

Community College Transfer Mess

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Like many community college students, Josie Showers saw her classes at Jefferson Community and Technical College in Louisville as the first step toward a four-year degree. She was among the nearly half of American students who start college in two-year community schools. They are told if they work hard, their state's four-year colleges will be happy to accept them as transfers and cheer them on to graduation. But Showers, like many others, discovered those four-year schools are not as helpful as she had been led to believe.

After she transferred to the University of Louisville as a 27-year-old political science major, she was told she could not get her bachelor's degree until she had taken the university's pre-algebra class. That made no sense to her. She had already taken an algebra course, learning concepts more advanced than pre-algebra, at her community college. Sorry, she was told. Rules are rules. That kind of red tape cost her an extra semester and \$4,000 before she could graduate.

This is only one of several revelations in an investigative report on the community college transfer system by Louisville Courier-Journal reporter Nancy C. Rodriguez, made possible by a fellowship from the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University. I was Rodriguez's adviser on the project, but I did not contribute much. She is a first-class reporter who had already set up all the interviews and asked all the good questions before I got involved. All I can do is encourage others to read her groundbreaking work, and that of the other fellows and associates who participated in the "Covering America, Covering Community Colleges" project, available at [this Web site](#).

Most education reporters, particularly myself, do a lousy job covering communities colleges. I knew I had missed many good stories, but I didn't know how good until I saw what Rodriguez and the other Hechinger participants produced. This is particularly shameful in my case because my parents both attended community colleges and my brother spent most of his career working at one.

Rodriguez came up with too many startling findings to mention them all, but here is one particularly galling section:

Transferring to a state public university seems simple enough: Fill out an application, submit an official transcript, and pay a fee -- usually less than \$50.

But it can quickly get complicated.

The university checks to see if its academic requirements have been met -- for many, that means at least a 2.0 grade-point average.

It also decides which courses to count. While Kentucky requires public universities to accept up to 60 general-education credits for students who have earned an associate's degree, they don't have to be counted toward a particular prerequisite or major.

"Universities are just expert in playing this game that says, 'Well, sure, you completed English composition, but you didn't take my class,' and sort of cheating students out of transfer credits by insisting that they retake essentially the same classes," said Kay McClenney, a professor at the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Rodriguez takes this system apart piece by piece, showing the bad rules and unexamined assumptions that deny students their dreams. She persuaded one admissions director to reveal there is little incentive for universities to seek great transfer students from community colleges because, unlike freshmen enrolling directly out of high school, the transfers don't count toward an institution's graduation rate, ACT or SAT average or retention rate -- important statistics that get their schools ranked in U.S. News & World Report or other college lists.

Rodriguez focuses on Kentucky, but that state's problems are similar to those in other states. During the 2006-07 academic year, she wrote, "roughly 3,500 community college students transferred to Kentucky's public universities -- 100 fewer than in 1997, when the legislature passed education reform" designed to open those door much wider to community college transfers. Why this failure? Rodriguez points to: "university requirements that make it difficult to exchange academic credits; not enough financial aid or advisers to help students make the jump to four-year schools; and a reluctance among some universities to aggressively recruit community college students."

A series by another Hechinger participant, Contra Costa Times reporter Matt Krupnick, shows similarly distressing failures in California. "In a 2007 study," he wrote, "Sacramento State researchers Nancy Shulock and Colleen Moore concluded that 60 percent of the state's incoming community college students in 1999 wanted to transfer or earn a degree or certificate. About a quarter of those 314,000 students had accomplished their goal six years later."

Many commentators have praised the American higher education system as the best in the world--challenging, accessible, forward-looking. These stories make it clear that at least in this important respect -- remember that community college students comprise 46 percent of all undergraduates -- that shining reputation is an illusion.

I would love to get data from other states confirming, or challenging, what Rodriguez found in Kentucky. The industrious students she interviewed were told they didn't have to be rich to graduate from college, and then discovered all these obstacles. Is this the best our colleges can do?