REFRAMING TRANSFER AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPERATIVE

Michael J. Rosenberg and Andrew K. Koch

Our higher education system broadly discriminates against transfer students. While on first read this assertion may seem harsh and perhaps even hyperbolic, the statement's accuracy quickly comes to light when one objectively examines the evidence provided both in this chapter and the broader book of which it is a part. Coming to grips with this reality is the first step toward building a better future for this oft-mistreated population. Embracing our responsibility as a higher education community is crucial—because the success of transfer students is vital to the institutions they attend, the communities where they will live, the places where they will work, and the larger society to which they will contribute.

As this and many other chapters in this book illustrate, current transfer processes are not based on a full understanding of today's students and their needs. Often, most faculty and staff at an institution will not know that transfer students, considered collectively, potentially make up a majority of the undergraduate enrollment at their 4-year college or university. The first-time/full-time students enrolling in the fall get the headlines, but transfer students contribute as much if not more to the bottom line.

The lack of focus on and awareness about transfer students stands in direct opposition to institutional efforts to foster an inclusive, diverse academic environment. Failing to recognize the contributions transfer makes to a diverse and pluralistic learning environment borders on neglect at best and malfeasance at the worst.

Postsecondary educators and institutions across the United States must recognize and repair the largely flawed and unjust design of the transfer experience currently existing at many colleges and universities across the nation. That design is particularly rife with negative implications for the types of students that higher education in the United States has not served well historically —students from first-generation, low-income, and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who are disproportionately overrepresented in the transfer-bound populations at community colleges today. Viewed in this light, repairing the transfer model shifts from an institutional responsibility to a moral and societal obligation. In short, transfer must be *reframed* from an enrollment management mechanism to a social justice imperative.

This chapter sets out to make the case why the transfer process, as currently organized and experienced, is unjust. In Part One of this chapter, we provide a four-component framework for social justice in and through transfer—a structure to help reframe the discussion and action associated with transfer in ways that more directly acknowledge and address its social justice implications.

In Part Two, the first two components of the framework are applied to show how institutions can become aware of transfer inequities resulting from outdated or ill-crafted policies and practices. This content is contextualized with demographic information about today's transfer students as well as historical, theoretical, and organizational content to help readers understand how and why transfer operates as it does today, and what is at stake those operational structures remain unaltered.

In Part Three, application of the third and fourth components of the framework should create more just transfer outcomes through evidence-based interventions and continuous quality improvement efforts. Guidance on how individual educators can help move their institutions to take actions yielding more just outcomes for their transfer students is offered, as well as recommendations for institutional level action to reframe transfer as a social justice imperative.

Part One: A Framework for Social Justice in and Through Transfer

Institutions can benefit from a new, social justice–tinted lens for examining and acting on transfer as a social justice imperative. This framework, in turn, should inform more just action and change for what institutions do with and for their transfer students.

In other words, this framework should help postsecondary educators see if and how social justice is being inhibited in what their institutions are currently doing with transfer students. The framework should also move postsecondary educators beyond a new awareness—to support and guide more just outcomes *through* what they will change and redesign in their efforts.

Social justice can be defined as equal access to social mobility, opportunity, and privilege within a society. When this term appears in many institutional and departmental mission statements, the phrase often refers to efforts in the realm of diversity and inclusion. While such efforts are certainly admirable and undeniably necessary, this terminology constrains "social justice" to a single or few campus departments whose efforts are frequently focused on race, ethnicity, and, in certain academic disciplines, gender and identity. Regardless of a student's classification, all transfer students are in the process of transitioning from a previous postsecondary educational context or contexts into a new one. These equity-focused units are rarely primary providers of support for transfer students.

In this regard, transfers are what anthropologists have come to call "culturally liminal"—meaning that they are in an intermediate or "in-between" state. They are neither "of" the transfer-receiving institution or "apart" from it. During this liminal state, social hierarchies may be annulled or temporarily suspended; what was once deemed tradition may now become uncertain, and future outcomes once believed to be guaranteed may now be cast into doubt. This liminal state may be more than temporary in many ways—it can be sporadic or even permanent (Horvath et al., 2015).

Recognizing the liminal nature of many transfer students is important. Transfers may bring much-needed racial/ethnic, gender, identity, age, family income, and other forms of diversity to a campus. They are a uniquely diverse population in their own right. However, their needs go well beyond those that most diversity resource offices can or even should address. As such, they merit nuanced focus and support, requiring broad, cross-unit efforts. Failure to do so can lead to inequitable outcomes.

Colleges and universities often state proudly that their form of education is a driver of social mobility, opportunity, and career access. Concerning transfer students, however, simply stating that students are permitted to transfer in, have credit accepted, and enter programs is typically considered sufficient. Often, little further consideration is given to what actually happens to transfer students once they enroll and have moved beyond the mechanics of "transferring in."

In response to this dynamic, we offer a four-component framework for social justice in and through transfer. To wit:

1. *Equity in access and outcomes is a positive institutional goal.* Transfer students should be an identified population that is examined when assessing institutional performance in pursuit of this equity.
2. *Systemic conditions such as policies, practices, and processes may inherently advantage some students over others.* Institutions should examine if/how their transfer students are impacted by these policies, practices, and processes.
3. *Well-designed interventions can and often do improve outcomes for historically marginalized groups while maintaining and often raising expectations and standards.* Institutions should examine if/how their interventions serve or neglect transfer students.
4. *Ongoing advocacy and continuous, evidence-based improvements are necessary for lasting change.*

At its core, our approach to anchoring and operationalizing transfer in a social justice framework is done to level a particular playing field and allow all postsecondary participants a fair shot at successful completion of a baccalaureate degree. Doing so requires institutions to undertake efforts to identify and remove institutionally generated and/or perpetuated barriers that subtly but effectively inhibit fair and equitable treatment that enable transfer student success and collegiate completion. In the rest of this chapter, we use this framework to help both educators and/or institutions begin and/or continue to do just that.

Part Two: Building Awareness of and Understanding the Context for Inequitable Design in Transfer

The first component of the framework deals with building awareness of inequity in higher education access for transfer students, and the second focuses on systemic reasons—policies, practices, and procedures—that may discriminate against an institution's transfer students. This section begins with some demographic, historical, and theoretical background on why transfer is structured as it is at many 4-year colleges and universities across the United States today. Keep these factors in mind as you consider some of the common inequities faced by the transfer population.

What Is at Stake—The Demographic Context

Recent surveys indicate that the vast majority of students who begin their quest for a higher education credential at a community college state that they eventually hope to earn a bachelor's degree. Sadly, fewer than 16% eventually walk across the stage to collect a diploma (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). The associated issues only get worse when considering both the sheer number of students who attend community colleges as well as the demographic composition of that group.

Roughly 40% of U.S. first-time first-year students begin higher education in a community college (Doyle, 2009; Kena et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2015, 2017). This means that first-year student enrollment in community colleges is proportionately higher than in any other postsecondary sector in the United States—since community colleges constitute just slightly above one quarter (25.1%) of all U.S. postsecondary institutions, but enroll approximately two fifths of all first-year students (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2018).

Students who enroll in community colleges are *diverse* in nearly all senses of the term. Over two fifths of Hispanic (42.6%), nearly one third of African Americans (31.3%), nearly two fifths of American Indians (39.3%), and nearly three tenths (29.4%) of students who identify as belonging to two or more race/ethnicity groups are enrolled in community colleges (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2018). And over two fifths (42%) of all low-income students who go to college in the United States, do so in the community college (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2011). Students of color and students from low-income families are overrepresented in a sector that, as previously mentioned, constitutes just about a quarter of all U.S. postsecondary institutions.

These data really matter when it comes to transfer. Community colleges disproportionately function as the primary entry point for students from historically underrepresented race and ethnic groups as well as low-income families. Shapiro et al. (2017) and their National Student Clearinghouse Research Center colleagues report that lower-income students at community colleges were essentially as likely as students from higher-income families to earn an associate degree or certificate before they transferred to 4-year institutions. But low-income students were much less likely to earn a bachelor's degree after transferring than their counterparts from higher-income families. Specifically, nearly half of community college students from higher-income families (49%) earned a baccalaureate degree within 6 years of starting at the community college compared to slightly more than a third (35%) of students from low-income families. Given these outcomes, there is a disservice being done to these students, unintentionally or not. As the next section shows, that disservice is rooted in and contextualized by theory.

What Is at Stake—The Historical and Theoretical Contexts

The discussion of education through a social justice and access lens is nothing new, but a significant focus of that discussion has primarily been on K–12 systems and on potential support for students in systems considered "failing" by one metric or another. These discussions are, in contemporary contexts, largely seen as a state-level issue, since the majority of funding for primary and secondary schools comes from state and/or local sources.

Equity in postsecondary educational opportunity in the United States has "trickled up" from the Civil Rights era in the 1950s and 1960s, where the focus was largely on *de jure* racial discrimination. While many colleges and universities also draw extensive monies from individual states, the overarching dependence on federal financial aid (among other statutes) and student mobility across state lines make higher education a national issue—an issue with a level of importance often tied to the party controlling the congressional purse.

Transfer, however, has largely been excluded from the social justice conversation and the related examination of contemporary higher education policy. Politicians and the media often extol the accessibility of community colleges, while also stressing the importance of postsecondary education to the economic opportunities of low-income, minority, and first-generation college students. Spotlights are placed on remarkable success stories like that of Kansas Congresswoman Sharice Davids, a graduate of Kansas City's Johnson County Community College who eventually earned a juris doctor (JD) degree from Cornell Law School (Palmer, 2018).

As deeply inspiring as these accounts may be, they often mask the difficult realities of transfer students and the labyrinthine nature of the transfer experience. In other words, while we often focus on stories of the survivors of the wreck of the *S.S. Transfer*, we need to determine why so few made it to the lifeboats.

The structural difficulties that these baccalaureate-desiring students face, some argue, are a hard-coded feature rather than a bug. Burton Clark (1960) posited his well-discussed "cooling out" function of the community/junior college nearly 6 decades ago. Clark's idea was that students not starting at a 4-year college are discouraged, both explicitly and implicitly, from pursuing more advanced programs and degrees through their experiences at community colleges. Consequently, they are ultimately denied degrees, and by extension, the economic opportunity and stature that comes with such. The effect further privileges those who do earn those degrees. Clark's theory about the existence of a winnowing ethos at community colleges certainly might be contested. The evidence strongly suggests that transfer student discrimination is alive and well nearly 60 years after Clark first wrote his article (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

The existing realities are that (a) transfer students largely do not reach their desired educational goals; (b) the institutions, largely the 4-year receiving institutions that are the gatekeepers to the baccalaureate, are not sufficiently responsive to the needs of this population; and (c) low-income students and students of color who disproportionately start their education in the community college bear the brunt of this flawed transfer design. Understanding how and why transfer students fare as poorly as they do—in essence, figuring out what makes the system so flawed for transfers—requires some knowledge of theory associated with "transfer student capital" and "social reproduction."

A professor in one of the contributors' graduate programs opined that the most important thing a student learns in college, regardless of their major, is how to successfully navigate a bureaucracy. That sort of knowledge, gained through lived experience, is key to a student's success. That functional knowledge mirrors what Laanan et al. (2011) term *transfer student capital*.

The concept of transfer student capital hinges on the notion of human capital put forth by Becker (1993) and Sweetland (1996) drawing on Bourdieu et al. (1990) and their discussions of social and cultural capital. Transfer student capital includes a student's synthesis of services and information accessible to them. A student accumulates transfer student capital through

activities such as academic skill building, academic advising and counseling, perceptions of the transfer process, cognitive development through learning, and interactions with faculty and staff. One might even make an argument that the overall process of accumulating academic credit itself could be a source of transfer student capital.

Laanan et al. (2011) makes the case that the more transfer student capital students acquire, the more likely they are to resist "transfer shock"—the phenomenon (and phrase) coined by Hills (1965) referring to the GPA drop that typically follows when a student changes institutions. If an institution provides (and students take advantage of) appropriate levels of challenge and support through both curricular and cocurricular efforts, students should increase their overall level of transfer student capital, thus improving the odds of success as they move through the transfer process. Rosenberg (2016), drawing on Laanan's concept, found a strong correlation, controlling for age, gender, race, and SES, between a student's self-reported intent to transfer and their participation in transfer student capital-building activities such as those mentioned previously.

The concept of transfer student capital is closely aligned with a construct called *social reproduction theory*. Social reproduction theory acknowledges the Marxist notion that, in modern economies, workers produce commodities, and then further asks what educational systems produce the workers and why those systems do so (Bhattacharya, 2017). The chapter contributors acknowledge that this is a simplification, but delving fully into all aspects of social reproduction theory would be well beyond the scope of the chapter.

In his social reproduction thesis, Bourdieu et al. (1990) focused extensively on the relationship among education, family, and social class. In this scholarship, Bourdieu makes the point that "education plays an important role in aiding and abetting the reproduction of social inequality and social exclusion" (Tzanakis, 2011, p. 76). As Tzanakis notes, the "reproduction of these inequalities is argued by Bourdieu to be facilitated in schools where teachers' pedagogic actions promote the cultural capital of the dominant class by rewarding students who possess such capital and by penalizing others who do not," thereby denoting that "the school becomes a central agent of social exclusion and reproduction" (pp. 76–77).

While Bourdieu emphasizes that pedagogic actions used by schools to reproduce—often unknowingly—social values, norms, and structures, social reproduction does not simply occur through actions in the classroom. The pervasive nature of dominant norms in all aspects of academic life make social reproduction possible. In the transfer process, the view that transfers serve as a means to meet or boost enrollment numbers is one manner in which social norms are reproduced. We believe that this enrollment-related view of transfer dominates institutional perspectives about and activities for the transfer experience and transfer students. This view also explains why the most common reporting "home" for transfer student responsibility is the enrollment management division. As a result, the possibilities associated with transfer are deleteriously limited, as we illustrate in the next section.

How Transfer Is Frequently Viewed and Organized Today

In a large, statewide survey of transfer-bound students, transfer students listed their top concerns (which were reported at statistically significantly higher rates than other concerns) with transferring as (a) ability to pay for college, (b) time management, and (c) academic preparedness (Rosenberg, 2016). Taken together, these represent a concern with being able to balance the academic requirements of a baccalaureate program with the realities of everyday life and finances.

An examination of transfer through a more organizational and functional perspective exposes that addressing these sorts of concerns among transfers is not a high institutional priority at many colleges and universities. A chief executive officer's cabinet reflects the functional areas seen as most instrumental to the success of the institution. The frequent absence of explicitly delineated advocates for transfer at the highest level means, naturally, that any transfer advocate will have to cut through numerous levels of bureaucracy before getting the ear of decision-makers with sufficient influence to effect and maintain structural change. Lacking upper-level advocacy, the "invisible nature" of transfer students at many institutions means their concerns go unheeded, as their potential champions (to the extent any even exist) are often diffused across units.

The lack of attention to these students from an institutional, structural perspective is bad enough considering a sense of justice and equity. Making matters worse is that this information is *absolutely nothing new*. The lack of seamless academic integration of transfer students is reported again and again, both anecdotally and through academic study (Belfield et al., 2017; Laanan, 1998; Lang, 2009; Rhine et al., 2000). Yet the problem persists, even among campuses known to rely on transfer students to bolster their enrollment.

This obstinacy has real-life implications for the students who find themselves illserved by these structures. Ever-increasing tuition, driven by cuts to public education by state governments; increases in costs; unfunded mandates; and so on, leave these students with mountains of unpaid student loan debt, often without a credential to show for their work. This failure is directly related, and primarily caused by, how institutions view and organize themselves for transfer.

This belief is supported by the findings from a survey of transfer practitioners undertaken by the Gardner Institute in 2017 as part of a planning grant funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The results showed that while the majority of colleges had an individual whom they considered a primary transfer advocate, that person was most often located within some part of the enrollment management division. Enrollment management proved to be far and away the most common location for transfer

student advocacy and support. Fewer than 2% of respondents indicated that the primary transfer advocate was at the presidential/CEO or cabinet level (Rosenberg & Griffin, 2017).

There are distinct merits of an enrollment management connection with the transfer function, and we think very highly about the good intentions and merits of enrollment management leaders and personnel. An issue arises, however, when enrollment management serves as the sole—or at least the overwhelming primary—area with responsibility for transfer. This arrangement causes most institutions to view and treat transfer as largely an organizational sustainment exercise.

The limits of the "organizationally sustaining" raison d'être for transfer may be further understood by considering the earlier information about social reproduction theory. If viewed as a sole or even primary enrollment management responsibility, transfer students become largely a means for keeping enrollment numbers and revenue projections at levels needed to keep the organization running—to perpetuate or "reproduce" the college or university as an entity. The reproduction feeds budget models as it spits out transfer students.

This point is further supported by the findings of the aforementioned Rosenberg and Griffin (2017) survey. Those survey results showed that institutions generally do not consider transfer a social justice imperative—but rather, as mentioned before, largely an operations issue. That is, transfer is seen as the process of transporting *credits* out of one registrar's system and into another's, which depersonalizes a very human phenomenon. Almost 68% of respondents indicated that either the division of enrollment management (48.3%) or academic affairs (19.3%) was the primary "owner" of transfer advocacy, and nearly 46% stated that there were no campus advocates for transfer *at all* outside of enrollment management.

With a singular or overemphasized enrollment management focus, the goal of helping low-income and historically underrepresented transfer students earn baccalaureate degrees and achieve social mobility ceases to be the primary driver of transfer policy. If these goals were primary, the problems related to low-income students' baccalaureate completion rates likely would not be as acute as they are, nor would they have been tolerated over decades.

Examples of Inequity Toward Transfers

Based on our experiences and research, we believe that even a cursory examination using the first two components of the framework would reveal issues surrounding the transfer student experience at many institutions in the United States. While certainly not exhaustive, some examples of biased design in access and practice follow.

Inequity in admission practices at "elite" institutions. As a recent report by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation illustrates, the more competitive an admissions process is at a 4-year institution, the less likely that institution is to accept transfer students from community colleges—favoring instead other 4-year students (Glynn, 2019). This approach effectively eliminates access for large swaths of the otherwise-qualified low-income, underrepresented, and first-generation college student population. These institutions are also then insulated from the talents these students bring—talents which help them graduate, by all indications, at rates comparable to first-time freshmen (Xu et al., 2018). The approach privileges one form of educational experience over another—thereby undermining the meritocratic promise associated with community colleges in particular and higher education in the United States in general.

To illustrate, Princeton University did away with transfer admissions altogether in 1990. While the University's administration undoubtedly discussed the implications, this decision conveyed a clear "if you didn't start here, you don't belong here" message. The same institution, 26 years later, made headlines by reversing its decision by admitting *13* transfer students out of over 1,400 transfer applicants (Jaschik, 2019).

Inequity toward "post-traditional" students. Even at moderately selective institutions such as typical regional 4-year public institutions, an implicit or explicit bias against the lived reality of transfer students often exists. Something as customary as new student orientation may be set up as long blocks of in-person presentations and activities. While appropriate for an 18-year-old student living in a residence hall, such an arrangement is potentially unworkable for an adult student with potential childcare and/or work responsibilities who likely would be unable to attend a 4-day series of welcome events.

Further, after evaluation of previously earned credits, students may learn that they are further from graduation than they had anticipated (Silberman & Rojas, chapter 7, this volume). Responsibilities for initiating an appeal to regain those credits often lie entirely with the students, who frequently must navigate a complex process at an entirely new institution with little accessible guidance.

Inequity in the design and availability of student information. The backbone of academic advising services for transfers is often some sort of transfer pathway indicating recommended course sequences for particular majors. These pathways may be difficult for a student to locate through a basic institutional website search prior to admission, and many individuals with whom a student may come into contact—faculty, resident advisors, financial aid professionals, and so on—may not even be aware of the existence of these sorts of articulations. These same individuals would likely have little problem pointing a first-year student to the campus library or recreation center.

Inequitable faculty bias toward transfer. Faculty may also have implicit or explicit biases toward transfer students—often centering on a perceived lack of individual academic acumen or concerns about curricular rigor at the institutions where the transfer students were previously enrolled. Frequently, these concerns exist in the complete absence of discussion with faculty counterparts at primary sending institutions or an evidence-based examination about who does or does not succeed in particular courses and curricula. The following anecdote should not sound uncommon in this age of expansive use of adjunct faculty.

After years of expressed frustration on the part of a department head, a 4-year institution held a meeting with its instructors and their counterparts from a local community college to discuss perceived rigor differences and instructional inadequacies in a particular course offered at both institutions—a course deemed pivotal to curricular sequences in a number of popular majors. Most of the sections taught at the 4-year university were taught by continuing term lecturers—instructors who had multiyear appointments to teach one or more sections of the course at the university.

Upon greeting the meeting attendees, the department head suddenly realized that over half of his continuing term lecturers were also teaching the same course at the nearby community college. The course content was practically identical—as evidenced by the syllabi shared in the meeting—and the majority of the instructors teaching the course were literally the same people. In addition, the courses at both institutions were approved by the same regional accreditor using the same evaluative standards. Yet, until that meeting, there was a pervasive belief at the university that the course and its community college instructors were somehow inferior.

This is not to say that all "equivalent" courses and experiences are, in fact, equal. However, egregiously misinformed biases such as this can lead to deleterious policies such as blanket rejection of transfer credit from certain institutions and institutional types with no option for a student to earn credit for prior learning. Also, some colleges flatly reject credit from courses taken virtually, even if the course is from a regionally accredited institution and uses the same syllabus as the "in-person" version of the course (Dohanos et al., 2019). While not necessarily unique to transfer students, the combination of rejected online credits, rejection of credits from certain institutions, and limited opportunity for prior learning assessment leaves many transfers with diminished credit for previous coursework.

In and of themselves, these sorts of issues represent known systemic inequality between transfer and non-transfer students. The lack of action from those in positions to effect change, despite firsthand knowledge of these issues, moves the issue into one of de facto discrimination. As a result, a fair shot at success is denied many transfer students, which include a large proportion of historically minoritized, first-generation, and adult students who begin their educational journeys toward a bachelor's degree at a community college.

Part Three—Evidence-Based Interventions and Continuous Quality Improvement Actions for More Just Transfer Outcomes

So far, this chapter has introduced both a need for reframing transfer as a social justice imperative and a four-component framework for social justice in and through transfer that institutions could use to guide a reframing effort and then offered considerations for the first two components in our four-part framework—illustrating the need for change in this unjust system.

To help institutions make that change, this section focuses on the remaining two components of the four-component framework. As explained earlier, these latter two components deal with how individual educators and the institutions of which they are a part can go about reframing transfer as a more just experience through both evidence-based interventions and continuous quality improvement efforts.

Interventions and actions which yield just outcomes for transfer students must reflect the context in which they are being applied. To address issues surrounding transfer on a more holistic level through a social justice lens, one must reconsider the nature of transfer itself. Rather than thinking about the archetypical transfer model—one where a student starts at a 2-year college, accumulates credits, and makes a transition either with or without an associate degree to a 4-year institution where they are left to sink or swim on the basis of academic merit—one must take a broader view.

As well, beyond the students themselves at a typical institution, little accurate data are available about who transfer students are and how they perform—both as a cohort and compared to their non-transferring peers. As well, the aspects of transfer student progression—such as performance in gateway coursework at both transfer-sending and transfer-receiving institutions—is not well scrutinized. In a performance-based budgeting world, any support program designed to assist a transfer student will have difficulty assessing impact and efficacy since equitable transfer student outcomes are generally not considered in state-performance funding models.

Further, transfer must also be seen as a process that has broader, and arguably higher-order, societal benefits. Transfer initiatives should openly recognize and consistently deliver on their social mobility promise.

The structure of the system itself must be thoroughly examined to determine where the "pain points" lie in the process. Taken alone, each of these points may be relatively innocuous, overcome by students whose perseverance has been demonstrated again and again. But the collective effect of these various bureaucratic issues may lead to an "academic death by a thousand paper cuts." To protect students from this potential fate, consider the continuum of the student experience from initial enrollment at a

sending institution to the eventual earning of a bachelor's degree—while understanding the reality, as previously discussed in this chapter, that the students most in need have the least transfer student capital with which to navigate this process.

The awareness-building components of our framework shared previously provide the structure and examples of methods for how educators can become more conscious about erroneous assumptions, inequitable treatment, and gaps in support for transfer students. Following are some ways in which informed educators can help their institutions act continuously to improve the entire transfer experience—from the pre-transfer stage to the point where the transfer student obtains a baccalaureate degree.

The Transfer Student Experience as a Just Continuum—Thoughts and Questions to Guide Action

John N. Gardner provided a definition that can be used as a basis for this reframing:

> Transfer is the totality of the educationally purposeful experiences which we intentionally provide our students to enable them to pursue their educational and personal aspirations for academic movement from any of our colleges to some other learning environment that enables our students to pursue a form of educational credentialing not provided by their initial institution. (Ehasz et al., 2017)

Effectively, a student's transfer experience begins at initial enrollment, ends at degree completion and graduation, and includes every aspect of the academic experience in between.

Educators interested in creating just outcomes in the transfer experience might consider the transfer student experience as a five-part continuum. Each part deserves in-depth examination and redesign bolstered by evidence. In support of these efforts, both the five-part continuum and some guiding questions for each part follow.

Part 1: Pre-Enrollment—These are the "pieces and parts" a student navigates before beginning coursework. Consider first the application process—both online and in-person. What does the initial advising process look like? How does your institution perform credit evaluation—whether from International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) exams, work experience, credit from other institutions, and so on? How is information about financial aid communicated, how are awards packaged, and appeals performed? Does the institution offer institutional aid to transfer students or reserve most of it for first-time, full-time, first-year students? How do students experience orientation and initial registration? How does your institution design and deliver placement testing? What about priority for registration? What about parity for access to on-campus residential accommodations? Is guidance available for exploratory students?

Part 2: First Institution (Transfer-Sending Institution) Experience—Once a student is enrolled, what safeguards does your institution put in place for a student to maintain an accurate academic path? When are they given information about transfer requirements at various destination institutions? Are transfer "pathways" clearly spelled out and accessible? Will their noncredit remediation needs throw them off an academic pathway? Do they have a guide for appropriate general education or pre-major courses in their eventual baccalaureate major? If those pre-major courses (e.g., advanced calculus for students desiring engineering) are not available, what options do students have to earn those credits? What ongoing advising and tutoring resources are available? Does the institution have a transfer center? What services exist to help them with "nonacademic challenges"? Are outcomes studied both in aggregate and disaggregated by (and in partnership with) primary transfer-receiving institutions to determine if/how transfer is actually facilitating progress for all students?

Part 3: The Transfer Move—This stage is where most institutions focus their efforts—the "bridge between campuses." For 2-year colleges: What sort of guidance is provided to students to ensure a proper institutional fit at their new destination? What is the transcript fee policy if a student has demonstrated financial need—or emergency financial needs? For 4-year colleges: What sort of recruitment messages are sent? How is the hand-off of financial aid handled? When does credit evaluation happen—and are previous credit evaluations from other institutions allowed to stand, especially among "horizontal" transfers from other 4-year schools? Does transfer orientation exist? Is there a transfer version of the first-year experience course available and, if so, is it required? Do registration policies send transfer students to the "back of the line" for course registration? Are housing options available for transfer students? Do the faculty from the primary-sending and primary receiving institutions discuss teaching, learning, and success in gateway courses that are foundational to successful completion in primary transfer-receiving programs of study?

Part 4: Receiving Institution Experience—How is admission of transfer students into desired majors, especially competitive majors, handled? If students have coursework gaps, such as missing general education courses, what is the remedy? How is advising performed in a student's receiving department? Is there a transfer center at the receiving institution? Do faculty examine transfer student performance in gateway courses and larger transfer-receiving programs of study? Do academic progression policies align with the transfer student experiences? Are

transfer student outcomes studied in aggregate and disaggregated with the primary transfer-sending institutions to determine if/how transfer is actually facilitating social mobility?

Part 5: The Baccalaureate Emergence—Do institutional residency policies mirror the lived experiences of transfer students, or do they unnecessarily delay completion of a baccalaureate? Are clear graduation application instructions sent to transfer students? Are transfer students eligible for academic honors? Does the alumni office celebrate the successes of transfer students?

Any institution trying to address the inequality with which transfer students grapple could start by asking questions like these in a systematic manner. Whether performed in a formal planning process or by an ad hoc committee, great utility exists in gaining a deeper understanding of the realities of the transfer experience. Armed with that information, however, advocates for transfer must build a broad-based coalition which recognizes the need for action to address these inequities, as no one can create change alone.

Making the Case Within Your Institution

While at least a bare majority of institutions have designated advocates for transfer, these champions for transfer students often do not hold positions of significant organizational and/or academic leadership influence outside of the enrollment management realm and generally have little if any contact with top academic and/or administrative leadership.

While enrollment management is essential to any institution's success, an individual or an office dedicated to recruitment or retention typically does not have the sole power or authority to set policy, change or augment curricula, or even broadly debunk campus mythology surrounding its transfer students. Enrollment management involvement in transfer is imperative, but as currently structured at many institutions, this role is insufficient in striving to create equitable transfer learning and social justice goals.

Barring a broad-based institutional effort directed at improving transfer outcomes that engages all elements of campus, transfer advocates often have the somewhat thankless task of convincing major campus stakeholders to support their efforts. Campus leadership is under a constant barrage of requests for support, especially financially related support, from any number of offices, departments, and interest groups. Rising above that chorus is a challenge. Transfer advocates who singlehandedly push for change on an individual level, or even those who try to simply go "up the line," following the hierarchy on an institutional organizational chart, often become frustrated at the lack of progress or support. As well, single-office efforts to improve transfer outcomes are vulnerable to changes in institutional leadership, organizational structure, or unexpected changes in departmental priority.

Lasting change requires advocacy, responsibility, and intentionality. Advocacy requires intentionally organizing and, more importantly, constant, evidence-based, action to build support for efforts in the transfer arena. This sort of outreach generally isn't part of the job description for many transfer practitioners and instead begs for advocacy from a senior level position or person. Building networks of allies outside of the typical enrollment management/academic advising/registrar triumvirate is critical to changing the conversation about transfer on any campus. What follows is a potential guide for potential outreach and momentum-building efforts. This guide is adapted from *A Pocket Guide to Building Partnerships* by the World Health Organization (2003), but any number of networking and partnership strategies could also work here.

Know the institutional mission. A mentor of one of this chapter's contributors once quipped, "When you run into resistance, bring everything back to mission." While having data that demonstrates improved retention, persistence, and graduation rates can help people understand that a focus on transfer is *important*, illustrating a connection between transfer and the core values of an institution demonstrates that focus is an *imperative*. The connection to mission can be further enhanced by making the connection between transfer and equity apparent to all involved stakeholders, particularly faculty.

Every institution has a mission statement. Many of those statements implicitly or explicitly discuss the institutional role in the creation of a just and educated society, broadening economic opportunity for all who walk through the doors, the value of diversity, and ending injustice. If you have not done so already, consider how helping your institution improves the lives of transfer students aligns with its stated mission. That alignment is the start of the pitch.

Identify the stakeholders. Who else on your campus engages in work that could support the social justice mission of transfer? Perhaps consider the chair of the faculty senate, who could make a social justice–based case to the collective professoriate. In collective bargaining environments, involving union leaders in discussions about transfer students is vital for change to occur. Offices of diversity and inclusion or multicultural affairs champion the causes of campus subpopulations—within which transfer students are often richly represented. The campus fundraising, development, and alumni affairs offices are also fair game. Fundraising involves highlighting stories of student success, and few students have better stories than transfer students. Regardless of where you begin, once you identify a person or persons within the targeted office, be able to articulate the direct

benefit to this department and its constituency of an increased focus on transfer—as well as how this focus will benefit the institution as a whole.

Establish points of contact and communication. Begin networking. Once a person or persons within the targeted offices is identified, invite them to lunch, coffee, or even a 15-minute meeting to break the ice. Come in with a bulleted list of talking points. In addition to transfer data, outline your best illustrations of why facilitating the transition of transfer students is a moral and ethical imperative that needs to involve multiple campus players. Once there's mutual interest, ask for a longer meeting to hammer out details. In that longer meeting, ask them who else they think should be a part of the conversation. See if they are willing to offer an invite.

Create strategy and assessment goals. The proverbial rubber meets the hypothetical road at this point, as you consider how championing transfer is a win–win case to advance to the institution's body politic. Consider what would be considered a "success" to your new partner. Identify how you would measure that success and outline an action plan, including communications. Get the wheels turning on the plan.

Report successes and institutionalize projects. Communicate your successes, to both internal and external audiences. If a program is working particularly well, work your channels to get those support systems backed by a budget. Make certain that everyone knows that it's a collaborative effort.

Other Recommendations for Action

1. Understand that many students in these transfer populations come to the institution with a baked-in assumption that the processes of successfully navigating a collegiate experience will be arduous and difficult. "Mystery shop" your own institution's student-facing processes with an eye toward a student's real experience. As you're following the process a typical student would follow, ask yourself whether a student with limited time, means, or experience would be successful in this effort. Personal experience goes a long way toward building knowledge for advocacy.

2. Perform regular audits of transfer pathways, articulation agreements, and credit acceptance policies to assure they're working in the best interests of students. If your institution does not have processes in place to perform those three audits, create them with an eye toward spotting inequitable trends.

3. When creating and/or reviewing transfer policy, outline policy intent, process, and expected outcome to a group of students. See if they understand what the institution is trying to accomplish. If it can't be easily explained, send it back to the drawing board with their feedback.

4. Work with institutional partners, both those with which you have a sending–receiving relationship and peer institutions with a similar transfer demographic. Avoid reinventing the proverbial wheel, and build problem-solving connections by involving the opinions and observations of other institutions and a diverse array of educators.

5. Find the area or areas where your state is prioritizing funds—sectors of workforce, various initiatives, and so on. Align your transfer message accordingly to justify additional pecuniary support.

6. Create a long-term campus plan for transfer. This can be done through a facilitated formal planning process like the Gardner Institute's Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus or created in-house. This plan should be dynamic, involving a broad assortment of stakeholders and created to withstand changes in institutional leadership. Focus on including strong faculty representation, as they are often left out of policy conversations.

7. In all forms of evaluation, discussion, and planning for the transfer experience, focus on outcomes for both transfer students in aggregate and transfer students from various demographic groups. Recognizing that systemic racism and classism are often hidden—thereby making them difficult to spot, let alone rectify—make sure data about transfer students can be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, family income, and gender. Use these data continuously as a focus of the conversations and work and to revise policy and practice in ways that eliminate inequitable gaps in achievement (Koch & Drake, chapter 13, this volume).

Concluding Thoughts on Transfer as a Social Justice Imperative

This chapter has provided a four-component framework for social justice in and through transfer, furnished historical and theoretical foundations for understanding how and why transfer must be reframed as a social justice imperative, and provided practical steps readers can take to move toward realizing a more just design for their institution's transfer experience.

Making transfer a social justice imperative is an evolutionary process, even if it may come across to some readers as a revolutionary idea. While this call to action may be rooted in theory of Marxist origins, we are by no means calling for the

transfer students of the world to unite and overthrow the owners of the means of educational production. Rather, we are calling for concerned educators to begin examining evidence in a new way—evidence that may display current transfer practices are reinforcing inequity instead of mitigating it.

We encourage postsecondary educators and leaders, especially those who have yet to be involved in the transfer agenda at their institutions, to examine if and how their institutional approaches to transfer are or are not contributing to a just and equitable learning experience, and, ultimately social mobility. We also encourage them to see and understand how their role—either through action or inaction—might be perpetuating class- and race-based injustice.

Change will not come overnight. Nor will it come simply by moving responsibility for transfer from one area to another. This change will require caring and concerned educators throughout the transfer pipeline taking steps to mitigate these issues. We hope this chapter informs such action.

References

Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. University of Chicago Press.

Belfield, C. R., Fink, J., & Jenkins, D. (2017). *Is it really cheaper to start at a community college? The consequences of inefficient transfer for community college students seeking bachelor's degrees* (CCRC Working Paper 94). Columbia University, Teacher's College, Community College Research Center. https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8HX1NC5/download

Bhattacharya, T. (Ed.). (2017). How not to skip class: Social reproduction of labor and the global working class. In *Remapping class, recentering oppression* (pp. 68–93). Pluto Press.

Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C., & Nice, R. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Chronicle of Higher Education. (2018, August 19). *The almanac of higher education 2018-19*. (2018). Author. (Access to this site requires a paid subscription.) https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-almanac-of-higher-education-2018-19/

Clark, B. R. (1960). The "cooling-out" function in higher education. *American Journal of Sociology, 65*(6), 569–576. https://doi.org/10.1086/222787

Dohanos, A., Swafford, M., & Morgan, A. (2019, February 20). *From community college to selective research institution: A humanities transfer pathway focused on student success*. Paper presented at the Ohio Undergraduate Education: Inspiring Practices for Student Success conference, Columbus, OH.

Doyle, W. R. (2009). Impact of increased academic intensity on transfer rates: An application of matching estimators to student-unit record data. *Research in Higher Education, 50*(1), 52–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/29782905

Ehasz, M., Gardner, J. N., & Rosenberg, M. J. (2017, February 20). *A transfer reform agenda: An exemplar and more coming—How does your institution fit in?* Presentation at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Dallas, TX.

Glynn, J. (2019). *Persistence: The success of students who transfer from community colleges to selective four-year institutions*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. https://www.jkcf.org/research/persistence/

Hills, J. R. (1965). Transfer shock: The academic performance of the junior college transfer. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 33*(3), 201–215. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-008-9107-6

Horvath, A., Thomassen, B., & Wydra, H. (2015). *Breaking boundaries: Varieties of liminality*. Berghahn.

Jaschik, S. (2019, January 22). The (missed) potential of transfer students at elite colleges. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/01/22/study-finds-elite-institutions-admit-few-transfer-students-community?mc_cid=0584ea1166&mc_eid=1b711a3551

Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). *Tracking transfer: New measures of state and institutional effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees*. Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Kena, G., Musu-Gillette, L., Robinson, J., Wang, X., Rathbun, A., Zhang, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Barmer, A., Velez, E. D., Nachazel, T. & Dziuba, A. (2015). *The condition of education 2015*. (NCES 2015-144). National Center for Education Statistics.

Laanan, F. S. (1998). *Beyond transfer shock: A study of students' college experiences and adjustment processes at UCLA* (Doctoral dissertation). https://www.library.ucla.edu/sel/grey-literature/dissertations/

Laanan, F. S., Starobin, S. S., & Eggleston, L. E. (2011). Adjustment of community college students at a four-year university: Role and relevance of transfer student capital for student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 12*(2), 175–209. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.12.2.d

Lang, D. W. (2009). Articulation, transfer, and student choice in a binary post-secondary system. *Higher Education, 57*(3), 355–371. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9151-3

National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education. (2011, June). Affordability and transfer: Critical to increasing baccalaureate degree completion. *Policy Alert*, June, 1–8.

Palmer, T., Dial, S., & Plake, S. (2018, November 6). Newcomer Sharice Davids triumphs against Kevin Yoder in Johnson County. *KSHB 41– Kansas City*. https://www.kshb.com/news/political/newcomer-sharice-davids-triumphs-against-kevin-yoder-in-johnson-county

Rhine, T. J., Milligan, D. M., & Nelson, L. R. (2000). Alleviating transfer shock: Creating an environment for more successful transfer students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 24*(6), 443–453. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920050137228

Rosenberg, M. J. (2016). Understanding the adult transfer student—Support, concerns, and transfer student capital. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 40*(12), 1058– 1073. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1216907

Rosenberg, M. J., & Griffin, B. (2017). *JNGI survey of transfer practitioners*. John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. http://www.jngi.org/surveytransfer-practitioners

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P. K., Bhimdiwali, A., Nathan, A., & Youngsik, H. (2015). *Transfer and mobility: A national view of student movement in postsecondary institutions, fall 2008 cohort*. (Signature Report No. 9). National Student Clearinghouse.

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P. K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Hwang, Y. (2017). *Tracking transfer: Measures of effectiveness in helping community college students to complete bachelor's degrees*. (Signature Report No. 13). National Student Clearinghouse.

Sweetland, S. R. (1996). Human capital theory: Foundations of a field of inquiry. *Review of Educational Research, 66*(3), 341–359. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543066003341

Tzanakis, M. (2011). Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis and the role of cultural capital in educational attainment: A critical review of key empirical studies. *Educate, 11*(1), 76–90. https://www.readyunlimited.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Cultural-Capital-report1.pdf

World Health Organization & Stop TB Partnership. (2003). *A pocket guide to building partnerships*. World Health Organization. http://www.stoptb.org/assets/documents/countries/partnerships/building_partnerships_guide.pdf.

Xu, D., Jaggars, S. S., Fletcher, J., & Fink, J. E. (2018). Are community college transfer students "a good bet" for 4-year admissions? Comparing academic and labor-market outcomes between transfer and native 4-year college students. *The Journal of Higher Education, 89*(4), 478–502. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1434280