The Value of Transfer Agreements

Introduction
Colleges and universities are “threading the needle” for the 2020–21 academic year under a dim light. In an effort to develop safe and welcoming plans for instruction while securing enrollments of new and returning students, one potentially underutilized tool worth deploying more aggressively is transfer agreements with other institutions.

Transfer or articulation agreements are formal agreements (partnerships) between two or more institutions documenting the transfer policies or arrangements for a specific academic program or degree in general. These agreements benefit both parties by providing a competitive advantage for the “sending” college and a consistent source of transfer students for the “receiving” institution.

For institutions that have such agreements in place, this paper may be useful for reexamining and revising the terms to derive their full value. For institutions that have not yet adopted these partnerships, the paper offers important steps and considerations to get started. A checklist of tasks to create new agreements and leverage existing agreements is appended at the end of this paper, as well as a list of helpful resources.

The Value of Transfer Agreements
During these unprecedented times when students are favoring colleges closer to home, an articulation agreement can present options that may be the reason for an institution to attract or retain a student instead of losing him or her to another institution. Students who regularly attend school at a remote distance are eying local community colleges for the next term as this option is perhaps more cost effective in uncertain economic times. Parents and students are considering these questions: Is there value right now for hands-on programs when classes are only held online? Is it more beneficial to continue with transferable/elective courses at a lower cost locally?

For recent high school graduates who are considering a gap year, the option to begin their studies at a local college with the promise of future enrollment (and acceptance of all credits) somewhere else may be a very attractive alternative. And for institutions worried about decreased enrollments this coming year, and smaller student populations in subsequent years, ramping up the number of transfer students is one way to buffer those declines.

Most transfer agreements are between community colleges and public four-year institutions. Agreements also exist between community colleges and private four-year colleges and universities. Dual admission programs offer another type of agreement where students apply to both institutions, and acceptance to the second is contingent on completion of the associate’s degree at the first institution.

Regardless of the form, these agreements are beneficial to all parties. The sending college benefits by marketing the acceptability of its program and courses—leveraging the senior four-year institution’s brand. The four-year institution benefits by cutting recruiting costs and finding college-ready students prepared to fill seats lost if other students are not retained. Discipline in scheduling, such as offering more transferable lower level or general education courses, rather than an abundance of higher level or specialty courses at the sending institution, and the elimination of redundant offerings will reduce instructional costs on both ends. In addition to lowering the overall cost of attendance, the student benefits by avoiding courses that are not applicable, reducing the loss of credits that often results from ad hoc enrollment.

Getting Started
So, who should be involved in this process? Academic agreements are usually initiated by faculty, department chairs, deans, academic vice presidents, or even presidents, at times. Not wanting to thwart the excitement and creativity shown by an individual working with a peer at another institution, the involvement of a vice president or appropriate dean who understands how such agreements are put into place helps tighten the details.

Individuals who develop partnership agreements on behalf of an institution are usually dedicated, entrepreneurial,
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and willing to take a risk. Their focus is often on outcomes and putting together a workable plan that benefits students and the institution, not necessarily on documenting the details. Translating agreements to written form requires an understanding of the requirements and protections needed to best serve all parties involved. An agreement without fiscal, facility use, or resource implications will generally bypass the desk of the chief business officer. However, there are still risks that must be accounted for, managed, and reviewed by the responsible individual.

From the seat of the chief business officer, agreements periodically arrive unannounced, with little or no background provided, and requiring an immediate turnaround. Agreements with similar purposes will vary widely in content and commitments, with details specific to mitigating risk often missing. Providing a framework for agreements will go a long way in eliminating renegotiating details already worked out before the agreement hits the final reviewer/approver’s desk.

An institutional commitment to actively pursuing partnership agreements, along with establishing strategic targets or documented outcome goals, is most beneficial. Seeking willing partners is the next step. When looking to identify potential partners, remember the importance of relationships that exist between your faculty, department chairs, deans, student services staff with like peers at other institutions. They may already have ideas or opportunities that can be mutually explored. Then, look locally: is there a community college or 4-year institution close by that participating students could easily attend? Reviewing a list of published articulation agreements for schools in your area will also show you willing partners. Consider schools or programs to which higher percentages of students are transferring. Keep in mind industry partners as they provide opportunities to deliver credit or not-for-credit training, student projects, or research experiences.

Other factors to consider include partnership alignment with your institution’s mission, understanding the partnering institution’s motivations, ensuring availability of appropriate resources, knowing how the partnership will be perceived, and more. It is also important to have an exit strategy should the arrangement reach a point where it no longer suits your institution’s purpose.

Any agreement must be signed by individuals with the appropriate authority to do so, and should include, at a minimum, the main elements noted. For academic agreements, the final authority typically rests with the president or their official designee, usually the vice president for academic affairs. However, if it is expected that the negotiating parties (faculty member, dean, etc.) also sign, this individual would sign “as to form” to confirm that the content of the agreement is properly noted. It goes without saying that accreditation standards and requirements should be upheld with the execution of this partnership. The vice president for operations or finance will often be the final approver of agreements involving a commitment of campus resources or including any financial arrangements.

Once an agreement is signed, its critical to display it prominently and promote it among your prospective students. Post the agreement on your website, email it, and use social media to inform both existing and prospective students and parents, actively share it through outreach and admissions efforts, and ask the partnering institution to do the same.

Developing individual plans under these agreements will require high-touch communications with students. The academic advisors at each partner institution will play a strong role in bridging the relationship and ensuring a seamless transition between the two institutions. If the agreement is with a professional organization, human resources and professional development offices also play a role in spreading the word.

Capitalizing on the Benefits

At a time when colleges and universities are being called upon to rethink their business models, and to be as creative and flexible as possible, the collaborations solidified via transfer agreements provide one more way to attract and retain students in a way that puts the interests of students first.

As consumers of education, students and their parents are becoming more keenly focused on the value of the product they purchase. A detailed transfer agreement is appealing and reassuring to both students and parents. With the path forward clearly spelled out, the number of costly wrong choice credits taken is significantly reduced. Not only does this lower the cost of attendance, eliminating such missteps accelerates a student’s time to degree. For students who are still trying to figure out their future direction—including progressing to a four-year institution—starting coursework at a community college allows them to complete at a minimum a certificate or an Associate’s degree should they decide to pause at that point.
An agreement that outlines courses preapproved for transfer greatly reduces the time and effort that both students and school advisors spend reviewing courses for transfer approval. Some two-year institutions may opt to only offer courses that would be accepted for transfer to a four-year institution. However, offering a stronger portfolio of transferable courses could encourage a reduction in the number of low enrollment or unique courses offered based on faculty interest as well as improve overall scheduling predictability.

Stewarding the Relationship
Institutions with transfer or articulation agreements in place should consider dusting them off and aggressively employing them now to help students plan their studies. Connecting students to transfer options as an alternative to residential campus studies may help to ensure their return for subsequent terms. A student “deferred” is better than a student “withdrawn.”

Maintain, review, and update a running list of active agreements. Filing away signed agreements is not the end of this partnership road. There are specific touch points that remain active throughout the agreement; specifically, sharing specified data and information; proper monitoring of students' progress; ensuring the maintenance of academic rigor; periodically reviewing the arrangements detailed; and the final completion of the transfer.

Strong and successful partnership agreements can open the door to other collaborations such as a sharing of services, joint grant or services contracts, increased faculty or staff collaboration, and providing other support or experiential opportunities for students. Considering the advantages, the time commitment required is worth the effort.

For institutions that have not yet taken advantage of the opportunities offered by these partnerships, the next two pages of "transfer agreement considerations" can serve as a checklist to assist with creating an effective agreement between institutions.
Transfer Agreement Considerations

Receiving Institution: Developing New Agreements

☑️ Understand your institution's general education requirements, including the commonalities and differences by major. Consider standardizing the requirements to the fullest extent.
- Discuss the variations with faculty—are they necessary to differentiate an academic program?
- Can some or all general education requirements be standardized?

☑️ Identify informal partnerships that already exist with other institutions or faculty.
- Do your faculty members have peers at other institutions who complement your institution's offerings?
- Which institutions provide the most transfer students?
- Which programs attract the most transfer students?

☑️ Convene a team that represents the academic, administrative, and student service areas to identify a partner school and develop an articulation agreement for one program or field of study. Getting advanced input from any area of the institution that has an expected role will help identify all necessary components. Include the following elements in the agreement:
- Primary contact
- Eligible participants
- Responsibilities by institution and department
- Duration, extension, and termination details
- Specific admission requirements or approvals
- Program details such as:
  - How will courses be delivered?
  - At which institution do students register and pay?
  - Grade requirements and the process for confirming requirements
  - Process for protecting and transferring sensitive or other information
- Timing when information will be provided
- Documentation of potential risks and how they will be monitored and addressed
- The costs or conditions for access or use of facility or campus resources (e.g. help desk support)

Receiving Institution: Leveraging Existing Agreements

☑️ Ensure that all deans, faculty, admissions officers, academic advisors, and student services staff are familiar with all of the existing agreements, by program and location.
- Are the agreements included in the search tools sponsored by CollegeTransfer.Net?
- Do admissions officers include information about these agreements when talking to students about their academic goals?
- Have academic advisors and student services staff talked with new and returning students to help them plan their studies for the fall term and listen to their concerns?
- For all institution employees with contact to students, do they know about and are they prepared to discuss transfer options with students who have health or financial concerns about returning to campus in the fall?
Transfer Agreement Considerations

**Sending Institution: Developing New Agreements**
- Identify the courses that could meet the general education requirements for a baccalaureate degree.
  - Are the courses both general and rigorous enough to support advanced study in many areas, e.g. the physical or social sciences, business, or education?
  - For current students who transfer to baccalaureate programs, contact them to confirm that they were well-prepared for entry to the four-year program?
- Identify informal partnerships that already exist with other institutions or faculty.
  - Do your faculty members participate in academic associations by major or discipline that include members from baccalaureate institutions?
  - For your students who pursue a baccalaureate degree, which institutions do they attend?
  - How successful are they at achieving a four-year degree?
  - What are the barriers to completion?
- Convene a team representing the academic, administrative, and student service areas to identify a baccalaureate institution to develop an articulation agreement for one program or field of study. To avoid surprises, seek advanced input from any area of the institution that has an expected deliverable. Include the following elements in the agreement:
  - Primary contact
  - Eligible participants
  - Responsibilities by institution and department
  - Duration, extension, and termination details
  - Specific admission requirements or approvals
  - Program details, such as course delivery options; institution where students will register and pay; and grade requirements and the process for confirming requirements
  - Process for protecting and transferring sensitive or other information
  - Timing when information will be provided
  - Documentation of other potential risks and ways to monitor and address them
  - The costs or conditions for access or use of facility or campus resources (e.g. help desk support)

**Sending Institution: Leveraging Existing Agreements**
- Ensure that all deans, faculty, admissions officers, academic advisors, and student services staff are familiar with the existing agreements, by program and location.
  - Are the agreements included in the search tools sponsored by College.Transfer.net?
  - Do admissions officers include information about these agreements when talking to students about their academic goals?
  - Do academic advisors and faculty communicate with individual students on a regular basis to assist with issues that would prevent a student from meeting the transfer requirements?
Helpful Links
AACRAO Guide to Best Practices Articulation Agreements

American Association of State Colleges and Universities: Making Partnerships Work: Principles, Guidelines and Advice for Public University Leaders

AP News: Amid virus, US students look to colleges closer to home, Collin Binkley June 6, 2020


College.Transfer.Net: Search for Articulation Agreements
https://www.collegetransfer.net/Search/Search-for-Transfer-Articulation-Agreements

Maximizing Resources for Student Success: The Business Case for Regional Public Universities to Strengthen Community College Transfer Pathways (with Guidance on Leading the Process)


Portland State University Articulation Agreement Guidelines Manual: For Deans and Department/Program Chairs