

Private Higher Education Transfer: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle

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In 1997, more than 2.2 million students in the United States successfully transferred postsecondary credit from one institution to another. In recent years, transfer and articulation concerns have become more prominent in higher education policy discussions based on both the increasing numbers of students transferring and the more varied and complex progression of students through higher education (Sima, Inman, & Stein, 2001, p. 1). Additionally, students do not always transfer simply a general education block of courses, but in fact shop around between institutions with criteria of accessibility, perceived ease, and cost.

Given the complexities of transfer and articulation, making such connections can be difficult at many levels, and the issue is clouded even further with a lack of consensus on the overall benefits of higher education (Katsinas, 1999). Attempting to predict an uncertain future and what type of degrees and competencies will be needed is difficult. The current examination was framed around the question: What can be learned about the community college students who decide to transfer to four-year institutions like Madonna and what does Madonna do to help them succeed?

Madonna University History and Mission

Madonna University is proud of its long-standing commitment to quality liberal arts education and public service. Founded by the Felician Sisters of Livonia as Presentation Junior College in 1937, it was renamed Madonna College in 1947 and incorporated as a baccalaureate institution; it became coeducational in 1972, initiated its first graduate programs in 1982, and achieved university status in 1991. Celebrating over 50 years of academic excellence, Madonna University maintains its tradition as an independent Catholic Franciscan University (Kujawa, 2002). A pioneer in opening its doors to both older and younger adults with diverse economic, religious, social and cultural backgrounds, the University remains committed to its belief in the spiritual, educational, and service-oriented mission: education for truth, goodness, and service (Kujawa, 2002).

Madonna University is an independent Catholic, Franciscan institution of higher learning committed to teaching, scholarship, and service with about 4,500 students. The University's educational philosophy is founded on Franciscan beliefs, and this view defines men and women as moral-ethical beings and advocates a life based on truth, goodness, and service to others.

Madonna University is committed to meeting the educational needs of traditional

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and non-traditional students as they pursue baccalaureate and master's degrees and lifelong learning. The University's strong foundation of liberal arts education combined with career preparation is acknowledged for its relatedness to the quality of life and economic growth and development of southeastern Michigan. In realizing all aspects of its vision, the University emphasizes a service approach to students through an integrated student support structure and flexible delivery systems both on and off campus, nationally and internationally, and through in-person and distance education instruction (Nolan, 1999).

Madonna University recognizes that each individual's contribution is vital to achieving society's goals and, therefore, values each person's special talents and abilities. A diversity of races, creeds, cultures, and physical ability enriches the University community, and, by creating a climate of mutual respect and justice, the University affirms each individual's right to dignity and civility. The University fosters a spirit of belonging, interdependence, and solidarity based on principles of mutual trust, respect for each individual, and social justice (Kujawa, 2002). The University strives to be an agent of transformation that, through the power of liberal arts education integrated with career preparation, educates men and women to create positive change in the lives of individuals and the global community. Thus, an ability to articulate with nearby community colleges is seen as evident, as is the creation of a smooth transition between the two-year college and the liberal arts setting is of paramount importance.

Madonna University believes in the enduring values of the liberal arts, with its curriculum based on the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences as the foundation for the critical and creative thinking, decision-making, and higher literacy necessary for being a responsible and productive citizen in contemporary society. Madonna University measures its success by the high level of learning achieved by its students. This is important because roughly 65% of all Madonna students are transfer students from local community colleges and an additional 10% come from other public and private institutions of higher education (Hribar, 2003). This mix of transfer and native students will continue to be an issue for the college to deal with, as many states are realizing enrollment increases. These increases are not spread evenly across the nation, and generally, they are confined to southern and western states and the cities of the northeast midwest that have high immigration rates.

Enrollment increases are not spread evenly across institutional types either, as many community colleges experience the greatest growth. For example, some of Madonna's 'feeder' community colleges have experienced growth from 2% to over 115% in the past 3 years (MACRAO, 2002).

While many students rely on the financial aid system to fund higher education, many students tend to start their higher education careers at community colleges because of cost savings. While public and private higher education institutions typically offer several forms of financial aid, community and junior colleges typically can 'undersell' or 'out-price' competing institutions. Recognizing the need and desire for many students to transfer for degree completion, many institutions, such as Madonna, have developed agreements to ease transfer for students from community colleges to four-year colleges.

MACRAO Transfer Agreement

In 1910, 24 college and university registrars and business officers, feeling the need to discuss their common responsibilities, met in Detroit, Michigan. Before adjourning the participants organized the American Association of Collegiate Registrars (MACRAO, 2002). From this small initial meeting, AACRAO has grown to a membership of more than 2,000 institutions with some 7,500 active members in the areas of admission, registration and records, international education, and institutional research, as well as affiliate member organizations.

In 1949 when many institutions began to establish separate offices of admissions and records, AACRAO adopted its present title: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). The Michigan Association of College Registrars hosted its first meeting in 1921 on the campus of Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. Like AACRAO, they adopted the title of MACRAO in the early fifties (MACRAO, 2002).

The Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (MACRAO) developed an agreement to facilitate transfer from Michigan community colleges to baccalaureate colleges and universities. The agreement provides for transfer of up to 30 semester credit hours to meet many (in some cases all) of the general education requirements at participating Michigan four-year colleges and universities (MACRAO, 2002).

The MACRAO Transfer Agreement stipulates that 30 semester credit hours of 100-level and above, compatible, college-level course work completed at one Michigan college or university will “transfer” to another Michigan college or university and be applied toward meeting the student's general education requirements at the “transferred to” institution. A complete listing of course and credit hour requirements are included under MACRAO Transfer Requirements from each of the participating schools, and specific courses in each general education category and which courses are counted as completed are determined by the institution offering the courses. Once students have completed the course work requirements for meeting MACRAO, they request that their transcript be posted “MACRAO Agreement Satisfied” by the transferring institution. With this in hand students can easily transfer and determine the amount of additional credits needed to graduate (MACRAO, 2002).

Transfer students pursuing their first baccalaureate degree at Madonna University must complete the requirements for general education, the desired major, including a minimum of 120 total semester credit hours. The University will consider accepting credits from degree-granting institutions listed in Accredited Institutions of Higher Learning published by the American Council on Education. The University will accept a maximum of 74 semester hours from accredited two-year institutions. With this policy in place, students have a good idea on the number of credits needed to graduate depending on their major. This also helps ease the technical aspects involved in transferring and gives students the most amount of academic credit possible for college level work. College administrators jointly developed specific “transfer guides” for

majors to help students transfer.

Transfer Guides are the “maps” that students intending to transfer to a four-year institution should be following. Each transfer institution typically has a Transfer Guide for specific majors; and they also typically have Transfer Guides for those students who may still be undecided or are planning to transfer in a Liberal Arts major. Counselors are available to help all transfer students in interpreting the Transfer Guides (as well as helping to select or narrow the choices of a transfer institution). Most colleges in Michigan currently have Transfer Guides on their web sites (MACRAO, 2002).

The successful recruitment of transfer students is only half of the issue. The “success of community-college transfers often requires extra monitoring by university officials” (Evelyn, 2003, p. A36) and collaboration with faculty. She also stated that there must be a balance between providing support services and making transfer students feel a part of the larger student body and campus community. Many colleges are seeing the value of having this particular group of students on campus.

Madonna has a number of articulation agreements with many community colleges and high schools in to assist with the transfer of students (Hribar, 2003). Most students are able to complete their degrees in two years after transfer depending on the enrollment status (e.g., full-time or part-time enrollment). Many classes are offered throughout the day, evening and on weekends to facilitate completion. Students are also able to take online courses, telecourses, and other convenient options to balance outside obligations such as work and family.

Madonna has a full-time admissions officer responsible for community college recruitment which hosts a transfer day with immediate admission for students. This has proven to be an effective recruitment strategy for students looking to obtain a four-year degree (Hribar, 2003). One advantage of Madonna over other institutions is the ability to have students apply immediately and know instantaneously that they have been accepted and can begin degree work. Many other institutions in the region require a lead-time of up to several months before notifying students of admission status.

Madonna offers a number of services typically found at major universities to help ensure student success, such as an Online Writing Lab (OWL), a Center for Personalized Instruction (CPI) which features TRIO programs, and an Office of Disability Resources (ODR). Considering the number of transfer students from multi-ethnic backgrounds, the institution has also found the use of an Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) to be especially helpful and relevant during recruitment, admissions, and orientation programs. The OMA especially has been successful in working with students whose first language is not English.

Within the past three years, the University has developed a strong presence in Southwest Detroit through its Southwest (Detroit) Educational Empowerment Program to encourage women, especially Latinas and African Americans, to complete a college education. Conducted on site in the Mexicantown district of Southwest Detroit, the SWEEP program offers college classes, including English as a Second Language and Education-to-Career Decision-making Workshops, along with support services such as child care, tutoring, transportation, and financial aid. Having served over 50 students in

the past three years, the program is successful at involving both full- and part-time faculty members in instruction, advising, mentoring, and other kinds of participation in the program (Nolan, 1999).

Community colleges and private institutions like Madonna University have a significant history of developing collaborations with community-based organizations, local K-12 school systems, and other higher education institutions to meet the needs of various student groups. In doing so it has attempted to promote access to colleges, address issues related to K-12 dropout rates and implement prevention strategies, as well as serve the needs of the local businesses in the community. Addressing these factors early on “in the educational pipeline,” colleges and universities are better able to recruit students with varying backgrounds into higher education and retain them more effectively. Additionally, private colleges can help ensure their enrollments by taking the attitude that serious students can come from any variety of locations, not just graduating high school seniors. The work and effort of Madonna to attract and retain transfer students is but one example of how private colleges can begin to reach out and make a difference in bachelor’s degree attainment.

Recommendations

Colleges and universities have implemented numerous recruitment and retention efforts for under-served and transfer students to achieve their educational goals. Activities geared toward fostering a favorable climate for the discussion of diversity issues within the college setting must continue to be a priority in programming, and universities must have particularly have extensive involvement with community organizations and local community colleges to improve educational opportunities for under-served students in metropolitan areas (Nolan, 1999).

Students may also enhance their educational opportunities through co-curricular activities, which have been shown to increase their persistence and graduation rates. Some examples of co-curricular activities include organizations, student government, and student involvement on campus committees. Collaboration, flexibility, and innovation are key elements of campus community building. Faculty, staff, and students have joined together to collaborate on the creation of an educational community that works toward the development of common experiences while appreciating differences and recognizing and respecting the importance of individual contributions to the academy. Another key element in campus community building has been a highly active student governance system that gives students an active voice in assessing student needs and in presenting innovative options that take into account the diverse student population.

There are many opportunities for student involvement in community service as well. Student concerns regarding peace and justice are translated in service learning with the students’ active involvement with: soup kitchens, Habitat for Humanity, Christmas for kids, and other volunteer opportunities in the community. There are many ways for students to become involved and connected to the university and community. Efforts

must be made to attract students to participate in these types of activities or create their own.

Research consistently shows that the level of student involvement greatly impacts the quality of a student's educational experience. Research by Kuh et al. (1991), for instance, shows that involved students are more positive about their college experience; more positively influenced with regard to social integration and institutional commitment; more satisfied with their social life, living environment and academic major; and have higher self-esteem than students who are not involved. Low levels of student involvement, limited socialization, limited interaction outside of class, and student apathy, produce a lack of student community (Astin, 1993).

The case of Madonna University is a good place to start the larger conversation of not only how students succeed, but how transfer students select their institutions and what can help them be successful. The discussion needs to be broad and include a wide variety of institutional types, but the unique nature and flavor of liberal arts colleges can and should not be lost in this discussion. There really is something different about an environment that places tremendous value on liberal learning. As enrollments rise throughout higher education, this is a wonderful opportunity for private liberal arts colleges to grow their enrollment, reconnect with their communities, and set the standard for student transition.

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