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“Audacious Advocacy”

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If the number of recent transfer publications provides a fair indication, it seems like everyone has transfer students on their minds. Yet, keeping the transfer function in the limelight is not something done only in foundation board rooms or legislative hearing rooms. In part three of their NISTS blog series Transfer Advocacy in a Post-Pandemic Higher Education Biosphere, the authors argue that all of us—in whatever roles we inhabit—must be prepared to effectively broker information and advocate for the needs of transfer students in every meeting.



If national reports, newspaper op-eds, recently published books, and federal and state legislation are fair barometers of interest, it seems like everyone has transfer students on their minds. Last March, the American Council on Education issued an extensive set of white papers focusing on the difficulties that transfer students have in transporting their credit from one institution to another. More recently, The Campaign for College Opportunity, a California-based advocacy organization, released *Chutes or Ladders: Strengthening California Community College Transfer So More Students Earn the Degrees They Seek.* In addition, just last month, the Tackling Transfer Policy Advisory Board published *The Transfer Reset: Rethinking Equitable Policy for Today's Leaders*. Of course, President Biden's efforts to advance a free community college proposal continues to be a top priority in federal policymaking. And more than a few states have already passed free college proposals.

In a recent *Forbes* article (April 15, 2021), M. Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public- and Land-Grant Universities—one of the largest four-year university advocacy organizations in the nation—argued that "Improving the transfer experience is an essential component of advancing equity, improving college affordability, and increasing college completion so more graduates—and society at large—can experience the benefits of a college education and a highly-educated populace."

Among recent books focusing on postsecondary education, there are at least three that tackle the transfer issue directly. *The Transfer Experience: A Handbook for Creating a More Equitable and Successful Postsecondary System* (2021), edited by John N. Gardner, Michael J. Rosenberg, and Andrew K. Koch, is a transfer advocate's treasure trove. The print version includes seventeen chapters written by some of the best transfer researchers and practitioners in the USA. The second book is *Power to the Transfer: Critical Race Theory and A Transfer Receptive Culture* (2020) by Dimpal Jain, Santiago N. Bernal Melendez, and Alfred R. Herrera. Given the current debate about the inclusion of critical race theory on college and university campuses, *Power to the Transfer* shows how enlightened

theory can inform practice, which is essential to our work with transfer students. The third book is a shameless plug for our recent publication, *Beyond Free College: Making Higher Education Work for 21st Century Students* (2021). In our defense, we mention the book only as an example of an emerging national consensus about the vitality of community colleges and the increasing prominence of the transfer function. The fact that there are numerous reports and books published so closely together demonstrates an authentic concern about the role of transfer in US postsecondary education.

It is gratifying that transfer students are receiving this kind of national attention. But how does this interest translate to your local transfer advocacy efforts? Will the publication of more reports serve your students in any direct way? Helping students gain access to postsecondary programs via the free college movement is certainly laudatory, but how does that help under-served students complete a certificate or a degree?

What's a good transfer advocate to do?

Transfer advocates connect the dots. Your role as a "transfer translator" is key. The best advocates study research from the academy, the philanthropic and policymaking communities, and other sources in search of insights and practices that will serve the unique challenges of your transfer students. In other words, you need to make the research literature *your own* if you want to have a positive impact on your institution and your students. Here is an example.

In 2013-14, facing a hostile legislature concerned about the number of students who transferred from a community college to the University of California, Stephen Handel and his campus admissions and enrollment colleagues marshalled data from a variety of contemporary sources to understand the national, regional, and state context for transfer. Building that context involved gathering data from IPEDs, the National Student Clearinghouse, and the College Board, among others. The result showed that the University of California bore responsibility in its

treatment of transfer students and suggested important improvements the University could undertake. However, the research also revealed how California lawmakers could strengthen transfer statewide. (The final report, which incorporates insights and data from a variety of sources, is titled *Preparing California for Its Future: Enhancing Community College Transfer to UC* and is available online.)

The lesson is that transfer advocates can advance their institution's transfer agenda by the judicious understanding of the good work of researchers and practitioners. Studying the "big picture" will ensure that your campus has a well-publicized credit transfer policy that reflects the best efforts of your colleagues at other institutions. Your broad-based understanding of the current literature will ensure that your admission and enrollment policies include the effective accommodation of transfer students in ways similar to that of your first-year students. As a local expert, you can serve as a key information broker on your campus, funneling reports and data to your president, your provost, or your supervisor to encourage dialogue and action on behalf of transfer students. You will be able to use the data to demonstrate where your institution is overperforming or underperforming as compared to peer institutions and to highlight the biggest opportunities for improvement.

Studying the literature of transfer and higher education is a key to becoming an effective advocate. On college and university campuses—where data and information are the essential currency—you must be prepared to effectively advocate for the needs of transfer students in every meeting. Without *you*, transfer students may be forgotten. This is usually a matter of benign neglect, but forgotten is forgotten.

It does not matter if you conduct your transfer advocacy on a two- or four-year campus. Nor does it matter whether you are an admissions representative, student affairs officer, or the campus registrar, thirty years in the job or just finishing your probation period. All of us—in whatever roles we inhabit—can contribute to the

college experiences and lives of our students by studying and synthesizing the available research, data, and public-policy initiatives, especially as they apply to real-world transfer issues in our local regions.

The momentum we are enjoying now is unlike anything we have observed in our three decades of work with transfer and transfer students. Some argue that this interest is the result of a response to enrollment losses at community colleges during the pandemic. Perhaps that is true; indeed, the pandemic has laid bare the inherent disparities already present in American higher education. Our current challenges, however, should propel us to advance the transfer process as perhaps the most egalitarian strategy to increase the number of degrees students complete, especially students from historically underrepresented groups. As we wrote in 2016, "the transfer process remains the most audacious conceit of visionary educational leaders who believed that the US could benefit economically and culturally by providing a new avenue to the four-year degree" (Handel and Strempel, 2016, p. ix).

Advancing "audacity" is what transfer advocacy is all about. Keeping the transfer function in the limelight is not something done only in foundation board rooms or legislative hearing rooms. It happens most effectively through our individual exchanges with our students and coworkers each day. Audacious advocacy is best delivered as a human exchange, strengthened by the latest and most up-to-date data, insights, and information from colleagues and allies around the country.

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About the Author

After serving as the chief admissions officer for the University of California System, *Stephen J. Handel* returned to the College Board as a senior strategist in higher education. As UC's first director of transfer enrollment planning and architect of the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives, Dr. Handel has devoted his career to the advancement of community colleges, the transfer process, and higher education access and equity. He can be reached at shandel1614@gmail.com.

Dr. Eileen Strempel currently serves as the Inaugural Dean of UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music. Strempel is a nationally recognized champion for transfer students and views superb public education as one of the principal social justice issues of our time. Previously, Strempel was the Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at the University of Cincinnati, served in a variety of roles at Syracuse University over a seventeen-year span, where she was awarded a Kauffman Foundation eProfessorship and an ACE Fellowship, which she served at Colgate University. Please reach Dr. Strempel at eileen.strempel@gmail.com with any questions.

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