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# THE TRANSFER EXPERIENCE: RETHINKING THE CONCEPT TO CREATE A MORE EQUITABLE AND SUCCESSFUL POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM

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I return gladly. . .

- as a recovering former New Englander from New Canaan, Connecticut

# Framing Ideas and Assumptions for My Remarks

- Higher education is the most likely channel for upward social mobility.
- Unfortunately, race and income are currently the best predictors of who will complete college.
- What can you do to replace those two predictors of success?
- The higher education system is unjust in design and outcomes.
- We created this system, and we could create an alternative one.

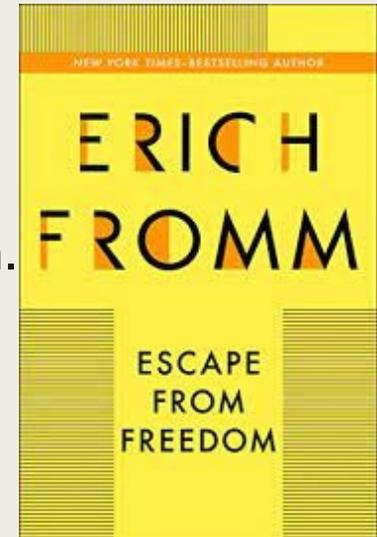
# Framing Ideas and Assumptions for My Remarks

- It's all about how you use your own sphere of control for transfer students.



# Framing Ideas and Assumptions for My Remarks

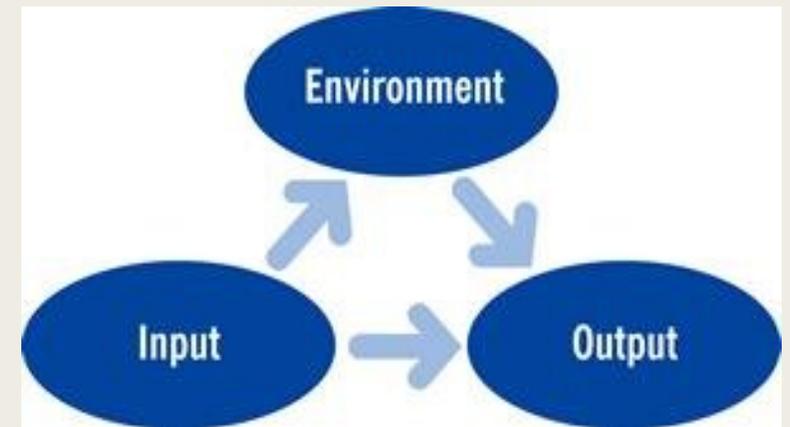
- We are living in a period of extraordinary change--politically, economically, and socially.
- If you don't manage that change, other forces and institutions will.
- Each of us has to change or be changed.
- No work environment provides more freedom than higher education.
- The question is: What are you doing with your freedom
  - *Both as an individual and as a college?*
- How I learned about freedom during my first year of college



# Framing Ideas and Assumptions for My Remarks

- This IEO model explains what happens to students in college.
- To improve the “O” you must modify the “I” and/or the “E.”
- It’s much easier to modify the “E.”
- The ways you are organizing the “E” are getting you the results you have today.

Astin, A. W. (1977). *Four critical years: Effects of college on beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



# Focusing on the 'E' in New England's College and Universities

- What happens to students when they arrive.
- The first year really matters – for both first-year and transfer students.
- Focus on students' 'common experiences' to yield maximum impact.
  - *Commuting*
  - *Registration, financial aid, and academic advising*
  - *Food service*
  - *Gateway courses*
  - *Professors*
  - *Peers*

# Focusing on the 'E'

- The REAL first-year experience: high-failure rate, gateway courses
  - *These courses must be re-designed because poor grades are excellent predictors of VOLUNTARY attrition!*
- The role of faculty. Emphasize faculty development. Work with them to redesign courses and the entire eco-system that supports instruction.
  - *Provide incentives for faculty to redesign courses*
- Rethinking the rules. Conduct a policy audit – know those that do or do not advance student success.
- Examine the barriers: policies, offices, people – especially those who have the authority to say 'yes' or 'no.'

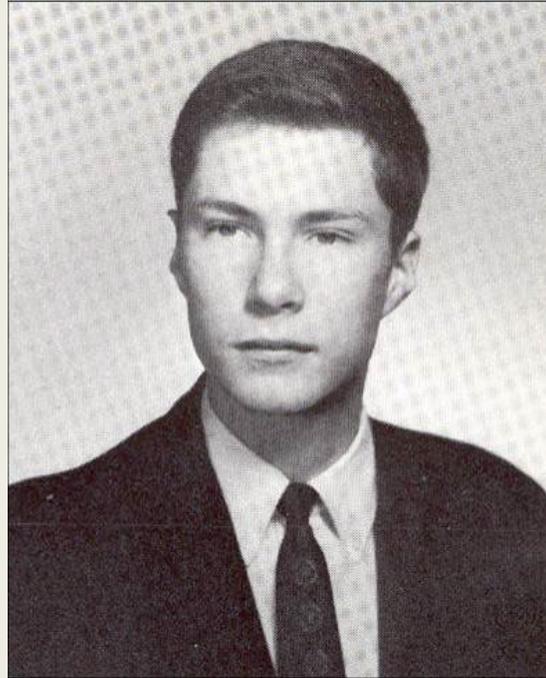
# Focusing on the 'E'

- Remember the seminal research: The greatest influence on students is other students. How are you leveraging the influence of your most able students on entering students?
- Look at the design of undergraduate education through the lens of 'Socially Just' vs. 'Socially Unjust' Design.
- Understand the student experience through the lens of disaggregation of data. There is no one student experience that fits all.
- Understand and communicate your story. Every institution has a story – what is yours? It's not static – it can change!
- Back to the fundamental question: What can YOU do within your sphere of influence without losing your job or incurring other significant negative consequences?

# Exhibit A of Unjust Design: The Transfer System



# My Personal Transfer Experience: None



Leaving Connecticut, 1961

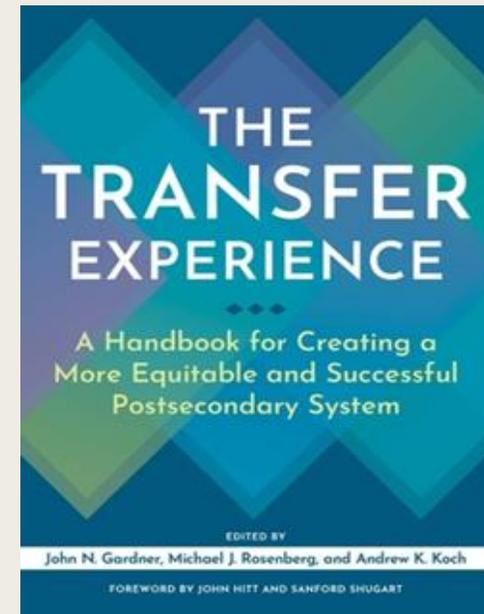
If you were like me, how would you acquire empathy?

# My Professional Experience Working with Transfer Students

- Co-designing a unique bachelor's degree for transfers (the Bachelors of Arts In Interdisciplinary Studies) at the University of South Carolina, 1972
- Senior academic officer, five two-year regional campuses of the University of South Carolina.
  - *Big take away: enormous amounts of discrimination against incoming transfer students and the faculty who have taught them, even in the same university system*
- Co-designer of a national transfer improvement process: Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus—70 institutions 2008-2021, **including 16 from the NECHE region.**
- Lead advisor for the creation of the Tulsa Higher Education Consortium, designed to advance transfer sending rate of one community college to 6 four-year institutions,

# More Professional Experience

- Co-PI on a \$300,000 planning grant funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation with a focus on creating an agenda for improvement of transfer. This grant yielded this book:
  - *The Transfer Experience: A Handbook for Creating A More Equitable and Successful Postsecondary System (2021)*. (John N. Gardner, Michael J. Rosenberg, and Andrew K. Koch). Stylus Publishers.



# Why is the transfer system ‘unjust’?

- The college experience was designed for protestant, white, middle and upper class, property-owning males who had a residential experience at ONE institution.
- Two-year colleges were designed to be “terminal” and to keep “those” students out of “our” universities.



- The current transfer system is a bolted-on system that provides access, but not success, to students for whom a four-year institution was not designed.

# The Results of an Unjust System

- Abysmal rates of transfer to bachelors-degree completion:
  - *80% of two-year students nationally declare an initial goal of transfer.*
  - *15% accomplish that goal within 6 years.*



# Who is responsible?

- Some of us blame the students.
- Some of us blame the two-year colleges.



- My view: Educators who designed, operate, and now perpetuate the system are responsible.
- What is each of you responsible for?
- What is your sphere of influence?

# True Confession—My *Mea Culpa*

- I should have included transfer students in my development of the first-year experience movement dating to 1982.
  - *But it never occurred to me.*
  - *I was never a transfer myself, so I had no empathy for the transfer experience*
- I could have . . .
  - *Organized conferences with an exclusive focus on transfer.*
  - *Come up with a language to motivate such a focus.*
  - *Designed an intervention.*
  - *Established a national center to focus on these students. Now, one exists at the University of North Georgia.*
  - *Published a book years ago to call attention to transfers.*
- But for me, just like you, what matters most is not what I haven't done but what I can do now!

# The Conventional Definition of Transfer is Too Narrow

- It is viewed as
  - *a phase, a “stage of development,” or a “transition.”*
  - *a limited time frame when a student moves from one institution to another.*
  - *a transactional process provided by admissions or enrollment management units.*
  - *an “event.”*
- It is not viewed as an academic experience, and hence not managed by academics

# The Life of a Transfer Student

Pre-Enrollment

Application  
Orientation  
Advising  
Credit Evaluation  
Registration  
Financial Aid  
Other Services

1st Institution

- Developmental
- General Education
- Pre-Major Coursework
- Career Exploration
- Advising
- Tutoring
- Other Services

Transfer Move

- Identify Transfer Institution
- Application
- Transcripts
- Credit Evaluation
- Financial Aid
- Physical Move

2nd Institution

- General Education
- Major admission
- Coursework Gaps
- Advising
- Registration

Baccalaureate

- Complete Major Coursework
- Graduation Application
- Earn Baccalaureate

Most institutions focus primarily on this point.



# Instead, I posit that the transfer student experience . . .

- Is the sum of everything the students experience at both sending and receiving institutions in pursuit of their desired educational credentials.
- Is the totality of educationally purposeful experiences that we intentionally provide our students throughout their educational journey enabling them to pursue their desired academic and life goals, whatever they may be, as they enroll in successive, occasionally simultaneous, different, post-secondary institutions.

# In the current US political and economic climate, how do we advance transfer student success?

- We need a compelling rationale.
  - *This is a matter of social justice.*
  - *Transfer is part of an unjust system that produces unjust outcomes.*
  - *The unjust nature of transfer is a byproduct of unexamined and unquestioned design.*
  - *To change this, we must examine and alter the systems that produce these inequitable outcomes.*
  - *Faculty, and the courses they teach, are overlooked yet primary areas for change.*

# In the current US political and economic climate, how do we advance transfer student success?

- Consider
  - *The human costs of non-completion*
  - *The costs of wasted credit hours - accumulated total credits minus those not accepted*
  - *The impact of transfers on overall enrollment*



# John's Hypothesis: Explaining an enrollment decline over the past two years in the nation's colleges and universities

- Part of the decline we are currently experiencing is explained by the same factors that are explaining the failure of employment levels to return to pre-pandemic levels.
- Working people - and some students - are sick of the status quo. They don't like the way the system has been treating them. (Transfer is Exhibit A of how the system treats them.)
- They are fed up and would rather stay home and out of the system, in both conventional "work" as they knew it and discretionary college contexts.

# Corrective Actions

1. Make transfer student success a high priority. There will be no progress or justice by maintaining the status quo.
2. Start with the end in mind. Provide experiences and support for beginning transfers that increase the likelihood they will thrive.
3. Use data to understand students and for decision making to improve student learning and success.
4. Conduct a voluntary study of the transfer experience and produce recommendations to improve. Reexamine your FoE self-study of 2010-11 and 'refresh.'
5. Intentionally involve faculty in the discussion around transfer-study success.
6. Identify institutional barriers to transfer student success.
7. Undertake a policy audit to determine the extent of prejudice against transfer students,

## 7. (Cont'd.) Compare the policies that determine how you treat transfer vs. non-transfer students.

- Admissions (deadlines for application, costs for application, deadlines for notice of acceptance, recognition of prior credit and learning experiences)
- Financial Aid (deadlines for application and notification, criteria for eligibility, amounts and types of aid, designations specifically for transfer vs. non-transfer students, criteria for renewal and maintaining eligibility)
- Eligibility for on-campus housing
- Priority for class registration
- Availability of required vs. elective programs, opportunities, courses to support student success (e.g., orientation, academic advising, college success courses, etc.)

## 7. (Cont'd.) Compare the policies that determine how you treat transfer vs. non-transfer students

- Provision of academic advising – is it optional or mandatory and for which populations?
- Eligibility for internships, co-op programs
- Eligibility for study abroad, National Student Exchange
- Eligibility for on-campus employment supported by College Work Study or regular institutional funds
- Eligibility for academic awards, prizes
- Existence of specific officer/programs dedicated to transfer support

8. Audit your website and other official publications. *Do they have specific sections that are clearly and conspicuously devoted to transfer students? Do they cover these topics?*

- Admissions
- Financial aid
- Registration
- Academic advising
- Orientation
- On-campus employment
- Career services
- Housing
- Student activities
- Parking/transportation
- Childcare
- Health services and insurance
- Family involvement opportunities
- Counseling

## 9. Peer-to-peer relationships

- Much of what seems to make real differences in transfer student success comes down to the informal relationships between peers. The most important peer-to-peer structure is that of CEOs for geographically contiguous institutions.
- Encourage these relationships across these critical roles
  - *Senior academic officers*                      *Senior student services/student success officers*
  - *Senior library officers*                      *Senior enrollment mgt. officers*
  - *Senior acad. support officers*              *Senior business officers*
  - *Senior financial aid officers*              *Senior developmental education officers*
  - *Senior academic adv. officers*              *Senior registrars' officers and support staff*

# More Corrective Actions

10. Showcase the history of transfer students at your institution and those who have supported and championed them.
11. Establish a stakeholder institution-spanning advocacy group.
12. Ask your students, "How transfer-friendly are we?"
13. Involve your institution in the major annual professional development conferences to support transfer-student success (e.g., New England Transfer Association).



# More Corrective Actions

14. Visit some other systems/institutions to learn and be inspired.
15. Fundamentally, this is a pipeline issue. We have to produce more students with enough credits to transfer anywhere!



16. If you agree with my definition of transfer as a fundamentally academic experience, realign responsibility for transfer students especially between academic affairs and enrollment management so as to increase the academic priority for the transfer experience.

## What NECHE Members told me about the status of attention to transfers

- E-mail message on November 4 to Chief Academic, Chief Enrollment Management, and Chief Student Affairs Officers at 17 NECHE Institutions (12 four-year and 5 two-year)
  - *Former participants in Gardner Institute work from 2003 - 2021*
  - *Institutions were from Connecticut (1), Maine (4), Massachusetts (8), New Hampshire (2), Rhode Island (1), and Vermont (1)*
  - *Responses received from Endicott College, Northern Vermont University, Plymouth State University, Salem State University*
  - *Responses from units responsible for transfer: admissions (2), registrar (transfer services) (1), and center for teaching & learning (1).*

# Responses

- Responses of special interest to me: (Note. Often what is of interest is what they DO and DO NOT reference!)
  - *A review of “foundational statements” –e.g., core mission, vision, community values found no explicit reference to transfer students*
  - *Web links to “profiles” of current transfer students*
  - *A search of institutional website found no specific information directed to transfer students re housing or registration*
  - *One institution has a sociology faculty member doing a “qualitative scan” of transfers.*
  - *Two institutions reported automatic fulfillment of BA/BS general education requirements for those with an AA/AS degree.*
  - *The private liberal arts institution stressed the use of “reflection” as a process to orient transfers---that is, stimulating student reflection on previous academic or social successes and challenges and focusing on strengths and removing barriers.*
  - *Two cited no cost for transfer applications.*

# Responses

- *One provost stressed “promptness” of completion of transfer evaluations and importance of use of assessment of prior learning to “accelerate” progress towards graduation.*
- *Only sources of professional development cited are NETA, NEACRAO and NACADA*
- *One stressed the importance of “innovation and continuous improvement.”*
- *Two reported the importance of “pathways” from community colleges.*
- *One reported that admissions counselors stay in touch with transfers until they have completed 30 hours at the receiving institution.*
- *One stressed the importance of providing “one point of contact” for application completion, credit evaluation, degree planning, and class registration (i.e., a transfer counselor”).*

# Responses

- *One stressed the importance of “faculty availability” to work with transfers.*
- *One cited welcoming and assisting “students whose colleges have suddenly closed.”*
- *One cited development of a “Late Admit” webpage “to streamline the process before the start of the semester.”*
- *One reported importance of collaborating with Student Affairs during “transfer orientation.”*
- *One stressed importance of “block transfer” for incoming liberal arts students from community colleges.*
- *None mentioned any efforts to increase priority for attention to transfers.*
- *None referenced any attention to working with academic units regarding unit cultures for care and feeding of transfers.*
- *None mentioned anything about the academic experiences of transfers.*

# Responses

- None referenced any kind of “alignment” efforts between two and four-year faculty in same disciplines.
- None mentioned a word about any priority for transfer vis a vis NECHE accreditation.
- All were focused solely on the mechanics, transactions, or processes for beginning as a transfer at the four-year receiving level.
- The most comprehensive description of transfer focused actions was from an enrollment management senior officer.
- What should I conclude about the significance of no response from any community colleges?

# My Thanks to These Four NECHE Institutions

# Final Suggestions for Next Steps

- Create communities of practice around functional areas.
- Institutionalize processes for asking those who have most contact with transfer students to tell the larger institution what they know about the transfer experience and what needs to be changed (e.g., academic advisors).
- Create more contexts for listening to transfer students
- Establish a transfer advocacy system. Do you need a transfer czar?
- Develop a culture of urgency – students are suffering.
- How about creating an 800 hotline for transfer?

# Final Suggestions for Next Steps

- Pay special attention to challenges for transfer students--pain points in the overall transfer system where students encounter what I term “discretionary review” – for instance, situations in which decisions about what credits do or do not “count” are left to individual reviewing officers, most commonly well-intentioned academic department chairs or assistant/associate deans of schools and colleges.
- Problems with discretionary review
  - *Inconsistency*
  - *Lack of transparency*
  - *Potential for bias, prejudice, capriciousness*
  - *Lack of predictability for the entire institution, especially students*
  - *Denying application of credit based on a desire to boost credit generation by transfer-receiving institution*
  - *Reviewers’ lack of requisite knowledge about content of courses from other institutions under review*
  - *Reviewers’ ignoring the reality that the two courses being considered are usually both approved by the same regional accreditor, meaning that reviewers are exercising a quality monitoring process that should be domain of the accreditor*
  - *Frequently the same adjunct faculty are teaching the same courses at both transfer sending and receiving levels, both of which are accredited by NECHE.*
  - *Denial of credit deprives the student of the chance to demonstrate that he/she can master the course content in next course in sequence*

# Final Suggestions for Next Steps

- How could you collect the kind of data that would help these reviewing officers make data-driven decisions?
- Student dissatisfaction with discretionary review begs for legislative intervention! Better to get our own houses in order than to have it done for us.



# What if we don't become more transfer-student friendly?



- The “nuclear option” – convert some of your two-year colleges to four-year degree-granting status.
  - *The community college baccalaureate movement can only grow (e.g., Florida, Michigan, Texas)*
- Private institutions will become more attractive to transfers .
- Cross-border institutions will become more competitive.
- For-profit institutions will attempt to address the needs.
- There will be more assertive intrusion from NECHE to help stave off pressure for more federal regulations.

*Bottomline:* All the alternatives to improving transfer are going to cost you students.

# Are You Ready?

- To ask the really big question? What would be an EXCELLENT TRANSFER SYSTEM?
- This question is being asked right now by task forces in four states: SC, NC, CO, WA in a project grant to SHEEO and the Gardner Institute from the ECMC Foundation
  - *This is an aspirational question*
  - *And a measurement question*
  - *And one that embraces, ideally, all sectors of PSE: two-year, four-year, public, private, not-for-profit/for-profit*
- What would it take for the states within the NECHE region to tackle this question?

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