

Why Transfer from Community Colleges is Crucial

Abstract:

Community colleges are crucial because they are the means by which the majority of undergraduate students will earn their baccalaureate degree in the future. Transfer students are key to economic and community wellness across the Texas panhandle. The university will be impacted by growing numbers of transfer students. Its welfare and future success will depend on how well it adjusts to the unique needs and preferences of students arriving with most, if not all, of their first two years' post-secondary studies completed.

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Introduction:

While some today question the value of a bachelor's degree, there is no question the labor market is continuing to demand more college-educated adults and to place a premium (in terms of salary and benefits) on that education.

"As of 2015, some 83 million people worked in jobs that require an average or above average level of preparation (including education, experience and job training), up from 49 million in 1980 – a 68% increase." –The Pew Research Center (Brown, 2016)

"While employment grew by 50% over all occupations from 1980 to 2015, this growth was much higher among jobs that require average or above average social skills (83%), such as interpersonal, management and communication skills, and those that require higher levels of analytical skills (77%), such as critical thinking and computer skills." –The Pew Research Center (Brown, 2016)

It is important – some would say 'crucial' – to the health and economic viability of the Texas Panhandle that a larger number of its citizens hold a bachelor's degree credential and possess the quality education it represents.

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Community colleges are institutions that exist to provide the first two years of that degree for anyone able to demonstrate academic mastery of the curriculum. Accreditation standards (SACSCOC) and curricular standards (ACGM) are the same. Their mission, like WT's mission, is set by the state of Texas.

State public universities are charged with conferring of the bachelor's degree. It is WT's mission to serve transfer students effectively and enthusiastically.

But although transfer from community college to university has been taking place as long as these institutions have existed, there is an urgent need to focus as never before on this group of students, primarily because of the significant numbers of community college students who do not transfer or complete a bachelor's degree [Figure One]. In this paper the case for improving transfer in the Panhandle will be briefly addressed, along with discussion of how this initiative might change the university and finally some next steps will be identified.

Background:

Educating students from community colleges is important to the Panhandle of Texas for many reasons. Several of those reasons are briefly listed.

- The future economic and social well-being of individuals, their families, and the communities in which they live are now, more than ever, dependent on the educational attainment of its individual citizens. (Wyner, 2017)
- The earlier high school students leave their communities, the less likely they are to return after college and live, contribute to, their home communities. Community college students who start local and then earn their bachelor's degree are more likely to return to their communities afterward. The community investment in the education of their young stays in the local area to feed the economic viability of the region, rather than leaving to feed the exploding population centers elsewhere. ("Rural brain drain" – Carr, 2009)
- It is an important part of WT's mission to serve these students and deliver the value that a bachelor's degree adds, which is considerable. That value encompasses increased earnings, better physical and mental health across their lives, more stable families, greater participation in civic and community endeavors, just to name a few. ("The Quadrant", BIS Research Paper 133, 2013)

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National studies have consistently found that around 80% of community college students “aspire” to complete a bachelor’s degree when they enter college. However, only a minority of them actually transfer directly to a university and even fewer graduate with a bachelor’s degree. (Jenkins, 2015)

Figure 1. Bachelor’s degree outcomes for community college students (Jenkins, 2015)



This loss of so many potential bachelor’s graduates (“leakage”) has become a national focus, with major policy initiatives by state and federal legislators, and intensive reform efforts by nationally prominent foundations (Gates, Lumina, Greater Texas, Meadows, and numerous others), all seeking to improve on these outcomes.

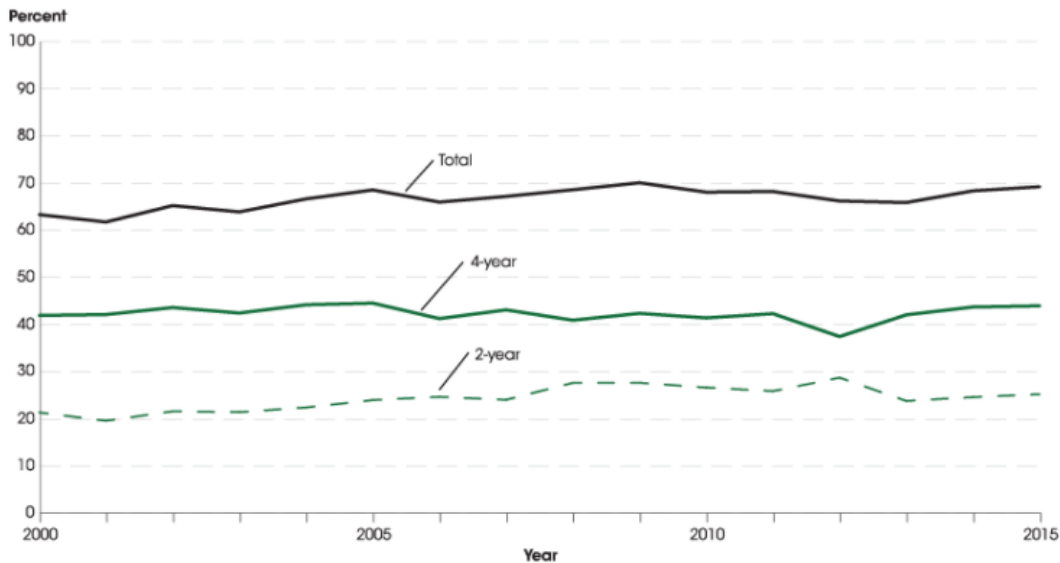
It will be important to the University to improve the recruitment, education and graduation of transfer students. This is because:

- Students and their parents are opting to complete increasing numbers of college credits through community colleges.
 - Up to 60 hrs of a bachelor’s degree is now available while in high school through dual credit;
 - More than half of all undergraduate students in Texas are attending a community college;
 - The number of new high school graduates enrolling directly in higher education annually is, and has been, flat for some time, meaning without increasing numbers of transfer students, WT will likely find growth difficult (Figure 2), p.4);

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- WT “first time in college” students who took dual credit in high school (fall, 2017), brought an average of 20 hrs’ dual credit with them (56% of this year’s freshman class). More than 200 students arrived with their first year complete (more than 30 hrs credit).

Figure 2. Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges by the October immediately following high school completion, by level of institution: 2000-2015 (Wyner, 2015)



NOTE: High school completers are individuals ages 16 to 24 who graduated from high school or completed a GED prior to October of the calendar year.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 2000–2015. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, [table 302.10](#).

- WT’s future will be affected by transfer issues – either positively or negatively. If WT does nothing, some community college transfers will not continue their studies after their Associate degree, a tragic loss to the community and nation. But others will simply find another way to a bachelor’s degree. And the effect over time of those two outcomes will be to erode public trust. This will negatively affect enrollment, fund raising, scholarship, and ultimately weaken the university. So there are both positive and defensive reasons for WT to more effectively serve transfer students in the future.

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Researchers (Xu, 2016) speculate causes of this “leakage” include:

- the fact that community college students make slower progress (earned credits) toward a degree in their early terms;
- the process of admission (and associated requirements) is often complex and confusing;
- considerable credits earned at the community college may be lost at the point of transfer;
- post-transfer “shock” as community college students adjust to the new culture of the university.

WT Environment:

For more than a hundred years WT has educated undergraduate students utilizing a set of expectations that served its students well. In brief, the expectations were that students would come to WT as young people, live on campus or in the immediate vicinity of campus, and take their courses in 16-week semesters, remain continuously enrolled until graduation, and that their studies would be the top priority in their lives for the four years that they would attend.

Today all of these expectations are changing rapidly and transfer students exemplify those changes clearly:

- Age – while the numbers of traditional students is flat (Figure 2), the number of older, more independent and more experienced undergraduate students is increasing nationally;
- Dorm living – students are more likely to be tied to specific geographic and living arrangements that will not change while they are in college because of full time employment, home ownership, and family obligations. This will mean fewer of these students will be living on campus in 16-week blocks;
- Semesters – new options include online, hybrid, and intensive short-courses;
- Attendance patterns – transfers “stop-out” (do not enroll for periods of time during their pursuit of a degree) at a higher rate. They also take courses from a variety of colleges before finally earning a degree (“swirling”);
- Priorities – transfers typically still have whatever personal life circumstance(s) that likely led them to select community college in the first place (job, family, or financial limitations). These characteristics mean that transfers, while committed to their education, can often face challenges the undergraduates of the past

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would not have had as frequently. It also means college is often not the top priority for transfers.

To be successful with transfer students, these differences will need to be considered as the university evolves to be successful in this mission.

Projected Changes By 2035:

Transfer students presently constitute 45.6% of WT undergraduate enrollment (3,339 transfer students, Fall, 2017). By 2035 if the growth of the past decade were to persist, this would grow to 51% of undergraduate enrollment, using current planning numbers from the Master Plan project (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Dec/2017).

These projections may significantly under-estimate the likely impact on WT because:

- Present reporting labels hide the true number of community college transfers by calling those under 21 years old who arrive directly from high school as “first time in college” students rather than “transfers,” even though 50+% arrive with significant dual credit;
- Present work to significantly improve the transfer experience through partnerships with the region’s CCs and changes in the admission process should significantly increase the enrollment numbers.

General Impacts:

Transfer students’ needs/preferences for staying in their home towns, finishing fast, and avoiding excess college credits will affect the university in predictable ways:

- Growth of Amarillo Center – if WT offers a coherent curriculum at that site;
- Growth of online and hybrid instruction;
- Pressure on campus student housing – either it will force change in the residential living model or cause shrinking occupancy rates.

If the university is successful at graduating significantly larger numbers of transfer students, this increase in educational attainment could result in greater growth and prosperity across the Panhandle and in adjacent states, when combined with local and regional economic development efforts.

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Growing numbers of transfer students will mean growing demand for graduate education; not only for the new Doctoral programs currently under development, but also for existing Masters programs.

Many of the changes that will be necessary to serve transfer students will also improve traditional freshman student experiences. Examples include:

- More efficient recruitment and admission through digital capabilities will mean smoother transitions, whether students are coming from CCs or high schools. Young students are increasingly choosing online and hybrid courses to meet their own needs and wants. Expansion of the use of current technologies will serve both transfers and traditional freshmen.
- Students will avoid considerable debt as they maximize the opportunities afforded at the lower cost CCs. Their total cost of a bachelor's degree will have been significantly reduced.

Transfer students bring a different set of challenges to WT faculty and staff. In the past the university "socialized" new students in their freshman year. Transfer students will need to be integrated in new ways since often they will directly enter junior level courses and their academic path at WT will vary depending on their program of study.

An intentional embrace of transfer students by WT will mean community colleges can become more successful at their mission to hand off students after completion of their community college coursework. Further interaction between WT faculty and CC faculty will also improve the "fit" between what is taught at each of the institutions, so transfer students will be better prepared to succeed in their particular major degree program once they transfer. (Known as "alignment")

If the university becomes widely known as a special place for transfer students, and can make a compelling case for the extra value of a campus life experience, residential life could become reinvigorated by serving more mature and diverse dorm students. The present trend for more middle class students to begin at the community college has, to this point, reduced the frequency in which college students have this valuable experience. But if WT built bridges into communities from across Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico, the vibrancy of campus life could grow in the future.

- This likely would require changes in what will make up "campus life" in the future, since the social and developmental needs of 18-21 year olds differ a bit from 22+ year olds who have likely lived independently before their arrival at WT.

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Impacts on University Budgets:

Many of the costs of serving transfer students are already embedded in the university budget. Some areas likely will need to reallocate. For example, the need to assist students who are not on campus means more phone, email and social media work compared to campus-focused services. Services delivered by phone, social media, and other technologically-mediated means will have an associated cost.

These cost shifts will be difficult for several reasons. First, people tend to resist change. Second, when shifts like this occur the needed skill sets change, meaning either the university will have to hire additional staff for these purposes or some existing staff must adopt new practices or be replaced. The more eagerly the University embraces this shift, the more successful it will be in attracting and keeping transfer students. Also, the more rapid the shift, the less cost will be incurred. But the faster the change, the more disruption to the status quo. Leadership at all levels will need to wisely navigate this culture shift to find the best balance.

Impacts and Issues Related to Leadership/Management/Governance:

Some of the anticipated impact is described previously. But to expand on it, leadership in times of rapid change must have clarity as to the goal and available avenues to achieve the goal. Performance must be the priority alongside other values like collegiality and patience. This does not mean other values must suffer. However, those other values cannot be used as excuses to avoid the necessary changes.

- Good leadership will be able to demonstrate that values of collegiality are best supported when the colleagues understand their shared purpose and focus on its achievement.
- Serving transfer students will inevitably challenge the status quo at WT. But for the reasons articulated previously, this disruption will ultimately serve as a positive stimulus for the university's next quarter century.

Recommendations/Suggested Next Steps:

- Raise the visibility of the transfer student portion of WT's mission, in its formal documents (generational plan, strategic plan, and other official publications of the university).
- Formalize relationships between the regional community colleges and the university with a series of commitments that will, in aggregate, serve the interests

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- of transfer students and both institutional partners.
- Persist at the task of communicating clearly to all WT stakeholders, internal and external, as to the critical nature of the path from secondary through community college to university and the need for support along the entire spectrum.
- Adopt a specific set of plans to align university policy, practice to this elevated mission, then annually review its progress before the university community.

Conclusion:

By embracing the expanded role of community colleges in undergraduate education, and stepping up its intentionality of effort with transfer students, WT can add considerable value to each community college graduate – value to the student, their family, and the communities in which they live and work. WT can fulfill its obligation to make this country a better place through improving the lives of its citizens.

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