

Third Evaluation Report
Urban Transfer Research Network (UTRN)
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Nancy Shulock
Outside Evaluator

Sources for this Report

This report is based on my review of materials available on the UTRN website, including research briefs, presentations, and meeting minutes, my attendance at the project leaders' meeting in Portland, Oregon on July 21, 2008, and interviews with the following nineteen individuals in Arizona and Oregon:

Oregon:

- Kathi Ketcheson, Project Director, Portland State University
- Juliette Stoering, Portland State University
- Joan Jagodnik, Portland State University
- Pete Collier, Portland State University
- Mary Kinnick, Portland State University
- Fauzi Naas, Chemeketa College
- Ron Smith, Portland Community College
- Craig Kolins, Portland Community College
- Judy Redder, Clackamas Community College
- Nancy Szofan, Mount Hood Community College

Arizona:

- Melinda Gebel, Arizona State University
- Shelly Potts, Arizona State University
- Kathy Wigal, Arizona State University
- Kristin Bennes, Glendale Community College
- Kelly Gwilliam, Arizona State University Maricopa Community College District
- Ann Huber, Arizona Transfer Articulation Support System
- Linda Hawbaker, Maricopa Community College District
- Andrea Buehman, Maricopa Community College District
- Betsy Hertzler, Mesa Community College

Summary of Third Year Activity

The third year of the UTRN project has been one of consolidation and concentrated data collection and analysis. For reasons outlined in my last report, Florida's participation in the project was terminated, although Florida team members continue to participate voluntarily as project "affiliates." Arizona, under new project leadership, picked up the pieces from two years of virtual inactivity and has scrambled to catch up. While its progress in supplying cohort data to project leaders at Portland State University (PSU) has been impressive, there are some consequences of the two years of inactivity, which I will cover below. Oregon has fully added two community colleges to the project, for a total of four, incorporating the new cohort data into existing data sets. They have also collected updated cohorts from all institutions.

There has not been much visible product from the project, in terms of research briefs or findings, because most of the activity has been focused on data collection. In addition to expanding and updating institutional cohort data, both states spent considerable time and effort administering and analyzing the administrator interviews. There was far less activity on the policy front as participants have been largely waiting for the results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis before focusing on the policy implications of the analysis.

Analysis of Progress to Date

Based on my review of progress to date, there are six themes that I would like to discuss. Unlike my previous two evaluation reports, I cover these themes for the project as a whole and dispense with a state-by-state analysis since the project is coming together nicely as a whole and since there are only two participating states.

1. Overall Positive Progress and Strong Support

Everyone with whom I spoke (who was familiar with UTRN) was pleased, generally, with their participation in the project. All had positive assessments of the PSU leadership team and felt that participation of various institutions and stakeholders in the project was appropriate. They were pleased with the progress of the project but especially with the *potential* of the project to produce useful information for their institutions.

2. The Year of Data – Good Progress on Data; Policy Mostly on Hold

As noted in the above summary of activity, the third year was principally a year of data collection and refinement. This activity has gone well, as Arizona has been able to provide its data consistent with the PSU template. All participating community colleges in both states have provided the necessary data files, and the links between community colleges and ASU/PSU, respectively, have been established. Analysis of the cohort data is proceeding nicely (discussed further in item 4 below). With the

focus on data collection and analysis, the policy committee in Oregon has been less active than in past years, which is appropriate, as it awaits the analysis of the data in order to make policy connections. In Arizona there has been little or no work on the policy aspects of the project (see item 3 below).

There continues to be discussion, and some indecision, about the definition of the cohort itself, i.e., who to include as transfer-seeking. While this is an unsettled question across the country, for sure, it does seem that in the third year of the project it is time to reach closure on this issue. There is no right answer, although my preference is for a more inclusive definition that does not inadvertently remove from the analysis an important target of the project: those under-represented students who seek a four-year degree but who drop out *long before* reaching that point. The reasons those students don't reach some threshold which might be used as a standard for inclusion could be very important clues to policy changes that would improve transfer rates and baccalaureate production at a time when both are solely needed by these states and every state in the nation. If we don't study those students and the reasons for their lack of success, we overlook a rich source of data that could spur improvements.

What was presented to me as the current thinking about cohort definition in the Oregon data seems reasonable: students who (1) were 18-20 years old upon first entry to community college, or (2) indicated transfer intent, or (3) enrolled for at least two terms. Arizona, after reviewing two alternatives, has chosen a more restrictive cohort definition than in Oregon: student who have completed (1) at least 12 units and (2) at least one general education course in the first three years. This more restrictive definition was chosen in order to comply with statewide efforts to define a cohort for computing transfer rates. While the definitions in the two states do not need to be identical, it will be necessary to keep in mind the more restrictive Arizona definition when drawing conclusions from the final analysis of the data.

Administrator interviews have been conducted for faculty, student support staff, and academic administrators at both community colleges and the universities. Several interviewees noted that this component of the data collection turned out to be a much bigger workload than had been anticipated and has been one factor responsible for this year being light on policy work. Great care has been taken to code the data consistently across the states and to look for patterns within and across states, institutional types, and respondent groups (academic administrators, faculty, student support staff). In light of the uncertain way that the interview data will be used to close the gaps and augment the findings from the cohort analysis (a "leap of faith," according to one respondent), I wonder if there has been some overkill in terms of methodological precision applied to the interview data. Interview data can enrich quantitative findings considerably without of this degree of pattern coding. But since that work has been completed, I hope that it will be applied successfully in a way that takes advantage of its comprehensive nature. Drawing on my recommendation in the first annual report that policy questions should drive the design of both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the data collection, I hope that policy questions drive the

application of the interview data so that it doesn't become a "fishing expedition" for patterns that may not illuminate important policy issues that have already been identified by the group.

The student interviews have not been conducted – which is a delay from the planned schedule. Project participants hope that the student interviews can be completed more expeditiously than the administrator interviews and that some of the experiences and coding decisions from the latter can be applied to streamline the process of student interviews, which are now scheduled for next calendar year. While I agree that every effort should be made to not make the student interview data analysis overly complicated, the student interviews must be tailored to follow up on key issues from the cohort data analysis that only students can answer and should not simply follow the interview protocol of the administrator portion. For example, preliminary findings in Oregon show that few transfer students follow those statewide transfer pathways that are most effective in terms of student persistence and baccalaureate completion once at PSU. Students should be asked why and how they make the choices they do – with specific reference to transfer pathway options. As another example, analysis of the data on swirling show differences across majors in the apparent impact of swirling. Students should be asked why they enrolled in the institutions they did as they followed a swirling pattern so that proper responses in policy could follow.

3. Arizona – the Unavoidable Price of Two Years of Inaction

As discussed in last year's evaluation report, Arizona had made virtually no progress after two years in the project. This past year, however, under new leadership, great strides were taken. The new project director, with assistance from institutional researchers at Arizona State University and the Maricopa District Office, was able quickly to provide the cohort data to PSU according to project specifications. This is an unexpected, positive development as it assures that there will be full results from two states when the project is completed. The Arizona team should be commended for their ability to resurrect the project and especially for meeting the PSU data protocol so completely and quickly.

Not surprisingly, however, there has been a significant price of two years of inaction. It seems unavoidable that there would be a consequence of the delay, since the team in Oregon has been working hard on the project for more than two years. The price of previous inaction, as I determined from my interviews, is that there has been no involvement of people at ASU or Maricopa on the policy side of the institutions and no effort to have policy concerns drive the data design or analysis as has happened in Oregon through the cooperative work of the policy and data committees. There are no formal committees – policy or data. The only involvement in UTRN has been among three individuals, as far as I was able to determine: the ASU project director and the two institutional researchers (ASU and Maricopa). The other individuals I was instructed to interview were not familiar with the project by name. Their only

involvement was that they had been the subject of an administrative interview, but most were not aware what project the interview was for, since several transfer-related initiatives are underway in Arizona.

Arizona has benefitted from the policy committee work that has occurred in Oregon because that work influenced the research design and Arizona followed that research design. But there are undoubtedly differences between Oregon and Arizona in the state and institutional policy contexts that will need to be brought to bear on the data analysis. It is imperative that much broader participation in the project begin as soon as possible, including individuals familiar with academic and student support policies in at the community college and university campus level – not just the Maricopa District offices. My conversations with individuals at ASU and Maricopa revealed that there are a number of important policy issues relating to transfer that need to be brought into UTRN discussions and that it will be important for individuals at ASU and Maricopa to hear each others' perspectives. My interviews revealed some areas of possible contention between the two institutions regarding the best approaches to serving potential transfer students and these issues need to be discussed as part of this project. In addition, it will be important for Arizona's UTRN project leaders to figure out how and where this project fits within the landscape of several other major initiatives to improve transfer in Arizona.

4. Excellent Potential to Influence Policy Affecting Baccalaureate Completion Among Student Who Succeed in Transferring

In last year's report I expressed optimism about the project's potential to contribute to the national debate about statewide transfer pathways to best promote transfer. I am pleased to report that this aspect of the project is proceeding well. Across the country states are struggling to devise transfer pathways that balance the need for local variation in curriculum with the imperative to give students as seamless and direct a pathway as possible. The main analytical activity of the UTRN project this year has been centered on the analysis of various pathways to determine which pathway taken by transfer students proves most effective in terms of student retention and baccalaureate degree completion once at the university. Both Arizona and Oregon provide excellent cases for the study of this issue because both have developed strong general education transfer modules as well as a variety of associate degree transfer options, but many students choose not to follow those pathways. An analysis of the effectiveness of these options for various majors and subgroups of students will be a very valuable product of this research.

This analysis of pathways seems well poised to lead to some useful policy recommendations. In Oregon, for example, data show that students who transfer with the AAOT do best once at PSU yet statewide data show there has been a decline in the number of students who transfer with that degree. This could lead to recommendations aimed at making more widespread use of this effective transfer degree. As another example, analyses of swirling patterns en route to transfer show key differences across majors in the impact of swirling. This could lead to

recommendations to modify curricula or co-admission policies to better meet student needs as appropriate to various disciplines.

In Arizona there is a puzzling finding, not from UTRN analyses but from an outside consultant study – the Hezel report. That report found that students who earned various transfer-oriented associate degrees *in addition to* the statewide transfer general education pattern did *less well* once they transferred to the university than students who had the general education module alone. It surprises me that the consultant report did not comment on the apparent counter-intuitive nature of that finding. It surprised me as well that Arizona interviewees were not actively following up on that finding. I believe that the UTRN project provides an important opportunity to dig deeper into that finding as it pursues the important analysis of the impact of various statewide transfer patterns on baccalaureate completion.

I do need to issue a caveat here that I discuss much more fully in the next item. As promising as the analysis of pathways is, it is relevant *only to students who successfully transfer*. As such it addresses one important part of the UTRN project's goal: increase baccalaureate success rates among transfer students. But it does not help us understand how we might get more students to transfer in the first place.

5. *Insufficient Project Focus on Identifying Barriers to Transfer*

In my first two evaluation reports I raised the concern that the project seemed to be largely ignoring an important question that was clearly part of the proposal to Lumina: how to increase transfer rates. The principal reason that Florida was dropped from the project is that the research design was limited to students who had transferred. As I stated in my earlier reports, it is impossible to learn anything about barriers to transfer by limiting the study to students who successfully transfer. Successful transfer students either did not face significant barriers to transfer or they successfully overcame such barriers. If this project is to contribute to national efforts to increase transfer rates (as an important means of increasing baccalaureate production among community college students) it is necessary to understand what prevents students who want to transfer from successfully transferring.

I was quite disappointed to find, in my interviews this time, that this issue is still seriously misunderstood or overlooked. I know from speaking with the project staff at PSU and from looking at their research design materials, that they understand this component of the project. Yet in both states I found that the quantitative analysis being undertaken and the policy issues being discussed are almost exclusively (if not exclusively) focused on students at the universities. For some reason the message received by community college project participants seems to be that whatever barriers to transfer students face at the community college is the community college's problem to address and is not part of this project.

Let me relay several responses from my interviews to underscore how widespread this attitude seems to be (emphases added in all cases).

These responses are from Arizona interviewees:

- A respondent said that they are unable to differentiate in the data between community college students who drop out and those who transfer somewhere other than one of the three public universities but that this was not a problem **since they are really focusing on students who transfer to ASU.**
- One interviewee brought up the problem of students who intend to transfer but fail to transfer. But when I asked how they were investigating this issue in the project, she said that **she never understood that this was part of the project – that she didn't see it as the purpose of the project.**
- Another Arizona respondent said that a top priority of the Maricopa district is to increase transfers among those who want to transfer but are not succeeding – adding that those who do transfer do quite well at the university. I asked if the UTRN project has the potential to help Maricopa with this priority she said **“I hope so but we're not there yet.”**

These responses are from Oregon interviewees:

- A respondent from a community college said that **no data analysis is being done that would examine barriers to transfer.**
- I asked an individual from another community college whether data fields exist that would allow examination of enrollment behaviors that might offer insight into barriers to transfer. I was told only **that there is “potential” for that kind of analysis but that it is not being pursued.**
- A third community college respondent, when asked what data elements would allow studying barriers to transfer, said that is **“a second research problem that we would have to do here” because PSU is looking at the data “from their perspective” – i.e., the pathways followed by their transfer students.**
- A fourth community college respondent echoed the same exact words, i.e., that **PSU looks at transfer “from their perspective.”**

I am providing all of this evidence not only because I believe that identifying barriers to transfer is important but because everyone with whom I spoke felt that identifying barriers to transfer and increasing transfer rates is important. In addition, everyone agrees that there are fields in the cohort data that could be used to investigate the issue. These include student course-taking behaviors such as unit load (full-time v part-time attendance), continuous enrollment v stopping out, credit accumulation, enrolling in student success courses, if and when a student enrolls in remedial courses, when a student takes or passes “gatekeeper” courses in math and English, etc. The faculty consultant who is playing a large role in the data analysis told me that she was “making a big star by her notes” on the potential to incorporate these kinds of data elements into the analysis to address barriers to transfer. She added that the issue is really important but that it hasn't been done and hasn't been discussed.

I know that the project leaders fully intended this issue to be addressed. I think that what may have happened is that with the project leadership in all three states (before Florida was dropped) residing at the four-year institution, that it was just a natural

reaction to address these issues from the four-year perspective of wanting to see their transfer students better served. I think that the community college participants must have assumed that any detailed analysis of problems or barriers at their own institutions was their own problem. I hope that this misunderstanding can quickly be rectified and that the issue can be incorporated into the quantitative analyses as well as in the qualitative portions of the project. This analysis could dovetail nicely with the ongoing analysis of transfer pathways in that it would be very important to understand why some students complete the general education portion of transfer and/or transfer associate degrees *but do not transfer*. Such an analysis could reveal important issues about the appropriateness of various pathways for various groups of students and majors and about the admission policies of the universities.

6. *Appropriate Priorities for Year 4 and Beyond*

With the added focus on the issues just discussed above, the agenda for year 4 seems to be appropriate and on track, with the possible no-cost extension, to deliver the intended results. Student interviews are the only major new data collection undertaking. The challenge here will be to get them done expeditiously while taking the front-end time to ensure that they probe the issues that were raised in the quantitative findings. Of course the big challenge for year 4 involves how to integrate the findings from both sets of interviews into the findings from the cohort data analysis. Convenings of policy and data folks together will be crucial to successfully meeting this challenge.

The project proposal envisioned an ongoing national network of urban universities and community colleges interested in applying the findings from this project to their states and in sustaining a national dialog about increasing transfers and transfer student success. Based on the experience of the project so far, I think that it would be overly ambitious and likely impractical to base this network on the kind of intensive data sharing and analysis that has occurred among these three (now two) states. I agree with the current thinking of the project director that a valuable national conversation could be established and sustained without PSU collecting data from interested parties and trying to produce multi-state analyses. Instead, PSU could publicize its own research design and protocol and set out some minimum requirements that states would have to follow in order to make similarly useful contributions to policy in their own states. States could share the results of their analysis and conversations could occur about various lessons learned and policy changes undertaken.

Concluding Comments and Recommendations

The UTRN project faced some major adversity in the first few years but did a nice job this past year of getting back on track with a two-state project. All the pieces are in place for a productive fourth year.

The following recommendations derive from the main points I have raised above:

1. In Arizona, advisory committees should be established right away to bring various perspectives to bear on remaining data design issues and especially to help interpret the results of the data analysis and link those results to policy recommendations. It may not be necessary to establish separate policy and data committees but there should be a committee with representation from academic, administrative, and student support areas within the Maricopa District, some community college campuses, and ASU. This committee should also determine how the UTRN project relates to the ongoing efforts in Arizona to improve transfer. One respondent, for example, mentioned Maricopa's participation in a national benchmark project for which they are doing a lot of analysis of barriers to transfer. These efforts might be able to be mutually reinforcing. There are also several statewide initiatives on transfer, including the one that led to the commissioning of the Hezel report. UTRN participants need to figure out where they best fit in to these other efforts.
2. In both states significant attention should be given to analyzing – through cohort data as well as interviews – the progress of students within the community college whether or not they ultimately transfer. The goal is to understand what promotes or impedes the successful transfer of community college students. This is quite different than efforts to understand what promotes baccalaureate degree completion of transfer students once they have transferred. Some data elements in the community college cohort data that might be useful for this purpose are:
 - Part-time v full-time enrollment
 - Credit accumulation – both absolute and over first year or first two years
 - College ready v remedial status at initial enrollment
 - Remedial course taking – take in first semester, first year, etc.
 - Enroll in student success course
 - Evening student v day student
 - Stop out v continuously enrolled
 - Declared major v no major
 - Gatekeeping math/English course-taking –when taken, grade earned
 - Prerequisites taken before attempting college level courses
 - Degree earned but no transfer – by specific type of degreeIt may be that not all of these issues are captured in the data but those that are should be incorporated into the analysis.
3. The original research design element of “backward tracking” of successful baccalaureate earners should be dropped (it has not yet begun). This was a suspect design component anyway as I pointed out in the first evaluation because by focusing only on successes it would not allow valid conclusions about the differences between successful and unsuccessful patterns. In addition, at this point it would be counterproductive to efforts to increase the focus on students who may never make a successful transfer to the university.

4. I know that the intent is to simplify student interviews by drawing on the protocol used in the administrator interviews, but care should be taken to use the findings from cohort data analyses to shape interviews, e.g., ask about why students follow or don't follow various statewide pathways, why they went to several colleges, etc.
5. Efforts to standardize the approaches between the two states should be relaxed. It is less important that both states use the same definition of "transfer intent" or even "transfer" than that each state makes the most of its opportunities to address its own circumstances and policy environments. Arizona, for example, does not use the Clearinghouse and therefore cannot track student transfer to four-year institutions other than the three public universities. This is a major limitation in its ability to define "transfer" since dropouts cannot be distinguished from successful transfers to other universities. Arizona will have to interpret results accordingly but this limitation should not affect how Oregon defines transfer students since it can access the Clearinghouse.
6. Committees in both states should discuss how the findings from this project, since it is a regional project, will be injected into discussions of state policy in order to have the broadest impact on student outcomes in the state. For example, one respondent in Arizona works directly within a reporting context to the Joint Conference Committee, which has representatives from the governing boards and presidents of Arizona colleges and universities. This group has set a major priority to increase baccalaureate degree production in Arizona. This respondent was not familiar with the UTRN project at the time of my call but her association with this statewide network would be a valuable outlet for the results of the UTRN project. Similarly, participants in Oregon should find good outlets to have their research results influence discussions of policy at the statewide level.