

Appendix A: First Evaluation Report
June, 2006
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Outside Evaluator

Sources for This Report

This report is based on my review of the proposal narrative, as submitted to the Lumina Foundation, some correspondence among project members, and selected meeting minutes, and interviews with the following individuals in Oregon and Florida:

- Kathi Ketcheson, Project Director, Portland State University
- Juliette Stoering, Portland State University
- Terry Rhodes, Portland State University
- Peter Collier, Portland State University
- Tim Green, Mount Hood Community College
- Ron Smith, Portland Community College
- Michael Moore, University of South Florida
- Jan Ignash, University of South Florida
- Karen Griffin, Hillsborough Community College
- Kay Burniston, St. Petersburg College

Summary of Activity to Date

The project start date was delayed due in part to the death of one of the project leaders. Most of the individuals with whom I spoke indicated they had been involved in the project for only 3-6 months and had attended just a few meetings. Not surprisingly, it appears that there has been somewhat more activity in the lead state, Oregon, although Florida is heavily involved in the discussions and provision of data. The participation of the third state, Arizona has been confirmed and will begin July 1, 2006.

Activity in Oregon

A data advisory committee and a policy advisory committee have been established and both have begun to meet regularly. There are representatives from two community colleges and Portland State University (PSU). Due to the late start, the project team elected to begin by looking at available data, because that was the quickest way to get the advisory groups thinking about the task at hand (as opposed to considering policy issues first). The data group has agreed on an initial research design for the quantitative portion of the project and has developed data-sharing protocols to comply with privacy and security issues.

There are two principal components to the quantitative design. The first is to track an entering cohort of first-time community college freshmen at the two community colleges and analyze their pathways and progress within the college and to other institutions, with, of course, a primary interest in progress and pathways relating to transferring to and graduating from PSU. The second is to “backward track” PSU baccalaureate completers to analyze the pathways they followed to their success.

The data committee has also begun to discuss some of the tougher data issues like what to do about missing SSNs and how to determine which community college students should be identified as having the “intent to transfer.” The group has decided not to limit cohort of first-time community college freshmen to transfer-oriented students, since many vocational students ultimately transfer. Nevertheless, the group does want to identify students with an initial transfer intent and this is a difficult issue being grappled with across the country.

The policy group has begun to identify the policies it wishes to investigate for their impact on transfer success and has laid out a template for collecting and analyzing information about these policies.

Activity in Florida

Florida also has participation from two community colleges and one university – University South Florida (USF), with the state’s project co-director being from USF. Similar to Oregon, Florida has appointed a data advisory group and a policy advisory group. As of this writing, the policy committee has met at least once and the data committee has met at least twice. The data group has reached some decisions about the various data fields to collect. The policy group is waiting for some data before taking any substantive steps to define policy areas of principal focus. Certain policy issues, however, are already targeted for study. For example, there is an interest in looking at some technically-oriented community college programs for which clear articulation agreements with USF are not as readily developed and whose students may, therefore, face more barriers to transfer.

The quantitative research design initially selected by the Florida team would have looked only at students who were enrolled in USF and primarily at those who earned a BA. In my interviews for this report, I raised questions about that design (see below for detail). The group is now reconsidering their approach to see how they can incorporate information about students at the community colleges who don’t complete a transfer pathway and students at USF who leave before obtaining a BA. I believe this is important in order to identify barriers to transfer and graduation.

Coordination among States

There has been some coordination among the state project directors, including a telephone conference call and numerous individual phone and email communications. Data advisory group representatives have shared templates and discussed some of the common data issues. These discussions, however, apparently did not reveal that Oregon and Florida were planning on very different quantitative research designs, i.e., that Florida was not planning to collect data for an entering cohort of community college students. I believe that conversations are now underway to modify the Florida research design to include the examination of community college students who may not successfully transfer to USF as well as USF students who may not graduate. Since Arizona's participation has only recently been assured, this report does not include any information on its participation.

The above summaries, and my individual interviews, reveal that the project is off to a good, if delayed, start. My interviews revealed strong support for the goals of the project and an eagerness to move further along with its implementation. I do want to make a number of suggestions and emphasize a few points that are intended to ensure that the project's goals, as I understand them, are addressed in the research design, both quantitative and qualitative.

Suggestions for Strengthening Initial Research Design

1. Clarify the research questions concerning community college transfer and BA attainment and the implications for research design

I recognize that it is early in the project and that substantial progress has been made on the issue of data sharing, data templates, data definitions, etc. Nevertheless, I think that the project could benefit from more clarity about the research question(s) being asked, the student populations for whom to include data, and the variables that should be included.

At the most fundamental level, I think there needs to be more discussion about the balance of focus on successful (1) transfer and/or (2) degree completion. The proposal states that “Ultimately, the goal of the project is to increase the transfer and success rates of community college students who intend to earn the Bachelor’s degree.” When asked what the main goal of the project is, the Florida co-director replied that it is to “help increase national transfer rates.” The project website for the Florida portion of the project also refers to analyzing the effectiveness of pathways with respect to transfer rates. A focus on increasing transfer rates requires examining barriers to transfer. However, the initial Florida project design, and my discussions, revealed a stronger project focus on describing the pathways taken by students *who have earned the BA*. If the focus is to be on factors promoting degree completion among transfer students, and not on factors promoting successful transfer, I would encourage the project team to clarify this with the funder to make sure there is no misunderstanding.

If the decision is, however, to include a focus on identifying barriers to transfer, then I think it is helpful to consider three separate target groups (each of which would then be analyzed by gender, race, etc.):

- students who intend to transfer from a community college to a four-year institutions but never do;
- students who transfer but fail to earn a baccalaureate; and
- students who successfully transfer *and* earn a BA.

This would foster an understanding of the barriers that lead to the first two outcomes (because the barriers may be quite different) and the factors that lead to the success of the third group. This effort to identify barriers to transfer cannot be limited to data collection to students who have overcome (or not encountered) the barriers.

Whether the focus is on understanding transfer success or BA success, or both, it's important not to look only at successful cases. While important descriptive information about pathways can certainly be gleaned from examining successful cases, the methodological caution in order here is that when you look only at successes you can't draw conclusions about causal factors in the success. That is, you cannot conclude that the pathways followed by students who graduated were factors in their success without similarly analyzing pathways for students who did not succeed. If, for example, you find that a large portion of students who graduated followed some kind of "swirl" pattern among institutions, you cannot conclude that "swirling" contributes to degree attainment because students who failed to graduate may also have followed the same "swirl" pattern.

A final issue I would like to raise about the quantitative research design concerns how to identify students with transfer intent. The Oregon group plans to use, at least at the outset, AA degree attainment as the indicator of transfer intent. I think this is too high a bar because it removes from consideration all of the students who intended to transfer but faced barriers such that they didn't make it to the AA level. The group recognizes the shortcoming of this proxy of transfer intent. They have mentioned the possibility of gleaning intent from student course taking behavior. This is time-consuming but valuable. The California Community College system, for example, defines "intent to transfer" as having completed 12 units and *attempted* transfer-level English *or* math. The data advisory committee should consider this and other means to better identify students who intend to transfer.

2. Strengthen the connection between the policy and data advisory groups to better inform the research design

Based on my interviews, it seems that there has not been sufficient attention yet devoted to how the identification of policies believed to foster or impede student progress toward transfer and degree attainment should affect the data collection component of the project. I understand that the groups were eager to get started and, indeed, looking at data is certainly a reasonable way to start. But I would encourage early discussions about what kinds of policies might influence student success because these discussions could influence research design and data collection. For example, if learning communities or first year experience courses can be identified, and are found to promote success, there would be clear "actionable" results from the research. Similarly, there are clear policy implications if data were to show that delaying enrollment in remedial courses or

allowing course adds/drops into the semester impedes success. Based on my interviews, I was a little concerned that the data design was not being fully informed by discussions about the policies that might factor into student success. Both teams indicated that these policy discussions would occur in time, but my point is only that it is best to know the data you want to collect before you get too far along in the data collection.

In these policy discussions I would also encourage some attention to whether the intent is to focus primarily on what I am calling “macro” policies to ensure consistency across institutions and facilitate seamless movement, or if there is an equal interest in looking at “micro” policies within institutions. For example, institutional policies that could affect pathways and success *and* that might be “capturable” in the data include those which address the following:

- assessment and placement in remedial coursework (voluntary or mandatory)
- when students must or may take any needed remedial coursework
- whether students are allowed to take college level courses before taking or completing remediation
- how late into the term students are allowed to register for class
- whether there are unit load restrictions for students on academic probation
- if and by when students are required to designate a major or degree objective
- if students are required to meet certain GPA requirement to maintain financial aid
- enrollment in learning communities
- enrollment in first year experience courses

I am not suggesting that these specific policies should be incorporated into the research – only that there are policies that, if selected as a topic of interest, could affect the quantitative research design.

By contrast, there are policies that affect student pathways and progress for which there may be no ability to track with data, such as participation in various student support programs, use of counseling and other support services, participation in orientation, and policies on residency and fee requirements. In these cases, methods other than the quantitative analysis of the cohort data will be needed to understand the impact of the policies on students.

3. Define pathways more specifically in order to influence research design and data collection

The principal goal of the project is to determine whether certain pathways are more conducive to student success, with particular attention to under-served students. In my interviews I found that there was no clear understanding yet across the participants about what, exactly, is meant by “pathways.” Some mentioned general points about “how students move through institutions” including whether transfer students do as well as native students. Some talked about “swirling” among different institutions in non-traditional patterns. Another talked about “pathways” in terms of more formal versus less formal structures for students to follow as they move through their academic programs. One respondent offered that the proposal was “purposefully vague” about the meaning of the “pathways” because it is necessarily an evolving concept. I agree that the meaning(s) of “pathway” will likely emerge more fully as the project participants begin to analyze data. But at the same time, I think that there are certain advantages to getting more

specificity around the concept at this stage of the project so that participants will end up with the best data possible to answer the questions they want to ask. For example, in addition to pathways across institutions, it may also be useful to examine pathways within an institution, e.g. remedial sequences and attendance patterns.

4. Address qualitative research design issues

Because of the late start and the attention to critical data issues, there has been little attention to date to the qualitative research components that were mentioned in the proposal. The project teams plan to address qualitative research design issues in the second year. This is reasonable; clearly you can't do everything "first." My only point here is that the design of the qualitative research component should not wait until the quantitative component is settled, as they need to complement one another. An important part of the qualitative research could be surveys or focus groups involving community college students to better understand the messages they receive about transfer pathways, the services they use and don't use, and the barriers they perceive. Whether the project is staffed and funded for this level of qualitative research, of course, is outside my purview.

5. Multi-state

Now that the participation of Arizona has been confirmed, it might be a good idea for the representatives from the participating states meet to discuss the key contextual differences among the states that could be incorporated into the project design. I am uncertain if the three states were chosen because of certain differences or not, but whatever the reason, there is a rich opportunity for cross state analysis. For example, there may be differences among the states in the mission of community colleges within the overall higher education system (i.e., the portion of students who begin college in a

community college), in the role of the AA degree in student transfer pathways, in basic articulation policies, in governance structures, in tuition and aid policies, etc. While these differences certainly cannot be subjected to any rigorous analysis with only three cases, I think some interesting lessons could be drawn, as envisioned in the proposal, about the impact of state-level policies and structures on student success.