

Reverse Transfer: A Case for Systematic Cooperation

The University of Hawai‘i made a decision to raise tuition across the board to the average of its peers across a 2006-2012 timeframe, and we continue to grapple with some of the unintended consequences of that decision. Although it was formally neutral with respect to different parts of the system, it had the effect of dramatically increasing the disparity between the tuition paid at the seven community colleges in the system and the tuition paid at the Mānoa campus. This is one reason why in the years that have followed, enrollment has essentially been flat at Mānoa while it has continued to surge at the community colleges, and we therefore find ourselves in the situation where Hawai‘i is one of the states with the highest percentage of its enrollment in community colleges and yet is one of the states with the lowest percentage of its own population earning post-secondary degrees.

The turning of the state’s population to viewing the community colleges as the point of entry into post-secondary education might understandably be thought of as a source of concern or even a threat from the perspective of the Mānoa campus since an increasing percentage of the population that could come to Mānoa is not starting there. And it is a relevant fact that the ratio between recent Hawai‘i high school graduates who enter other parts of the UH system and those who enter Mānoa continues to shift away from Mānoa. But we need to view this as largely an irreversible shift that is a function of the changes in tuition and rethink this as an opportunity: we need to shift our focus from essentially a losing battle in which we compete with the community colleges to be the dominant entrance point into higher education to a focus in which we cooperate with them in order to be the exit point. 50% of students entering UH community colleges tell us that they plan to get a bachelor’s degree, and for a very high percentage of them, Mānoa will be the obvious and in some cases the only choice. Systematically cooperating for those students could have a profound effect on Mānoa’s enrollment and—much more importantly—on the degree production of the UH system and more important yet, the educational attainment of the population of the state.

One of the challenges here is that entering post-secondary education does not mean successfully exiting with a credential, and we need to keep this fact in mind. Although we at Mānoa need to focus on increasing degree completion and community college transfers do better in this respect than students who start at Mānoa, the fact of the matter is that many—though not quite most—students are not graduating within six years. Many students who start at the community colleges transfer to Mānoa before completing an initial credential at the community college level, and if they transfer without a degree and then do not complete a degree, then they and we could have invested a significant amount of time and money in their education without any concrete result. Nationally, we know that earning an associate’s degree is associated with higher earning power, lower unemployment, and other desirable outcomes when compared to the ‘some college but no degree’ category, and of course, anyone earning an associate’s degree counts in the community college graduation rate metric. So those are good reasons from the point of view of the student and the institution to encourage students to complete an associate’s

degree, yet many students transfer before that point. Any attempt to discourage early transfer is itself likely not to work, and in any case we want students to find their own pathways through higher education and make their own decisions.

I want to propose an innovation which would simultaneously address all of these concerns and improve degree attainment by the students of the University of Hawai'i at a minimal cost. Many of those students who transfer before completing an AA degree, for instance, will go on in the course of their bachelor's education to complete the courses that they would have needed at their community college for that degree. So Mānoa could at a certain point (75 credits?) analyze the transcript of community college transfers to see if between the courses they took at the community college (or colleges) and what they have taken at Mānoa they have satisfied the degree requirements for an associate's degree. If they have, then Mānoa could in effect transfer those courses back to the community college, the community college could satisfy itself that the requirements for the degree had been met, and then the community college could issue a degree to that student. Any student very close to meeting the requirement could be informed of his or her situation ('take this one course, either at Mānoa or at a community college, and you will have earned an associate's degree'), and of course similar checks could be repeated at higher credit levels to identify additional students in this category.

The student would then have a concrete result of some use if he or she completes the bachelor's degree and of great use if he or she does not. I suspect it might also serve as a tangible marker of accomplishment (5k down, 5k to go) that might help with persistence. It would increase degree attainment in the state, again both for those students who completed their bachelor's degree and those did not, and it would increase degree completion and graduation rates at the community college level. Given that around 800 students transfer every year from UH community colleges to Mānoa, and most do not have an A.A., we think that as many as 500 additional students could earn their A.A. degree through this approach. Best of all, it would do this within the course of study and pathway through higher education that the student had individually chosen: this is wind at their back, not a detour.

Given STAR, I don't think implementation costs are a huge factor here: there would be labor costs involved that would have to be estimated and addressed. I see no reason why this could not be implemented quickly, and we could look at the transcripts of all current Manoa students to see how many current students fall into this category before we began the process in the future of reviewing transcripts of students after they had reached a certain credit threshold.