Collaboration Between Universities and Community Colleges

Offer New Educational Opportunities for Students

by Michelle R. Davis

Driving along the highway in west central Michigan, a prospective college student might be intrigued by a roadside billboard with the Ferris State University flame logo. But the same billboard might also feature the logo of a local community college.

That’s because Ferris State has embarked on a partnership with many of the community colleges in that area of Michigan. Those partnerships take a number of forms, including shared faculty and educational space to agreements that make it easy for students who have earned associate degrees at two-year institutions to transfer to Ferris State as juniors. Often, those students don’t even need to leave their community college campuses to earn their bachelor’s degree from Ferris State.

While this cooperation between four-year and two-year institutions may take many forms, the universal goal is the same, says Ferris State University President David L. Eisler. “Our mission is to provide access to a bachelor’s degree,” Eisler
Decades. The state guarantees that any student who graduates from one of the state’s 28 community colleges can enter a state university as a junior. However, the law does not guarantee a particular university, says John C. Hitt, president of the University of Central Florida.

But the University of Central Florida has struck an agreement with four of the local community colleges that guarantees admission to the university with an associate degree. Four years ago, when this agreement was struck, the university served 25 percent of all transfer students in the state, says David Harrison, the university’s vice provost for regional campuses. The number has increased to 28 percent, and when the actual numbers are high that boost is significant, he says.

In addition, Hitt says, community college transfer students can be an asset to the university student body. “We keep being driven to raise our standards in terms of SAT scores and high school GPA for incoming freshmen,” he says. “But we find the students who have earned associate degrees are a good risk. They perform as well or better than native students in most areas.”

A ‘Problematic’ Past

Students attend community colleges for a variety of reasons. The costs of a two-year program are often lower, students can live at home, or they may have family or work-related reasons for trying to stay in their own communities.

Many universities and colleges across the country have long had articulation agreements with community colleges. Those agreements typically try to ensure that the courses taken in a two-year program align with those offered at four-year institutions. They give community college students some degree of confidence that the credits they’ve earned will transfer if they seek a bachelor’s degree.

However, in some places those efforts have not been well-coordinated, at times leaving community college students with credits that aren’t accepted at the university level, says Lynn Barnett, vice president for academic student and community development with the Washington-based American Association of Community Colleges.

“In the past it’s been problematic,” Barnett says. “A state might have an articulation agreement, but if the agreement wasn’t designed for a specific program, that program might not transfer all the credits. That’s a real hardship on students.”

But Barnett says she sees increased efforts on the part of community colleges and four-year institutions to work together. “I think there’s a new spirit of collaboration now,” she says. “There’s more collaboration in general in this world.”

Florida is one of the leaders when it comes to the collaboration between universities and community colleges, with what is often called “two plus two” agreements and a common course numbering system that’s been in place for decades. The state guarantees that any student who graduates from one of the state’s 28 community colleges can enter a state university as a junior. However, the law does not guarantee a particular university, says John C. Hitt, president of the University of Central Florida.

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Acting as Partner, Not Competitor

The U.S. Census has predicted a shrinking number of college-age students in coming years, so universities looking to shore up their enrollment numbers are taking a hard look at how to draw in community college students. Community college enrollment numbers have been “skyrocketing” Barnett says, with figures jumping anywhere from eight to 20 percent in some states.

Louisiana, for example, has a declining high school population, says Randy Moffett, president of the University of Louisiana System, and community colleges are a good place to look to add strong students to the university’s rolls. “We want to create these partnerships because we have that declining...
population and a shrinking pool of potential students,” he says.

Louisiana is working to strengthen ties between community colleges and state universities and last year announced that along with its “2+2” agreements for the University of Louisiana System, eight universities within the system would offer special scholarships of up to $4,000 per year for students transferring from two-year colleges.

Moffett said Louisiana wants to push those agreements even further, with more shared faculty and facilities. “Our state is impatient for that and our citizens are impatient for that too,” he says. “From a higher education standpoint, I think we should be too.”

Prairie View A&M University in Texas is also trying to boost its enrollment and seek out new students. But the historically black university is also trying to diversify its student body and attract new faces. Ninety percent of the school’s students are African-American, but university president George C. Wright says he wants to show other students what his institution has to offer. The state is also pressing the school to increase enrollment, he says.

“In the community college setting, there are a sizable number of African-American students, but also Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans and white students as well,” he says. “We want to show them we can make the transition as seamless as possible.”

To do that, Wright sends university counselors to community college campuses to make sure their history classes, for example, match university requirements. They also offer presentations on the opportunities a bachelor’s degree can provide, paid internships, and A&M’s business contacts. “So many of these students are practical,” he says. “They want to get a degree to get a better job.”

Many colleges and universities have long maintained an office on community college campuses, staffed with a guidance counselor or someone to help students earning associate degrees navigate their way into bachelor’s degree waters. But in some places, school officials are taking that a step further.

Though Michigan’s Ferris State University already offers associate degrees to its students, Eisler views community colleges not as competition, but as allies. Ferris State offers classes at 20 locations and often offers bachelor’s degrees right on the community college campus, Eisler says. In addition, Ferris shares the costs of faculty with some community colleges and uses community college facilities at cut-rate prices.

The university has also created specific degrees for community college campuses that aren’t even offered on the main campus, due to demand, including computing and technical degrees. They key is to not duplicate services with the community college and to make sure the degree programs offered are the ones students want. These programs have to make financial sense, Eisler says. “When you really get interested in being a partner, the barriers drop away and the next thing you know you have programs there,” he says.

Unique Course Offerings

At California State University Channel Islands in Camarillo, Calif., officials embarked on a unique venture with community colleges aimed at not only boosting enrollment and increasing knowledge between institutions, but at introducing a new method of learning to engage both types of students more heavily in their education.

Working with several nearby community colleges, including Ventura County Community College and Moorpark College, the university developed a series of courses to be held both on community college campuses and their own, all centered around service-learning. Service-learning is designed to give students information and then challenge them to take what they’ve learned and work in the community to provide some type of services related to the classroom experience, says Therese Eyermann, special assistant to the president at California State University Channel Islands.

Studies have shown this type of learning increases student achievement in those classes and improves knowledge acquisition, Eyermann says. For example, organic chemistry was one of the service-learning courses offered. In addition to traditional lessons, the school used grant money to buy a “pesticide sniffer” to detect chemicals in the air. Students used the machine at different locations on both university and college campuses and also mapped the structures of the molecules they detected. They then used this information to alert the National Pesticide Information Center of their findings, Eyermann says.

Students in an English composition class at Moorpark College learned about the Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly, an endangered species kept at the zoo run by the community college. The students helped care for the butterflies then shared their experiences in a brochure the zoo could use to publicize the plight of the creatures.

Though Eyermann says the long-term goal is to increase enrollment, the university is just starting to collect data on the very new program. But at a student-presentation on their service-learning classes, some students said the experience changed their outlook on education. “They said they were more
engaged in education, had long-term career goals and were planning to graduate and go on to a four-year institution,” she says. Service-learning “inspired a love of learning that made them want to do more.”

The program is set to continue, with faculty from the university and community colleges brainstorming about shared projects and more community colleges being added to the list of participants, she says. California State University Channel Islands hopes to become a regional resource center when it comes to service-learning. “Many places have articulation agreements, but I’m unaware of any other deliberate attempt to form faculty and students partnerships, particularly around the areas of service-learning and student engagement,” Eyermann says.

Respecting Rich Traditions

Wilson G. Bradshaw, president of Florida’s Gulf Coast University, says when embarking on a partnership between community colleges and universities, both types of institutions need to realize they’re equal partners in these efforts. Gulf Coast is careful not to duplicate programs, even bachelor’s programs on community college campuses, where they’re not needed. Edison State College, a community college that works closely with Gulf Coast, has the authority to develop baccalaureate degrees and Gulf Coast is careful not to compete.

“One has to guard against one institution feeling superior to the other for whatever reason,” he says. “When you come to the table you need to make sure you do this in an honest and earnest way, looking for an equal partner.”

Both types of institutions bring different strengths to the table, Bradshaw says. “They are different cultures. Community colleges have their own rich traditions and universities also have rich traditions and they need to be respectful of each other’s role in higher education,” he says. “Their roles are not opposites.”

For a student who might be the first in his or her family to get a bachelor’s degree, someone worried that the academics of a four-year program might be too rigorous, or someone who has a job to hold down, the prospect of going to a university may be daunting, but partnerships between these institutions can provide the bridge, says Wright of Prairie View A&M.

University bachelor’s programs on community college campuses help students stay in a familiar environment and often save them on gas and transportation costs since they’re close to home, for example, Wright says.

By making sure the student has contact with and reassurance from the four-year institution, students will not only be encouraged to take on the challenge, but also to succeed in the endeavor, Wright says.

“Community colleges do a better job of providing the nurturing and attention some students need,” he says. “We’re trying to make sure we understand what the students’ expectations are. The more students are less shocked by the difference, the easier it will be.”

The best way to make these partnerships successful, says David Harrison of the University of Central Florida, is to make sure that whatever effort is going forward is “about the student,” and not about shoring up an institution or about fundraising.

“If you use that as your guiding principle for decisions,” he says, “the partnership gels around that principle.”

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