

Project Overview

The Urban Transfer Research Network (UTRN) is a collaborative multi-institutional research project focused on low-income and minority students who begin their postsecondary careers at community colleges with the goal of attaining at least the Bachelor's degree. The purpose of the research is to chart the pathways and success of the target student populations and inform institutional policy and practice as it affects student transfer success. Ultimately, the goal of the project is to increase the community college transfer rate and success rate of students attaining the Bachelor's degree.

Progress on Grant Objectives, Activities and Timeline

Year One Objectives

The project timeline listed the following objectives for the first year:

- Local organization, including staffing
- Establishment of data and policy advisory committees for each research site
- Meetings of the principal and co-principal investigators
- Design and validation for local research designs for quantitative analyses
- Development of a local protocols for review of policy and practice
- Establishment of baseline data and initial analyses of subgroups
- Progress reports from research sites

Delay in Project Start

In July 2005, Dr. Dan Walleri, the primary author of the UTRN and well-known researcher in the area of community college transfer, died suddenly. His untimely death was followed by a period of grieving among his close colleagues in the Portland metro area and a longer period of uncertainty on the Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC) campus, where he served as Director of Research and Planning. Dr. Walleri was to serve as a paid consultant and had committed one of his research analysts as the data analyst for the Portland site. He was also planning to lead the qualitative research.

While Portland State and USF stayed in close communication throughout the summer and fall, several months passed before MHCC was able to name a new co-principal investigator. At the end of October 2005, Dr. Beth Pitonzo joined the UTRN, representing the campus. During the fall, the research analyst who had been committed to the project took the position of interim Director in Dr. Walleri's place and was not able to devote time to the UTRN. A search for a permanent replacement for Dr. Walleri was not concluded until March 2006.

There can be no doubt that Dr. Walleri's death substantially slowed progress on the research during the first few months of the project. Uncertainty on the MHCC campus following his death prompted frequent communication between the principal investigator and the MHCC leadership to ensure its continued participation. Identification of key individuals who could take up the roles identified for MHCC in the project proposal was a difficult and lengthy process.

Summary of Progress During First Year

Despite the late start, both research sites were actively engaged in the project and communicated frequently throughout the first year. Extensive involvement by faculty and administrators from the universities and their community college partners through their data and policy advisory committees has provided visibility and credibility to the project. Portland State has completed a preliminary identification of cohorts and establishment of baseline data; USF will have completed this work in July. Communication of the project has begun through press releases, development of websites, and presentations at regional and national conferences.

The project has generated considerable excitement in both locations, and has drawn the interest of other institutions who are not currently included in the grant funding. Portland State has linked UTRN research with a related project funded by the Portland State/Community College Research Consortium, and has begun to link up with a related FIPSE-funded project that is focused on mentoring to increase the likelihood of student success in the first year. Community colleges and Portland State have recently formed the Portland Area Higher Education Consortium to streamline transfer and co-admissions among these institutions. The Consortium's work in developing common admissions, financial aid, and registration processes will inform UTRN's work in identifying policies and practices that either hinder or help transfer students in completing the baccalaureate. Funding from Lumina has allowed both Portland State and USF to pursue research on transfer students that could not have been accomplished without additional staff or resources.

Expansion of Research Network

Expansion of the research network has begun in the Portland area. In January, Portland State appointed a representative from Portland Community College (the largest source of transfer students for Portland State) as the chair of the Policy Advisory Committee. PCC's institutional research office is engaged with Portland State and MHCC in the project and a data sharing protocol has been established between the campuses. Clark College, located across the river in Vancouver, Washington, has expressed interest in joining in the data exchange, and a representative from Chemeketa Community College in the Salem area will be joining the Policy Committee in the fall.

In July, Arizona State University (ASU) and Maricopa Community College (MCC) will join Portland State and USF as co-investigators for the UTRN. Building on the data and policy analyses frameworks established in the first year, ASU and MCC will appoint policy and data advisory committees and begin quantitative and qualitative research. During May, Portland State forwarded data definitions and the charge to the advisory committees to ASU and MCC so that they could begin to plan for implementation in the new fiscal year. A joint meeting of the three research sites will be scheduled for fall 2006.

Local Organization

Both Portland State and USF established data and policy advisory committees and conducted several meetings between January and June 2006. Portland State hired a part-time office support person to handle meeting logistics and budgets. Both campuses have hired research analysts to conduct data collection, establishment of baseline data, and preliminary analyses.

Meeting of Project Leaders

Project leaders from Portland State, USF, and MHCC met in Portland in December to discuss the research design and goals for the year. A second meeting was held in April in conjunction with the American Association of Community Colleges conference in California. The principal investigator participated through a conference call from Portland, while the chair of the Portland State Policy Advisory Committee, co-investigator from USF, and a representative from MCC met face to face in Long Beach.

Local Protocol for Review of Policy and Practice

The policy committees at USF and Portland State are collecting university and community college policies related to transfer, along with short narrative descriptions of the impact of these policies, as seen by the administrators in various offices across campus. A faculty member from the Graduate School of Education at Portland State has agreed to develop the qualitative research design and will use the policy inventory as a basis for interviews with faculty, students, and administrators during year two. At USF, a graduate student will develop an additional qualitative piece to capture students' thoughts and experiences in the semester before transfer as well as the semester immediately after.

Data Collection and Establishment of Baseline

Portland State University

Institutional Review Board approval was received for the quantitative research portion of the UTRN at Portland State. The research design in the first year included an effort to track two cohorts of entering community college students throughout their careers at the community college and at Portland State. MHCC supplied data for two cohorts of students, those who first enrolled in credit bearing courses during the summer or fall of 1999 or 2000. Those data include MHCC enrollment records through Fall Term 2005, associate degree attainment records, and financial aid records. MHCC student data have been matched to Portland State enrollment and degree attainment data. Portland Community College (PCC) is providing student data in the same format so that Portland State can conduct the same analysis on these data.

A second phase of the research will track Portland State bachelor's degree recipients back to the community colleges. Data on students who have earned a bachelor's degree at Portland State between the summer of 2003 and the spring of 2005 have been provided to the community college partners. This data file will be used to identify enrollment at the community college at any point before earning the bachelor's degree. Portland State will then conduct similar analyses identifying drop-out, stop-out, and continuous enrollment behavior. Course taking patterns will also be examined during this phase of the research.

In this first year, an important data-sharing problem was identified and resolved. Sharing data from past cohorts involves the disclosure of student social security numbers among the institutions. In view of the numerous high profile national incidents of theft of confidential data, the University set up a secure file transfer server to ensure that student records would be protected. Researchers at both the University and the community colleges can now download and upload student information in a secure environment.

In addition to the research activity related to the UTRN, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) is also conducting a survey of transfer students who have participated in one of Portland State's coadmission programs with local community colleges. The information from this survey, particularly the information about the transfer process, will complement the findings from the UTRN research.

University of South Florida

The Policy Advisory Committee in Tampa approved a set of core research questions for the national project, as well as several sub-questions specific to USF. The Data Advisory Committee has developed a draft data file and discussed the research

design to gather data from all participating institutions, Hillsboro Community College (HCC), St.Petersburgh College (SPC), and USF. Generous assistance in data gathering is also being provided by the Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges. In addition, forms have been submitted to Florida's K-20 Education Data Warehouse to request information concerning high school variables that the Tampa Policy Advisory Committee specifically wanted to include in the study. Florida's state databases provide a rich source of longitudinal information that helps inform this study. Institutional Review Board approval at the Tampa site to conduct the study was also requested and received.

The draft data file is expected to be finalized by the beginning of July and, shortly thereafter, the first baseline data will be run on a select cohort of transfer students (aligned with the cohort Portland is using). Most of the work to-date at the Tampa site has focused on transfer student characteristics, behavior, and outcomes, both before and after transfer. Longitudinal macro-level data on community college "leavers" exists at the state level, broken down by individual colleges, GPA, and program track. Policy Group members at the participating community colleges agree that tracking a cohort of "leavers" could yield some useful information if it were included as part of this grant. Recent survey instruments and reports on community college leavers were obtained from two large Florida community colleges, Daytona Beach Community College and Indian River Community College, to serve as possible models for our Tampa group.

Evaluation

The external evaluator for the project has prepared a detailed report, which is attached. The project will consider recommendations from this report and incorporate

them into the activities for year two, as appropriate. In addition to the written report, the evaluator discussed suggestions and concerns with the co-principal investigators over the phone. Her input has been invaluable in aligning project goals between Oregon and Florida and in clarifying the direction that should be taken by the quantitative and policy research. In addition, the Arizona campuses will benefit from the points made in the evaluation report when they join the project in July.

Learning

The evaluation report was instrumental in flagging and correcting misalignment between USF and Portland State as the quantitative research was underway, thus helping to avoid misinterpretation of results as the analysis moved forward. This also helped to provide a better framework for the Arizona campuses in year two by clarifying methodological issues for the two leading campuses before the first year of the project was over. Differences in the methodological orientation of the research teams in the two states, as well as local variations in the way data are gathered, stored, and analyzed, did not serve as a barrier to progress, but may have led to a lack of consistency further down the road. It was important to have an outsider's perspective on the direction of the project to keep the overall objectives and expected outcomes in line with the project proposal.

It will be important in year two to share quarterly reports among the three research sites and to hold more frequent email or telephone conferences. Development of a formal communication protocol among the three sites will be a priority. Two project meetings will be scheduled during the year, one in fall and one in spring, to facilitate face to face conversations among the research teams. Communication is all important to a

project sited in three distant locations, and will be a major focus of the project in the next two years.

Communication

Work on the project has been communicated through press releases in Oregon and Florida, and through project websites on both campuses (which are in various stages of development). During February, the Portland State and MHCC project teams made a presentation to the Oregon University System's Student Success Conference in Portland, Oregon. Session participants were asked to provide feedback on issues surrounding transfer, generally, and for underrepresented students. Their comments provided a basis for the protocol for the review of policy and practice.

In addition, a special interest group session focused on the UTRN was held at the Association for Institutional Research Forum in Chicago during May. Session participants provided feedback on the project's research questions, advice for data collection and analysis, and suggestions for dissemination. One suggestion was to make available to potential participants in the "urban transfer research network" a basic data file layout, listing data elements to be collected and brief descriptions. Participants felt that other urban institutions would be more likely to join a network to promote urban transfer if they were given practical tools as a way of diffusing the time-intensive task of setting up the necessary data file.

Sustainability

The baseline data definitions and data sharing protocols through secure servers developed in the first year of the project will be useful beyond the funding period, as additional research is carried forward by the project campuses. Links between the

Lumina research and other funded research projects and with local or regional initiatives are being established, and the network is expanding to include institutions not mentioned in the grant proposal. These two activities will help broaden the research and ensure that it is a long-term focus for the institutions involved. In addition, interest in issues surrounding transfer, and specifically around low-income and underrepresented students, is running high in both Florida and Oregon, and substantial interest in the Lumina research has been reflected in discussions among faculty, administrators, and state and local level officials.

Financial Report

Financial reports for Portland State, MHCC, and USF are attached. None of the three campuses expended the full amount allotted for the first year, in large part because of the project's late start following Dr. Walleri's death. MHCC spent the least amount of its budget because the individual originally designated to provide data analysis for the project was assigned other duties, resulting in the permanent move of the data analysis function to Portland State. The year two budget for MHCC will be adjusted accordingly. A small subcontract will be awarded to Portland Community College as a new partner in the project to cover the costs of data extraction and file creation. USF will receive some carry forward from the previous year, while Portland State will use some of the year one balance to support and additional graduate student assigned to the policy committee.