

Paving

COMMUNITY COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY DEGREE PARTNERSHIPS

Editor's Note: This article is a follow-up to an article that appeared in C&U in fall 2005 (Bontrager, Clemetsen, & Watts 2005) and to a presentation made at the 2007 AACRAO conference in Boston.

INSTITUTIONAL SIDEWALKS VS. STUDENT TRAILS

It is not uncommon to look at a campus and see beautiful grounds with sidewalks guiding traffic and buildings where students are given opportunities to learn. Yet these well-kept campus grounds also have foot paths that attest to the ways people really travel from one place of learning to another. Some have argued that no sidewalks should be put in place until after the foot paths have become evident. Such an approach would ensure that sidewalks were placed to meet the needs of the most people—and, given the current price of cement, also would ensure the best use of fiscal resources. The reality is that we don't wait to put in sidewalks. Rather, our grounds staff tries to channel people to use the sidewalks, to discourage people's use of pathways, and to hide heavily worn mud tracks. This dance has gone on for years and likely will continue until it

is decided that the mud paths are a permanent reality and are more important than sidewalks that “look right.”

Sidewalks also describe the common approach to facilitating student transfer. Institutions design systems—sidewalks—intended to provide a safe, clean, predictable flow of students from community colleges to universities. Many students use the sidewalks, but many also find the sidewalks to be neither the most efficient nor the most readily navigable path; others blaze along a foot path. Academic and integrated service agreements between community colleges and universities can be established to reflect and support the building of sidewalks on the beaten paths, better serving the growing traffic along these paths, reducing frustration and resources spent trying to keep students on the “sidewalk” and off the “grass.”

In 1998, Linn-Benton Community College (LBCC) and Oregon State University (OSU), only a few miles apart, decided to clear the brush from a trail already being blazed by students. With presidential support, academic and student services areas began, jointly, to explore how to coordinate resources in order to improve students' educational expe-

the Path to Success

rience and to reduce the impact of many of the issues that confound successful student transfer. Capitalizing on a long-term set of previously uncoordinated academic relationships, the LBCC/OSU Degree Partnership (originally called Dual Enrollment) was created.

In this article, we summarize the literature's findings regarding barriers to successful student transfer. A brief description of *key program elements* will convey how the partnership enhanced systems in order to reduce the impact of barriers described in the literature. Finally, we share descriptive statistics relating to the program's successful implementation as well as the results of a qualitative study of the program's meaning for a diverse set of students.

ARE SIDEWALKS THE BEST PATHS? THE TRANSFER STUDENT LITERATURE

A review of the literature on student transfer supports the concept of developing the Degree Partnership path between community colleges and universities. The historical mission of the community college, the identified barriers to transfer—systemic, institutional, and student developmental—and current findings related to student attendance patterns all support the creation of a more integrated collegiate experience to leverage institutional strengths and improve student success.

Community colleges are strategically positioned to offer many students a pathway to higher education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 46 percent of all undergraduates are enrolled in a community college based on January 2007 data from the College Board and the U.S. Department of Education (AACC 2007). Jacobs estimates that one-third of students transfer at some point during their college career (2004). Cohen (2003) indicates that 40 percent of students who receive bachelor's degrees from four-year institutions each year have some community college credits on their transcripts. Factors such as low tuition, small classes, and a focus on teaching and learning attract many students who previously were uninterested in or unable to gain admission to a four-year college or university (Kim 2001). For many such students, the community college serves as a gateway to their educational goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

Building smoother pathways for students moving from community colleges to four-year institutions has been a long-standing goal for faculty, administrators, and enrollment management specialists.

The negative experiences of students transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions have been documented in numerous research studies (see, for example, Cejda 1994; Diaz 1992; Flaga 2006; Hills 1965; Jacobs 2004; Lanann 1996; Lanann 2001; and Zamani 2001). Transfer students often face academic, psychological, social, and environmental challenges during their transition to four-year institutions. Laanan (2001) reports that barriers to successful transfer include students' inability to locate appropriate transfer student services,

inadequate preparation for the university environment, and a lack of support programs at the university. More specifically, transfer students often experience a decrease in academic achievement upon transfer to a university (Hills 1965; Diaz 1992; Cejda 1994; Lanaan 1996; and Lanaan 2001). In addition, Davies and Dickmann (1998) found that transfer students' expectations of what university life would be like were not accurate; many transfer students experienced loneliness and isolation during the transfer process. More recently, Harrison (2002) reported that transfer students felt academically and socially alienated from other students at the four-year institution. Finally, Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that transfer students needed additional assistance to understand the research university culture and community. Flaga (2006) identified five challenging dimensions of transition to the university environment, including learning resources, connecting, familiarity, negotiating, and integrating into the university community.

What is becoming better understood is the fact that students do not necessarily follow a linear attendance pattern in their pursuit of a degree; rather, they "swirl." Cliff Adelman (1999) found that the number of students attending multiple postsecondary institutions increased significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, the numbers had increased such that more than half of a substantial sample of 1972 high school graduates matriculated at more than one institution. Alfredo de los Santos and Irene Wright (1990) applied the term "student swirl" and "double-dipping" to describe this multi-institutional enrollment pattern among community college students. McCormick (2003) suggested a taxonomy of student swirl patterns: (1) trial enrollment, (2) special program enrollment, (3) supplemental enrollment, (4) rebounding enrollment, (5) concurrent enrollment, (6) consolidated enrollment, (7) serial transfer, and (8) independent enrollment.

Building on evidence of student swirl and its various patterns, some observers have suggested ways of working with rather than against this phenomenon. Victor Borden (2004) suggests four mechanisms for accommodating swirl: student tracking and research, assimilation programs that quickly engage students in campus academic and student culture, cross-institutional efforts to collaboratively establish common outcomes, and competency-based assessment for placement. Similarly, a joint conference on baccalaureate attainment sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2004) generated a report recommending joint admis-

sions programs and dual financial aid programs; improved student access to accurate, timely, and consistent advising throughout the educational experience; and structures that promote ongoing inter- and intra-institutional communication about advising and transfer issues.

Furthermore, Peter and Carroll (2005) found in a National Center for Educational Statistics study that "students who began in public two-year institutions who had co-enrolled had higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment and persistence at four-year institutions than their counterparts who did not co-enroll" (p.19). Co-enrollment at a two-year and a four-year institution for at least one month resulted in persistence and graduation rates similar to those of students who attended a single four-year institution.

The research cited above attests to the need for a new trail: combining academic experience from two institutions can lead to success.

PAVING THE TRAIL: THE LBCC/OSU DEGREE PARTNERSHIP (DPP)

DPP Purpose: Where is the trail going?

The primary goal of the degree partnership program at OSU and partner community colleges is to provide opportunities for students to meet their individual educational goals. The program is designed to expand access, to increase affordability, and to provide a more transparent process for bachelor's degree attainment. To that end, institutional impacts of the degree partnership program have driven academic and service innovation, flexibility, and efficiencies. (Bontrager, Clemetsen, and Watts 2005)

Program Components: Paving the Trail from Beginning to End

In their effort to establish a program that results in a coordinated educational experience, the two institutions developed the following:

- Joint recruitment materials
- A single application and fee
- Financial aid (federal, state, scholarships) that supports combined enrollment
- Coordinated orientation
- Block transfer Associate of Science degree
- Coordinated advising
- Concurrent enrollment
- Transfer and articulation of credit each term
- Free bus transportation between campuses
- Access to cocurricular experiences at both campuses

- Residence halls, health center, recreation center use at OSU without enrollment
- Career/technical courses integrated into bachelor's programs

This list inevitably raises myriad questions from two- and four-year enrollment management colleagues. Here we try to answer some of the most common questions. Both schools still recruit to meet targets, but LBCC recruits most students interested in transfer. Students are admitted by OSU with no altering of criteria for freshmen. Transfer applicants to the program may be admitted with one term fewer credits. All financial aid requirements are met, and institutions as well as students are in compliance. Students pay the tuition rate of the school offering the course. The academic transcript for both institutions remains unchanged. Students in the program do not have minimum enrollment requirements for either institution. Students are not required to complete an associate's degree.

Certain materials have been used to build this path. The implementation had presidential support at both institutions. Existing financial and human resources were utilized to begin the program; as the program has grown, additional resources have been invested. The implementation of EDI for transcripts, a Web application, and financial aid data exchange (OFAX) have enabled existing resources to manage the program's growth.

TRAFFIC ON THE TRAIL

We knew that students were using the trail. Paving the trail, pointing people to it, bringing it into full view, and enhancing it, have resulted in a rush of users. The numbers and the stories of those who have traveled along the partnership trail attest to its value.

Data suggest that the new trail has become the "beaten path." Between fall 1998 and spring 2007, more than 6,000 students were admitted to the program. DPP applications have increased to account for more than 25 percent and 5 percent, respectively, of total applications at LBCC and OSU. Neither school has lost enrollment or FTE; rather, they have grown. More than 70 percent of applicants are admitted under OSU DPP transfer criteria. The most commonly declared majors are liberal arts, business, and engineering.

Important outcome measures also show positive change. For example, the three-year transfer rate of DPP students is double that of non-DPP students. At OSU, initial examination of the graduate class of 2003 revealed that DPP students graduated with a higher average cumulative

GPA and, on average, 18 fewer OSU credits. Fewer university credits means lower cost to students. A comparison of tuition and fees paid indicates that students could be saving \$4,000 to \$6,000 over a four-year period.

Stories from the Trail

A qualitative research study over two academic terms between January and July 2005 (Balzer 2006) explored the experiences of six students in the Linn Benton Community College and OSU Degree Partnership Program. Participants represented various majors, hometowns and educational experiences. The stories of Amy, Allan, Deb, Jessica, Sarah, and Jerry (pseudonyms) demonstrate the diversity of the DPP student body. Many of the stories exemplify the swirl patterns suggested by McCormick (2003) and reveal the effectiveness of the program in supporting other documented concerns about student transfer.

Amy

Amy dropped out of high school in California at age 15. At age 24 she gave birth to a daughter. At age 30 Amy started to seriously consider the possibility of attending college; she applied to DPP in fall 2000 after a friend at OSU suggested that it might be a good way for her to overcome her fear of attending a university.

My first term was completely at LBCC, and I quickly began to realize, wow, you know, I can really hold my own around here. And it really gave me the confidence.... By the next term, I started taking one class at OSU to see what it was like, and I tried to integrate into the campus. I spent the first couple of years kind of doing things I enjoyed to build my confidence....

While participating in DPP, Amy involved herself in student activities at LBCC and at OSU. She received several awards for her academic and personal achievements. Amy described her DPP experience as the "best way" she could attend school. She was very grateful for the momentum and confidence she built during the early terms of her enrollment as a DPP. Amy appreciated being "considered an OSU student" from the very beginning.

Allan

Allan had always intended to attend OSU. He enrolled in DPP after graduating from high school because it allowed him to explore the two schools and save money.

I wanted to be a dual enrolled student since I was a senior in high school and applied earlier because it al-

lowed me some exploration between two schools, LBCC being, you know, smaller classes and being maybe a little tighter community than OSU. You can have the best of both worlds.

Allan's first term in DPP included all LBCC courses though he lived in on-campus housing at OSU.

Living at OSU from the very beginning really helped me to meet people at both schools. I have friends who are dual and friends who are just OSU. Both friends helped me.

While in DPP, Allan participated in numerous student activities, including intramurals, marching band, and a study abroad trip to France. Allan described his experience between the two schools as "blended" because he was able to "make friends" at OSU before attending classes. He perceived living on the OSU campus before attending classes as a "big help," especially when it came to understanding how to get around campus.

Jessica

Jessica was born and raised in a small Oregon town. She was an excellent student and graduated from high school with honors. As a freshman, she moved into an on-campus residence hall and roomed with someone she did not know. Jessica's first year at OSU was characterized by large classes, social activities, homesickness, and academic difficulty.

After two years of attending OSU, Jessica described herself as very close to "dropping out." Jessica decided to talk to her academic advisor, who suggested that she consider switching to DPP. Jessica described herself initially as "not interested," but when she learned that DPP was "connected" to OSU and that she could still utilize OSU services, she made the switch. She was especially interested in continuing to use OSU's counseling and recreation services.

I was ready to start over at a new place since things at OSU didn't go so well. So I started over there and [it was a] totally different atmosphere. Over there, every single one of the instructors knows me by name. They know how long I've been there; they know my specific style, a lot of the way that I do things. I needed that since I came from a small town. It was nice starting over. I felt defeated before I changed to dual.

While participating in the degree partnership program, Jessica utilized support services at LBCC and OSU and joined an honor society at LBCC. Jessica described herself as a small-town girl who "failed at the big university." She

felt as though she was "saved" by the degree partnership program. Jessica appreciated the opportunity to "start over" and "regain some confidence" away from the university but without leaving it completely.

Deb

Deb grew up in southern California and was a high school honor student. Instead of attending college, Deb married and raised two children. Deb enrolled in the degree partnership program when she was 45 years old.

I think what I like the most about the dual enrollment program is it really allowed me to save some money, and [it] kind of set a safe path into this really scary university world. I mean, at that point, I was so scared; I didn't understand: how could I really go to school and support my family... and keep my health? Now I understand it all. I understand how the system works. And it was like that gave me a sense of security that I could do it. It felt safe, and now I feel like I'm confident and I can be here [at OSU], and I can go after the challenges.

While participating in DPP, Deb worked full time and continued to raise her two children.

Sarah

Sarah grew up in Oregon and graduated from high school with honors. She enrolled at OSU and moved into an on-campus residence hall for her first year of college. Sarah's first-term GPA at OSU was below 2.0. Sarah continued to struggle throughout her first and second years at OSU. She enrolled in DPP in the fall of her junior year. After successfully completing Physics 201 and two study skills courses at LBCC, Sarah completed her remaining courses at OSU.

My advisor at OSU really helped me to see I could make it a different way. It helped me to stay positive and hopeful. When I was working with people at LBCC and OSU, I felt like I was getting help at two schools at once.

Sarah described the degree partnership program as her "second chance" at graduating from OSU. She believed she benefited tremendously from the academic environment and caring faculty at the community college.

Jerry

Jerry dropped out of high school at the age of 17. After completing his GED, he found employment as a construction worker. Jerry "made a few mistakes" and was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to five years in prison. After his

release, Jerry enrolled at a community college and obtained a part-time job. Jerry's initial goal was to get into a four-year college; however, he had little knowledge of how to achieve this goal. Jerry learned about DPP after taking a course at LBCC.

I needed this type of program if I was ever going to get a degree. I needed to get some momentum, and I really wanted to be a Beaver.... And then I learned more about it, how you could take half and half....

While participating in DPP, Jerry attended numerous OSU sporting events, lived in OSU family housing, and participated in several faculty research projects. Jerry explained that he could have "bounced around forever" within the community college system. The DPP set Jerry on a path toward a major and a baccalaureate degree.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF DPP?

DPP allows a student to move back and forth socially and academically, as needed, changing the traditional community college to university transfer student experience. Rather than an abrupt transfer to the university, the DPP student feels "invited" and even "encouraged" to enter the university world, even before he or she begins taking classes. Balzer (2006) found that DPP students—despite their differences—experience a somewhat similar transition to the university. She identified five phases of DPP student transition: *Identifying as a Degree Partnership Program Student*; *Gaining Momentum at the Community College*; *Testing Out the University*; *Moving Thoughtfully between Two Institutions*; and *Settling into the University*. These overlapping phases vary in length for each individual student.

Phase one, *Identifying as a Degree Partnership Program Student*, is characterized by being admitted into DPP, calling oneself a DPP student, and declaring an intention to transition into and graduate from the university. This identification is important to students, especially at the beginning of their experience. Enrolling in a partnership program between two schools is perceived by the students as a declaration of their intent to obtain a baccalaureate degree from a specific university.

Being a dual student meant I was going to leave the [community college] for OSU, someday. I was sort of an OSU student from the very beginning because I was living on campus and going to activities. —Jerry

I liked calling myself a dual student. I considered it a positive label. It meant I was in both schools and

would eventually end up fully at OSU. It also meant that OSU intended to have me as soon as I wanted to take classes. —Allan

Being a dual student meant I was on my way to OSU, but I wasn't fully here [at OSU] yet. I knew I had some work to do before I could make it at OSU, and I knew Linn Benton was the best way to go about getting things done. I was so happy I could be dual. While I was dual I felt like I was invited to explore OSU. —Amy

Phase two, *Gaining Momentum at the Community College*, is characterized by enrolling in almost all (if not all) community college classes. During this phase, students overcome their lack of confidence and improve their academic preparedness for the university. Students also utilize academic opportunities and services at the community college to prepare for the university environment.

Being in those CC [LBCC] classes really helped me. The smaller class sizes, I don't know, I just felt more comfortable because I wasn't worried about being judged. —Sarah

At LBCC it was basically time and opportunity to help me study better. Kind of learning how to learn, you know. —Allan

I was just trying to learn how to learn in the beginning. I was trying to learn what would help me be a more successful student. The teachers at LB treat you a little differently, a little bit more hands-on, and it just felt safer. —Deb

Phase three, *Testing Out the University*, is characterized by participation in university activities, use of university services, spending time on the university campus, and enrolling in a small number of university courses. During this phase, students begin to explore the university; they learn how to get around and see what the university has to offer.

That's the value of the dual enrolled program: ...it allows you to move into the university environment in a comfortable way for you. Test it out with a few classes at a time. It's sort of a safe way to be a student. —Deb

I started hanging out at OSU before I started to take classes—you know, visiting the library, going to plays. It was a good way to see what things were like before I took classes—testing it out. Then I took one class. —Amy

Living at OSU really helped me to meet people at both schools. I have friends who are dual and friends who are just OSU. Both groups of friends helped me. And doing the marching band at OSU the whole time made me feel like I was a part of the campus from the very beginning.—Allan

Phase four, *Moving Thoughtfully between Two Institutions*, is characterized by choosing classes and utilizing services at one or both institution(s). DPP students carefully decide on classes at the community college and university based on their perceptions of what is best for them. DPP students frequently utilize academic support services at the community college while they avail themselves of the university's extracurricular activities, large and diverse facilities, computing resources, library, housing opportunities, faculty scholars, and advising.

I have the advantage of really picking and choosing classes at both schools.—Amy

I like telling people about how I have access to both schools and save more money than they do.—Jerry

I like being able to pick classes at either school. It's nice to be able to take classes in a smaller setting.—Jessica

Phase five, *Settling into the University*, is characterized by full integration into the university community. Students in this phase view themselves as university students and former DPP students.

This year, I feel like I'm part of a community at OSU. I'm no longer dual. I've moved out of my BAC core and so I'm seeing a lot more of the same students. I'm actually seeing some of the students from Linn-Benton; they're also dual-enrolled students.—Deb

I'm a senior and I consider myself an OSU student now.—Amy

DPP also allows students to leverage the advantages of the community college. For example, students benefit from smaller class settings, less expensive classes, and community education opportunities. DPP students have many positive things to say about the community college structure and atmosphere:

To be honest, I wanted to be in the dual enrollment program because I was intimidated by the university environment. I needed a way to begin school where I could be successful and confident. It seemed like the

community college would be that place. The first terms at the community college allowed me to understand the educational system. I wasn't afraid to ask questions; I know that sort of sets me apart from the younger student who just would have known where to go or where to turn.

I was looking to maximize my experience. And of course there is the money part of it. I can go through the community college and take many of these classes that are in my BAC core, and I don't have to pay the OSU tuition prices. It really did make sense for me and my family financially. I think many more students should consider this route.—Deb

Smaller classes and cheaper: what's there to think about? You get the best out of it. Instead of being in a classroom with 300 students, you get to start out small. I need that kind of attention.—Allan

The campus out there is so much smaller, and the hands-on that you get with the teachers—the style of teaching, the methods—are just completely different. It was very helpful to learn how to study in that kind of environment. I really utilized the classroom experience at LBCC to gain momentum.—Deb

TRAIL ENHANCEMENT AND MAINTENANCE FOR FUTURE USERS

The LBCC/OSU Degree Partnership constitutes a new, proven pathway for students to achieve a bachelor's degree in a manner that lets them customize their educational experience. The evidence has convinced administrators, faculty, staff, government leaders, and families that this type of partnership facilitates success as it is developed around *student* rather than *institutional* needs. As with any true partnership, its effects are extending into new areas and into new programs that leverage our ability to serve changing student demographics.

We have a robust agenda for the future. Ongoing assessment of students in the program will reveal ways in which we can improve the trail. We have a lengthy research agenda to act upon, including a review of financial aid usage and comparisons to non-DPP students. DPP has inspired institutional changes as well as new academic and service department partnerships. These new relationships will need to be evaluated in light of their impact on student success.

Our institutions and the students who have benefited from DPP thank those individuals who dared to not fol-

low the sidewalks and to expose more effective routes to transfer and academic success.

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