April 5, 2012

To: President John Fitzsimmons
Maine Community College System

Chancellor James H. Page
University of Maine System

Re: Report of Joint Work Group (JWG) on Transfer

Preface:

The charge to the JWG was to investigate issues related to transfer between the Maine Community College System (MCCS) and the University of Maine System (UMS). Likewise, we were charged with laying out next steps to address any issues identified. Faculties and administrations of the UMS universities and MCCS colleges have written and endorsed over seventy articulation agreements that help to promote and ensure seamless transfer. In addition to program specific articulation agreements, the UMS and MCCS established AdvantageU for Liberal Studies degree candidates as a streamlined transfer process with dual advising. Universities within the UMS developed Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degrees (one of which is offered statewide) to allow MCCS with vocational degrees to use the sixty hours earned in an Associate of Applied Science towards earning a baccalaureate degree. The BAS is an important tool in the state’s educational arsenal as it permits trades people to come back to college learn 21st century skills after their trade has been rendered outdated.

The collaborative effort between Southern Maine Community College, the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine to build a high quality and effective pre-engineering program on the former Brunswick Naval Air Station base is an excellent example of cooperation between our Systems in advancing the workforce development needs of the state and could serve as a useful model for similar initiatives in the future.

Finally, what we found out in our investigation is that many of the solutions to the issues identified already exist. The biggest issue in a word is “communication”. We need to make resources more visible to and/or clearer for students. Faculties from within and across the Systems need to meet regularly with each other, or a representative group of them, to discuss and better align curriculum. We need to insure that existing best practices from within and across the Systems, as well as the nation, become the norm. As the expression goes, the solution is simple but not easy. The recommendations of this Work group will lay the groundwork for both enhancing the relationship between our two Systems and ensuring the best possible transfer experience for our students.
Report:

In 2011, the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee of the Maine State Legislature asked the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System to undertake an analysis of the process by which students transfer from one institution to another in pursuit of a degree. Toward this end, a Joint UMS/MCCS Work Group on Transfer was created, a standing committee comprised of representatives from both systems (three individuals from each) who are charged with:

- examining all aspects of the academic and admissions relationships between the two systems;
- generating data to describe current conditions;
- inventorying current work, and;
- proposing a set of collaborative actions for better curricular alignment and improving both qualitatively and quantitatively student transfer.

To carry out its charge, the group conducted two focus group discussions, one each with Transfer Officers from each system, and developed and implemented detailed surveys of department chairs, faculty, and transferred/transferring students from each System. The focus groups occurred in July, 2011; the surveys were conducted electronically in late December, 2011. This report presents the results of that research, as well as initial recommendations that are indicated by the responses.

Background:

In the fall 2011 semester, 700\(^1\) students transferred into University of Maine system schools from the state’s seven community colleges. According to data from the UMaine system, 40% of the students entered the University of Southern Maine, followed by UMaine Augusta (29%), UMaine (15%), UMaine Farmington and UMaine Fort Kent (5% each), UMaine Presque Isle (4%), and UMaine Machias (2%).

Among community colleges, 34% of the transfers came from Southern Maine, followed by Central Maine (19%), Eastern Maine (18%), Kennebec Valley (12%), Northern Maine (7%), York County (6%), and Washington County (4%).

Universities in the UMaine System variably attracted students from the community colleges. For example, UMaine’s transfers primarily came from Eastern Maine CC (50%); UMaine Augusta’s from Kennebec Valley CC and Central Maine CC (26.1% each), and Eastern Maine CC (23.2%); UMaine Farmington’s from Central Maine CC (34.3%) and Southern Maine CC (25.7%); UMaine Fort Kent’s from Northern Maine CC (43.7%); UMaine Machias’ from Washington County CC (68.8%); UMaine Presque Isle’s from Northern Maine CC (78.6%); and USM’s from Southern Maine CC (59.7%).

The community college experience is similar. For example, York County’s transfers primarily went to USM (75%); Central Maine’s to USM (42%) and UMaine Augusta (40%); Eastern Maine’s to

\(^1\) The 700 transfers includes all MCCS to UMS students regardless of whether they earned an associate degree, took only one course or anything in between those two points at a community college prior to matriculating at a state university. Likewise, it does not distinguish whether they graduated in May 2011 or from any other point in the past.
Student Surveys:

Transferred students in the UMaine system, which include students that transferred from two-year and four-year schools, reported general satisfaction with their transfer experience, with nearly 60 percent reporting that their overall experience was either excellent or very good; 87 percent said they found transfer information easily available and 90 percent said it was helpful; 60.5 percent said their UMS advisor had been useful or very useful, 56.9 percent said UMS faculty had been useful or very useful and 61.2 percent found the university or UMS website to be a useful or very useful resource. Concerning course transfer, three quarters (75%) agreed that their transferred courses were accepted as either general education or electives, and 57.3 percent for courses that were accepted in the student’s major. Those who said they had to repeat a course at their new institution was 45.6 percent.

In a separate survey, community college students who are transferring also reported general satisfaction with their process, with 72 percent of the respondents reporting that they received adequate guidance at their current school and over 66 percent saying they received adequate guidance at their intended school. However, over 60 percent said they never sought out advice during the transfer process. A similar number reported their best resource was online information.

Ninety-five percent of respondents in the UMS survey said they did not use Advantage U, which is available to community college students majoring in Liberal Studies. This is a significant number, since the agreement, when used by students as designed should guarantee seamless transfer experiences. However, that number may be misleading high since the respondents to the question included transfers from four year schools, who would not know about or be eligible for Advantage U. Similarly, community college students with majors other than Liberal Studies are not covered by Advantage U and therefore would not use it. Still, this result suggests the need to promote the agreement more actively among students.

In reviewing and analyzing individual comments from the students in both surveys, several broad themes emerge about the way the process works and can be improved. A major one involves the manner and timing of transferring credits. Essentially, a student’s credits can either be accepted as major credit, as general education credit, as elective credit, or rejected. While some individuals said the system worked easily for them (“The process was simple, easy and went fairly smoothly. I’m very pleased.”), others voiced concerns, citing the need to repeat courses, which involved additional time and money, delays in getting their credits accepted, and receiving misleading advice at both their previous and new schools. Note the following comments as examples:

“Although there was an articulation agreement, it took a year and a half for my credits to transfer. My advisor was not helpful and I had to consult with several different people to have my credits transferred.”

“My initial classes were a long time ago and it was difficult to find what would transfer.”
“The information was transferred easily enough, but I was disappointed in the way some of my transfer credits were applied.”

Some cited a desire for clearer upfront information concerning which classes would transfer and which would not. (Interestingly, this is completely articulated in the Advantage U program, but, as noted above, many transfers aren’t eligible for it, don’t know about it or choose not to use it).

“While exploring the possibility of transferring it seemed there were no concrete answers to how my classes would transfer. This applies to both institutions.”

“Put together a Q&A booklet that transfer students can get so they know what they might need to do.”

Students also noted a need to have course comparability across the entirety of both Systems.

“Six classes that did transfer could not be applied to my major, although I am required to take similar classes. At (my community college) I was required to take two computer classes. My advisor (at the university) told me they did not count toward the one computer class I’m required to take (here). I took that class this past semester and got an easy ‘A’ because it was material I already knew.”

“I am upset that not everything transferred. If you are running a program that coincides with another institution, one would think that everything would transfer over.”

Other students cited the need for more and better online information.

“A streamlined web portal outlining required transferable credits and degree audits would help.”

“An online system for seeing what transfers to what colleges is key.”

It should be noted, that UMS does in fact have a comprehensive course transfer grid online, which suggests the need to increase its visibility among students.

Lastly, some asked that they receive a separate orientation from that offered to incoming first-year students.

“It would have been nice to connect with other transfer students. If a separate orientation group isn’t possible, then at least some sort of event for transfer students at the beginning of the semester. It would have made a huge difference.”
Recommendations:

- Convene a workshop of admissions and advising personnel from the seven university and seven community colleges to identify and promote best practices. These people should then proceed to develop course transfer checklists for easy reference by students and advisors.
- Grandfather transfer community college students who have been using transfer checklists as a guide to prepare for university studies. That is, if a student has followed the checklist and the program changes its requirements prior to the student’s matriculation at the university, treat them as if they were matriculated under the old program requirements.
- Evaluate the current status of Advantage U and determine the next steps, which may need to include expansion of the program to cover students outside of the AA in Liberal Studies degree.
- Consider offering a separate orientation for transfer students at the various universities.
- Review the web-based resources at both Systems.
  - Convene a focus group of students to evaluate the effectiveness of both Systems and individual institutions’ websites relative to the transfer process.
  - Develop a process for the annual updating of the Equivalency Matrix within MaineStreet (the UMS’s data management system).
- Explore the feasibility of adding three “circuit riding” transfer advisors at the UMS level to work with community colleges (one in Southern Maine, one in central Maine, and one in Northern Maine), knowledgeable of all system programs.

Faculty/Department Heads:

Faculty at both the University and Community College Systems tend to be aware of transfer students, but indicated they find out about them either when the student self-identifies or during an advising session. Survey comments by faculty in both systems indicate they have mixed experiences with transfer students and the process. Some individuals have undertaken efforts to make the system work, with success. Note the comments below:

“The 2+2 program in my department for early childhood students has been very effective.”

“My strongest students come from the ECE [Early Childhood Education] programs in the community colleges. I have developed very careful articulation agreements with all but Washington County and coordinate content carefully. I have strong working relationships with the Chairs in those programs. That has been a key to our success with transfer students.”

“I work with CMCC and bring 5-15 students to campus to expose them to Maine Business School. My goal is to form a relationship with community college faculty as well as make UM feel personal and exciting to them. The yield is 1-2 student transfers to UM. I suggest we be more aggressive in doing things of this nature.”
“Articulation agreements are super and since we’ve developed one with EMCC, the transition of students from the two year program to our four year program has been greatly enhanced.”

Concerning articulations agreements, 72 percent of Department Heads in the Community College system rate them as very critical and effective or somewhat critical and effective. However, while 50 percent of them said they reviewed and updated the agreements annually or after one to two years, 28 percent reported never doing so.

Faculty at both Systems offered suggestions for strengthening the process, including assigning advisors early in the process, using students as peer mentors, developing a common catalog/standardized course content across the two systems. Again, note selected comments:

“A simplified listing of which courses will transfer between institutions would be valuable to both students and advisors/faculty.”

“Many of our successful students transfer to universities. These "success stories" don’t always complete all the requirements for their degree from the community college, so the retention numbers for community colleges are lower than our actual success in teaching and encouraging students to get advanced degrees.”

“It would be nice to have a true 2 and 2 as opposed to the requirements differing from UM[S] campus to UM[S] campus.”

“Articulation agreements are a must. I encourage most of my students who wish to obtain a Bachelor's Degree to go to UMA because I know that their courses will transfer well. We can do the same for other colleges as well.”

“We need to make it very clear to transfer students that transfer credits accepted by the institution are not necessarily accepted by the program.”

Summarized comment: Need standard rigor of courses and qualifications of faculty across the entire UMS and Community College Systems.

Finally, there was a sense that communication with students during the process was a critical element to making it work.

**Recommendations:**

- Convene faculties of the two Systems for workshops in critical disciplines to better align basic courses and general education outcomes. Use these workshops to:
  - Generate better networking among peers across and within the systems
  - Develop a forum for continuing the work begun at the workshops. Use the Maine Writing Coalition as a model for other disciplines to follow
• Develop/carefully monitor articulation agreements between institutions, including ongoing department chair/faculty dialogue, feedback at both schools, and regular updating of agreements
• Where appropriate support and promote the 2 + 2 programs
  a. Insure that all professional advising staff members and appropriate faculty are informed about applicable agreements.
  b. Insure that all professional advising staff members and appropriate faculty abide by applicable agreements.
  c. Improve the MCCS advertising and recruitment of students predicated upon these agreements.
  d. Improve the visibility and ease of access of the agreements in MCCS literature and online materials.

Transfer Officers:

The focus groups indicated the transfer process varied from institution to institution and among degree programs, a result that was also reflected in the student and faculty surveys. From the University System, issues identified included the need for faculty-to-faculty dialogue between the Systems; maintenance of articulation agreements; clarity regarding how credits transfer between institutions (do they apply to a student’s major or are they counted toward general education or elective requirements?); better information regarding how internet courses are handled; a determination of how best to inform students of what courses will transfer; identification of course equivalencies among institutions; information on how to address course credit differences between institutions (e.g., UMaine Farmington offers four credit courses while most others offer three credit courses); need for increased student participation in Advantage U; understanding of differences in educational backgrounds of faculty across the two Systems; and the need to clean up misperceptions of the community colleges’ transition from technical colleges.

From the Community College System, issues included educating faculty to work proactively with transferring students; encouraging participation in Advantage U; developing clarity in how credits transfer (major versus general education/elective); providing better self service options for students via MaineStreet or elsewhere; ensuring course equivalency among institutions/establishing a common core of courses across the systems; encouraging faculty-to-faculty dialogue to build relationships and enhance course alignment; minimizing turnaround time for course transfer evaluation; evaluating the need to have separate orientations for transfer and first-year students; developing a concise website that students could refer to; and determining and implementing ways to ease the transition for transferring students.

Recommendations:

• Evaluate the establishment of a transfer processing center serving both Systems
• Continue the Joint UMS/MCCS Task Force for Transfer as a regular standing committee to further develop and implement these recommendations and monitor progress
Respectfully submitted,

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