

**Creating and Sustaining Community College-University Transfer Partnerships:  
A Qualitative Case Study**

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Ever since community colleges emerged in the early twentieth century, they have been alternately lauded as “democracy’s colleges” (Mahoney, 1997) for their role in providing access to higher education for previously underserved groups, and lambasted for accentuating rather than reducing “prevailing patterns of social and class inequity” (Karabel, 1986, p. 18) in part because only about a quarter of their students transfer to a university (Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 2001). This tension is also evident on community college campuses, where many faculty and administrators believe both that their institution supports transfer, and agree that more can and should be done to further assist students in meeting their transfer goals (Cohen, 1996).

Whether one faults the two-year college for “cooling out” their students’ educational aspirations (Clark, 1960) or defends the institutions by pointing out the myriad challenges inherent in educating an incredibly diverse and frequently underprepared student body, most agree that low transfer rates are a problem, both for community colleges, who may not be effectively supporting the goals and aspirations of their students, and for four-year universities, who may not be successfully enrolling representative numbers of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and traditionally underrepresented races and ethnicities. Yet neither institution may be able to solve the problem on its own. Due to budget restrictions and increased pressure to quantitatively demonstrate learning outcomes on community college campuses (Serban & Friedlander, 2004), few institutions have the personnel or the resources necessary to focus on enhancing and supporting transfer. Similarly, state policymakers and university leaders may hesitate to allocate resources toward outreach initiatives when there is not enough money to fund all programs and activities on their own campuses (Hebel, 2004).

Therefore, community colleges and universities must work together to create and sustain effective transfer practices, and to legitimize the community college as a viable and important path to the baccalaureate.

Unfortunately, while transfer partnerships that consist of more than simple articulation agreements between two- and four-year colleges are increasingly common throughout the United States, they have received scant attention in the scholarly literature. Even fewer articles have examined these partnerships through a conceptual lens that helps to identify the factors that may be barriers or aids to achieving partnership goals. In sum, we have little understanding of the processes by which community college-university transfer partnerships can be created and sustained. The purpose of this study is to draw upon the lived experiences and knowledge of faculty and administrators involved in the development and ongoing operation of one community college-university transfer partnership in order to gain an understanding of these processes and of the importance of transfer partnerships in the future.

### **Literature on Community College-University Transfer Partnerships**

Throughout the past twenty years there has been an “explosion in alliances” in America (Dyer and Singh, 1998, p. 661), both in private industry and in higher education. Indeed, some scholars have noted that collaboration has become pivotal in ensuring quality postsecondary education: “whether we realize it or not, interdependency has become the hallmark of American higher education, and we must seek to get the most out of inter-institutional cooperation if our colleges and universities are to succeed” (Neal, 1988, p. v). The literature reinforces the importance of educational alliances, and is replete with

examples and examinations of, among others, technology sharing partnerships, library consortia, high school and college dual enrollment opportunities, distance education consortia, and workforce development partnerships (see, for example, Abramson, Bird, and Stennett, 1996; Dotolo and Noftsinger, 2002; Dotolo and Strandness, 1999; Neal, 1998). One type of partnership that has emerged in recent years is what I have termed *transfer partnerships*, or collaboration between one or more community colleges and a bachelor degree-granting institution for the purpose of increasing transfer and baccalaureate attainment for all, or for a particular subset of students.

The majority of the literature on transfer partnerships, however, has focused on the most basic form of inter-institutional collaboration—articulation agreements—rather than active, collaborative partnerships between institutions. Articulation agreements, formal agreements identifying the types of credits that transfer and the conditions under which transfer takes place, have been widely touted as an essential first-step in providing broad access to the baccalaureate (Ignash and Townsend, 2000; Rifkin, 2000). However, many scholars have argued that to significantly increase transfer and baccalaureate attainment, educators must move beyond articulation agreements, and actively collaborate with complementary institutions (Case, 1999; Chatman, 2001; DiMaria, 1998). Indeed, Case (1999) has identified community college-university partnerships to be the “best practice” in promoting student transfer (p. 4). Perhaps this is because many transfer partnerships, unlike isolated programs such as MESA and EOP&S that concentrate on increasing transfer for a select group of students, seek to modify organizational structures and practices at both the community college and the university in order to improve the overall transfer *process*.

In response to numerous calls for transfer partnerships by policymakers and practitioners, several articles, books, and practical guides have emerged in the literature in recent years. Most of the publications on the topic are aimed at community college or university professionals, and either identify different types of transfer partnerships (Case, 1999; DiMaria, 1998; Fincher, 2002; Rifkin, 2000; San Diego Community College District, 2002; Windham, Perkins, and Rogers, 2001) or describe best practices for implementing them (American Council on Education, 1994; Eckel, Hartley, and Affolter-Caine, 2004; Fincher, 2002). This study builds on these examples and best practice publications by incorporating rigorous, qualitative research techniques and a conceptual framework that allows both scholars and practitioners to better understand the processes involved in creating and sustaining transfer success through community college-university partnerships. In addition to providing valuable information to those engaged in or working to create transfer partnerships, this study contributes to growing evidence about the merits of utilizing partnerships to enhance transfer and degree attainment, and has valuable implications for future research on educational partnerships.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study relied on an organizational perspective known as network embeddedness theory to provide a framework for developing research questions and constructing the interview protocol, and to help interpret and contextualize empirical findings. The network embeddedness perspective arises from systems theory, which views organizational actions as externally controlled and constrained (Hall, 1996). In particular, network embeddedness theory suggests that an institution's external and internal "social

networks” are the most influential factors shaping organizational behavior (Gulati, 1998; Powell and Smith-Doerr, 1994). According to network embeddedness theorists, all organizational action is embedded in social networks of relationships, defined as “a set of nodes (e.g., persons, organizations) linked by a set of social relationships (e.g., friendship, transfer of funds, overlapping membership) of a specified type” (Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden, 1978, p. 458). By examining these social networks of relationships, both within and between organizations (in this case, community colleges and universities), we can begin to understand the forces that shape the creation, maintenance, and success or failure of inter-organizational collaborations (Gulati, 1998).

One advantage of the network embeddedness perspective is that it makes salient the opportunities (such as geographical proximity or previous ties between organizational actors) and constraints (for example, opposition from a powerful, centrally-located actor) that can influence partnership creation and evolution (Gulati, 1998). Gulati (1998) argues that these opportunities and constraints can be identified by examining five key themes: partnership formation, governance or management structure, evolution of the alliance, performance (including the factors that influence performance), and the effects or consequences of the relationship on partner organizations.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my study. The first draws from the five themes Gulati (1998) identifies as important to understanding institutional alliances, as well as the gaps in the literature about community college-university partnerships. The second

question emerged from my interviews with partnership personnel, and contributes to our understanding of the merits of utilizing partnerships as vehicles to improve transfer.

1. What are the processes involved in creating and sustaining a community college-university transfer partnership? What factors do participants identify as barriers or aids to developing and maintaining transfer partnerships? How do “social networks of relationships” influence these processes?
2. Do participants believe that transfer partnerships will be important in the future? In what ways?

## **Methods**

To examine the processes involved in creating and maintaining transfer partnerships, and to understand participants’ thoughts about the importance of transfer partnerships in the future, I conducted a qualitative case study analysis of a transfer partnership between a large, public research university in Southern California and nine community colleges in the surrounding area. While several community college-university transfer partnerships exist in Southern California, I purposely selected this partnership as its relative size and five-year history ensured there would be an adequate number of participants—both at the university and the community colleges—to give me a range of perspectives about partnership creation and operation. As well, all the institutions involved were within driving distance from my home or work, thus allowing me to make multiple trips to colleges in order to interview partnership personnel.

Following case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), data collection consisted primarily of thirteen one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with partnership participants, although I used document analysis and limited participant observation to triangulate and lend validity to the themes that emerged from participants’ experiences and observations. Over the course of twelve weeks I interviewed two university administrators—the

director and coordinator of the campus office for community college partnerships—as well as faculty, senior, and mid-level administrators at three of the nine community colleges. I chose to limit my analysis to these three colleges as they had been involved in the partnership the longest, and therefore their personnel (presumably) had more experience and knowledge about the processes involved in creating and sustaining transfer partnerships.

Relevant personnel were identified through partnership documents, as well as via a snowballing technique (Merriam, 1998) in which I asked each interviewee to refer me to other partnership participants, both at the community colleges and the university. I sent each potential participant an email describing the purpose of my study and asking if they would consider participating. Thirteen of the seventeen partnership participants I emailed agreed to participate. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and took place in the participant's office or other quiet, private setting of their choice. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded with the participant's permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Interview questions were loosely organized around the five themes Gulati (1998) identified as important to understanding the creation and evolution of strategic alliances from a network embeddedness perspective (see appendix for a copy of my interview protocol). As well, after the first interviewee spoke at length about the importance and viability of transfer partnerships in the future, I added a similar question to the interview protocol. During the interviews I allowed partnership participants to talk freely about their experiences and beliefs, but used informal prompts when necessary in order to gather as much relevant information about partnership processes as possible. Throughout data collection, prompts were revised in order to more deeply understand experiences and

ideas that emerged in previous interviews. In addition, after each interview I reflected upon the experience and recorded my observations, questions, reactions, and potential biases in a field journal. These entries helped me to contextualize and make sense of the interview data, and to identify possible researcher bias or reactivity (Maxwell, 1996).

In addition to conducting interviews with partnership personnel, I also collected and analyzed relevant partnership documents, including grant proposals, conference agendas, written communication between partners, and notes from steering committee meetings. These documents helped to triangulate themes that emerged in the interviews. I worked to further establish validity by sending each interviewee a copy of his or her transcript in order to ensure that I accurately represented their thoughts and experiences. Data were initially coded around the five topics Gulati (1998) identified as important to understanding partnership processes, but many of the most interesting and important themes emerged organically from the data.

### **Description of Partnership**

This five-year old partnership between a large, public research university in Southern California and nine community colleges in the surrounding area evolved from an earlier partnership supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). In 1999, partnership personnel at the university wrote and received a three-year FIPSE grant to, as is stated on numerous partnership documents: "Develop a rigorous transfer-focused academic culture at each community college campus by addressing the persistent problems of weak academic preparation and inadequate academic counseling." In addition to this official purpose, partnership participants cited other goals such as increasing minority transfer into the university,

“employing strategies that academically accelerate rather than remediate underprepared students” (university administrator), and allowing for two- and four-year faculty to interact and “develop dialog around better preparing the students and getting them ready for coursework in our areas at the four-year universities” (community college professor).

Partnership activities included five distinct components. The first involves paying university students to act as peer mentors on each community college campus. These mentors are all transfer students themselves, and typically work at the college they once attended. The second partnership activity involved implementing a rigorous theory-based tutoring model—developed by the university—on community college campuses through tutor training sessions and dialogs. Third, university personnel put on a conference each year to introduce partnership participants to new theories and ideas about enhancing transfer. Ideas presented at these conferences informed several partnership projects including learning communities, accelerated remedial sequences, and writing across the curriculum courses. Fourth, the university invited first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students from each of the community colleges to spend two weeks during the summer living and studying on campus in order to inspire and motivate them to transfer. The final component of the partnership involved bringing two- and four-year faculty together to discuss how they could develop the community college curriculum “in a way that was going to better facilitate students’ matriculation” (community college professor). Professors in math, science, English, and social science departments were provided with a small stipend (\$4,000) in order to encourage their involvement.

University administrators managed all partnership activities and grant allocations,

although several community college presidents, faculty, and administrators sat on a steering committee.

Initially, the FIPSE partnership included only three community colleges, chosen for their heavily African American and Latino student bodies and proximity to the university. By fall 2002, the third and final year of the grant, a fourth college joined the partnership as an unofficial member. When FIPSE funds dried up in September 2003, and upon hearing testimony from participants that the partnership is valuable and important to sustain, the community college district's board of trustees agreed to provide the funds necessary to expand the partnership to include all nine colleges within the district. Although the district does not fund all partnership activities at the same levels as FIPSE and no longer provides stipends for faculty, it subsidizes the peer mentors and pays for one of the university administrator's salaries.

Currently, the partnership is in its fifth year of operation, and its second since the community college district took over the funding. All four partnership components exist at some level, yet not at the same intensity or frequency as under the FIPSE grant. Although little hard data exists to show whether or not the partnership resulted in higher transfer rates, the university's office of undergraduate evaluation and research conducted a study in 2002-03 that examined the student experience in three different partnership programs. Their report concluded that as a result of the partnership, students "began to view themselves differently, noting more academic preparation and increased academic confidence" (2004, p. 10). In addition, most participants felt that the partnership has been successful, both in raising students' awareness of the transfer function on two-year campuses, and in involving community college faculty and staff in transfer efforts. These

outcomes will be discussed in more detail in the following section. First, however, this paper describes two of the findings that emerged from interviews with participants as important in creating and sustaining community college-university transfer partnerships.

## **Findings**

Several findings emerged as important factors in creating and sustaining community college-university transfer partnerships (my first research question), including the importance of previous relationships between institutions, the significance of presidential support for partnership practices, the need for adequate and sustained funding, and the importance of maintaining a university presence on community college campuses. This paper, however, concentrates on two of these findings: challenges in partnership management and governance, and the importance of involving faculty in partnership programs and activities. The section concludes with findings about the importance of transfer partnerships in the future.

**Challenges in Partnership Management and Governance.** During the interviews, nearly all partnership participants noted that in the initial phase of the partnership, university personnel were “usually the prime movers” in managing the relationship (community college administrator), because they controlled the FIPSE funds and had a dedicated staff member to coordinate partnership activities and manage the peer mentors. Although several community college faculty and administrators sat on the partnership’s steering committee, both partnership documents and interviews reflect the fact that university personnel were primarily in charge. University administrators were conscious of this dynamic, and made several efforts to institute a more collaborative

process. As one stated, “we didn’t come in saying ‘you have a problem, we want to help you fix the problem,’ because we realized it was our problem as much as theirs. So we went in there saying ‘you’re not transferring students to us, part of that is our problem, part is your problem, let’s see how we can work on this together and figure out a way to do this.’”

In many ways, having the university manage the partnership’s day-to-day operation made it easier for participants to accomplish the goals set forth in the FIPSE grant. As one community college administrator noted, “they kind of guided us, you see: this is where we’re going because this is what the grant says.” As well, even though many community college trustees did not like the idea of providing funds to the university to run the partnership after the FIPSE money ran out, they recognized that no one at the community colleges had enough time to effectively manage partnership operations. Because the partnership was not initially as collaborative as it could have been, however, university personnel encountered some resistance from participants who didn’t agree with the way university administrators wanted to implement certain programs and activities. In particular, community college faculty and staff reacted to the university’s emphasis on accelerating remedial sequences for underprepared students and to its theory-driven tutoring model.

While some community college faculty endorsed the university’s efforts to accelerate remedial or “pre-baccalaureate” sequences at the two-year college as a way to speed up the transfer process for students, others strongly objected. One community college administrator noted:

There was some faculty opposition... Some of the faculty here were concerned about standards, so there was some debate or discussion about that

in the process...The science people did not agree with the concept of the acceleration, they think you have to go through the steps in the process. So there was a little difference in terms of the theory.

Indeed, several faculty argued that acceleration would not be feasible given the large percentage of students who arrive at the two-year college without the basic skills necessary to succeed in college-level classes. Others simply resisted being told how to teach their courses. One community college administrator explained, “I think there was [sic] some feelings among some faculty that ‘here comes this, you know, the big brother concept...they’re going to come down and tell the poor little folk here at community college how to teach to their students.’ And faculty aren’t receptive to that.” He went on: “I think the major barrier was the attitude of faculty feeling that they were being told what to do. Maybe partially from the concept: ‘here we are because we are...the experts and we’re going to tell you what to do because we know best.’ Rather than a real sharing and communication.”

Often this resistance was concentrated in certain community college departments. At one college, the math and science faculty reacted negatively to the university’s ideas about acceleration; at another, the English and science departments were slow to get on board, even as their colleagues in the social sciences became very involved in partnership programs. Although this resistance was frustrating for university administrators, they eventually modified their approach in order to sustain the partnership. As one community college administrator noted, “they found that even in a college English 101, a high number of the students just were terribly weak on reading and foundations. And they recognized that you just can’t compress it, you know, not under the circumstances in which we have to compete.” He went on, “They really do understand better, I think, how

basic skills deficient so many of our students are, and why it often takes so long for them to get through the process.”

University administrators also encountered resistance when they attempted to implement their theory-driven tutoring model at the community colleges. As one community college administrator noted, “There’s a lot of theory involved, especially with the transfer, a lot of theory given. But how can we actually use it in the classroom?” One community college professor reacted to another aspect of the university’s tutoring model: tutors’ physical location within the college. As he explained:

[The university] really resisted having tutors actually working in the classroom. Their outlook was different... they wanted to see things like study groups established, and to have tutorial and other kinds of support outside the classroom. I clearly remember [one of the administrators] saying that this is kind of tired pedagogy to have tutors in the room. My experience is that the farther away from the teacher of the classroom the tutors are, the less effective the tutoring is in terms of actually...helping the students meet the objectives of the class.

Resistance from community college personnel and was at least somewhat understandable to university administrators:

During the FIPSE project, we designed some discussions between [our] tutors and tutors from the community college, and they sort of saw it as training. That wasn’t our approach originally, but that’s sort of how they saw it, because it was something that they lacked. So we talk about tutoring, and how tutoring is a part of student success, and what we do here. [Our] philosophy... is much different than that at the community colleges. But we show them what we do here and, you know, we hope that they take some elements of that and incorporate that into what they do.

In fact, despite their initial disagreements, community college faculty and administrators were able to incorporate much of the university’s approach to tutoring on their campuses, and university personnel “became more aware that their way is not necessarily the right way...here at the [community] college” (community college administrator). Dialogs

among tutors and learning center directors have been collaboratively managed for the past few years, and several participants cite improvements in community college tutoring as a major partnership success.

Looking back on the past five years, many partnership participants wish there had been more collaboration in the way the partnership was set up and managed. As one community college professor noted,

I think that the partnership needs to be planned by the groups that are going to participate... When I read the grant, it did not look like community colleges had participated in it. And I think that planning has got to be done by any segment that participates...[It is] okay for one person to have the idea, but if the idea is not put into words by all the potential participants, then you're going to run into some of the problems that we had.

However, while participants may have desired a more collaborative partnership from the onset, since the FIPSE grant ended there has been some confusion over who is in charge of making sure partnership practices are sustained. As one community college administrator noted, "there seems to be a lack of clarity about who should be the initiator, who should be aggressor. Should it be the university coming to us and pulling us along, or do we have to take the initiative to pull the university in and say, 'ok, what's supposed to be happening with this partnership? What can we do?'" While collaborative management of partnership programs and activities may thus be desirable, partnership participants found that it can often be difficult in practice.

**Importance of Involving Faculty.** Another major theme that emerged from interviews with partnership participants was the importance of involving faculty in transfer efforts. As one community college administrator stated, "In my mind, the absolute best way to work with our kind of students, who often undersell their potential, is to have a faculty person take a personal interest in them and encourage them." Many

community college professors agree with the idea that they should be on the front lines of transfer efforts: “You know, from the first day, the faculty are the ones who have the day-to-day contact with students. And I know counselors do, I understand that, but...a lot of students, they don’t see counselors very often.” Another professor added, “If you’re going to really make articulation agreements meaningful, then you have to have some kind of contact between [university] faculty...and the community college faculty. Because otherwise it’s just paperwork that’s funneled back and forth, and we don’t do our paperwork very well.” Partnership participants found it especially important to involve faculty leaders, as these professors were well positioned to influence others in their department. As one university administrator stated, “If you don’t have their buy-in, you’re not going to get anywhere. And so trying to coddle that is real critical and important...You’ve got to have the faculty vice president...but even more so you’ve got to talk to department chairs.”

Although most partnership participants echoed this belief, many also acknowledged the difficulties inherent in involving faculty. Several cited organizational and structural barriers to participating in partnership activities. As one community college professor noted, “community college teachers teach between twelve... and twenty hours. And if you’re going to do the job right, then you’re grading papers, and you’re preparing and scheduling things, you’re seeing students, and that does not leave a lot of time.” Community college administrators were sympathetic to this point. As one stated, “You have a group of faculty that are really committed to students and to the college who will put in extra time. But it gets to the point that they’re not really making any money to be

here and do that, and then have go and track over [the university] on their own time, because they're not getting excused from their classes; it makes it difficult."

Other partnership participants blamed the challenges in involving faculty on the age or long tenure of some community college instructors: "Our average faculty age oftentimes tends toward the high fifties, so even if you have some motivated faculty, others don't necessarily feel there's a virtue in going above and beyond" (community college administrator). Similarly, when asked to identify barriers to accomplishing partnership goals, a university administrator blurted:

Faculty! Faculty attitudes. I mean, you're dealing with a wide range of attitudes, from the faculty member who is been at the institution for 30 years, who is not representative of the students that they're teaching: I mean, old, white, male faculty is generally who I'm talking about. [They] have been teaching the same thing for the longest time, and are the people that are the most difficult to influence and change. You also run up against faculty who, for whatever reasons, have a very negative idea or view of our institution.

Indeed, the majority of community college instructors who participated in the partnership were either younger faculty—including one who was still working on her doctorate at the partner university—or those who had strong relationships with university professors.

Other attitudinal factors can preclude faculty from participating in transfer partnerships as well. One professor noted, somewhat begrudgingly, that "the community college milieu is one of territoriality...As soon as a proposed change comes up, then that change is seen against the backdrop of, you know, what is mine and what's theirs." These attitudes, as well as the structural and organizational barriers that restrict how much time faculty have for transfer activities, result in "a handful of faculty and a couple of administrators who really believe in [transfer], but most people just going about doing their jobs without a sense of this as being a mission" (community college professor).

Although only a few key faculty from each community college academic department were initially involved in partnership programs, in many cases these professors were able to “shame” their colleagues into participating in transfer activities over time. According to one instructor:

I think even faculty members who are reluctant, who are sort of binding to this idea that these students aren't going to go anywhere, or that I'm too busy to put some time into this, I think sort of by force we pulled them into this idea that we really need to go beyond the classroom. I think even those people were sort of pulled into being involved, because—at least within our department—once we started tracking our members, and acknowledging students as they transferred... I think the faculty felt that we should participate, or get on board, or find ways of showing results.

Indeed, having respected professors act as advocates for transfer programs and activities emerged as key to involving other faculty: “We need someone who is very motivated and committed to the project to be able to have release time to work with faculty. And that someone has to be someone who is well respected by the faculty, an insider. And if ... it's someone that people respect, then they'll stop and they'll listen to that. And they'll buy into it more” (community college administrator).

Although community college faculty may not have an immense amount of time to dedicate to transfer activities, one professor noted that “little things can be done, like just working with faculty in terms of emphasizing the importance of faculty being more than just teachers, but also being mentors or advisors to students... There are small steps that can be taken, that can have a larger effect—even just familiarizing faculty with transfer requirements.” She added that when faculty are aware of where students are or should be in the transfer process, they can be very effective in helping students successfully transfer. Indeed, perhaps due to their frequent interactions with students, faculty involvement was seen as the key to promoting a “culture of transfer” at community

colleges. One professor noted, “I think when faculty were involved in the dialog around transfer...and knowing that you’re having interactions with people from [the university], I think it created this culture where people were more responsive to this idea that we are responsible for helping with transfer.” Participants in this community college-university transfer partnership clearly felt that faculty play a key role in sustaining and institutionalizing transfer activities on community college campuses.

**Importance of Transfer Partnerships.** At the close of every interview, I asked partnership participants to discuss how important they felt community college-university transfer partnerships would be in the future. Without exception, all participants felt that collaborative efforts to enhance transfer were extremely valuable, and perhaps even “critical to the success of [the community colleges’] ability to increase transfer” (university administrator). Indeed, several two-year college administrators felt the partnership had helped to increase transfer rates over the last five years, in large part because it made the colleges’ transfer function more visible to students. As one mentioned, “I think that some of our people were not thinking [transfer], and so it helped people to think ‘oh, I can do it.’ So I think...lifting their horizons a little bit was beneficial. Some students won’t be able to do it, but to at least have them think of it as an option... is a substantial change.”

Involvement in the transfer partnership also seemed to help community college faculty and staff focus more on transfer. Several participants noted an increased emphasis on transfer on their campus over the past few years. As one administrator noted, “the partnership brought in new energy, which is nice. And got more people involved and helped transform more of a transfer culture.” In particular, the partnership appeared to be

an effective way of involving faculty in transfer efforts. One professor stated that the partnership “was kind of a reminder that, we’re not just here to instruct students and give them a set of knowledge that we think is important, but we’re really here to think about what students want and need to transfer.” A community college administrator echoed this point: “Our faculty have been learning to look beyond the student sitting there and not assume why they’re sitting there...I think they’re seeing that students hopefully are more serious. I think for a time our students were... [wrinkled her nose]. Well, that’s what the faculty impression was. ‘We don’t have serious students.’ And I think now they’re seeing that there’s a change.” Another administrator added that one of the most positive aspects of the partnership is that it helps “faculty have a connection with a major university. So that they’re no longer just teaching... they can build into their teaching and their lesson plans the concept of what [the university] requires.”

Several participants also noted that transfer partnerships can be invaluable public relations tools. The majority of community colleges in this partnership are struggling to maintain enrollments, and many are under added pressure to recruit students with a high likelihood of transferring to a four-year institution. This transfer partnership emerged as an important way to promote the colleges to high school students. As one community college administrator noted, “we already had kind of the emphasis towards transfer, and what this did, I think it just stepped it up a notch, because we’re able to do some publicity that year that said, ‘[our community college] and [the university]; partners in transfer.’ We were able to put that in our publicity and send it out to our high schools. So it emphasized more our relationship with [the university].” Another two-year college administrator added, “When you don’t toot your own horn, who knows about you? So, I

think that we should take a cue from the [colleges] who do put out great PR materials, in brochure form, or advertisements on the radio; they know the game.”

In addition to using transfer partnerships as public relations vehicles, many participants also believe that it is important to extend community college-university partnerships to include local high schools. As one community college administrator stated:

The missing element [in this partnership] had to be high school. Because if you don't convey, again, to the high schools that [your community college] is working with [the university], you just lost a big, big customer. So if you want the high schools to produce students who think that the community college experience is viable, is a great stepping stone...you're missing out! You've neglected a great base, that's where students come from! If you're not addressing them, which FIPSE didn't, you're only working with one part.

Extending transfer partnerships to high schools may be an effective way to recruit potential transfer students to the community college. As another community college administrator pointed out, however, it might also help high school students to start thinking earlier about what it takes to transfer and to receive a college degree:

And I would like to... be a partner with the high schools, and try to reach them at that level to get them started. And to say, “If you're ready to go to university, great, or if you want to pursue that path you may want to start at this college and get these requirements out of the way, and then transfer.” So trying to get that at the earlier levels and work together to reach the students who want to go on... So if we can get that connection going, especially from our high schools... and the middle schools, and get them started, and then tell them that we have this partnership with [the university], then we can help them get thinking about the transfer process.

Although most partnership participants felt that this community college-university partnership has been valuable and effective in both boosting transfer rates and creating a culture of transfer on campus, many felt that including high schools was the next logical step. A three-way partnership would not only help to solve some of the community

colleges' enrollment problems, but by educating students earlier about what it takes to enter and succeed in higher education, it would also help to create a seamless transition from secondary school through the baccalaureate.

### **Discussion and Implications**

It seems clear from this study that the value of this community college-university transfer partnership is greater than simply increasing the number of students who move from one institution to another. It has also raised students' awareness of the opportunities available to them after community college, has assisted in the two-year colleges' marketing and public relations efforts and, perhaps most importantly, has helped to create a culture of transfer on community college campuses, especially among faculty. This finding has clear implications for policymakers and institutional leaders hoping to enhance transfer and baccalaureate attainment among their students: community college-university transfer partnerships may indeed be an important and viable way of meeting the goals of the state, its institutions of higher education, and the students attempting to move through them.

Despite the clear importance of transfer partnerships, this case study identified several difficulties inherent in creating and sustaining meaningful relationships between community colleges and universities. Chief among these are the challenges in managing the partnership's long-term goals as well as its day-to-day operations. As participants in this partnership learned, when a relationship is primarily governed by one of the partners, especially when that partner has traditionally enjoyed a higher status, participants in the other institutions may disagree that the partner's approaches are the best way to educate

students at their institutions, or may simply resent be told what to do. Transfer partnerships that are more collaborative in nature, and that involve key constituents such as faculty in the design and implementation of partnership practices and activities may face less internal resistance from participants and might thus be able to accomplish partnership goals more easily.

Network embeddedness theory tells us, however, that it may be difficult to collaboratively manage new partnerships. As Gulati (1998) notes, when strategic relationships are uncertain, they are frequently governed with more structure. Indeed, the amount of hierarchical control is influenced by the newness of a partnership and the degree of trust among partners. As partners become increasingly embedded in a social network of ties (i.e., they gain more experience and trust with each other as the partnership progresses), “cautious contracting gives way to looser practices” (Gulati, 1998, p. 303), and the relationship can be governed more collaboratively and flexibly. Thus if a transfer partnership is to be jointly developed and managed, partnership participants must work to establish a high degree of trust among institutions and the actors within them prior to implementing partnership programs and activities.

Another important finding that emerged from this study is the relationship between transfer partnerships and faculty involvement in transfer efforts. As participants noted, involving faculty may be a key to promoting a culture of transfer on community college campuses, one of this partnership’s major goals. Unfortunately, as this research also shows, even those faculty who are interested in becoming involved in transfer activities are often precluded from doing so due to their heavy course loads and other instructional responsibilities. According to faculty and administrators interviewed for this

study, however, transfer partnerships can be an effective way of involving professors in transfer programs and activities. If partnerships can support, through stipends or release time, the involvement of at least one instructor in each academic department, those professors may be able to help their colleagues think more about what faculty can do to assist their students in transferring to a four-year institution. This mutually reinforcing cycle—involving faculty is key to ensuring transfer success, and partnerships can help to involve more faculty—is an important addition to our current understanding of community college-university partnerships.

However, the question of *why* faculty are so important to transfer efforts still remains. Network embeddedness theory may help us to better understand this phenomenon. As stated previously, network embeddedness theorists look to an organizational actor's location within one or more social networks of relationships to explain organizational behavior, including that related to inter-institutional collaboration. In particular, Gulati (1998) notes that “an actor in a social network can derive control advantages by being the *tertius gaudens*, or one who is situated between two other actors” (p. 297). Perhaps community college professors are so influential in transfer efforts because they are located between administrators and students and thus are well positioned to influence how administrative goals (such as increasing the institutional emphasis on transfer) are enacted in classrooms and in students' day-to-day experiences. Similarly, due to their close ties with departmental colleagues, administrators and, sometimes, disciplinary associates at other institutions, it is possible that community college faculty function as network “hubs” that have considerable power in facilitating or stymieing organizational action.

Network embeddedness theory thus provides a useful explanation for why faculty appear to be so essential to the success of transfer partnership programs and activities. This theory might also be a useful framework from which to examine how relationships and power dynamics among individual professors in a community college academic department influence the department's willingness to participate in transfer efforts. Future studies that apply network embeddedness theory to the problem of faculty participation in transfer, as well as research that more closely examines the mutually reinforcing relationship between faculty and collaborative transfer partnerships (perhaps through qualitative investigations into what a transfer program designed by two-year college faculty might look like) would be valuable additions to the literature.

In addition to implications for future research, findings from this case study have clear implications for policy and practice, and can help to inform state and institutional leaders attempting to create and sustain transfer partnerships in their own states and on their own campuses. Community colleges occupy a unique position within a network of educational institutions that enables them to work with both high schools and four-year universities. By instituting and publicizing transfer partnerships, especially those that include all three educational sectors, two-year colleges can become the central agency ensuring students a seamless transition from secondary school to their college degree and, in the process, can help to legitimize the community college as an important path to the baccalaureate.

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## **Appendix: Interview Protocol**

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin, I would like to give you the opportunity to read and sign the consent form. As we discussed, the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes by which transfer partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions form, develop, and evolve. During the interview, I will ask you about the development, evolution, and operation of {name of partnership}, as well as the forces that have facilitated or hindered achievement of partnership goals.

Although all names and identifying characteristics will be excluded from the data, because so few people are involved in this partnership, it may not be possible for me to protect your identity from others involved in or familiar with the collaboration. Therefore, if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please feel free to elect not to answer. I would like your permission to digitally record our conversation so that I can more accurately record your comments and perceptions.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

- What is the purpose or goals of this partnership?

### **Partnership Formation**

- Who initiated this partnership?
- What needs were it designed to meet?
- Who else was involved in creating this partnership? Was there a previous relationship between your college and the partner institution}?
- Was the state involved in forming this partnership? How
- Was there start-up funding for this partnership? Where did it come from? How was the funding agency involved in the formation of the partnership

### **Partnership Management & Governance**

- Is this partnership governed by a formal contract, or is the agreement more informal in nature?
- How was partnership governance decided and agreed upon?
- Who is in charge of overseeing the partnership? Are other actors involved?
- Is responsibility for the operation of the partnership shared equally or does it lie primarily at your college or at the partner institution?
- Are there other actors or agencies involved in the management or governance of this partnership? Who?
- Is the partnership funded on a continual basis? By the same funding agency?
- What is their role of the funding agency in managing or governing the partnership?
- How supportive are each of the actors?
- How do the actors work together?

### **Partnership Evolution Over Time**

- ❑ How has this partnership grown or expanded?
- ❑ How have the purposes or goals of the partnership changed or evolved?
- ❑ What, if any, changes have been made in how this partnership operates or is managed?
- ❑ Have any actors increased their levels of participation? Decreased? In what ways?
- ❑ Has funding remained steady or has it fluctuated?
- ❑ What, if any, changes in regulation or oversight by state or funding agencies have this partnership experienced?
- ❑ How has the level of support for this partnership changed over time?

### **Factors That Have Aided or Hindered the Partnership**

- ❑ Do you feel that the partnership accomplishes its goals? How? Has this changed over time?
- ❑ What actors, agencies, or events have helped to facilitate achievement of partnership goals? How did this occur?
- ❑ What actors, agencies, or events have proven to be barriers to the achievement of partnership goals? How did this occur?
- ❑ Has there been any conflict between actors involved in the partnership? How was this been resolved?
- ❑ How has funding or involvement of the funding agency affected achievement of partnership goals?
- ❑ How has the state affected achievement of partnership goals?

### **Relationship Between Partnership & Performance of Institution**

- ❑ How has your college been affected by the formation and ongoing operation of the partnership?
- ❑ Has the partnership enabled your college to focus on its mission or what it does best? How?
- ❑ Has the partnership detracted from your college mission or outcomes? How?
- ❑ Are there any other ways in which the formation or ongoing operation of this partnership has affected or changed the institution?

### **Questions about the Future**

- Where do you see the partnership going?
- Do you think the importance of the partnership increases or decreases in the future?
- What barriers do you foresee to continuing this partnership?