

*A Periodic Review
of Ideas and Issues in
Education Marketing*

THE LAWLOR REVIEW

SPRING 2011

VOLUME XIX • NUMBER 2

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VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2

PUBLISHER John T. Lawlor

EDITOR Amy Foster

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Nancy Ashmore, Virginia R. Buege,
Amy Foster

LAYOUT Lynn Clayton

PROJECT MANAGEMENT Kristen Kokkinen,
Will Dudzinski

BUSINESS MANAGER Molly Schomburg

COPY EDITING Carole Arwidson

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Earlier this year, I traveled to Capitol Hill for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) annual meeting to hear firsthand what was on the minds of Congress members and legislative assistants as they debated higher education policy and funding. Republicans, newly in control of the House Education Committee, were prioritizing cost cutting and deficit reduction. So the overwhelming message from both sides of the political aisle to the gathered private college and university presidents was that something would have to be done to control the growth of federal student aid spending.

“It is time for a serious conversation about the cost and quality of our higher education system,” said Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL). “It’s time to question rising tuition and rising student loan debt when students aren’t seeing improvements in outcomes. And it’s time for a serious conversation about a new study that found that nearly half of college students showed no significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing by the end of their sophomore years.”

Sen. Durbin was referring to the research of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, both of whom I spoke with for this issue’s in-depth interview. Here they discuss findings that were published in their book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* and offer specific recommendations to college and university administrators regarding effective ways to prioritize student learning.

Also in this issue, our writer Virginia Buege investigates some of the challenges higher education institutions are encountering as they comply with the federal mandate to post a net price calculator on their websites. And writer Nancy Ashmore takes a close look at the state of transfer student admissions as the marketplace becomes dominated with more prudent and frugal consumers.

During this time when public perceptions of higher education’s return on investment are in flux, we hope you find it helpful to learn how some colleges and universities are responding to marketplace demands and reinforcing their value propositions.



Amy Foster

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 requires every college or university that administers federal student assistance to make available and accessible the information consumers need to understand its cost of attendance and to make accurate comparisons across institutions. One element of the legislation is a soon-to-be-enforced mandate that colleges and universities host a net price calculator on their websites. But will this indeed bring transparency to the issue of cost? Or will the net price calculators only increase public confusion and frustration?

THE NET PRICE CALCULATOR MANDATE: A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

by Virginia R. Buege

For the past decade, the soaring cost of college has been a prominent point of public debate and a favorite topic of the media. So in mid-February when The University of the South (Tennessee), better known as Sewanee, pledged to cut their 2011-12 fees by 10 percent, it was no surprise when prospective and current students celebrated the news and the story received a lot of favorable, high-profile press.

“Bucking Trend, College Will Cut Price,” declared *The New York Times* article featuring Sewanee Vice Chancellor John M. McCardell, Jr. announcing the news. “The university has made a bold and perhaps risky move,” explained McCardell. “But given the realities of higher education in the current economy, we believe that some college or university needed to step up and say, ‘Enough.’”

However, those in the know were a bit more cynical about what the University’s cost-cutting move actually would mean for students. In a *New York Times* editorial on the subject, Sandy Baum, emerita professor of economics at Skidmore College (New York) and a



frequent commentator on the economics of higher education, called attention to the practice of discounting, the use of non-need-based aid, and the difference between sticker price and net price. Regarding Sewanee’s price reduction, Baum concluded, “Indeed, many (most?) students may not experience any decline at all in the net price they pay.”

And therein lies the problem: Most students and their families are in the dark about what the real cost of college might be for them. The terms “discounting,” “sticker price,” and “net

cost” baffle them when they simply want to know what the bottom line will be for their pocketbooks.

Enter the net price calculator (NPC). Mandated by politicians and intended to bring transparency to the issue of costs for consumers, NPCs are required for nearly 7,000 post-secondary institutions by October 29, 2011. The mandate applies to all Title IV institutions that enroll full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduate students; in other words, most four-year colleges and universities as well as community colleges, technical schools, and even for-profit institutions are affected by the requirement.

But with only a few months left to become compliant, many institutions have yet to find an NPC solution. More troubling, the public seems scarcely aware of their existence. Will the NPC be the solution Congress anticipated?

THE CALCULATOR MOVEMENT

Since America’s post-war college boom, there has been a steady and lively discussion about the cost and

value of post-secondary education. But in the last decade, with a perfect storm of declining economic conditions, increasing consumerism, and deteriorating graduation rates, the debate has reached a fever pitch. Issues like access, affordability, quality, and accountability in higher education have been deliberated on Main Street and on Pennsylvania Avenue.

“After the Spellings Commission [2005-06], the political climate included lots of discussion about controlling college costs,” recalls Jim Miller, coordinator of enrollment research at the University of Wisconsin-Superior and current president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). “The press was focused on sticker price, and some in Congress suggested we should put limits on college costs.”

Others made the case that it was inappropriate to paint all colleges and universities with the same brush stroke. “Private colleges argued that their tuitions weren’t as high as they appeared once one considered discounts, particularly in response to need,” says Nathan Mueller, principal at Hardwick-Day, a higher education consulting firm that focuses on enrollment optimization. “So Congress basically said, ‘Fine. Show people the real net cost.’”

Thus the “calculator movement” began with a push toward transparency.

As defined in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), the net price calculator’s purpose is “... to help current and prospective students, families, and other consumers estimate the individual net price of an institution of higher education for a student. The calculator shall be developed in a manner that enables current and prospective students, families, and consumers to determine an estimate

of a current or prospective student’s individual net price at a particular institution.”

To help institutions meet the NPC requirement, the Department

“We don’t have any empirical data on this, but it seems that the Fed’s NPC is too simplistic for most institutions. We anticipate most will include some customization at a minimum.”

—HALEY CHITTY

Spokesperson for the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

of Education has designed a fully functional calculator template. Colleges and universities may use the calculator template or develop their own customized calculator—either in house or with the help of a third-party vendor—so long as it includes the same minimum elements as the Department’s template. Using student-entered data, the Department’s calculator allows prospective students to determine their estimated net price at an institution based on the following basic formula: the average price of attendance for full-time, first-year undergraduates minus the average need-based and merit-based grant aid.

Available at no cost to all Title IV post-secondary institutions, the Department’s template is available online and includes a Quick Start Guide designed to walk users through the basic steps required to configure and use the federal NPC. Annual updates to the template will be provided every August.

THANKS, BUT NO THANKS

Despite the fact that it is free and simple to configure, the federal template might not have many takers, according

to Haley Chitty, a spokesperson for the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). “We don’t have any empirical data on this, but it seems that the Fed’s NPC is too simplistic for most institutions,” says Chitty. “We anticipate most will include some customization at a minimum.”

Director of Financial Aid Mike Scott quickly ruled out the Department of Education’s template for Texas Christian University. “Choosing an NPC just because it’s easy and free and slapping it up on your website might not be the best option for your school,” he says.

“The federal NPC is fine, but we never seriously considered that option,” explains Scott. “Among other concerns, I also think there are huge marketing implications associated with how this data is presented, and we wanted something more personalized to present our information on pricing.”

Beloit College (Wisconsin) did actually download the template to experiment with it in house. “We thought it was quite good,” says Nancy Benedict, Beloit’s vice president for enrollment. “I give the Feds a lot of credit for giving colleges a tool that is effective for schools that use the Federal Methodology.” But the federal template won’t be the calculator Beloit College uses.

“We recognize that Beloit operates in a different world than the Federal Methodology, and we needed to modify the way the calculator operates on our website to better reflect our robust merit program,” says Benedict. “We simply needed a more sophisticated product.”

Most detractors cite the federal template’s “one-size-fits-all” formula as the main disadvantage, suggesting that for most institutions the formula is so generic it will result in numbers that are inaccurate.

Student Aid Services tested the federal template's methodology for determining Expected Family Contribution (EFC) with 149,490 actual dependent and independent students' financial profiles. When run through the federal template, seven out of 10 were \$500 or more outside their correct Federal Methodology EFC range.

Myra Smith, executive director of financial aid services at the College Board, agrees with Benedict that the Department of Education's template can work for institutions with limited gift resources, but she is quick to point out that few colleges and universities have such simple financial aid strategies. There are all kinds of imperatives at all kinds of schools, she notes, and the federal template simply does not account for any distinctions made between students based on the cost or merit side.

The main reason the federal template won't work for most institutions boils down to its use of averages, says Smith.

"The troubling part of using averages is that no one is really average."

SELF-HELP

Just prior to the HEOA's authorization in 2008, Stanford University (California) had launched an online estimator to help families understand how the University's new financial aid policies would affect them directly. At the time, few vendors offered the services Stanford sought, so they built their own calculator.

"For a school like Stanford, with relatively straightforward need-based financial aid strategies, creating a calculator that expresses our policies is somewhat easier," says Karen Cooper, director of financial aid. "I fully recognize that other schools have much more complicated methodologies, and creating a calculator is likely to be far more challenging [for those colleges]."

"Whether you build it yourself or farm it out is a tough call," says Rod Oto, director of student financial aid

services at Carleton College (Minnesota). "Even if you have the internal IT resources to build it, you have to have the additional time and resources to test, test, test."

Although Carleton worked with Hardwick-Day, creating the NPC was still a hands-on, labor-intensive process for the College. First, Carleton had to address what type of calculator they wanted to feature—essentially choosing between a simple, easier-to-use calculator or one that is more accurate but requires more inputs from the user (Carleton went with the latter). But even after creating a calculator that replicated the College's Institutional Methodology to their satisfaction, Carleton took a great deal of time confirming that the calculator was easy enough to use. Oto believes the extra time was essential. "The price estimator is meant to be a service to families," he says, "and if it's too confusing for them to bother using it, it won't really help them."

CUSTOMIZING THE FEDERAL CALCULATOR TEMPLATE

Federal legislation allows colleges and universities to customize the Department of Education's calculator template, build their own calculators in house, or use a third-party net price calculator (NPC). However achieved, every NPC must include at a minimum very specific input and output elements.

The required inputs must include data elements to approximate the student's Expected Family Contribution (EFC), such as income, number in family, and dependency status or factors that estimate dependency status.

Output elements must include the following:

- Estimated price of attendance
- Estimated tuition and fees
- Estimated room and board
- Estimated books and supplies

- Estimated other expenses (personal expenses, transportation, etc.)
- Estimated total grant aid
- Estimated net price
- Percent of the cohort (full-time, first-time students) that receive grant aid
- Caveats and disclaimers, as indicated in the Higher Education Opportunity Act

A customized NPC can ask for additional inputs—such as other asset information, high school GPA, test scores, or contact information—in order to more accurately assess EFC and possible merit qualifications, but it cannot require them in order for the user to access the calculator.

Source: *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)* 

Time and money were both considerations for deciding how to build the University of South Dakota's NPC. Scott Pohlson, dean of enrollment, says the decision to go to a third party for assistance with their calculator came easily. "Given the state of public financing, the truth is that it was easier to go out of house," he says. "We knew instantly that we wouldn't make the deadline if we did this ourselves."

"Lots of institutions have told us that the initial instinct was to build it themselves," says Kevin Crockett, president and CEO of Noel-Levitz. "But they soon realized their IT office doesn't have the bandwidth to build or keep up with federal compliance over time, so they are more comfortable turning it over to a professional."

For many institutions, it was natural to partner with vendors with whom they previously have worked. As a CSS/Financial Aid Profile subscriber, Pomona College (California) turned to the College Board for its NPC solution. "For us it made sense to continue using the same information in the calculator that we were already using in financial aid," says Mary Booker, Pomona's director of financial aid.

Capitalizing on the limitations of the federal template, outside firms are offering calculators that more accurately reflect Institutional Methodology and, in some cases, design and messaging elements that better reflect the college or university's brand. Of course they vary, but most third-party NPCs augment the basics of the federal template with features that allow institutions to calculate student achievement-related merit aid, segment by student population (in-state or out-of-state, first-year or transfer), ask additional asset questions, clarify the number of dependents, include self-help aid, and provide users with an option for further contact with the financial aid office.

BALLPARKING COSTS

The misgivings about the HEOA mandate are significant, and counselors on both sides of the admissions desk worry about the potential unintended consequences of NPC use. Stealth shopping, undermatching, erroneous calculations, and gaming the system are frequently mentioned, but the foremost cause of concern seems to be related to the possibility that consumers' expectations might exceed the intention of the NPC to provide an *estimate* rather than a *final* net price that students and parents should bank on.

Alice Kleeman, college advisor for Menlo-Atherton High School (California), has watched families use estimators and believes they can help demystify the subject of financial aid. She plans to recommend that families use the NPC, with a caveat: "The net price calculator will be a useful tool if it is regarded as *one step* in the continuum of zeroing in on a family's precise college costs," says Kleeman. "That continuum ends only when an offer of admission and a financial aid award are in hand."

Wisconsin-Superior's Miller speculates the NPCs could be problematic for public institutions where funding is tenuous and limited. "Need-based aid at state schools tends to be a finite amount of money," says Miller. "And when it runs out, it's out."

"The worry here is that a student who runs the net price calculation in January might get an idea of what she would receive if she filed the FAFSA immediately. The problem is that if in fact the student doesn't apply for financial aid until April—or worse, later—she could find herself with a very different aid package, even though her situation hasn't changed," he says. "What kind of algorithm can account for that?"

Calculating merit-based aid can be equally vexing. Highly selective

Kenyon College (Ohio) is still fine-tuning its NPC as it relates to their very small merit award program, admits Jennifer Delahunty, Kenyon's dean of admissions and financial aid. "This year, our academic profile in the Early Decision pool has taken a huge leap—up 31 points," she says. "How are we to account for who will qualify for merit in our net price calculator?"

The truth is, calculating costs for students is rarely easy. Traditionally, awarding aid had taken time, effort, and in some cases, professional judgment. So capturing all of the nuances of aid in a calculator is impractical.

Even with these challenges, Delahunty believes the NPC mandate is a step in the right direction for removing some of the mystery of price and cost in higher education. "The NPC will help families ballpark their costs," she says. "But that's a very important element: It is an estimate, not a definitive answer."

Even so, how well will the public tolerate mere estimates during their college searches? Critics point out that the legislation was intended to not only help college-bound students better understand the actual cost of any institution, but also to allow them to make accurate comparisons across institutions. And this simply won't be possible, because families won't be working with one NPC, but dozens, predicts Jon McGee, vice president for planning and public affairs at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (Minnesota).

"You can argue that colleges award aid differently, so they should have different calculations," says McGee. "But consumers simply will see different calculators with different results, perhaps from similarly looking schools. Families using the NPCs will still be left bewildered about costs—just *earlier* in the process."

ADDING UP TO ACCESS

No one denies that cost is a huge factor related to college choice and that it would be better if families could cut through the clutter and know their real costs sooner rather than later. As Anna Burkhalter, director of college counseling for The Northwest School (Washington), says, “The exciting part of an NPC is that it does provide information where there is a gaping hole right now. What other product [besides higher education] do we have to commit to in so many ways before we know what the cost will be to us?”

On the other hand, she thinks the absence of the “human touch” in the calculator is worrisome. “Giving a student the numbers without any explanation leaves the potential for

a high degree of misinterpretation, especially with less educated families,” says Burkhalter.

For more than a decade as president of the National Center for College Costs (NCCC), Dave Murray has helped families of all backgrounds navigate the financial aid process to understand that college is an option they can afford. “So many families have no idea that college is not only attainable for their student, but probably also paid for,” says Murray. “Bringing that kind of education and realism to students and their parents is awesome—and a powerful motivator, especially to young students.”

But as noble as the intent of the NPC mandate might have been, Murray is doubtful it alone will solve the issue of access. “It’s one thing to have a fully

functional tool—and we’re not even there yet [with the NPC],” says Murray. “It’s another thing to have the necessary counseling to interpret the data and to assist with all the other aspects of the admissions and financial aid process.”

MOVING BEYOND THE MANDATE

“One of the media’s favorite messages is that high-cost schools are out of touch,” says Carleton College’s Oto. “With net price calculators, we have an opportunity to show that we are trying to get it right.”

That means colleges can’t just put the tool out there and walk away, and the disconnect between sticker price, cost, and value will be solved, even if that’s all the mandate requires. “We

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY USE IT?

by Virginia R. Buege

Today’s consumers turn to calculators for other big purchases, like mortgages and automobiles. So will using a net price calculator (NPC) be a natural for college-bound students and their parents?


“Absolutely,” says Kevin Crockett, president and CEO of Noel-Levitz. “The demand for an NPC is on the rise.”

Crockett cites his company’s “E-Expectations 2010” survey of college-bound students. When asked to identify the value of interactive features on college websites, respondents ranked a “cost calculator” as the third most valuable feature, just behind online applications and campus visit request forms. Of the students polled, 68 percent said that cost calculators would add “a lot” or “extreme value” to a college website.

In practice, however, only 34 percent of those same respondents replied that they had ever used an online cost calculator. Similar results were published in the May 2010 edition of Art & Science Group’s “Student Poll,” which indicated that only 26 percent of high school seniors said they or their family had used an online calculator.

The “Student Poll” survey further revealed that calculator use varied by household income, with usage higher in the upper income brackets (25%) than in the lower income brackets (8%). In the highest income bracket families (\$100,000 and up), parents are using the calculators; in the lowest income bracket families (those earning less than \$40,000 a year), it’s the students, rather than their parents, who are accessing the calculators.

These findings don’t surprise Nancy Benedict, vice president for enrollment at Beloit College (Wisconsin). “The range of calculators out there now varies widely in sophistication, making it very difficult for families to trust the results or to understand affordability.” She hopes the NPC mandate will prompt colleges to expand upon the bare minimum required and provide calculators that will allow families to predict with a little more precision the actual cost of education.

“The cynical part of me expects there to be a lot of flurry and conversation when it’s launched,” says Benedict, “but then the NPC will lose its sparkle, and it will all go back to business as usual.” 

need to do more to get it in the hands of the right people, which certainly includes the uninitiated—the first-generation and low-income students. They need more help and prompting to use this type of tool,” says Oto.

Kent Barnds, vice president for enrollment, communication, and planning for Augustana College (Illinois), thinks that greater public awareness of net price calculators will move the question of affordability further up in the admissions funnel. And he believes this is a good thing, although not without its own set of challenges for college enrollment officers.

“We will have to do a better job communicating about price and value,” says Barnds. For Augustana, that means it is no longer feasible or practical to meet a family at a college fair and expect to refer them to the financial aid office for the discussion about real cost and net cost.

“I have an obligation to train my admissions staff to be more fluent in the language of financial aid and value—and the inefficiencies of the NPC,” says Barnds. “It is up to us to make [the NPC] work for our students and our institutions.”


CALCULATING SUCCESS

In November 2010, *The New York Times*’ “The Choice” blog featured the topic of net price calculators. The responses in the comments section varied widely, but all were telling.

Identifying herself as a college consultant, one reader wrote that she thinks “it sounds like one more gadget that may not be a real benefit to anyone.” Another commenter remarked, “This is yet another tool with variables that colleges can manipulate to look more appealing. No thanks.” And a third, identifying himself as a parent, asked: “What’s wrong with our own calculators? Ours showed us, in advance, that we needed to raise a couple of tens of thousands of dollars before we even thought about setting foot in college.”

As the deadline for HEOA compliance approaches for post-secondary institutions, it’s not yet clear if college-bound students are aware of the pending availability of net price calculators or whether they would ever be inclined to use or trust them. (That said, it is probably only a matter of time before the likes of *U.S. News & World Report* or *The Princeton Review* draws greater attention to NPCs via case studies or rankings, thereby putting them on the radars of more high school students and their families.)

Nevertheless, the cost of higher education is an issue for most families, and not one that is likely to go away any time soon. Will Congress’s net price calculator shed light on the issue and bring transparency to the issue of cost? Or will NPCs further increase public inquiries, confusion, and frustration?

Only time will tell, but colleges and universities would do well to prepare themselves for all eventualities. The HEOA mandate may be fulfilled by the deadline in October, but for most institutions, that’s when the real story begins. 

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UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING GAINS: ARE COLLEGES MEASURING UP?

by Amy Foster

*With the release of their book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* earlier this year, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa shocked the higher education community with the findings of their study. In tracking more than 2,300 students at a diverse mix of 24 four-year colleges and universities from the first semester of their freshman year through the end of their sophomore year, the researchers found that “for a large proportion of them, the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent. At least 45 percent of students in our sample did not demonstrate any statistically significant improvement during the first two years of college.”*

Arum is a professor of sociology at New York University, with a joint appointment in NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education. He is also director of the Education Research Program of the Social Science Research Council. He earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Tufts University (Massachusetts), a master’s degree in education from Harvard University (Massachusetts), and a doctorate in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley.

Roksa is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, with a courtesy appointment in U.Va.’s Curry School of Education. She is also a fellow of the National Forum on the Future of Liberal Education. She earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts) and a doctorate in sociology from New York University.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO DELVE INTO RESEARCHING NATIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND WHAT WERE YOUR GOALS IN BUILDING YOUR DATASET?

Arum: Our interest in doing this research grew out of our awareness that research in K-12 education that looks for factors associated with learning, measured with objective indicators, has

existed for decades. Yet similar research has not existed in higher education. And so when the opportunity arose to join the Council for Aid to Education and develop a dataset that would allow one to explore the factors—individual and institutional—associated with learning, we jumped at that opportunity.

Roksa: We were interested to learn how much students are learning and whether different groups are progressing

at different rates. We also wanted to understand what factors may predict learning, at both the individual and institutional levels. In higher education, we don’t have measures of learning that track students from entry to completion. So we used the Collegiate Learning Assessment [CLA], which is a measure of general collegiate skills that aims to capture critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. We

administered it to the same students during the fall of their freshman year and then at the end of their sophomore year.

WHAT MADE THE COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT SO WELL SUITED TO YOUR PURPOSES?

Roksa: It takes a holistic approach; it's not a multiple-choice test. And it aims to place students in a situation they could possibly be in after they graduate. The CLA uses open-ended scenarios, in which students are given materials to work with and are asked to respond to a particular prompt and write a response that reflects their critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and writing skills.

Arum: So students are given a set of documents, and they're asked to interrogate the evidence, synthesize information across these documents, and then construct logical arguments based on their reading of the evidence. And these are the generic higher-order skills you would hope all college students would be developing.

WERE YOU SURPRISED BY YOUR FINDINGS?

Arum: We did not anticipate a set of findings that would draw attention to the limited learning in higher education. That pattern surprised us and dismayed us when we looked at the data. The key findings were that large numbers of students are going through higher education with little asked of them in terms of academic rigor, with little effort applied to their studies, and with few, if any, gains on this objective measure of learning.

YOUR ANALYSIS IN *ACADEMICALLY ADRIFT* SEEMS TO TRACE THE PROBLEM TO BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES THAT AREN'T CLOSELY ALIGNED WITH A FOCUS ON UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING. COULD YOU EXPLAIN THAT?

Roksa: We titled the book *Academically Adrift* for that reason. We think about it in two ways: as institutions being academically adrift,

We did not anticipate a set of findings that would draw attention to the limited learning in higher education.

and as students being academically adrift. With students, we see large numbers who are moving through college and are not applying themselves, not working very hard, not studying lots of hours, and not taking very rigorous courses. They're managing to identify pathways through college where very little is asked of them academically. And so the students are kind of drifting through.

Arum: You could say colleges and universities themselves have incentivized students picking pathways where they can get a credential with little amount of work. In countries in the Middle East, people are using the social network technology to overturn autocrats. Our students often use it to figure out where the easy courses are. Not only can they get the credential, but they also can get a high grade with little work. The system has set up incentives for students that aren't aligned with academic rigor.

Roksa: We also see the academic institutions themselves as being academically adrift, because they have moved away from the core mission of undergraduate education. Higher education is doing a lot of things

because it's being asked to do a lot of things. But undergraduate education has often not been at the top of the priority list. And we argue that's the case across the board in higher education. It's not just students who are not being properly incentivized, it's also faculty. Research is often seen as a primary driver of promotion and tenure, which incentivizes faculty to focus on their research.

If teaching comes into the picture, it usually comes in through student evaluations. And that can provide perverse incentives, because student evaluations are

correlated with grades the students expect to get, and it's not clear that they're related to learning. So if faculty members are being evaluated based on the course evaluations, and if students provide high course evaluations when they get good grades, the incentive is to make an easy curriculum, not ask a whole lot of students, and give them good grades. And indeed we find that students who study very little—students who report studying alone five or fewer hours a week—still have a 3.16 GPA.

And administrators are in a similar situation. They are being asked to run successful institutions, but unfortunately success is often defined in terms such as a ranking in the *U.S. News & World Report*—and success there is heavily dependent on whom an institution recruits, because the ranking formula depends extensively on the characteristics of the incoming cohort. A large proportion of the formula is also based on resources a school has. And so administrators have an incentive to try to get the best students in and get as much money as they can to improve their standing, but there is no incentive to improve learning or to even focus

on what happens after students get in. And really, the whole 20th century has been about getting students in and improving access. We haven't spent that much time thinking about what happens after we get students in, or setting up incentives to ensure they are learning.

Arum: I think one of the big challenges for some of the institutions is the fact that they feel a need to be attentive to making their institutions attractive to and catering to students as consumers and clients. And unfortunately, students-as-consumers-and-clients and their families have been trained to look at what the student center and the athletic facilities look like and whether there are new dorms. So if that's what students-as-consumers-and-clients and their parents have been trained to look at, it leads to investments being made not in improving the academic quality of the institutions, but in improving all these other aspects of the institutional setting. And so one of the challenges for administrators is to try to figure out a way to communicate to students and their families the value of traditional academic rigor and the value of institutions investing in that core function of the school.

BUT DO YOU THINK PERHAPS WHEN FAMILIES SEE A HIGH STICKER PRICE, THEY ASSUME ACADEMIC RIGOR IS A GIVEN—AND THEN AMENITIES DO ENTER INTO THEIR CALCULATION SINCE THEY'LL BE PAYING SO MUCH?

Arum: Absolutely. And of course, some of them should. However, do we have the balance right? And again,

the challenge for administrators is making sure that balance is right and communicating effectively to their audiences that the university first and foremost is an academic institution and will ensure high-quality instruction and student learning—that it's an environment conducive to that focus.

Have we focused so much on social integration and persistence and retention that we have neglected this other side that says students should not only persist and finish, but they should also learn something on their way to the degree?

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES OFTEN PROMOTE THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES. DID YOU FIND THOSE HAVE A RELATIONSHIP TO STUDENT LEARNING?

Roksa: Higher education has focused on the social integration aspect of education as a mechanism for keeping students enrolled. Having students socially integrate and having them persist are important goals. But we found that the social activities have either no benefit for learning, or actually have a negative relationship to learning. We find that the more time students spend in fraternities and sororities, the less they learn. And the more time they spend studying with peers, the lower their learning. And to be clear, when we talk about studying with peers, we're not talking about structured programs like learning communities. We're talking about students reporting that they get together and study. And it doesn't look like much studying happens in that context, because their learning is not improving at all, and is actually declining.

So those two factors—involvement in fraternities and sororities and

studying with peers—actually have a negative relationship to learning. And then a number of other activities have no effect. We looked at volunteering, we looked at participation in other clubs and organizations, we looked at employment on and off campus, and none of those have a relationship

to learning once we control for individual differences. There are differences initially, because students who engage in those activities are

different to begin with. But once we adjust for that, those activities have no relationship to learning.

So then the question becomes, "Where is that balance?" Have we focused so much on social integration and persistence and retention that we have neglected this other side that says students should not only persist and finish, but they should also learn something on their way to the degree? That the degrees should actually be meaningful and represent a certain set of skills and knowledge?

Arum: And I should say, all these findings that we identify with these broad strokes are useful in raising particular questions, but none of them are detailed enough that you'd want to assume that being in a fraternity or sorority couldn't have positive effects on learning—it definitely could if it were structured in the right way, and there's no reason to think that there's not a lot of variation within. That would also be true about the group work. Some groups could be effective, some not effective. The same thing is true about the majors. In general, programs like communication, business, education—they're not learning, on average (at least on this measure), as much as students

in the social sciences, humanities, math and sciences. However, that doesn't mean that there aren't some very high quality programs in business and in education and in communication where students actually might be learning more. So again, these things are suggestive, but the observations are not fine-grained enough that you would want to jump to specific policies about broad programs based on them. That would be a misuse and a misinterpretation of the average tendencies we identify in the book.

WHAT VARIABLES DO CONTRIBUTE TO LEARNING, BASED ON YOUR FINDINGS?

Arum: Our findings strongly suggest the importance of academic rigor in general in student educational experiences; in particular, students being exposed to coursework where they're asked to read and write at significant levels. We measured them in our work as taking at least a course where they wrote more than 20 pages over the course of the semester, and taking at least a course where they are reading more than 40 pages per week on average. So reading and writing requirements of coursework is one [variable], and hours devoted to studying alone is another. The amount of studying a full-time college student engages in today has dropped by about 50 percent in the last several decades—that's a dramatic drop. And high faculty expectations is a third variable. Students are responsive to learning more in settings where they report that faculty have high expectations of their academic performance. These are the factors that clearly track with improved performance on this CLA measure.

Roksa: And a number of our findings regarding academic rigor and engagement are replicated in the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], which makes us feel more confident in the representativeness of our sample. In our study, for example,

The amount of studying a full-time college student engages in today has dropped by about 50 percent in the last several decades—that's a dramatic drop.

we find that our students, depending on the year, spend between 12 and 14 hours a week studying, and that's exactly the number that NSSE reports, as well. Similarly, NSSE asks students a question about writing 20-page papers, and about academic rigor and other aspects of their coursework. These are not the same questions we ask, but if you look at the distributions, I think you would come away with similar conclusions that we have in terms of an average lack of student focus on academic rigor, particularly when it comes to higher-order skills.

IS THERE ANYTHING IN YOUR FINDINGS THAT YOU FEEL IS NOT RECEIVING ENOUGH ATTENTION?

Arum: The piece that's frustrated Josipa and me a little bit in the media coverage is the lack of acknowledgment that a lot of the book is about the *variation*. In every institution we looked at, there are students who are seeking out and taking rigorous coursework, applying themselves to their studies, and showing impressive gains in learning as measured by the CLA. And so it's not all students who are failing to take advantage of these opportunities. But it's too many.

WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOTIVATING THE STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT MAKING LEARNING GAINS?

Arum: Increasing reading requirements and writing requirements in coursework, reviewing program quality to make sure that it requires academic rigor, reviewing grading standards

so that it encourages students to apply themselves to their studies, urging faculty to have high expectations—these are things that do not require huge resource outlays. Many of these things can be done if administrators and faculty want them to be done. So we face the question, "Do colleges and universities worry that it's going to make them less attractive to students-as-consumers-and-clients if they emphasize academic aspects of their institutions over the social aspects?" And again, to the extent that is true, it requires administrators to develop effective communication strategies to convince students and their families that their best investment in an education is one that ensures academic rigor and student learning, not just the social aspects of college and university life.

Roksa: The conversation should be about 21st century skills and the extent to which we are competing in an increasingly globalized marketplace, and the extent to which students will be changing jobs frequently. So they are going to enter a very different labor market than what was happening 15 or 20 years ago—a labor market that is more competitive and more dependent on the general skills of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. And

so if we are graduating large portions of students without developing these fundamental general skills—the skills that provide a foundation for lifelong learning, for application to new jobs and new contexts—we think it is going to harm them individually and us as a nation in the long run.

IT SEEMS THE FEDERAL POLICY AGENDA REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION HAS MOVED FROM PROVIDING ACCESS TO FACILITATING COMPLETION. DO YOU THINK THE NEXT FOCUS WILL BE LEARNING OUTCOMES? NOT JUST GRADUATING, BUT GRADUATING WITH KNOWLEDGE?

Arum: If you look at the political winds in Washington, there are some indicators that the administrators and policy makers have a growing concern with the issue of student learning and the extent to which future college graduates will manifest a set of competencies across a broad set of learning domains. So I think there's ample evidence that there is growing concern and attention to this issue. However, as sociologists, we're not experts at predicting the future. So where policy goes is anyone's guess, but there certainly is an increasing and emerging interest in these issues, and in some ways, you could think about the attention our book has received as being an indicator of people's growing interest in this topic.

Roksa: When people see these results, one inclination (well-intended) is to think about developing a federal accountability system like we have

in K-12. But we think that would be very counter-productive at this time and would likely lead to a number of negative unintended consequences. And so we don't believe that a federal mandate of accountability is the way to improve learning in higher education.

Our book is very clear that we have the organizational outcomes we do because the organizational environment we're in, in terms of its incentives, has structured and created these patterns.

As an aside, we do believe the federal government should collect data for research purposes, so researchers can learn about what factors predict learning and how much of it is occurring and where. But we don't think that having a federal accountability system would work well or be a productive endeavor.

Sometimes people have the idea that you either have federal accountability or you have nothing. And that's not necessarily the case, because there are many places lower down in the system where you can embed accountability. So the boards of institutions, we argue, have a responsibility to ask their presidents what they are doing to measure learning, to identify weaknesses, and to develop programs and plans to improve learning on their campuses. If we are really going to reform higher education in the way in which we propose, and refocus its mission on undergraduate education, then the leadership of higher education has to play a crucial role. The presidents, provosts, and deans need to commit to developing and promoting organizational cultures that are going to emphasize academic rigor and undergraduate learning. And they


need to communicate that symbolically, as well as when making funding, promotions and tenure, and other institutional decisions.

We also think faculty have a role to play in taking responsibility and committing to the path of academic

rigor and undergraduate learning, in the sense that they need to collectively develop systems and review protocols to

ensure academic rigor in their courses and programs. They need to develop consensus about what academic rigor is, what is expected, and what we should make sure our graduates are learning in our courses and our programs and in our institutions at large. That's where we think the focus really needs to be—on higher education institutions and the incentive structures that students, faculty, and administrators face.

SO ARE THERE ANY GLIMMERS OF HOPE IN YOUR BOOK THAT THOSE CHANGES WILL COME?

Arum: I think it's a mixed bag. Our book is a complex portrait of the patterns we see in terms of academic experiences and student learning outcomes, coupled with a sense that change to address these problems is possible, but in no way inevitable. Our book is very clear that we have the organizational outcomes we do because the organizational environment we're in, in terms of its incentives, has structured and created these patterns. And so you can change that, but left on its own, it's not going to change by itself. 

THE SAVVY CONSUMERS OF THE TRANSFER STUDENT MARKETPLACE

by Nancy Ashmore

The “traditional” student who enrolls at a residential college upon graduating from high school and attains a bachelor’s degree within four years at the same institution is no longer the norm. In fact, more than 60 percent of students in the United States will transfer at some point before receiving their baccalaureate degree, according to a study by the Department of Education.

While many public institutions have long-established pipelines that connect them with feeder schools in their areas, at many private colleges and universities the transfer market historically has been an afterthought. Transfer applicants weren’t something they actively sought; transfers sought *them*.

That was then. This is now, when a recession of historic proportions and a drawn-out economic recovery have complicated the circumstances of many students—and of many institutions. Community college enrollments are surging to record levels as families look for ways to reduce costs and find them at places like Montgomery College (Maryland). In August 2010, *The Washington Post* profiled Sean Daly, who spent a summer at Montgomery (which is located near his hometown) taking courses in statistics, 20th-century history, nutrition, and anthropology. He enrolled at Montgomery in order to satisfy several graduation requirements toward his four-year degree at Loyola Marymount University (California), which costs \$52,705 per year in tuition, fees, and living expenses. At Montgomery, he spent \$1,600 completing nearly a semester’s worth of credits that transferred to Loyola Marymount.

Transfer students, long the neglected stepchildren of private higher education admissions, are gaining greater respect and attention of late, as more and more institutions recognize the value that transfers can bring not only to their balance sheets, but also to the richness of their academic programs and campus life. The gains don’t come without costs, however. Done right, recruiting transfer students and helping assure their success requires significant investments of time, planning, and money—and a willingness to be flexible.

Daly’s not the only student who’s “swirling” his way to a degree (that is, attending multiple institutions). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 67 percent of the students progressing directly from high school to community college in recent years have done so with the intention of pursuing a bachelor’s degree or higher; 39 percent of them originally planned to attend a four-year institution. Financial factors certainly account for some of this shift, but the emergence of honors programs at community colleges has

also made them more attractive (and socially acceptable) to high-ability students.

Another group newly catching the eye of those in higher education is the more than two million service members and the members of their families eligible for expanded education benefits under the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. The “new G.I. Bill” funds 100 percent of a public four-year undergraduate education for a veteran who has served three years on active duty since September 11, 2001. It also provides the ability for the veteran to transfer benefits to a spouse or children after serving or agreeing to serve 10 years. The Yellow Ribbon Program allows institutions that charge more than a state’s highest cost public undergraduate program (i.e., most private institutions) to voluntarily enter into an agreement with the Veterans Administration (VA) to contribute up to 50 percent of those expenses, to be matched by the VA.

Private institutions are realizing that transfer students like these could be the answer to enrollments eroded by the recession and by changing demographics in the Northeast and Midwest, where the Department of Education projects decreases or very slim increases in the number of students who will be graduating from high school in the coming decade.

They are also realizing that in order to compete with public institutions for the best and the brightest in these pools of motivated and diverse students, they’re going to have to modify their transfer policies and recruiting procedures.

VALUE-ADDED ENROLLEES

Not every institution will be comfortable making the changes that are necessary to meet the needs of transfer students. But those that are able to do so stand to gain much more than a body in every seat and an improved bottom line.

Yes, transfers can help enrollment managers meet net revenue goals. Yes, they can be less costly to recruit than first-year students, and the overall yield on their applications tends to be higher (64 percent vs. 42 for high school seniors). Yes, they can be less expensive to educate, since they make demands on faculty, classrooms, and labs for only two or three years instead of four or five. And yes, enrolling community college transfers enables colleges and universities to enhance the access of low-income and underserved populations to higher education while simultaneously improving key diversity statistics in their Common Data Sets.

Practical, tactical reasons aside, as institutions with extensive experience with them will attest, transfer students regularly bring with them something extra to the classroom.

“Our faculty has said to me many, many times, ‘We’ll take as many transfers as you can bring us,’ ” says John McCloskey, Jr., vice president for enrollment management at Alvernia University (Pennsylvania). “They know that transfers bring into the classroom life experiences unlike those of the traditional freshman. These students have already sorted themselves out. They’re coming here focused and more purposeful.”

Each year Alvernia, a comprehensive university with an undergraduate enrollment of 1,500, enrolls 400 first-year students and around 120 transfer students. “Transfers play an important role in the revenue stream of the institution,” McCloskey says, “but more than that they bring to campus a higher level of leadership qualities.”

Most of its transfers come to Alvernia from community colleges, but more and more are transferring from other four-year institutions. There were 27 in 2006; by last year that number had grown to 44. McCloskey credits the school’s programming for some of that growth. In a practice that differs from many schools, for instance, Alvernia reserves slots for sophomore and junior transfers in its competitive nursing and occupational therapy programs, restricting freshman access if necessary.

When it comes to life experience and leadership opportunities, it’s tough to beat military service, as schools participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program are discovering.

Westminster College (Missouri) became involved in the program a year after it began, says President George “Barney” Forsythe. The institution, which has an enrollment of 1,100 undergraduates, currently has eight Yellow Ribbon participants.

“We love having them here,” says Forsythe. “They have real-world experience, so they tend to be very serious, very focused students.” Fully integrated into the campus community (“... we’ve had three or four combat vets on the football team, they’ve joined fraternities ...”), the veterans have also provided wonderful learning opportunities for other students, he notes. Last fall, for instance, when the college’s annual symposium on democracy focused on global conflict, breakout sessions featured both international students who have been the victims of war and student veterans who have participated in such conflicts. Each of the sessions attracted 120 or more to rooms that could comfortably hold 50. “They make a huge contribution to our campus,” explains Forsythe.

Small liberal arts colleges are ideal places for veterans to pursue their educations, Forsythe adds. “Schools like

Westminster provide high contact and high engagement, small classroom sizes. They are places where everyone knows everyone else. Those [features] are all incredibly supportive for servicemembers who are returning to college or starting college after time away from education to serve their country.”

How do interested veterans hear about Westminster? “We’re listed on the VA website,” explains Forsythe, “and we partner with the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium, which certifies institutions as ‘military friendly.’ ”

What does being military friendly entail? Among other things, it means having policies that allow mobile servicemembers and their families to complete degrees rather than just accumulate course credit. “We’re working now with a young woman who’s about to deploy, looking for ways she can continue her program through distance learning and then come back and finish,” Forsythe says.

In addition to credit flexibility, Westminster offers veterans and other transfer students transition support and transfer student seminars similar to the seminars it provides for first-year students. A commuter lounge offers those who don’t live on campus a locker and a place to hang out. There’s someone on staff who advocates for veterans’ needs. The college tends to the counseling and healthcare needs of combat veterans with the aid of the VA hospital in Columbia, Missouri, 20 miles away.

Westminster, which had an ROTC program on its campus into the 1990s, also has supportive and knowledgeable alumni, faculty, and staff—including Forsythe, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point who taught psychology and leadership there for many years before retiring with the rank of brigadier general.

TAKING THE LEAD

As they venture further into transfer recruiting, institutions may want to profit from the lessons learned during the \$6.8 million Community College Transfer Initiative (CCTI) of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, designed to increase access for high-achieving, low-income students to Amherst College (Massachusetts), Bucknell University (Pennsylvania), Cornell University (New York), Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts), University of California, University of North Carolina, University of Michigan, and University of Southern California.

Five years into the initiative, the foundation invited higher education administrators, faculty, researchers, and others to a conference last fall to learn about the programs developed by the eight institutions and their 60 community college partners and discuss the kinds of practices and resources that are required to strengthen the educational pipeline and success rates for talented and underserved students. Included among these were:

- Annual open houses on campus for students from community colleges and ongoing outreach visits to those community colleges to answer

questions about the college, transfer admissions requirements, and the application process

- A commitment to meet low- and moderate-income transfer students' total financial need through a generous mix of grants and work study, allowing most to graduate with little or no debt
- Early “reads” on financial aid applications to help prospective transfer students make informed decisions about transferring
- An orientation and academic preparation institute for students

HOW TO PUT OUT THE WELCOME MAT

by Nancy Ashmore

Feeling out of place after his freshman year at Occidental College (California), the young man from Hawaii decided to transfer to somewhere more urban. Upon arriving in New York City, he learned to his surprise that Columbia University didn't provide housing for transfer students. He eventually found a poorly heated apartment near the campus, but that first night he slept in an alley.

Things have improved markedly since 1981—for Barack Obama and for transfer students in general. As he recounts in *Dreams From My Father*, despite the transfer hassles, the switch to Columbia turned out well for the future president. And, private colleges and universities are much more hospitable to transfers today: Columbia now guarantees housing for transfers, and its transfer alliance program helps new students acclimate to campus life.

Much of a college's success in recruiting transfer students will depend upon developing a “transfer-friendly” campus culture that supports them. Is your institution doing everything it can to be truly welcoming to transfers?

DO YOU HAVE DESIGNATED PEOPLE ON YOUR ADMISSIONS STAFF ACTING AS TRANSFER RECRUITERS WHO SPECIALIZE IN KNOWING WHAT ISSUES MATTER TO THIS AUDIENCE?

At Hamline University (Minnesota), where nearly 25 percent of the undergraduates come from two- or four-year colleges or universities, the Transfer Student Services office helps inquirers find answers to their questions about transfer credits, financial aid, academic advising, and how to get involved in student life.

DO YOU SEGMENT YOUR MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS TO TARGET TRANSFER STUDENTS WITH MESSAGING RELATIVE TO THEIR CONCERNS?

Make transfer-specific admissions information easy to find on your website and as comprehensive as the information you provide to students who will enter as freshmen. Don't assume that the messages, whether online or in print, you target to high school juniors and seniors will speak effectively to community college students, displaced workers looking to retool job skills, or military veterans.

DO YOU INCREASE AWARENESS OF YOUR INSTITUTION AMONG TRANSFER STUDENTS BY USING TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA?

Catch the ears of working adults who might be interested in commuting to your evening or weekend degree-completion programs the old-fashioned way—

during the summer prior to matriculation

- Assistance for childcare to eligible students
- A peer mentoring program for prospective transfer students, staffed by trained students who themselves previously transferred from community colleges
- A monthly “campus day” for interested community college students and counselors that includes sessions on admissions, financial aid, and academic unit counseling and a campus tour, plus a yearly “campus

day” for admitted transfer students and their families

- Including families of transfer students in orientation programs
- Support services on campus for new transfer students, including access to a lounge equipped with computers and printers as a venue for social interaction among community college transfer students

CAPITALIZING ON ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS

As the Community College Transfer Initiative has demonstrated, recruiting

transfer students and helping them succeed requires a certain amount of financial capital. It also requires a deep understanding of the needs of transfer students and a commitment to thoughtful planning. Evelyn Burdick, vice president for enrollment and marketing at Concordia University Chicago (Illinois), has both of the latter. She worked for two community colleges before coming to Concordia.

Concordia has an undergraduate enrollment of just under 1,400 students. Last year it enrolled 450 new students, including a record number of transfer

with drive-time radio ads. To keep your institution front of mind after they’ve contacted you, sign them up for a Twitter feed like @UMDTransfers, billed as “the place for transfer students to get information on how to find their place and get involved at the University of Maryland, College Park.”

HAVE YOU REACHED OUT TO PROSPECTIVE TRANSFER STUDENTS WHO ARE MEMBERS OF TWO-YEAR HONOR SOCIETIES SUCH AS ALPHA BETA GAMMA, ALPHA GAMMA SIGMA, MU ALPHA THETA, AND PHI THETA KAPPA?

Each year Phi Theta Kappa inducts approximately 100,000 members who qualify for membership by maintaining a GPA of 3.5 or higher. The organization’s annual convention offers institutions the opportunity to advertise to more than 3,800 talented community college attendees and interact with them and 500 transfer counselors at a Senior College Transfer Fair.

ARE YOU KEEPING AN EYE ON EMERGING ONLINE TOOLS SUCH AS COLLEGEFISH.ORG AND COLLEGETRANSFER.NET?


CollegeFish.org, a website developed by Phi Theta Kappa, offers free tools for two-year college students planning the completion of a baccalaureate degree and features profiles of four-year institutions that could include details on transfer scholarships, transfer process deadlines, and articulation agreements. CollegeTransfer.net similarly

has profiles of over 1,000 colleges and universities, and a free transfer profile account provides access to student leads. Upgrading to two other levels provides additional tools, including its Course Equivalency Management Center.

SPEAKING OF COURSE EQUIVALENCY, IS YOUR PROCESS FOR TRANSFERRING CREDIT HOURS FULLY TRANSPARENT AND AS EASY AS POSSIBLE TO COMPLETE?

Hamline doesn’t just assure students that “we strive to make the process of transferring credits as seamless as possible.” It helpfully posts detailed information on its articulation agreements with 46 area institutions on its website.

DO YOU OFFER SEPARATE VISIT EVENTS AND AN ORIENTATION SESSION SPECIFICALLY GEARED TOWARD TRANSFER STUDENTS?

“These students have already acclimated to college,” notes Evelyn Burdick, vice president for enrollment and marketing at Concordia University Chicago (Illinois). “As I tell my staff, what we must do during transfer orientation is to help them become acclimated or affiliated with *our* institution, to make them a part of the community. That is especially true for those who are admitted, as many are, for the spring semester. If you’re going to be serious about transfer students, you need to treat those who arrive in the spring the same way you do those who start in the fall and have special orientation programs for both of them.” 

students (150, up more than 40 percent from the previous year) who came in as sophomores and juniors. It is on track to post similar totals this year, thanks in part to a marketing plan that capitalizes on the relationships it has established with admitted students who decide for financial or other reasons to begin their educations at community colleges.

In the end, “it comes down to the relationship we have built with each student,” Burdick says. “We know that in every daily interaction with every student, each one of us is reinforcing that student’s decision to create a future here at Concordia University Chicago.”

Accordingly, “when we survey our applicant pool each year, we make note of those who say they intend eventually to get a four-year degree. If they say they’re open to continuing to hear from Concordia, we touch base with them annually,” explains Burdick.

Concordia also pays close attention to cost. Its aid packages for transfers follow discounting models very similar to those for first-year admits. The institution offers merit scholarships to transfers, including \$2,000 scholarships to those who are members of Phi Theta Kappa, the academic honor society of community college students.

Another Concordia practice recognizes that for transfer students time is money, and that every previously taken course that must be retaken at the college they’re moving to not only delays their degree completion, but often costs them significantly more than the original coursework. During “Walk In Wednesdays” in April, June, and October, prospective transfer students visiting Concordia can sit down with one of the University’s transfer counselors and get an instant transfer credit evaluation and admissions decision.

Private institutions that are serious about attracting top community college students need to be prepared to be flexible when considering transfer credit

requests—or to establish articulation agreements in advance that outline how specific courses and letter grades completed at the community college will transfer to the receiving institution. Concordia is a participant in the Illinois Articulation Initiative, a statewide agreement assuring transferring students that Illinois General Education Core Curriculum courses completed at any participating college or university will satisfy lower-division general education requirements (excluding graduation and mission-related requirements) for an associate’s or bachelor’s degree at other participating institutions.

EMBRACING THE SWIRL

The transfer trend picked up speed after 2008, but it has been evident for some time now, notes Marc Cutright. He’s an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Texas and director of research for the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students. For more than 20 years, he says, sticker shock has had students looking for less expensive ways to obtain their college educations. The number of them attending community colleges has grown as a result—and with it the need for institutions to reconsider their assumptions about community college students and about transfers. Private institutions that fail to do this, Cutright says, are going to miss out on some “really excellent students.”

“All community colleges aren’t the same,” he points out. “All community college *departments* aren’t the same. And all individual community college graduates aren’t the same. A categorical dismissal of transfer students leaves any institution a little poorer in terms of the students it might have had.”

Among the assumptions that need examination, Cutright argues, is the one that community college students are not up to the intellectual rigor of


a four-year program and are less likely to graduate. “Our studies indicate that these students are ‘completers,’ that they graduate at the same rate or better.”

Further, at least one study challenges the notion that transfers have less institutional loyalty and thus make less desirable alumni. A greater proportion of transfers donated to the institutions that were surveyed than did their conventional counterparts, and they gave at higher levels.

Private institutions interested in getting their feet wet in the transfer market don’t have to jump into the deep end. They might consider a focused initiative in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, Cutright suggests, aided perhaps by a grant from the federal government, which is very interested in increasing the number of women and minorities in the pipeline.

Institutions need to be aware, says Cutright, that transfer students increasingly will be coming to us with more savvy about the system and how to use it. “They will have more social capital—more ‘insider’ knowledge and stronger support systems,” thanks to parents who have attended college and “know which buttons to press.”

Colleges and universities, both public and private, need to realize, too, that they are not the only fish in the sea when it comes to students in their area, even though community college students have historically been geographically bound. “Increased access to distance-based degree-completion programs will liberate [students] from the local environment and institutions, particularly if those institutions are not doing substantive outreach and service,” says Cutright.

Institutions that depend implicitly on a “take it or leave it” approach to transfer students, he warns, may find more students saying, “I’ll leave it.” 

ENROLLMENT IS FILLED. LOOK FOR COVERAGE IN THE SUMMER ISSUE OF THE LAWLOR REVIEW.

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ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT
FOR TODAY'S HIGHER
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