

Executive Summary

Partnerships That Promote Success:

Lessons and Findings from the Evaluation
of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's
Community College Transfer Initiative



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

From 2006-2010, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s Community College Transfer Initiative (CCTI) funded eight highly selective colleges and universities to help *high-achieving low- to moderate-income community college students* to transfer to, and succeed at, their institutions. The initiative recognized both the influence of attending selective colleges and universities on students’ future success, particularly for those from lower-income families, and the contributions that the students could make to the four-year campuses. The long-term goal is to promote sustainable increases in the number of low- to moderate-income community college students who enroll in and succeed at the nation’s selective four-year institutions.

The Foundation issued \$6.8 million in grants to the institutions to increase the number of high achieving, low-income community college transfer students at the participating four-year colleges and universities. The grants would enable the institutions to foster programs, policies, and partnerships with community colleges to improve student preparation, assistance with admission and financial aid processes, orientation and “bridge” programs, and post-admission support. The eight institutions were Amherst College, Bucknell University, Cornell University, Mount Holyoke College, University of California, Berkeley, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and University of Southern California. To evaluate the CCTI, the Foundation selected the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University’s Heller School for Social Policy and Management.

Despite many challenges, all eight campuses improved their ability to recruit qualified students and support their success. From 2007 through 2010, almost eleven hundred students enrolled in these eight schools because of the CCTI.¹ Many of the CCTI students were nontraditional with respect to life experience, personal circumstances, and age. The initiative transformed students’ lives and the students made substantial contributions to the institutions where they matriculated. At the end of the initiative, six out of eight campuses were on track to continue their efforts.

This is the executive summary of the final evaluation report, which outlines implementation challenges, poses solutions, and describes results.

Rationale for the Initiative

The college enrollment gap for underrepresented students in higher education has been a national concern in the United States for decades. In recent years, high-profile national initiatives have focused new attention and resources on the need to expand the college *access* goal to include college *success* and increasingly recognized the role of community colleges in preparing students for transfer to and success at four-year institutions. Yet, although many community college

¹This figure only includes those who enrolled in the eight institutions; it does not include the much higher number of community college students receiving pre-enrollment outreach and support.

students from low- to moderate-income backgrounds are prepared to excel at highly selective four-year institutions, considerable barriers limit their opportunities to do so. This matters because lower-income students who attend highly selective institutions are more likely to complete their four-year degree and enroll in graduate school. Supporting the transfer of community college students to top four-year institutions helps to maximize individual accomplishment – which increases our national vitality.

Since 2001, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has supported the educational success of high-achieving, low-income community college students by awarding the most generous private scholarships in the nation to students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions. Prior to awarding the CCTI grants, the Foundation, in collaboration with the Lumina Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, commissioned research² to examine opportunities for and barriers to transfer to highly selective academic settings for low-income community college students. Among other themes, the research identified the importance of: (1) institutional readiness to support community college transfer students at the four-year institution, (2) partnerships between four-year and two-year campuses in facilitating successful transfer, and (3) pre- and post-admission academic, social, and personal support. These three themes are reflected in the CCTI evaluation findings and addressed in detail in the full report.

Key Findings

The two broad areas of findings from the CCTI evaluation concern the initiative’s benefits to students and campuses and the lessons learned for other institutions that are interested in implementing similar programs.

CCTI Benefits

Increasing access for low-income, community college transfer students benefits not only the students who transfer, but also both the two- and four-year institutions.

▪ **Benefits to students**

- The CCTI expanded students’ educational opportunities and enabled them, perhaps for the first time, to take part in what one called “intellectual feasting.”
- The programs broadened aspirations and transformed lives. Most CCTI students faced barriers to simply completing a bachelor’s degree (indeed, many had planned to stop at an associate’s degree), but 79% planned to attend graduate or professional school.
- Illustrative student comments:
 - “I had never dared dream this big.”
 - “This program saved me.”
 - “I thought the letter I got inviting me to a meeting about transferring was a scam. I couldn’t believe that a selective university would invite community college students like me to apply.”
 - “It has expanded the things I thought I could do. I see that doors are not locked.”

▪ **Benefits to community colleges**

²Dowd, A., Bensimon, E., Gabbard, G., Singleton, S., Macias, E., Dee, J., Melguizo, T., Cheslock, J. Giles, D. (2006). Transfer Access to Elite Colleges and Universities in the United States: Threading the Needle of the American Dream. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. See <http://www.jkcf.org/grants/community-college-transfer/research/transfer-access-to-elite-colleges-and-universities-in-the-united-states-threading-the-needle-of-the/>

- The CCTI helped community college partners enrich their institutional transfer culture, made more information available for students interested in transferring to a four-year institution, and reached out to students who were not necessarily seeking to transfer.
- The program enhanced the community colleges' efforts to develop more rigorous curricula, honors programs, and higher-quality advising systems.

▪ **Benefits to four-year institutions**

- The CCTI contributed to cross-campus collaboration and communication.
- The programs increased the diversity of the student body in terms of demographics, life experiences, and income.
- Focused and typically more mature, the CCTI students contributed to the intellectual life on the campuses – often transforming classroom discussions with stimulating questions and impressive preparation.
- CCTI students contributed to campus life by becoming deeply engaged. They formed transfer student organizations, provided significant feedback to improve communications with and services for transfer students, assumed campus leadership roles, won awards, honors, and competitive scholarships, and conducted research with faculty. Many became peer mentors and ambassadors to potential applicants at community college as well as to recently enrolled CCTI students.
- The CCTI did not detract from the institutions' overall academic performance. CCTI students performed academically on par with native students.³ Faculty and administrators described them as disciplined and highly motivated. Most CCTI students said they felt academically prepared for the rigorous curriculum at the four-year campuses.
- Faculty support towards transfer policies and the presence of community college transfer students on their campuses increased.

In addition, the promising practices that emerged during the initiative add to the known repertoire of practices that promote success for nontraditional, low-income, and/or first generation students and show how to open up more avenues to highly selective four-year institutions for low-income students. Moreover, the increased diversity of the pool of potential public and private sector leaders benefits society.

The chart below summarizes these promising practices by CCTI institution.

Selected Promising Practices

	Summer program	Cohort model	Post-admission programming	Peer mentors	Customized orientation	Assistance with applications	Pre-admission advising	Structures supporting communication among partners
Amherst			√	√	√			
Bucknell	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Cornell		√	√		√			
Mount		*	√	√	√	√	√	√

³The term “native students” refers to those who enrolled in the institution as freshmen.

Holyoke								
UC Berkeley	√		√	√	√	√	√	√
UM	√		√		√		√	√
UNC-CH	*	√	√	√	√	√ ⁴	√	√
USC	√	√	√		√	√	√	

* Denotes that some elements of and/or a variation on the practice were present at the site.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the CCTI can increase a four-year institution’s odds of developing effective transfer programs by addressing challenges that stand in the way of successful transfers, such as the following:

- Students tend to lack the information and experiences that equip their middle-class counterparts to navigate a college setting with relative ease.
- Virtually all students have financial challenges (although more CCTI students anticipated financial troubles than actually reported them at the end of their first or second years at the four-year institutions).
- Many students lack belief in their potential as “bachelor’s degree material.”
- Many students have family obligations.
- Transfer policies are not always clear and may be aimed at students transferring from other four-year institutions rather than community colleges.
- A lack of advising support at both the two- and four-year institutions sometimes keeps students from applying for transfer, especially to elite institutions.
- CCTI students reported time management and keeping up with reading, papers, and exams as their biggest challenges.
- Negative faculty preconceptions about transfer students, especially those from community colleges, can hinder efforts to promote more transfers from community colleges. These preconceptions often arise from lack of faculty engagement and experience with community college students.
- Organizational silos and lack of communication among faculty, administration, staff, and students can hinder an institution’s efforts to implement a transfer program.

Though the individual CCTI programs were tailored to each institution’s needs and experiences, the lessons learned were applicable to all grantees. Following are key lessons the CCTI institutions learned as they addressed these challenges.

- **High levels of institutional readiness and buy-in are associated with more effective and sustainable programs. “Paving the way” may be as important as program design.**
 - Institutions whose mission and/or strategic plan aligned with recruiting transfer students and helping them to succeed were better positioned for this effort.
 - Learner-centered campuses moved more quickly into successful partnerships with community colleges and a successful transfer program.
 - Institutional buy-in is needed for smooth implementation. A critical mass of supporters can be formed by making a plan collaboratively, having transparent communications,

⁴ Students in C-STEP were guaranteed admission to UNC-CH upon completion of program requirements.

and having point people from among faculty and key administrative units. Both senior-level and broad-based commitment support effectiveness.

- **For maximum success, institutions must find and prepare the right students and support them through and after transfer.**
 - Campuses recruited students through community college honors programs, classes, and the honors society (Phi Theta Kappa), as well as lists of students with high GPAs. Some talked with community college faculty and staff to find other students with potential who might not be discovered through these channels and who were not thinking about transferring to a four-year institution (one institution called such students “diamonds in the rough”). Most made every effort to identify prospective students early, to leave more time for campus visits, program engagement, and better academic preparation.
 - Campuses enhanced community college student readiness for success at the four-year campus in several ways: appointing a campus point person for community college transfer students (and often point people in admissions and financial aid); organizing peer and staff mentoring; providing joint classes and summer academic programs; working with community college faculty to align curricula; providing workshops and other opportunities for students to learn about the four-year campus and about “college survival skills,” such as time management.
 - The campuses supported students during and after transfer in many ways:
 - All developed or enhanced reasonable credit transfer policies and worked to make them as clear, transparent, and individualized as possible.
 - All developed social integration strategies such as cohort activities and peer mentoring to help CCTI students feel like they belonged.
 - Many actively promoted faculty, staff, and peer mentoring for CCTI students; according to student surveys, CCTI students who were mentored were nearly 5.5 times more likely to feel like they fit in than those who were not.
 - All designated one or more “trusted agents” to help students navigate, answer questions about everything from parking to advising, and trouble shoot.
 - All supported CCTI students academically, through promoting tutoring and other services as a smart choice (one advisor said, “We want them to see the writing center as the place successful students go”). Many gave CCTI students priority access to such services, offered extended faculty office hours, and developed tracking systems to identify students who may be struggling academically.
- **The most effective and sustainable programs had the most robust partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions.** These partnerships identified key individuals (on both campuses) focused on facilitating student transfer (some also developed program advisory committees involving faculty, administration, staff, and students); established structures to facilitate frequent communication; and were mutually respectful, stressing the importance of learning from each other.
- **Involving students in the partnership is advantageous – they can help with outreach, support other students after transferring, increase the program’s visibility, and provide important feedback and recommendations.**
- **The most successful programs continually assessed how things were working and used data to improve the programs and sustain success.**

- **There is no one-size-fits-all program. Each of the eight CCTI campuses ended up with a somewhat different mix of practices that fit within their culture and structures.**

Evaluation Activities and Strategies

The CCTI evaluation sought answers to the following questions about the Foundation-supported programs:

1. How does the transfer program affect the community college transfer students' enrollment, retention, and graduation?
2. How does the institutional context and type of institution affect the success of the CCTI?
3. How do community college transfer students perform compared with students who begin their undergraduate education at the institution?
4. What are the experiences of the community college transfer students, faculty, and staff affected by the Foundation-funded transfer programs at each grantee institution? What are the attitudes of faculty and administrators at both the two-year and four-year institutions toward transfers?
5. To what extent will these programs continue after the funding period?

The design included multiple types of data and sources. Interviews with students, faculty, and staff during annual site visits yielded qualitative data about the initiative's impact on the campuses, the extent to which the initiative was being institutionalized, and campus-specific practices. The evaluation used several sources of quantitative data to answer questions about CCTI student performance, academic success, social integration, and financial aid compared to their non-CCTI peers; and, at two of the three smaller institutions, faculty attitudes.

- Interviews with students, faculty, and staff during annual site visits to the eight CCTI institutions and more than 25 community college partners yielded qualitative data about the initiative's impact, the extent to which it was being institutionalized, and campus-specific practices. The researchers interviewed more than 600 students who had transferred from community colleges to the CCTI campuses; 300 community college students who were considering transfer; 300 faculty, staff, and administrators at the four-year institutions; and 150 community college faculty, staff, and administrators.
- Several sources of quantitative data shed light on CCTI student demographics, academic success, social integration, and financial aid compared to their non-CCTI peers. Researchers conducted baseline and annual end-of-year surveys with students who had transferred and collected annual student data (for CCTI students and two comparison groups – other transfer students and native students) on academic performance, financial aid, and demographics. To explore the nature of and changes, if any, in faculty attitudes toward and experience with community college transfer students, researchers conducted faculty surveys (a 2007 baseline and 2010 follow-up) at two of the smaller CCTI campuses.
- To assess the effectiveness of the CCTI programs at the four-year campuses, the analysis compared characteristics and outcomes for CCTI students, non-CCTI transfer students, and students who enrolled in the four-year institution as freshmen.
- Using mixed methods and multiple sources of data enabled the researchers to look for patterns across sources and enhance the credibility and richness of the findings. Rather than depend

only on a survey or a series of observations or interviews, we can compare and contrast findings from different sources. This strategy, also known as “triangulation,” strengthens our confidence in the findings.⁵

- Variation among the sites increases confidence in the applicability of the findings for a range of other institutions. The CCTI sites include large, small, public, and private institutions, with different campus cultures, in different geographical locations, and with different political, economic, and social contexts. Community college partners also varied greatly in size and type.
- An emphasis on promising practices and lessons learned enabled the evaluation team to collect a great deal of useful data and encouraged the campuses to be candid in their assessments of program effectiveness.

Conclusion

The brief summation of the lessons learned from the CCTI for institutions seeking to develop and improve transfer pathways is this:

- Be ready: prepare the way for introducing a transfer initiative.
- Develop both broad and high-level buy-in.
- Develop strong partnerships with community colleges.
- Look for the “right” students, take steps to help them prepare for transfer, help them through the process, and support them during and after the transition.

The benefits of a transfer initiative like the CCTI are many, and the time is right to engage in such initiatives. Senior administrators from the eight institutions uniformly said that the effort, while considerable, is eminently doable and is simply the right thing to do. They hoped that the lessons from their experience would encourage other institutions to engage in similar ventures.

The full report is available at <http://www.jkcf.org/news/research/>.

CCTI PARTNERS

FUNDER	EVALUATOR	CCTI INSTITUTIONS
Jack Kent Cooke Foundation 44325 Woodridge Parkway Lansdowne, Virginia 20176 703-723-8000 http://www.jkcf.org/	Center for Youth and Communities Heller School for Social Policy and Management Brandeis University 415 South Street, MS 035 Waltham, MA 02453-9110 http://cyc.brandeis.edu	Amherst College Bucknell University Cornell University Mount Holyoke College University of California, Berkeley University of Michigan University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill University of Southern California

⁵ "Different methods have different strengths and weaknesses. If they converge (agree) then we can be reasonably confident that we are getting the true picture" (Gillham, 2000).

