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Non-Traditional Paths: New International Student Pathways to the Baccalaureate

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Abstract

There is a growing “swirling” trend of students alternating between 2- and 4-year colleges. The non-linear paths traveled by many community college students often take them through multiple colleges and/or through patterns of stop-out and return. Due to the rapid growth of international students pursuing US degrees, this study identifies the demographic composition of international students and investigates their swirling patterns for what may appear as erratic paths. This manuscript includes important implications for practitioners and others at community colleges.

Introduction

The term “swirl,” coined in 1990 by officials of the Maricopa County Community College system in Arizona, refers to the non-linear paths which many community college students take through multiple colleges and/or through patterns of stop-out and return. The swirl may include alternating between 2- and 4-year colleges or attending both at the same time (Palmer [2001](#)). A recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Hossler, Shapiro, and Dundar [2012](#)) revealed that approximately one third of all students have transferred at least once. And, approximately half of all transfers were from a four-year to a public two-year institution. Thus, the transcript records of a growing number of students include multiple institutions and non-traditional pathways, forcing both community colleges and four-year colleges to consider appropriate policies to assist students to be successful.

Due in part to the rapid growth of international students pursuing degrees in the United States, another pattern of swirl is simultaneously developing. However, the swirl patterns and the demographic structure for the non-linear enrollment in international student groups are not clear and may need more investigation and deeper analysis. This study investigates the swirling trend of international students at an American Midwestern research university as a case study. The data for the current study is limited to international students enrolled in baccalaureate (undergraduate) institutions and aimed at gaining their baccalaureate degrees. We present our results for the benefit of four-year colleges and universities to better understand swirling trends and drives behind this emerging popular trend.

Problem Statement

Patterns of non-traditional enrollment for international students are growing rapidly, but there is a policy void of how to deal appropriately with the new phenomenon. It is not uncommon for international students to earn community college credits while being a full-time student at a four-year university. Summers may offer an especially good time to take advantage of community college courses, especially when courses are offered online. This new variety of swirling is causing some consternation at universities that may not be prepared or really know how to handle this type of activity. Is this a beneficial type of enrollment for students who may struggle with specific courses? Or, is this behavior detrimental to the student and/or the university? The answers to these questions are complex as they likely depend on the course, the timing, and the student motive. But we do know that swirling behaviors as well as other non-traditional credit transfers add a level of tension to articulation and other transfer type policies present at many universities.

Articulation Policy

The function of articulation policies is to preserve credits as students move specifically from two-year to four-year institutions (Roksa and Keith 2008). Articulation agreements are designed to promote the transfer process and enhance transfer rates (Anderson, Sun and Alfonso 2006; Bender 1990; California Postsecondary Education Commission 1990; Donovan, Schaier-Peleg, and Forer 1987; Kintzer 1970, 1973; Knoell 1990; Medsker 1960; Townsend 2002). But without a doubt, articulation policies are narrow, are written from a unidirectional perspective of two-year to four-year colleges, and do not include provisions for swirl. Articulation agreements must consider four key policy areas (Bender 1990; Ignash and Townsend 2000; Roksa and Keith 2008):

1. Transfer direction—what are the included paths?
2. Sectors—what types of institutions are included?
3. Transfer components—what courses or clusters of credits are included in the agreement?

4. Faculty involvement—to what extent are faculty (from both institutions) responsible for crafting and maintaining the statewide articulation agreements?

Articulation policies are designed for student success. They are not designed to provide an easy path to credits or to behaviors that may actually create greater problems later. In order to construct articulation policies to respond to the new order of swirling, specifically for international students, it is important to acknowledge the types of courses that university-enrolled international students may take at community colleges.

Purpose Statement

American students may exhibit swirling behaviors to take advantage of community colleges' less expensive tuition fees and also to add additional pathways to credit accrual. Due to the increasing number of international students and the growing popularity of students utilizing community colleges while attending four-year institutions, it is essential and beneficial to identify the reasons driving such actions. Despite the flexibility and lower cost, swirling can also bring difficulties for international students, who are likely to struggle with traveling between colleges, negotiating tricky financial aid issues, and figuring out how to select transferable courses. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to take a focused look at the swirling patterns of international students. Identifying the demographic structure as well as the swirling trend pattern of international students swirling between community colleges and four-year colleges or universities will provide student services and other administration with the knowledge to create appropriate policies to advise and assist international students.

Research Question

We pose the following research questions:

- “ RQ1: What are the demographic structures of university-enrolled international students who take courses at community colleges?
RQ2: What are the swirling/transferring patterns for university-enrolled international students who take courses at community colleges?
RQ3: What are the policy implications for both four-year colleges and community colleges? How do the community colleges and four-year colleges or universities collaborate to better serve swirling international students?

”

Literature Review

To place the non-traditional paths of international students within the extant literature, we reviewed the relevant literature. The review begins with the swirling trends of American students. We then move to the reasons driving swirling enrollment patterns among international students. We investigate the articulation agreements and transfer policies from a regulation viewpoint. Finally, we reviewed internationalization trends within higher education in the United States.

Swirling Trends of American Students

According to a report by the US Department of Education released in September 2003, 22.6 percent of 1992 high school graduates attended three or more institutions before earning a bachelor's degree, and another 36.6 percent attended two institutions (Bailey [2003](#)). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has cited the new enrollment patterns of multiple-institution attendance as one of the key pressures and prevalent problems American higher education faces in the 21st century (AAC&U [2002](#)). Both Bailey ([2003](#)) and the AAC&U ([2002](#)) report titled "Greater Expectations" found that 58 percent of bachelor's degree recipients attended two or more colleges and 73 percent of all undergraduates are non-traditional students.

Reasons Driving Swirling Enrollment Patterns

Swirling students may mix courses from multiple institutions to take advantage of unique courses, convenient timing, popular professors, or less expensive offerings. Cost may also be a key factor as astute students and their families may note that community college tuition may be half or even one-third of the cost charged by a large university. Lowered cost can be a powerful attraction for students on a tight budget or for non-traditional students with other financial obligations. And, an astute student with the knowledge of the transferability of specific courses can indeed save significant money intermixing courses or by taking a summer load at a community college (Hagedorn and Castro [2000](#)).

Growing enrollments and shrinking budgets at universities have also introduced another reason for swirl: required courses at the home institution may be full or not offered during the semester that the student needs them (Barnes and Robinson [1999](#)). There is also evidence that university students may choose to take courses that they perceive as "difficult" at a college they perceive as less rigorous in an attempt to keep their GPA high (Hagedorn and Castro [2000](#)).

Articulation Agreements and Transfer Policies

Transfer is related to "who" and articulation to courses and programs is related to "what." Cohen and Brawer ([2008](#), 205) defined articulation as the movement of "students' academic credits from one point to another." Articulation encompasses transfer and is "the entire range

of processes and relationships involved in the systematic movement of students interinstitutionally and intersegmentally throughout postsecondary education" (Kintzer and Wattenbarger [1985](#), iii). One of the first systematic analyses of articulation endeavors was provided by Kintzer (Kintzer [1973](#); Kintzer and Wattenbarger [1985](#)). He identified three types of articulation agreements: (a) formal and legally based policies, (b) state system policies, and (c) voluntary agreements between individual institutions or systems.

The literature provides seven guiding principles for establishing strong statewide articulation agreements (Ignash and Townsend [2000](#), [2001](#); Roksa and Keith [2008](#)):

1. Parity must exist between institutions such that community colleges and four-year institutions enter the agreement as equal partners in providing freshman- and sophomore-level undergraduate coursework.
2. Parity of students must exist such that native and transfer students are treated equally by the receiving institution.
3. Faculty should have primary responsibility for crafting the actual statewide articulation agreements.
4. The agreements should accommodate students who transfer without an associate's degree.
5. There should be agreements in specific program majors as well as transfer of program major courses.
6. Private colleges and universities should be included in statewide articulation agreements.
7. There should be data-driven evaluation to judge how well statewide articulation agreements are working.

A number of scholarly papers and academic research studies focus on the impact of articulation agreements on transfer rates (Anderson, Sun and Alfonso [2006](#); Bender [1990](#); California Postsecondary Education Commission [1990](#); Donovan, Schaier-Peleg, and Forer [1987](#); Kintzer [1970](#), [1973](#); Knoell [1990](#); Medsker [1960](#); Townsend [2002](#)). As a result, in terms of transfer rates, compulsory policy instruments such as statewide articulation agreements would likely yield better outcomes and effectiveness when compared to states without statewide policies (Banks [1992](#), [1994](#); Ignash [1992](#), [1993](#)).

The Age of Internationalization

College campuses reflect the diversity of the society in which we live (Levine and Cureton [1998](#); Ward and Kennedy [2001](#)). Today, a significant and increasing number of international students are seeking admission into the United States for postsecondary education. According to the Open Doors report (Institute of International Education [IIE], [2012](#)), during academic year 2011–2012 the number of international students at colleges and universities increased by 6.5% as

compared with the previous year. The number of Chinese international students studying for their baccalaureate degrees in the United States increased by 26% in academic year 2012–2013 compared to the previous year 2011–2012.

The latest statistic fixes the number of international students at 764,495 in 2012 with a constant increase throughout the past decade.

With the large number of international students studying to earn baccalaureate degrees in the United States, there is also an increase in non-traditional transfer patterns among these students.

Method

In order to study the phenomenon of the non-traditional paths of international students, we analyzed data from a research university that accepts a relatively large number of international students.

Data Collection

According to the Fact Book of the university in this study, the total number of international undergraduate students recruited in 2012 reached a record high of 1,989, accounting for 6.4% of total enrollment. Moreover, between 2006 and 2012, 1,127 international students transferred credits they earned from a community college.

Through cooperation with the university Registrar's Officer at a large research university in the Midwest, we obtained data pertaining to the full population of international students who have earned transferred credits from community colleges during their enrollment (2006 to 2012). The variables included demographic information (such as gender, year of enrollment), year/term of transferring credits, name of transfer courses, grades of transfer credits, departments accepting transfer credits, number of transfer credits, and the name of the community college.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis helps to describe or summarize data. A simple descriptive analysis also provides an initial picture of emerging trends. In this study, descriptive analysis is utilized to describe typologies of courses students take at community colleges as well as the swirling trend to community colleges. Two typologies are described, one concerning demographic analysis, such as nationality, gender, and enrolled type, and the other concerning swirling patterns, such as community colleges with top transferred credits, total number of transferred courses, major categories of transferred courses, grades for top transferred courses, and the year of transfer.

Results and Findings

Within this section we categorize our findings into two major parts: demographic analysis results of swirling international students and swirling patterns.

Demographic Analysis Results

To answer the first research question, we employ demographic analysis.

The data analyzed included 1,127 students who exhibited swirling patterns of enrollment. These university enrolled students transferred 3,130 courses from a community college to their four-year institution which serves as the study's research site.

Number of Transfers by Year

Figure 1 shows the number of courses transferred to the university by swirling international students by calendar year. The increasing trend of swirling international students has been obviously demonstrated. Note that the figure represents the number of courses transferred, not the number of students transferring credits. Although a useful statistic, the number of swirling students is not routinely recorded.



Figure 1

[Open in figure viewer](#)

[↓ PowerPoint](#)

Calendar Year Trend of Transfer Credits (By Total Number of Courses)

Table 1 displays the academic year that students transfer their community college credits to the university. As indicated in Table 1, international students usually swirl after the first year at college, the most popular time being the junior year. It is likely that students become informed of swirling techniques later in their college enrollment.

Table 1. Distribution of School Year When Transferring Credits

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
#	92	390	548	483
%	6.1%	25.8%	36.2%	31.9%

Nationality

The largest group of swirling students was Chinese, 61% of the total. Chinese students accounted for 54.62% of all the international students enrolled at the university.

Swirling Pattern

To answer the second research question—“What are the swirling/transferring patterns for university-enrolled international students who take courses at community colleges?”—we provide information regarding the college from where credits were transferred as well as the number of transferred courses. We also provide information on the types of courses transferred and their grades.

Community Colleges with Top Transferred Credits

The students have taken community college courses from a number of different colleges. Table 2 provides information on the top seven community colleges providing the transferred credits. All colleges are within the same state.

Table 2. Top Community College Locations for Transferred Credits Number of Transferred Course(s)

College	Distance from the University	# of Transferred Courses	% in All Transferred Courses (3130)
1	37 miles	1,332	42.6%
2	43.5 miles	490	15.7%
3	186 miles	338	10.8%
4	190 miles	307	9.8%
5	112 miles	198	6.3%
6	160 miles	184	5.9%

The highest number of community college courses taken by a single student was 21. The vast majority of students transferred one or two courses (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of Transferred Courses

# of courses	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	17
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# of students	373	317	164	95	65	40	23	16	11	5	2	4	5	3	1	1
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Major Categories of Transfer Courses

We classified the courses transferred from the community colleges into six categories:

1. Languages and Literature

This subject category includes languages, linguistics, literature, and foreign languages. The total number is 1,231, which accounts for 39%.

2. Engineering, Technology, and Physical Sciences

This subject category includes courses covering engineering and the physical sciences. The number is 670, or 22% of the total.

3. Social Science and Education

This subject category includes courses covering social and human sciences, including anthropology, communication, education, history, human development, international studies, law, military science, political science, psychology, public administration, and sociology. The total number is 588, 19% of the total.

4. Philosophy

This category includes the subjects of philosophy such as Introduction to Ethics. The total number is 385 which accounts for 12%.

5. Architecture, Arts, and Design

This subject category includes architecture, arts, and design, such as music appreciation. The total number is 146, 5% of the total.

6. Business and Economics

This subject category includes business and economics. The total number is 89, or 3% of the total.

Transfer Course Distribution

Analysis of all the specific courses taken by swirling international students at community colleges reveals the top five courses listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Top Five Transfer Courses Taken by Swirling International Students at Community Colleges

	Composition II	Composition I	Intro to Ethics	Business Law I	Music Appreciation
#	616	317	259	218	99
%	19.7%	11.9%	8.3%	7%	3.2%

Composition I and II are the top two courses taken by swirling international students with 192 international students taking both courses at a community college consecutively.

Grade Distribution for Top Three Courses

The grade distribution with percentage for the top three courses—Composition II, Composition I, and Intro to Ethics—are displayed in Figure 2. Note that most grades are relatively high, especially Composition II and Intro to Ethics.



Figure 2

[Open in figure viewer](#) | [PowerPoint](#)

Grade Distribution of Top Three Courses

Implications

The most popular types of courses taken at the community college were those under the category of languages, social sciences, and arts. At the same time, the top departments accepting transferred credits were English, Philosophy, Accounting, Speech Communication, and Sociology. Based on these analysis results, we provide several assumptions:

1. Since many of the classes are smaller at the community college than at the research university, students may take courses they perceive to be difficult at the community college in the hope that they may receive more individualized attention.
2. As “English as a Second Language” learners, the students in this study faced challenges in the process of reading and writing in academic-level English and hence may perceive courses with heavy reading and/or writing requirements as the most difficult. The courses

offered at the community college may be perceived as less rigorous and therefore more attractive.

3. Students may perceive that it will be easier to get higher grades in courses offered in the community college.
4. Some courses may be offered online and therefore be perceived as more convenient.

Another view of our findings is that international students may be conveying an important message to the university with regard to the courses that were more likely to be taken at the community college. We found that university-enrolled Chinese swirling students are more likely to take courses that involve a high level of reading, writing, or speaking at a community college. It is likely that these students perceive social science and humanities courses such as English Composition and Introduction to Ethics as difficult at a university and conclude that the course may be less rigorous or the grading less severe at a community college. It may be beneficial for the university to get a better understanding of why so many international students prefer to take, for example, a composition (English) course at a community college. Of course another message could be gleaned from our study: the university is not serving international students well and as such, the students are taking their business elsewhere.

In addition, it may be important to note that the university faculty members from the study site have been quite vocal about their opposition to international students taking English requirements online at other institutions. In addition to the questioning rigor and curriculum equivalence, they also question the pedagogical effects of courses offered at the community college.

With respect to swirling policies, the swirling of students raises important policy questions for all types of postsecondary institutions. In addition to university's loss of tuition revenue, additional questions regarding course equivalencies, especially for international students, seem timely. It is important to note that mode of instruction such as online or blended is not recorded on a transcript. Hence, pedagogical questions regarding the efficiency and quality of instruction when using online methods for international students remain unanswered.

There is a current policy void regarding university-enrolled international students taking courses at community colleges. It appears that transfer policies may need re-examination, especially with respect to international students. Transfer policies should be designed to assist students to be successful. But if students are using the policies to bypass rigorous courses that may be necessary for their development, the policy may not be contributing to their success.

Conclusions

Like two sides of a coin, swirling can be considered both positive and negative when seen from different perspectives. On the one hand, swirling can be positive if: (1) the swirling path can

help students graduate sooner and gain their baccalaureate degrees by taking courses in two institutions; (2) it reduces their tuition expenses by taking courses at community colleges; (3) community colleges offer the necessary courses at times when the four-year universities don't; and (4) online courses offered at two-year institutions can save students' time and money, and provide appropriate pedagogical experiences.

However, on the other hand, swirling can be negative if: (1) students take the swirling path to avoid rigorous assignments at four-year universities; (2) students do so to avoid public speaking courses that may make them uncomfortable, such as a speech course; (3) the courses at two-year institutions fail to prepare students for the subsequent course (e.g., students with completion of Composition I may not be very well prepared for Composition II at four-year universities); or (4) taking courses at two-year institutions threatens either academic or social integration at the four-year universities.

Generally speaking, it is necessary and essential for policy makers and higher education practitioners to regulate the swirling trend of international students with appropriate policies and regulations. Avoiding the negative effects of the swirling trend and strengthening the positive aspects are beneficial for international students as well as for two-year and four-year institutions.

Future Research

For future research, it is suggested that a survey instrument be administered to conduct a deeper analysis. Questionnaires should be developed to inquire of international students their reasons for transferring community college credits back to their home four-year institutions.

Additionally, future studies should include a qualitative component to better understand students' motives and beliefs regarding enrolling in community colleges while concurrently enrolled in a four-year institution.

Biographies

Linda Serra Hagedorn, PhD, is associate dean of the College of Human Sciences and professor in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Hagedorn's research focuses on two areas: (1) international students and programs, and (2) community college student success, retention, and transfer. Prior to joining the faculty at Iowa State University in 2008, she directed the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Florida.

Hagedorn is the author or coauthor of four books, more than 80 journal articles, 30 book chapters, and numerous reports and editorials. She has presented more than 200 presentations and workshops in the United States and in Indonesia, Korea, Russia, Spain, England, Tunisia, Vietnam, and China. Hagedorn is the recent recipient of two US Department

of State grants. She is directing the American Cultural Center at Henan Normal University (China) where English language and customs are shared with Chinese students in a spirit of friendship. She is also working with Kirkwood Community College in a project designed to counteract the Arab Spring by bringing community colleges to Tunisia.

Jiayi Hu is a doctoral candidate of the School of Education at Iowa State University. Her academic interest is international students' academic success and transition experiences in the United States. Her research also focuses on international students' college preparation and readiness.

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