David Fonken, the college's dean of math and sciences.

"If you're a parent, you can get the first two years of your engineering degree done without having to move and disrupt your family," Mr. Fonken says. "Or if you're in a family where no one has ever gone to college, it lets you stay in your own community while you make that transition to college."

Clear 'Maps'

The A&M academies solve a problem that many community-college students encounter: If you don't know what four-year degree you plan to seek, and precisely where you will pursue it, odds are good that you will end up taking courses that don't count toward your degree.



Matthew Ryan Williams for The Chronicle

Mark Walsh is a Washington State student who is part of the Boeing Scholar Program at Everett Community College.

5 Ways to Improve the Transfer Experience

Community colleges and four-year institutions are working together to ease students' transition from one to the other. Here are five examples.

Guaranteed admission. When students are simultaneously admitted to both a community college and a university, they have a visible path to a bachelor's degree and are far less likely to take courses at the community college that won't count toward their four-year degree.

Automatic enrollment. New community-college students who express interest in a bachelor's degree are automatically enrolled in a program that involves academic advising by both the community college and a nearby university that students frequently transfer to.

University centers on two-year campuses. Many universities now offer bachelor's degrees at centers on community-college campuses, allowing students to finish a four-year degree without changing their commutes or moving away from their families.

Summer programs. Some four-year institutions invite promising community-college students to summer programs after their first year to allow the students to experience a residential campus and university-level courses.

Admissions mentoring. LaGuardia College links mothers who have already shepherded their own children through the admissions process with community-college students who are looking to transfer. The program, called Pushy Moms, is now exploring the possibility of expanding to other colleges.

Mr. Wyner, of the Aspen Institute, says inadequate "program maps" — a listing of the course sequences and prerequisites that two-year students need to transfer into a four-year degree program — are one of the greatest hurdles faced by students transferring from community colleges.

"It can lead to damaging outcomes," Mr. Wyner says. "Students take longer to graduate, they incur more debt — and they may not even graduate at all. There's another year for life to get in the way."

Tarrant County College, with six campuses in and around Fort Worth, has worked to overcome that problem with the University of Texas at Arlington, the most-common destination for Tarrant students who transfer.

Just four years ago, Tarrant County largely left it up to students to make sure they were taking courses that would be accepted by UT-Arlington and other universities. Too often that led to courses that wouldn't transfer, says Jade Borne, the college's associate vice chancellor for student success.

"It was a problem that we were hearing from our students over and over again," Mr. Borne says.

In 2013, Tarrant County began requiring students to sit down with an academic adviser each semester. But even then students typically didn't meet with a UT-Arlington adviser until their final year at Tarrant County, which meant many students were still arriving at the university and learning that some of their courses wouldn't count.

This fall the two institutions started a program in which a student chooses a four-year degree when she enters the community college, and then, with the help of advisers from both Tarrant County and UT-Arlington, she maps out a course schedule that ensures all credits will transfer and count toward the degree. Incoming Tarrant County students who indicate that they want a four-year degree are automatically enrolled in the program, called UTA by TCC: The Transfer Pathway.

"The student still has the potential to take excess credit hours — this doesn't stop them — but doing so will raise a flag," says Vistasp M. Karbhari, UT-Arlington's president. "The adviser will say, 'Are you sure you want to take this class? It will increase your time to degree, and the cost.' There's constructive guidance given to the student from Day 1."

The program also freezes UT-Arlington tuition for up to two years from the time the Tarrant County student signs up for the program.

Reducing the 'Shock'

Transfer shock for community-college students can be especially acute at private colleges, where many students come from privileged backgrounds and attended high-performing high schools. **Bucknell University** brings in 30 students each summer for a six-week program, after the students have completed their first year at one of five community-college partners. The goal is to give the students a taste of Bucknell's academic rigor and experience what it's like to study at a rural liberal-arts college.

Those who attend the summer program, called Community College Scholars, are invited to apply for transfer admission to Bucknell after they complete their associate degree. In a typical year, half the program's graduates enroll as undergraduates at Bucknell, and each one receives a scholarship that covers tuition (though not room and board).

Tom Conroy, who served in the U.S. Air Force for nearly a decade, went on to maintain track for a railroad in Philadelphia before an injury made the job difficult and prompted him to pursue a college degree. He was invited into Bucknell's summer program in 2014 after earning all A's at the **Community College of Philadelphia**.

"We lived in the dorms, ate together, went to class together," Mr. Conroy says. "It reminded me of basic training."

Mr. Conroy, 53, is now entering his final year at Bucknell and expects to graduate in December 2017. He hopes to earn a master's degree in social work and eventually counsel returning veterans.

"It's like going from the minor league to the big leagues, you know?" he says, describing the transition to Bucknell. "I'm not socializing too much. I don't know how the kids do it."

At **LaGuardia Community College**, in New York, the additional support is more informal and focused on helping students navigate the often complex admissions process required by elite institutions. At LaGuardia, a team of Manhattan moms who helped their own children get into selective colleges are sharing their expertise with low-income students seeking to transfer. Karen Dubinsky, the

LaGuardia administrator who created the team of volunteers, dubbed the group "Pushy Moms."

"That's what my son would always say to me — 'You're too pushy, Mom,'" Ms. Dubinsky says. (Her son, Jack, is now a senior at **Evergreen State College**, in Washington.)

The Pushy Moms work mostly with ambitious students who are eager to get into highly selective colleges, but the volunteers will also assist LaGuardia's transfer office in January. The office expects more than 1,000 students to seek help submitting transfer applications to four-year institutions in the **City University of New York system** before a February 1 deadline.

After *CBS This Morning* reported on the Pushy Moms in November, Ms. Dubinsky received about 100 emails requesting more information — from community colleges, nonprofits, and "lots of moms." She's now working with a student at **Harvard Business School** to explore creating a national platform. One possibility: Universities interested in the diverse students at community colleges might provide revenue to support the rollout of Pushy Moms.

"You start with what's in front of you," Ms. Dubinsky says. "Is this the answer to the massive transfer problem in this country? I don't know ... but it's one answer."

This article is part of:

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