

Notes from the Roundtable on Transfer Credit Policy in a Multi-Campus Environment

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The parameters for this discussion were fairly open, with some pre-planned prompts about policy and practice challenges at each of the institutions, but otherwise flexible. These notes represent the facilitator's understanding of the discussion, and are in no way comprehensive. Other participants might have additional insight.

At the universities represented, **differences in campus culture and ethos**, especially as this manifests in differences in programming, are common obstacles to stable, universal policy and practice. Where each campus has its own administrative structure and where programming is discrete from one to the other, a relative autonomy in creating and implementing policy can be helpful. Where leadership or programming are shared, it seems desirable to find other ways to make sure that one campus doesn't compete against the other for the most qualified transfer applicants.

A related issue is **student demographics**. At the University of Toronto, for instance, potential students will apply to a specific campus based on a range of preoccupations—distance to travel, cost, other forms of convenience, campus diversity, extra-curricular activities and associations, intellectual and professional ambitions, and, of course, the likelihood of maximizing potential credits.

Data collection and tracking is another challenge. At WLU, we have solid numerical data on in-transfer, and can even determine the program where credit is being awarded, just as we can determine the institution where they completed credited work, but we can't yet identify which programs these students are coming from, nor have we tracked how much credit they've received. Given these unknowables, we can't be entirely sure of the numbers themselves: do they represent individuals, or individual instances of credit awarded? Better linkages between registrarial information and transfer information will help clarify those issues.

But how is data collection a multi-campus issue? Again, a multi-campus structure makes these kinds of challenges more complex: knowing where students are transferring from and to which campuses and programs they are coming is helpful **in allocating resources of time and effort**: it demarcates popular transfer pathways to the institution that might bear clarifying or widening attention, but it also reveals neglected actual or potential pathways, and these are effectively campus as well as program concerns, concerns that ought to drive transfer policy and practice.

Of the universities represented on the panel, York gets the most transfer traffic: 10,000 of the 50,000 students enrolled are transfer students, often from colleges, but also from other universities in Ontario and elsewhere, some carrying bulk, others with one or two courses. **Uniformity of policy**, both between the two campuses and across programs, would be a welcome approach to reduce the time and resources committed to evaluation and processing of credit. And this signals another of the vexatious tendencies in transfer policy, one not specific to multi-campus environments: student offers often include a mere guess about what credit students will receive. This is the case even where a block policy is in place, for given complex rules about exclusion, etc., students not only cannot be assured about the actual, specific credits and their place in the degree study plan, but they will often end up having to take

supernumerary courses later on. We see this as an area in which ONCAT can play a vital role: its focus on specificity of equivalencies, and networks of equivalencies, will result in what I call "**hard credits**" in more and more cases: where a specific equivalency is approved, maintained, warehoused, and thus active in the processing of a file. That should allow the institution to forecast with specificity the bulk of the credits a student will receive.

An additional concern involves **shifts in mandate**, and this raises important questions about the role ONCAT and Ministry initiatives play in shaping transfer activity. While the institutions represented are keen to practice good citizenship in the provincial post-secondary community, it is clear that a degree of self-interest must shape that participation if it is to have an enduring impact and retain the support of both internal and external stakeholders. It was generally agreed among the panelists that both pathway and equivalency initiatives can be helpful, value-adding initiatives: certainly we have been working hard to get the transfer house in order, attending to areas of weakness and potential strength that might otherwise have remained in benign neglect, *ex mentis*. But responses to those initiatives must also keep in mind the possibility that external engines for change, and the funding they provide, will eventually stop chuffing.

This means that we must develop **policies and practices** that are **sustainable**, from warehousing data in a way that is compatible with domestic platforms; and that positions and projects funded externally focus on laying enduring, flexible groundwork: from template to process, from data library to transfer culture. ONCAT is mindful of this need for flexibility, and works hard to accommodate a range of policies and practices, but the particular challenges that arise internally must be resolved internally.

It also means that **resource issues** will persist and challenge the ongoing development of this work where the resources are not already integrated into administrative structures: again, establishing the ground and frameworks, and then sharing out the work of maintaining, capturing, integrating, updating, and maintaining again will help protect against a fizzling out of this activity.

At colleges, inducing from the example of Seneca, the problem isn't so much cultural as **directional**: colleges are generally in competition with each other given provincial oversight over specific programming, meaning that any cross-transfer will be fairly straightforward. They also don't experience as much difference in cost or academic reputation, so their objective is to promote opportunities for graduates to slingshot into generous credit arrangements at receptor universities.

Seneca has addressed several of the issues above by **proactively developing partnerships** with, most notably, York, and by being open to others, working the inevitable and clerkly problem of reckoning equivalency of learning outcomes from their end, and meeting partner institutions in the middle. They are careful to speak to and support students on all campuses, and to promote potential university pathways early on. They have developed systems for capturing and processing transfer information, and thus can promote successful pathways with competence.

Seneca, like York, Toronto, and Laurier, have **recruited labour** to deal specifically and directly with pathways and transfer credit issues. At Seneca and Laurier, a specific position coordinates that activity. It isn't this person's job to review and assess student applications, but to make sure that the machinery is oiled and functioning. Toronto's pathways specialist serves a similar function. But the frontlines work remains squarely with admissions and registrarial staff at these institutions, of necessity, perhaps. But this fact has bearing on the ongoing practical attention that can be given to developments in transfer

credit: again, when and if external funding dries up, how will we deal with the necessary work of developing and supporting pathways and capturing and maintaining equivalencies with enduring effect?

Again, a **strategic approach** to the energy and resources being brought to bear through ONCAT is to build and/or bolster the foundation and framework for transfer activity by one or all of the following:

- i. establish a culture among faculty such that looking for and thinking about pathways becomes a twitch reflex, and faculty experience with development is substantial enough that that work can go on, coordinated, without an anchor point;
- ii. ensure that a suitable container is in place to capture, track, and maintain strategic, reasonable equivalencies, and allow communication between university and provincial systems;
- iii. shift the burden to universities to fund this activity directly, either through a dedicated position, or by sharing the work out across a group.

Whatever happens, the panelists and delegates agreed that **cooperative, collaborative work** with faculty and academic administration is essential in making sure that the work we do is meaningful, serves the interest of the institution, and draws us into strategic citizenship and partnership with other institutions. This requires mutual understanding: our jobs are complex, multi-faceted, and demanding on all sides. But faculty are regularly over-worked, and sensitivity to constraints on their time must be a mainstay of any policy and practice.