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Grit to Graduation: The Evolution of a Transfer Pathway

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The Start of a Transfer Pathway

The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) received approval to offer a bachelor's degree in the Spring of 2016. Yes, that's right – a medical university specializing in master and doctoral programs developed a new and online ***Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Studies*** (BSHCS). Associate degree graduates from South Carolina technical colleges were the target for this competitive degree completion program. By Fall, MUSC and the South Carolina Technical College System (SCTCS) signed a statewide transfer agreement, and the first cohort started class.

What appeared to happen in a mere few months was actually the culmination of a two-year effort. Healthcare was (and still is) a critical workforce need in South Carolina. MUSC identified a way to close the educational gap, and the SCTCS was the bridge. MUSC's Program Director began consulting with SCTCS curriculum experts and system leadership. These strategic interactions informed the development of the BSHCS and created a foundation for the statewide transfer partnership.

Paper-to-Practice Challenges

Generated by an intentional collaboration to promote degree completion, create access, and address workforce needs; enthusiasm behind the opportunity for SC technical college transfers to earn a bachelor's degree from MUSC was authentic and engaging. However, despite careful pathway planning, recruiting for the BSHCS quickly revealed a challenge. Interest and demand were high but mostly from strong students with applied science degrees who would need more general education coursework to become eligible, extending their pathway. Similarly, those with general associate degrees who wanted to use the BSHCS as a path toward graduate school would likely require additional undergraduate pre-requisite coursework for their intended graduate programs. So, changes were needed.

Over another two years, the BSHCS Program Director worked with SCTCS and college partners to streamline the curriculum pathway. As a result of a collaborative, iterative process, the BSHCS program requirements were revised earlier this year to better address the needs of both the applied and general associate degree graduates. Along the way, tweaks were made to improve the program's recruitment and admissions process.

What Worked

Transfer partnerships that thrive beyond the blue-inked document are likely to experience the ebb and flow of success. They also take time. Much like their most successful students, BSHCS program leadership demonstrated a certain amount of grit in their efforts to establish a new degree completion program designed for transfer and then, soon after, revise it. They did not waver in their belief in the technical college system's critical role in preparing potential BSHCS students. This level of transparency and truth-in-partnership supported approval of the revised program and an increase in college-level collaborators.

To better guide interested transfer students, the BSHCS program offers unofficial transcript reviews for interested students paired with academic advisement to ensure students are taking the classes they need to be eligible for the BSHCS program. A snapshot of enrollment with six persisting seniors and 22 new juniors is evidence of positive impact.

For SCTCS, this partnership and statewide transfer agreement showcase the advantages of system-level agreements. It removes geographic barriers making transfer to the receiving institution available to all students within the system, not just those attending the neighboring technical college. It can fast-track the development of programmatic articulation, inform promising transfer practices, and create a collaborative effort.

What's really working, four years later, is the ability to overcome the plight of creating access without success. Instead of letting remnants of the cafeteria model of course selection impede success, we made programmatic and partnership improvements.

Graduate Success

The most significant value to our partnership is graduate success. For example, a 2017 SC technical college graduate completed the BSHCS degree earlier this year. A non-traditional student, working-mother, and career-changer; this new MUSC alum was just accepted into the MUSC College of Nursing for doctoral studies. From tech transfer to BSHCS graduate, she's now part of the MUSC PhD Class of 2022.

The first few BSHCS cohorts are yielding other success stories too with associate degree graduates from both general studies and applied health science degrees navigating the transfer and competitive admissions processes to earn their BSHCS degrees. Some are beginning graduate degree programs such as Physician Assistant

Studies and Healthcare Administration. Others are advancing their healthcare employment. All, proudly attribute SCTCS transfer for paving the way.

A Not-So-Final Thought

There's still work to do.

We can't predict how our partnership may change. The adage often quoted in business and sports, "if you're not changing, you're dying" ensures our partnership will continue to evolve and strengthen.

The BSHCS program growth plan includes technical college advisor training sessions, expanding upon pre-health professions and allied health curriculum pathways, partnership scholarships and marketing development, exploring the online-to-online transfer experience, and consideration of dual enrollment coursework.

We intend to build upon this momentum but aren't complacent with a lather-rinse-repeat process. Understanding that access is necessary and a foundational driver of transfer agreements, we're focused on the next rungs on the student success ladder – learning and completion.

We'll keep (and make better) what works. We'll leave behind (but learn from) what doesn't.

Know someone who may be interested in the healthcare studies program? They can learn more about the program at https://chp.musc.edu/academics/healthcare-studies or contact Dr. Gellar at Gellar@musc.edu.



Pictured are Online Bachelor of Science Healthcare Studies Program 2018 Junior and Senior students, staff, and faculty. Eight of SC's 16 technical colleges are represented in the current BSHCS cohorts including: Trident, Piedmont, Orangeburg-Calhoun, Horry-Georgetown, Central Carolina, Florence-Darlington, Greenville, and Midlands Technical Colleges.

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