



Engaging Decision Makers on Attainment Targets and Student Success

Report on Project Virtual Conversations

Executive Summary - Highlights

“Transfer should not be a consolation prize.”

The conversations that filled twenty-four hours between April 28 and June 25 were robust, thoughtful, and enlightening. They also were thought-provoking and, in many instances, a call to action. The report for which this document serves as an executive summary contains myriad findings and recommendations, along with a lengthy list of resources to be added to as the future unfolds for NYSCAC and its members.

In drafting the report, three themes emerged: Consideration, Collaboration, and Communication. The two hundred ninety-eight participants represented the full spectrum of what could be considered the higher education “village:” community based organizations that support access to postsecondary education, secondary school counselors, independent college counselors, community college advisors, four-year institution enrollment staff, and state higher ed policy makers. And, while it was natural throughout the Virtual Conversation series to frame these issues within the context of the ever-present COVID-19 pandemic, most of the issues raised and discussed existed prior to this tragic situation. The disruption simply exposed many of these vulnerabilities to a greater degree, making it more imperative that they are remedied as New York and the country in general move into the post-COVID normality.

Consideration:

Throughout these rich and lively conversations, it was clear that taking time to consider the role each person can play in encouraging and supporting students as they strive to realize their dreams is important.

“That would have been helpful to know when I was working with my students.” “I never realized there was a process in place for that.” “Many of my students could benefit from beginning their higher ed journeys at community colleges, but it is unclear how four-year schools will view them as transfer candidates.” “That CBO’s financial literacy program seems very helpful. Many of my students – and their families – need that kind of information.”

These and many other statements made indicate that the more each of us consider the services and opportunities offered to students by others, the more we can be open to exploring ways to optimize our collective energies.

Collaboration:

Once people and organizations consider the resources and talents others bring to this process, efforts can be made to find ways to collaborate. Collaboration – in contrast to duplication – can lead to operational and financial efficiencies. In times of constraint, collaboration is key to optimizing available resources. This often includes the time professionals and their students can commit to a particular task. Collaboration also can encourage and nurture creativity, helping to identify innovative ways to address changes in organizational culture and operations, for the near term and into the future.

Communication:

Often during the VC sessions, participants made statements such as “good to know” or “helpful information” or “I didn’t know that.” Whether it was high school counselors wanting to learn about the transfer admissions process at four-year schools or CBOs sharing information about college programs they are offering to members of the surrounding community, it appears that all students, families, and organizations would benefit from more communications. And, wider and more consistent communications could lead to more considerations and collaboration.

The report is presented in sections which are summarized below and can be quickly accessed by the links provided.

Introduction

NYSACAC’s primary role in this multi-organizational, statewide initiative to establish targets for postsecondary attainment and success is to look closely at the transfer policies and practices that are succeeding and those that are not. Through the Association’s own project work and its involvement with other Gates collaborators, there are clear signs that greater coordination of effort and communication between and among the various stakeholders can yield positive results.

The Process

Because of the pandemic, information gathering became a virtual effort which might have been a “silver lining” among these dark clouds. Two hundred ninety-eight people participated, most likely more than would have been engaged with the original travel plan. Along with NYSACAC members, participants included members of NYSSCA and NYSTAA.

Topics – After an initial session describing the Student Success project and a session devoted to the disruption being felt due to COVID-19 (see separate section of report), the following topics were discussed over a six-week period:

- Transfer Admission Policies and Practices
- Academic Credit Transfer Policies and Practices
- Financial Literacy
- Transfer Student Onboarding/Orientation
- 2+2 Transfer Programs
- Non-Traditional Transfer Students

Participants – Two hundred ninety-eight (298) individuals participated in at least one session. The affiliation of these professionals:

- 19 CBO Leaders
- 107 Secondary School Counselors
- 27 Community College Staff
- 124 Four-Year College Staff
- 13 Independent Counselors
- 5 NY State System Staff
- 3 Graduate Students

Framing the Issues: Common Transfer Questions

While each transfer student has his/her own unique questions about this process, the following are a common set of transfer issues that emerged from these VC sessions:

1. Will I gain admission to my target transfer institution?
2. What academic credits will transfer and how long will it take to complete my degree?
3. How much will it cost to complete my degree?
4. Will I fit into my new campus community?

Seeking to increase student success, the logical place to begin is determining how best to help a transfer student fit into their new campus community. Once this is established, the preceding questions can be answered with this framework. Discussion during these meetings highlighted the efficacy of identifying prospective community college transfers near the beginning of their CC experience, staying involved with these students during these CC years, and making early commitments to them to ease their transition and create a connection (affinity) with the four-year institution.

What Role will NYSACAC Play?

With the focus on the transfer process and, in particular, the potential benefits of transfer pathways, the Association is in a unique position to contribute both in terms of advocacy for policy change and effecting adjustments to the processes and practices of college access. NYSACAC membership runs the full gamut from CBO and secondary school counselors to community college admission and transfer advisors to four-year college admissions staff. Also, the Association's close working relationships with CICU, NYSSCA, NYSTAA, and NYSFAAA provide opportunities for inter-association collaboration.

Legislative and Policy Advocacy

These findings and recommendations will be a central part of the deliberations during the Virtual Convenings in October. They support and augment NYSACAC's Government Relations Committee's current agenda of:

- Basic Needs Insecurity
- For-Profit Colleges
- Pathways that Support Postsecondary Persistence
- TAP and State Aid

Institutional Policy and Practice

This section delineates the many issues raised during the VCs that pertain primarily to institutional policy and practice. It also offers recommendations for consideration. These are organized within the three categories below.

Finding and recommendations are organized as best possible within the following categories: Advising/Admission/Aid, Academics, and Transition to Four-Year Colleges.

Resources

Throughout the project, the following resources have been collected to inform and support these conversations. While not exhaustive – new information and ideas come available on a regular basis – the list is representative of the variety of resources individuals, institutions, and organizations can utilize as they seek ways to strengthen opportunities for more transfer students to achieve their higher ed goals.

Information and Data

Important facts on which advocacy agendas and operational changes can be based.

Advocacy

Advocating systemic and program change to legislators, along with sector and institutional policy makers, is central to this effort and the overall Student Success initiative. As indicated earlier, NYSACAC continues to pursue a robust and ambitious advocacy agenda to which some of the project's results can be added. This section also highlights advocacy activity of NACAC and other project collaborators.

Pertinent Research

Research efforts and findings can be invaluable as institutions and organizations seek to improve their transfer programs. There is much recent research to consider and ongoing studies whose future findings will reveal additional insight.

Press and Publications

Hardly a day passes without some report and/or opinion piece in a major newspaper exploring the potential impact of COVID-19 on higher education. Prior to the pandemic and since, college admissions – complete with concerns about pricing, diversity, and ongoing relevance, among others – was and continues to be a regular topic of writers. This section provides a sampling of stories, opinion, and published books pertinent to the project’s theme of student success.

Programs

There are programs in place that can serve as sources of information and inspiration. This sample of programs is pertinent NYSACAC’s student success project.

Tools

These “tools of the trade” now utilized by institutions, systems, and organizations can provide useful insight and, perhaps, a quick start to projects others are considering.

Best Practices

Taking the approach that “there is nothing new under the sun” or “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” best practices can serve as models for new program design or existing program enhancement. Many “best” practices are also “transferrable” practices.

COVID-19

Without question, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed, exacerbated, and created significant inequities in our PK-16 educational system. No school district, private school, community college, or four-year college – regardless of resources – has been untouched. However, our low SES communities have been particularly hard hit. While the post-pandemic response is considered, it seems inevitable that there will not be enough resources to address all these needs in the near future.

In the not-so-distant future we can hope that the lessons learned from this experience will be applied to a reimagining of what a 21st century education in the United States looks like. In the meantime, it will take a coordinated effort by all those involved in PK-to-postsecondary success work to find opportunities for collaboration. To not find ways to streamline processes, share resources, and coordinate efforts could jeopardize these opportunities for a few generations of students who wait by the sidelines as we figure out what this reimagined American education will look like.

This section is a snapshot of participants' observations, concerns, hopes, and plans at an early stage of the pandemic. It is organized within the categories of Observations, Findings, Recommendations, and Resources. The story continues to develop and remains central to all (at least) near term considerations for educational planning.