

Kansas State University: 2+2 Partnerships with Community Colleges

*Sue Maes
Jennifer Pfortmiller
Melinda Sinn
Rosanna Vail*

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The key to economic success for the United States is an educated workforce. The US Department of Education estimates that each four-year college graduate generates on average \$5,900 more per year than a high-school graduate in local, state, and federal tax revenues. In the United States, 40 million American adults currently have some college credit but no certificate or degree (Smith), and among young adults aged 25–34, 7 million have some college education but no degree (US Department of Education). A report from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* indicated that the US government, at both the state and federal levels, spent an estimated \$9 billion between 2003 and 2008 on students who subsequently dropped out before the end of their freshman year.

This article focuses on how Kansas State University (K-State) built partnerships with all 19 community colleges in Kansas and streamlined the process of providing place-bound adult students with access to complete a bachelor's degree while continuing to live, work, and serve in their home communities. As a case study, it may offer other institutions practices and approaches in connecting community colleges with continuing education units.

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THE PROBLEM . . . AND K-STATE'S SOLUTION

The State of Kansas has a strong and geographically dispersed community college system consisting of 19 community colleges, making it relatively easy for an adult student to access the first two years of a college degree. The number of adults in Kansas who have some college credits but no bachelor's degree is 448,306 (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning). However, according to the US Department of Education:

Students spend valuable time and money on courses only to find out credits do not fully transfer, resulting in their having to retake course work. The lack of a coherent, navigable, and transparent transfer process both increases the cost and time needed to earn a degree and diminishes the likelihood of completion.

Many institutions do not have a concrete plan for how to apply credits toward a bachelor's degree, and the transcript evaluation process can be quite lengthy and cumbersome. Challenges in transferring credits can result in longer enrollment, more tuition payments, and additional federal financial aid awards (US Government Accountability Office). Because of the inability to transfer credits, the redundant costs to students, institutions, and the government approaches \$30 billion per year (Smith).

Kansas State University (K-State) has been an educational leader in the state, delivering online degree programs for more than 16 years. For the past five years, K-State's Division of Continuing Education has been partnering with community colleges to address the needs of working adults who could access education locally or who already had many university credits but no bachelor's degree. The partnerships, called "2+2 agreements," provide services, direction, and a streamlined completion process for place-bound students in the form of degree maps that determine the courses they need to take from their community college and the courses they can take at a distance through K-State to complete a K-State bachelor's degree. In addition to benefitting students, 2+2s have opened up opportunities for enhancing marketing strategies that benefit the community colleges and the four-year institution.

2+2 AGREEMENTS

Kansas State University has made many of its bachelor's degree completion programs available through distance delivery for more than 40 years. To expand the reach of these programs, build stronger ties with commu-

nity colleges, and help adult Kansans realize that a bachelor's degree was obtainable from their community, K-State developed the 2+2 partnership, which is made up of:

- a formal, signed agreement with the community college;
- a degree map listing the courses that need to be completed at both institutions in order to complete the bachelor's degree; and
- publicity for both the community college and K-State.

The university's development of 2+2 partnerships began in the K-State Division of Continuing Education when the associate dean—a former community college president—recognized the need for adults in Kansas to earn both their associate's and bachelor's degrees while in their home community. Two K-State Division staff were hired and strategically based at community colleges in central and western Kansas to facilitate education for these adults in rural communities and develop a clear pathway to a bachelor's degree. Initial efforts to garner community college interest involved division leadership traveling throughout the state to introduce the idea of the 2+2 partnership.

More specifically, the following steps were used in developing 2+2s between Kansas State University and the community colleges:

- *Contact* the community college and establish a working relationship with the key players. This varies by community college but the usual starting point is the academic dean and/or the faculty members in the respective programs. Community colleges statewide and from outside states often initiated the first contact upon learning about the university's distance education options.
- *Acquire* the associate's-degree curriculum and integrate it into the bachelor's curriculum, making sure all requirements are met and credit hours are kept at the absolute minimum needed to satisfy the requirements for the associate's and bachelor's degree.
- *Arrange* time for a transfer specialist to provide a thorough review of the proposed curriculum—a critical step to ensure seamless transferability of

- credits. Obtain university approval of the degree proposal, allowing the respective college units to sign off on the curriculum as presented.
- *Secure* community college approval. Send the proposed 2+2 to the community college to make sure its courses are represented accurately for its degree requirements.
 - *Review*, amend, and re-approve as needed until the final document is finalized.
 - *Finalize* agreement with signatures and photo opportunities. The signature document contains language about the partnership, how to discontinue the partnership should programs be eliminated, and how each institution will market, promote, and advise students.
 - *Create* marketing pieces. Graphic designers put final curriculum information into visually appealing 2+2 degree maps for print and online distribution. These degree maps outline which courses students need to take from the community college and which they need to take through K-State distance education.
 - *Promote* 2+2s through press releases, printed degree-map distribution, website presence, community college and university marketing campaigns, and other avenues.
 - *Enroll* students in the community college (currently or in the near future) and enroll students in the university (usually two or more years later).

ANATOMY OF A 2+2

2+2s degree maps are eye-catching, visually appealing documents that succinctly represent the final goal, without unnecessarily overwhelming the student. After being reviewed and approved by academic advisors, they accurately list the courses needed at both institutions to earn the respective associate's and bachelor's degree.

There are two components of 2+2s. The first lists the courses and credit hours needed to satisfy the requirements for the associate's degree at the community college. The degree map uses the community college's course language, stating the exact course prefixes, numbers, and names. Depending

on the associate's-degree program from the community college, the courses may or may not all be offered in the online/distance format. Regardless, if a student successfully completes only the first two years as outlined on the 2+2, the student would have earned the associate's degree.

The "+2" component lists the courses and credit hours needed to satisfy the requirements for the K-State degree. It uses the university's course language, stating the exact course prefixes, numbers, and names. Since not all freshman- and sophomore-level courses at K-State are offered at a distance, it became extremely important for the university to partner with community colleges that provide lower-level courses either on campus or through distance delivery, and all courses in the +2 component are available through distance delivery from K-State. When the student successfully completes courses as outlined on the 2+2, the student will have earned the bachelor's degree.

The 2+2s are set up to represent the amount of time it would take a full-time student taking approximately 15 credit hours each semester to complete a degree. However, every student is in a unique situation and completes classes at the student's own pace. So the degree-completion time varies by student, depending on the number of credit hours the student can take in a semester and whether he or she needs any preparatory classes. We are fully aware that distance students may only take three to six credit hours per semester while pursuing their degree and maintaining the other obligations in their lives. Therefore, it would take longer than four years to complete the degree.

Some community college associate's programs still have courses that require a physical presence on their campus. The 2+2s offer a great opportunity for these students—often place-bound near the community college—to complete their bachelor's degree without setting foot on the university's campus. This is especially useful for place-bound students served by the community colleges in the rural areas of Kansas.

However, some community colleges have their entire associate's degree available online, which meshes very well with the K-State portion of the bachelor's degree being offered online. Obviously, this is a great fit for students who live out of the area, out of state, or who are unable to take classes in the face-to-face format.

In sum, 2+2s are:

- answers to the question, "What classes do I need to take to get my degree?";
- simple but informative curriculum guides;

- superior recruitment tools for both the community college and the university;
- attractive, eye-catching marketing pieces;
- collaborative, joint promotions for the community college and the university;
- excellent pre-printed, time-saving advising tools for busy academic advisors at both the community college and university;
- valuable partnerships for students and institutions; and
- designed for busy, nontraditional, place-bound students.

2+2s are not:

- new articulation agreements or programs of study requiring admission, sign-up, commitment, or acceptance to K-State.;
- the only way to transfer to K-State to complete a bachelor's degree—there are numerous ways to meet the degree requirements and numerous combinations of classes students can transfer to the university, but the 2+2s show the most “efficient” way to complete the degree; or
- meant to recruit students for the on-campus degree programs, although they most certainly can be used that way.

A complete listing of K-State's 2+2 partner institutions in Kansas and other states, along with individual degree maps, can be found at: <http://www.dce.k-state.edu/affiliations/2+2programs/>.

RESULTS

As a result of 2+2 partnerships, there is a win-win-win scenario for the student—especially the distance student—the community college, and the university. The partnerships give place-bound adults greater possibilities for obtaining a bachelor's degree and thus expanding their career opportunities. Students and advisors at both institutions appreciate the ease of using visual degree maps to guide degree completion. The community colleges are able to encourage adults to start degrees because they can now complete a bachelor's degree without leaving their home community. The community colleges can also market their own distance programs more widely because they have a partnership that directs students to completing their bachelor's degree.

K-State's 2+2s evoke phenomenal interest from students, advisors, and administrators and have created many marketing opportunities for both the community college and the university, including:

- photo opportunities;
- press releases;
- well publicized "signing events";
- statewide coverage;
- recognition from community and government leaders;
- cross listing on institutional websites; and
- opportunities to be included in print material and advertising material as partners.

Joint promotion furthers the marketing reach of both institutions, creating heightened awareness about online bachelor's-degree programs at K-State. Local promotion of 2+2 signing events and photo opportunities build name recognition and can provide statewide coverage. K-State's presence in these communities now includes membership in local chambers of commerce, participation in community events, enhanced visibility in the communities, sharing of web links, signage, and advertising opportunities, and advising at the community college where K-State is recommended for bachelor's degree completion. Community colleges can notify their communities and businesses that they have access to bachelor's-degree programs and advanced degrees through K-State distance education.

Government officials look favorably upon partnering during these economics times. A benefit the university gains is recognition for partnership and collaboration with local institutions. The university also has the ability to focus on the last two years of the educational experience through distance education, utilizing the university's resources to a higher degree.

The 2+2s have provided increased customer service for prospective students and have led to jointly submitted grant proposals and a tremendous amount of positive public relations. The partnerships increase marketing exposure and open new marketing opportunities for both the community college and the university. In 2009, Kansas State University's Bachelor's Degree Completion Program realized a 50 percent increase in applications over 2008, and much of that growth can be attributed to the 2+2 partnerships.

While the 2+2s were initially developed for students living in rural areas of Kansas, an unexpected result was the increase of out-of-state students who found and took advantage of these partnerships between the community college and the university.

By spring of 2011, K-State partnered with all 19 Kansas community colleges with the development of 2+2 agreements for the general business bachelor's degree. Additionally, K-State's 2+2 partnerships now include agreements with five out-of-state institutions located in Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. Institutions outside of Kansas increasingly contact K-State to explore 2+2 partnership opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

The 2+2 agreements take time to develop and perfect. They involve many people with very busy schedules. Once degree maps are developed, they must be reviewed regularly, preferably once a year. The process and maintenance require labor and diligence to keep agreements a top priority for updating on a regular basis.

As a result of our collaborations with community colleges, we have learned the necessity of having the following in place:

- dual admissions procedures;
- dual advising capabilities;
- adequate staff support to create and maintain 2+2 agreements;
- adequate staff support to market and recruit more students;
- a Customer Relationship Management system and good tracking procedures; and
- better transfer and articulation processes for all higher education institutions in the state.

CONCLUSION

The *US News & World Report* indicates that "almost half of all college students in the United States attend community colleges," but that "more than 50 percent of community college students fail to transfer to a four-year school." Recent initiatives by the Obama administration included a White House summit on community colleges. The summit explored ways to increase community-college student retention and transition into the workforce or a four-year institution. The initiative is part of the administration's goal for the US to lead in college graduation rates by 2020 (*US News & World Report*).

Kansas State University's 2+2 partnerships play a large part in helping to achieve this national goal. We at K-State agree about the importance of increasing "the number of citizens in a state with a college certificate

or degree is to target adults who have ‘some college, but no degree’” (US Department of Education). Making it easier to earn a four-year degree in Kansas benefits the state by providing a more educated workforce, which in turn can bolster the state’s economy, attract new business and industry, and increase tax revenues.

K-State’s agreements with all 19 community colleges in the State of Kansas have established a more unified effort for helping adults in Kansas who have some education to complete their education. Its 2+2 partnerships for the general-business bachelor’s degree allow a student anywhere in Kansas or beyond to first earn an associate’s degree from a local community college and then earn a Bachelor’s degree in General Business through distance education. These adults can access a bachelor’s degree without leaving their home community, quitting their job, or moving their family. The next goal for K-State is to finish developing 2+2 agreements with all 19 Kansas community colleges for the Bachelor’s Degree in Technology Management and Interdisciplinary Social Science.

While these collaborative partnerships between community colleges and the university produce resources, marketing, and other benefits to both institutions, the real winners are the adult students. These place-bound adults are able to complete a quality, four-year education while maintaining their jobs, fulfilling family obligations, and continuing to serve in their home communities. Thus, students who complete bachelor’s degrees utilizing the streamlined 2+2 degree process can achieve greater opportunities for success in Kansas and beyond. 

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