# PolyTransfer: A Dynamic and Collaborative Approach to Transfer Student Success

*S. Terri Gomez and Cecilia Santiago-González*

*The PolyTransfer Initiative is a collaborative effort between Cal Poly Pomona and local community colleges aimed at easing students' transfer through the state's educational system. PolyTransfer is focused on recruitment, enrollment, engagement, retention, and increasing timely graduation of transfer students, especially among underrepresented minority (URM) and first-generation students. This article provides an overview of our efforts to partner across divisions to establish a transfer-receptive culture predicated on innovation and adaptability. Our internal and external reflective, critical discussions have underscored that nothing has been sacred or "off the table" in moving forward to make significant changes to support transfer student success. On the contrary, we determined that the university must make fundamental changes in its policies, procedures, business practices, and expectations.*

Like many institutions across the United States, Cal Poly Pomona, an urban 4-year public institution in California, has experienced a dramatic increase in its transfer student population. Between fall 2001 and fall 2014, the number of transfer students grew by 121%, from 1,362 to 3,021 students. While this increase in enrollment has been intentional and mirrors California enrollment trends, students' protracted time to graduation is a concern. This concern and interest in holding ourselves accountable for the lagged graduation rates for transfer students resulted in the creation of a a cross-divisional team whose focus was to analyze the transfer student experience and examine institutional practices that support or hinder student success. The team met regularly to review research related to transfer students' needs, discuss practices at other institutions, and review institutional data. The team concluded that, similar to many other higher education institutions, Cal Poly Pomona transfer students received very limited transfer-specific support services, academic programming, and advising. It also identified complex and macro issues that impact transfer, matriculation, and timeline to graduation for transfer students. For example, policies, procedures, and operating practices at four-year institutions can make it difficult for community college students to transfer course credit; enroll in courses requiring prerequisites; identify necessary academic,

**S. Terri Gomez** (stgomez@cpp.edu) is the Founding Director of the Poly Transfer Program, Professor of ethnic and Women's Studies, and Interim Associate Vice President for Student Success at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

**Cecilia Santiago-González** is the Director of Enrollment & One-Stop Services at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

financial, or support services; and navigate the institution in other ways.

These findings led to the creation of the PolyTransfer Initiative in 2012 the goals of which are to (1) create a "transfer receptive culture" that will change campus culture for transfer students, especially first-generation and underrepresented minorities (URMs); (2) institutionalize policies and practices to facilitate a seamless transition from community college to Cal Poly Pomona; and (3) implement High Impact Practices (HIPs; e.g., summer transition programs, first-year experience programming, and peer mentoring), which positively correlate with persistence, deeper learning, and enhanced academic and social integration in the university and are known to have a significantly larger impact on URMs. Our unique multidimensional, holistic approach, leveraging the expertise of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, consists of (1) intervening at all levels of community college and the university through outreach and recruitment to support students through application, admission, and matriculation processes; (2) developing an orientation and transitional first-year experience program responsive to transfer student needs; (3) engaging transfer students academically and socially through HIPs; and (4) preparing students for graduation, graduate and professional schools, and effective participation in the workforce. Recent data shows promising and quantifiable outcomes for students who have participated in the program. The fall 2014 cohort had a 96% first to second year persistence rate compared to the 90% persistence rate for all other transfer students who did not participate in PolyTransfer. This is a significant and notable difference.

In developing the PolyTransfer Initiative, the team members focused on making sure that they understood the factors that disproportionately affect transfer students, specifically transfer students from underrepresented backgrounds. They identified five significant factors that have an impact (both positive and negative) on post-transfer transition processes: (1) *student integration* (perception of belonging) in the four-year institution; (2) *student involvement* (student behavior) in the four-year institution; (3) *environmental pull factors* (outside commitments such as family responsibilities and off-campus employment that prevent students from spending more time on campus); (4) *academic, social, and cultural capital* that students have at entry to the four-year institution, and (5) *transfer receptivity* of the four-year institution (i.e., the dominant cultural assumptions and social structures at the receiving institution can lead to stigmatization of transfer students; Bahr et al., 2013).

While it is common for student support programs to intervene with students to mitigate some of the impact of the factors mentioned, PolyTransfer has also taken on the task 0f changing the culture and climate of the institution as it relates to transfer students. The first step to creating a transfer-receptive culture is to eliminate "deficit perspectives" about transfer students (Herrera & Jain, 2013). A practitioner's deficit perspective may attribute low transfer rates to students' lack of motivation, academic preparation, or the skills to navigate the transfer process (Dowd, 2003). This lens manifests itself in that students' real-life and diversity of experiences are not acknowledged in the institutions' business practices, programs, and policies (Aragon & Perez, 2006). Further, educators at the receiving institution

may (mistakenly) assume that transfer students do not need the same level of support as freshmen (Brint & Karabel, 1989). This deficit perspective can diminish transfer students' academic self-efficacy and confidence (Handel, 2013) and lead to the development of inadequate policies that could hinder the students' timely graduation.

We believe that the development of a strong institutionalized transfer-receptive culture and strengthened transfer pathway policies and practices, coupled with integrated High Impact Practices (HIPs) will provide a sustainable, replicable model for transfer student success. HIPs, as identified by research, are proving to be very effective interventions and have a larger impact on underrepresented students. These types of practices include (1) a prematriculation summer program to orient transfer students to campus and provide academic and social opportunities for them to feel comfortable in their new environment, (2) peer mentoring on academic and personal transition issues by demographically similar students, and (3) ongoing graduate and professional school preparation. Research shows a significant difference in the quality of students' pretransfer and posttransfer experience concerning student engagement (Grites, 2013). These differences can lead to dissatisfaction with the university and feeling unprepared to pursue a graduate degree (Herrera & Jain, 2013). Indications of this problem are the tendency for transfer students to work less with classmates outside class or be less likely to speak to an academic advisor or professor about career plans (Diaz, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). All these problems, of course, have been exacerbated by more stringent admissions standards; sweeping budget cuts; increased campus, program, and major impaction; and statewide enrollment reductions.

While there have been significant gains in student outcomes and in developing a transfer-receptive culture at Cal Poly Pomona, the work is far from over. We understand that student success is contingent on a collaborative relationship between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. Furthermore, we understand that the notion of collaboration has to go deeper. It has to be a broader, campuswide, and intersegmental effort with community college partners to ensure seamless delivery of services. Close coordination among the various campus divisions and departments enables students to take advantage of an array of programs and make efficient use of resources, and because the institutions, divisions, and departments have common goals, ensures greater likelihood of program success and sustainability.

**References**

Aragon, S. R. & Perez, M. R. (2006). Increasing retention and success of students of color at research-extensive universities. *New Directions for Student Services, 114*, 81-91.

Bahr, P. R., Toth, C.,Thirolf, K. &, Massé J.C. (2013). A review and critique of the literature on community college students' transition processes and outcomes in four-year institutions, Chapter 10. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed.) *Higher education:*

*Handbook of theory and research*, pp. 459-510, doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-5836-0_10.

Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America*, 1900-1985. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Cejda, B. D., Kaylor, A. J., & Rewey, K. L. (1998). Transfer shock in an academic discipline: The relationship between students' majors and their academic performance. *Community College Review, 26*(3), 1-13.

Diaz, P. E. (1992). Effects of transfer on academic performance of community college students at the four-year institution. *Community/Junior College Quarterly, 16*, 279–291.

Dowd, A. C. (2003, March). From access to outcome equity: Revitalizing the democratic mission of the community college. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 586*, 92–119.

Grites, T. J. (2013). Successful transitions from two-year to four-year institutions. *New Directions for Higher Education, 162*, 61-68.

Handel, S.J. (2013). Transfer as academic gauntlet: The student perspective. *College Board*.

Herrera, A., & Jain, D. (2013). Building a transfer-receptive culture at four-year institutions. *New Directions for Higher Education, 162*, 51-59.

Jacobs, B. (2004). *Today's transfer students: Trends and challenges. The college transfer student in America*. Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO).

Laanan, F.S. (1996). Making the transition: Understanding the adjustment process of community college students. *Community College Review, 23*(4), 69-84.

Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.