

Centering Equity in Transfer Partnerships

Gloria Crisp, Professor, Adult and Higher Education, Oregon State University
Emily Kolby, Doctoral Student, Adult and Higher Education, Oregon State University
Charlie Potter, Instructor, Adult and Higher Education, Oregon State University

Transfer partnerships do not necessarily produce equitable outcomes. A lack of scholarship identifying critical practices needed to make partnerships equitable impedes transfer success. Based on a review and analysis of existing literature, this paper proposes a three-stage transfer partnership framework focused on designing, implementing, and assessing partnership practices that center equity. Kania and Kramer's (2011) theory of collective impact and Bensimon and Malcom's (2012) equity scorecard are used as dual lenses through which partners should approach these efforts. This framework encourages practitioners to adopt innovative ways to center equity and carries specific implications for admissions and retention professionals.

Student transfer between colleges and universities is becoming more prevalent and increasingly critical to bachelor's degree completion. Of the 2.8 million first-time students who entered college in fall 2011, one third of students attended two or more colleges over a span of six years (American Council on Education [ACE], 2021). It is also becoming more complicated for students to navigate transfer admissions processes and plan coursework for major-specific prerequisites and requirements that vary across institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; LaViolet & Wyner, 2020). The most tangible condition influencing the problem is loss of credits upon transfer, with 60% or fewer students transferring the majority of their credits (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). Factors contributing to credit loss affect students before, during, and after the process of transferring to a baccalaureate-granting institution. For example, enrollment in developmental education or vocational courses, rigid transfer credit policies at universities, and upper-division coursework constraints can all contribute to credit loss (LaViolet & Wyner, 2020). Credit loss can negatively impact students' progress toward bachelor's degrees by requiring them to enroll in excess courses, draining

their financial aid, or adding to the total cost of completing a degree—including the opportunity costs that result from delayed graduation (U.S. GAO, 2017).

The challenges and burdens of transfer are not equally distributed or experienced across students with different identities and educational experiences. Persistent structural issues have a disproportionately negative impact on transfer access and outcomes for students of color (Crisp et al., 2020; Taylor & Jain, 2017), producing and maintaining what Martinez-Wenzl and Marquez (2012) and others have termed the “racial transfer gap.” Crisp and Núñez (2014) found that 45% of a national sample of White community college students successfully transferred to a baccalaureate-granting institution, compared to only 31% of African American and Latinx students. Likewise, national findings by Shapiro et al. (2018) and Crisp et al. (2020) suggest that additional racial inequities in transfer are less well-documented or understood. For instance, Crisp and colleagues (2020) found that White students were more likely than students of color to benefit from transfer articulation policies by vertically transferring from a community college to a baccalaureate-granting institution after two years of completing a core curriculum. Moreover, White students were shown to be more likely than Latinx or African American students to attempt and successfully transfer lower-level credits toward a bachelor’s degree.

Research focused on the overall effectiveness of articulation policies has suggested that statewide articulation policies may have minimal impact on transfer rates for some students (e.g., Handel & Williams, 2011; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Stern, 2016). A national task force on transfer (ACE, 2021) observed that transfer inequities would continue unless and until institutional practices and policies are tailored to the needs of all students—including students of color. Institutional transfer partnerships have the potential to overcome limitations in state policies by providing tailored advising and other resources for students both pre- and post-transfer (Crisp, 2021). Although they differ in type (Yeh & Wetzstein, 2020), partnerships are typically defined as collaborations between one or more community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions focused on improving transfer and bachelor’s attainment (Kisker, 2007). Based on the myriad ways that institutions work together, partnerships can be information- and process-oriented (e.g., articulation agreements, website updates) or relationship-driven (e.g., shared advising models, cross-campus faculty workgroups). Transfer partnerships also exist in multiple forms. For instance, some partnerships emerge from a review of student success data (Meza & Blume, 2020), while others are built from faculty relationships that evolve into partnerships (DeChano-Cook & Casey, 2020). For some institutions, partnerships are created from shared resources and enrollments that allow students to move between institutions as needed (Clemetsen & Balzer, 2008).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Relatively few studies have given explicit attention to active collaborative transfer partnerships between institutions (Crisp, 2021). However, findings from interviews with transfer coordinators suggest that institutional articulation agreements may have more impact on student transfer than statewide policies (Handel & Williams 2012). At the same time, transfer partnerships do not necessarily produce equitable outcomes. For instance, Meza and Blume (2020) found racial inequities in transfer between 308 institutional pairs in which students of color completed bachelor's degrees at rates comparable to White students. To produce equitable outcomes, transfer partnerships must center equity in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs. Unfortunately, with the exception of a 2020 *New Directions for Community Colleges* issue edited by Bragg and colleagues, there is currently a lack of scholarship identifying critical practices needed to make transfer partnerships equitable. Our scholarly paper fills that gap using Kania and Kramer's (2011) theory of collective impact and Bensimon and Malcom's (2012) equity scorecard framework to analyze research focused on transfer partnerships. We also considered broader literature that sought to identify practices that can support equitable transfer outside formal transfer partnerships. The objective of our review was to develop an equitable transfer partnership framework that identified practices and processes that transfer professionals could use to center equity in the design, implementation, or evaluation of transfer partnerships. We begin with an introduction to transfer partnerships, followed by a description of theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide and frame our review and analysis. We then present our review findings, which offer a framework for identifying practices needed to make transfer partnerships both equitable and effective. Our paper concludes with implications to guide transition professionals in developing, implementing, and evaluating transfer partnerships that center equity.

Transfer Partnerships

Partnerships between sending and receiving institutions are a common strategy for supporting transfer students. Researchers and policy analysts have recommended transfer partnerships as a solution for increasing persistence and bachelor's completion rates, decreasing student credit loss as they transfer, and creating clear pathways for students from community college to baccalaureate-granting institutions (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Wyner et al., 2016 LaViolet & Wyner, 2020). In contrast to statewide articulation agreements and other transfer policy decisions made at the institutional level, transfer partnerships generally focus on the relationships and decision-making processes between the parties involved. This allows administrators, faculty, and staff involved to shape the transfer experience and determine the allocation of needed resources. Specifically, partnerships elevate transfer as a priority and provide resources like shared advising and other student supports (Crisp, 2021).

While a vital strategy, the phrase “transfer partnership” is broadly used and applied to a variety of structures and relationships between community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions. Kisker (2007) defined transfer partnerships as collaborations between one or more community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions focused on improving transfer and bachelor’s attainment. Still, this definition provides an opportunity to develop transfer partnerships with varying goals in mind. For example, some institutions may focus their partnership on information, process, and student communication, which results in updates to websites and articulation agreements. Others may steer toward developing relationship-based partnerships that produce shared advising models or cross-campus faculty and student research. Bragg et al. (2020) highlighted a variety of unique partnership approaches, including those involving technical colleges (Carlsen & Gangeness, 2020) and private universities (Collins et al., 2020). Clemetsen and Balzer (2008) provided insights on a partnership model that supports students moving back and forth between a community college and a baccalaureate-granting institution. These examples demonstrate that transfer partnerships exist among multiple institutional types and with multiple objectives set forth by those involved.

To enhance clarity regarding transfer partnerships development and engagement, Yeh and Wetzstein (2018) formulated a typology that explains the increasing commitment as institutions choose to invest more time and energy. This framework highlights four types of partnerships to categorize the levels of engagement and corresponding transfer practices employed by institutions: cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and alliance. For example, cooperation between institutions is the first partnership category and the lowest on the continuum. Cooperation relies heavily on information sharing and often results in unequal participation or a feeling of strain on one of the partners. In contrast, the most developed partnership type, an alliance, is built on trust between leaders of institutions, with both partners and students benefitting from the work. Our review and subsequent framework complement Yeh and Wetzstein’s typology by providing a set of recommendations that partners should consider when engaging in collaborative transfer work at any level of engagement.

Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

Our analysis was grounded by both the theory of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and Bensimon and Malcom’s (2012) model of organizational change, known as the equity scorecard. Not all of the transfer partnerships we examined or analyzed necessarily contained elements of both models. Yet, taken together, the dual lenses offer a framework that practitioners can use when designing, implementing, and assessing equitable transfer partnerships. The first lens, the theory of collective impact, puts forth five conditions that provide support for partnership development and educational change. These include the presence of a common agenda and vision

for change, a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization for support (Kania & Kramer, 2011). These five conditions are defined and described below.

When there is a *common agenda* and vision for change, all involved are working toward a shared vision. Additionally, partners know how the problem is defined and have reached a shared direction in working toward a solution. Decisions are made together about the steps to take toward this solution. Using specific tools and uniform methods helps groups reach their goals. In this sense, a *shared measurement system* leads to clear alignment and accountability among efforts. Sharing data allows partners to monitor how groups engage in *mutually reinforcing activities*. Doing so ensures coordination among efforts through a clear agenda while activities remain separate in their approach and contents. The final two conditions provide the needed structural conditions to foster environments in which collective work will thrive. *Continuous communication* leads to trust among parties. It also ensures that goals are shared and all are energized about the work. Backbone support from another entity provides a separate and dedicated staff to develop and oversee progress toward goals. This support offers logistical coordination for all parties. Still, without the first four conditions, collective impact may not be realized, and change will take longer or be nonexistent.

Our analysis was also guided by the equity scorecard theory of change developed by Bensimon and Malcom (2012), which was created initially at the University of Southern California's (USC) Center for Urban Education (Harris & Bensimon, 2007) to encourage active, collaborative learning (and unlearning) focused on racial inequities. Ideally, the resulting process develops into individual and campus-wide growth and change. In sum, this theory of change posits that "when professionals who are committed to doing good become engaged in a carefully structured participatory process of inquiry into their own practices, they are more apt to accept equity as a worthy and viable goal that deserves attention" (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012, p. 5). In concert with the theory of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), the equity scorecard theory provides a clear lens for higher education scholars and practitioners to work toward consistent, intentional change and opportunities for students within transfer partnerships.

Bensimon and Malcom's (2012) equity scorecard theory is guided by five assumed conditions or suppositions: (a) "doing the good," (b) participatory process, (c) remediating practices, (d) inquiry as a change strategy, and (e) racial inequity as a problem of practice. From its first supposition, the equity scorecard assumes that professionals are committed to "doing the good." The scorecard also assumes that with the right training and knowledge, they have the capacity and the potential to become "agents of equity" (p. 3). The second supposition posits that all professionals in all

roles and at all levels are engaged in a participatory process; this includes faculty, staff, advisors, teaching assistants, and others. Bensimon and Malcom (2012) encourage partners/colleagues to meet often to identify and implement strategies to reduce or eliminate inequities.

Moving beyond participants, the institution looks inward in the third supposition to develop remediating practices that address its culture and how it has applied a deficit lens in how it views and supports students. Bensimon and Malcom (2012) posit that equity will come when the institutions create practices and structures that make it student ready rather than the other way around. Fourth, inquiry as a change strategy observes that practitioners should assume the reasons for problems are not known and that outcomes should not be prescribed without first studying the problem. The fifth and arguably most important tenet of the equity scorecard states that racial inequities should be framed as a problem of practice—with practitioners viewing themselves as agents of change.

Analysis of Transfer and Equity Research and Theory

Our review brings together existing transfer research findings, Bensimon and Malcom's (2012) equity scorecard theory of change, and Kania and Kramer's (2011) theory of collective impact. First, we identified and reviewed roughly 50 empirical studies, case studies, and policy reports specific to transfer partnerships, including a 2020 special issue of *New Directions for Community Colleges* (Bragg et al.) focused on equitable transfer partnerships and other key transfer partnership publications that may contribute to our framework (e.g., Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Handel & Williams, 2012; Taylor & Giani, 2019). Our review also included recent studies from the broader transfer literature that have sought to identify practices that can support equitable transfer outside formal transfer partnerships, including but not limited to Jain and colleague's transfer receptive culture work (Jain et al., 2011, 2016, Jain, 2020; Laanan & Jain, 2016) and research focused on the racial transfer gap (e.g., Crisp & Núñez, 2014; Crisp et al., 2020).

As shown in Figure 1, our framework identified practices needed to develop, implement, and continuously improve (Kania & Kramer, 2011) transfer partnerships that are both equitable and effective. Aligned with the theory of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), we view the process of (un)learning and improvement as ongoing, even for the most well-established transfer partnerships. Programs should take care to establish a cyclical process of evaluation and continuously emerging and evolving outcomes. As such, the arrows and flow of the steps in Figure 1 are meant to convey an ongoing process, acknowledging that transfer partnerships should continue to be refined. To begin describing our framework, we outline nine practices that our review identified as critical in designing transfer partnerships grounded in equity.

Figure 1. *Framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating equitable transfer partnership*

PRACTICES FOR DESIGNING EQUITABLE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

Designing Equitable Transfer Partnerships

Partners have institutional commitment and a common vision for equity.

Equity is an explicitly stated goal of the partnership.

Partnership staff are committed to equity.

Racial and/or other inequities are viewed as a problem of practice.

Partners assume the reasons for problems are not known.

Administrators and practitioners think outside the box in identifying partners.

Partners avoid reinventing the wheel with practices.

Partnership supports flexible pathways and address student experiences holistically.

Partnerships attend to affordability and reducing costs.

Implementing Equitable Transfer Partnerships

Partnerships should have a backbone organization for support.

Partnerships encourage broad participation.

Partners need clarity in responsibilities, and all partners are responsible for identifying and implementing equity strategies.

Partners use asset-based thinking.

Partnerships focus on remediating institutional cultures, practices, and structures to center students of color and other minoritized students.

Partnerships provide holistic transfer supports, including tailored quality and early advising support.

Partnerships provide broad and consistent access to transfer information, and promote belongingness at the receiving institution.

Offer professional development.

Effective partnerships ensure continuous communication.

Evaluating Equitable Transfer Partnerships

Promote continuous improvement through evaluation.

Harness data for transformational change.

Develop and evaluate common metrics.

Collect and use student and other constituent feedback.

1. Partners have an institutional commitment and a common vision for equity.

Chase et al. (2014) described transfer as

a matter of educational opportunity and of outcome equity, where equity invokes a standard for higher education accountability to ensure that transfer resources are used not just to provide access but also to promote equal transfer outcomes among minoritized groups. (p. 671)

When designing transfer partnerships, it is imperative that the partnership is supported by a shared commitment to transfer (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and a common vision for equity. In addition to the partnering institutions having a value commitment to transfer (Blume & Meza, 2019), the partners should also share a commitment to providing resources that will sustain the health of the partnership (e.g., dedicated transfer advisors). Moreover, the partners' shared vision of equitable transfer should be reflective of the context and values of the partnering institutions (McNair et al., 2020).

2. Equity is an explicitly stated goal of the partnership. When designing transfer partnerships, equitable transfer outcome(s) should be a shared goal among partners (Amey, 2020; Chase et al., 2014). Specifically, partners should work together to develop objective and measurable transfer goals. For instance, partners might develop a goal for equity in the proportion of students from different racial/ethnic groups who successfully transfer to the receiving institution within a specific timeframe. We also encourage partnerships to develop and assess equitable outcomes post-transfer, such as racial/ethnic equity in degree completion between direct-entry and transfer students (Bragg, 2020). Relatedly, partners may consider using USC's Equity Scorecard to organize and monitor progress in meeting equity goals (scorecard information available at <https://cue.usc.edu/tools/the-equity-scorecard/>).

3. Partnership staff are committed to equity. Drawing from Bensimon and Malcom's (2012) concept of "doing the good," when developing partnerships, efforts should be taken to recruit, hire, and retain partnership staff who are committed to equity. Although it is expected that all staff will need time to learn and develop, staff should have the potential to become agents of equity (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012.). Moreover, partnerships should strive to develop and collaborate with key transfer champions at both the sending and receiving transfer institutions (Amey, 2020; LaViolet et al., 2018). Key transfer champions may include faculty and staff who are committed to transfer students (e.g., staff who were transfer students themselves). Champions should also be able and willing to mentor and provide psychological stability to transfer students (Dowd et al., 2013).

4. Racial or other inequities are viewed as a problem of practice. Racial transfer gaps should be viewed as a problem of practice for partnering institutions. There needs to be a shared understanding among leaders, faculty, staff, and students that

transfer gaps are a product of a long and persistent history of racism in higher education. Transfer partnerships should therefore be viewed as mechanisms designed to disrupt and dismantle Whiteness and racism in higher education (McNair et al., 2020). Moreover, transfer partnership staff and transfer champions should view themselves as agents of change (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012).

5. *Partners assume the reasons for problems are not known.* Related to the last practice, when designing a transfer partnership, it is important that partners do not presume to fully understand the issues or problems contributing to transfer inequities. For instance, it is a common misconception that the majority of students transfer or do not transfer for academic reasons (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Bensimon and Malcom (2012) encouraged inquiry as a change strategy—meaning that programs should take time to understand the problem before designing solutions. We recommend that partners begin with a needs assessment that critically examines transfer policies and practices (Meza & Blume, 2020). We encourage partners to ask critical questions (e.g., How are students of color included or excluded from transfer?; Laanan & Jain, 2016). It is also important to gather data to document baseline inequities in transfer students' experiences and outcomes (LaViolet & Wyner, 2020).

6. *Administrators and practitioners think outside the box in identifying partners.* Findings from our review suggested that institutions may benefit from considering various partnership models with different types of institutions (Bers, 2013). Transfer partnerships do not have to be designed as 1:1 partnerships, for example (Soler, 2020). We recommend community colleges consider private institutions or industry partners when appropriate (Phelps & Prevost, 2012). We also encourage partners to work with institutions with similar cultures and values (e.g., a minority-serving college partnering with a baccalaureate-granting Hispanic Serving Institution) (Amey, 2020; Bragg, 2020). Equity-focused partnerships may also include universities and community colleges that are not exclusively transfer-focused. Relatedly, equity-centered partnerships should be mindful of intentionally including students who are enrolled in vocational programs, which disproportionately serve students of color (Crisp & Núñez, 2014).

7. *Partnerships avoid reinventing the wheel.* When designing transfer partnerships, we strongly recommend that partners draw from the promising practices outlined in Burack et al. (2014), such as summer programs, pre-admission advising, and transfer orientation. Partners may also design practices that draw from elements of programs that have been shown to effectively serve students of color, such as TRiO, which provides students with holistic supports (e.g., financial, health). At the same time, we encourage partners to be careful not to rely too heavily on the status quo if they want

equitable transfer, as most transfer partnerships do not produce equitable outcomes (Meza & Blume, 2020).

8. Partnerships should support flexible pathways and address student experiences holistically. When designing partnerships, we encourage partners to think outside the box by facilitating flexible pathways and supporting transfer students' experiences in a holistic way (Soler, 2020; Wetzstein, 2018). Traditional partnerships promote clearly outlined pathways (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). Equity-focused partnerships are different in that they acknowledge student swirl (e.g., simultaneously enrolling at multiple institutions) and complex enrollment and transfer patterns (e.g., reverse transfer from a university to a community college; Bontrager et al., 2005). Partners should strive to build sidewalks to better understand students' paths, including swirl (Clemetsen & Balzer, 2008). The messiness and complexity of students' transfer behaviors should align with partnership policies and practices (Crisp, 2021) by giving "credit when it's due" (Taylor, 2016), considering high school, dual credit (Bailey et al., 2017; Holod et al., 2019), and reverse transfer (Taylor & Giani, 2019) in articulation agreements.

9. Partners should give attention to affordability and reducing costs. Equity-focused transfer partnerships should be designed with explicit attention to affordability and reducing costs. Our review identified several partnership practices that can make college more affordable for transfer students, including joint admissions policies, requiring a single application fee, and adding credits at both institutions to allow for full-time financial aid status (Amey, 2020; Bontrager et al., 2005). We also encourage partnerships to align articulation agreements and degree offerings with local industry needs to allow graduates the opportunity to stay in the community post-graduation (Phelps & Prevost, 2012). Moreover, equity-minded transfer partnerships should consider developing and promoting clearly articulated degree pathways that support the local economy's job market to ensure employability of graduates (Payne et al., 2021).

PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING EQUITABLE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

Next, we outline 10 practices that our review uncovered specific to implementing equitable transfer partnerships.

1. Identify and use a backbone organization for support. Kania and Kramer's (2011) theory of collective impact recommends that partnerships have a backbone organization for support. Note that backbone support should be in addition to support provided by partner institutions. Backbone organizational support may include state coordinating boards that mandate and support transfer policies (see a review of statewide transfer policies here: <https://www.ecs.org/transfer-and-articulation-policies-db/>). Many states also have transfer councils or other formally

appointed groups that support the development of articulation agreements. Both coordinating boards and transfer groups provide natural opportunities for supporting transfer partnerships.

2. Encourage broad participation. When implementing equity-focused transfer partnerships, it is critical that multiple perspectives are included in developing the recruitment plan (e.g., admissions, advising, marketing, registration, IT; Collins et al., 2020). Moreover, students should be encouraged and incentivized to engage in various stages of the transfer partnership, including providing feedback regarding the implementation process (Amey, 2020). We also recommend that transfer partnerships include an advisory board or committee (Burack et al., 2014) that can provide critical feedback and suggestions to partnership staff.

3. Clarify responsibilities for all partners, ensuring that everyone is engaged in identifying and implementing equity strategies. Aligned with Kania and Kramer's (2011) principle of mutually reinforcing activities, partners need clarity in responsibilities (Locklear et al., 2009) and should be held accountable for their actions and outcomes. All partners should be responsible for identifying and implementing equity strategies (e.g., promoting strategically to communities of color) and leveraging resources to advance equity goals (McNair et al., 2020). Transfer should be viewed as a shared responsibility between full partners (Bahr et al., 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Wang et al., 2020). Effective transfer partnerships require trust (Crisp, 2021). We acknowledge that it takes time and can be challenging to build trust, in particular when there is unequal power between partners (Bragg, 2020; e.g., university partners typically hold the most power [Schudde et al., 2021]). However, trust is critical to implementing a transfer partnership that is able to move beyond cooperation and coordination toward collaboration and alliance (Bragg, 2020).

4. Use asset-based thinking. Equity-focused transfer partnerships use asset-based thinking (McNair et al., 2020). This includes identifying and eliminating practices and policies that perpetuate deficit-based thinking (e.g., students in vocational programs are not academically prepared to transfer). We strongly encourage transfer partnerships to use data collected in designing the partnership (e.g., needs assessment) to implement partnership practices that give focus to the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and other assets that students of color and other minoritized groups bring to both the transfer sending and receiving institutions (Jain et al., 2016).

5. Focus on remediating institutional cultures, practices, and structures to center students of color and other minoritized students. Related to the above-mentioned suggestion, our review identified several ways that partnerships can and should shake up structural norms (Schudde et al., 2021) by focusing on remediating practices

and centering students (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). It is critical that partnerships are able to break down practices at transfer sending and receiving institutions that hinder transfer progress (Clemetsen & Balzer, 2008). Transfer partnerships should not be color-blind (Meza & Blume, 2020). Rather, partnerships should center students of color and other minoritized students (Chase et al., 2014; LaViolet & Wyner, 2020; Taylor & Jain, 2017). This includes developing partnership practices that are student-centered and that support equitable transfer outcomes through equity-informed supports (Laanan & Jain, 2016).

6. Provide holistic transfer supports, including tailored support and early advising support. Our review identified a wealth of strategies for implementing equitable transfer partnerships that offer holistic supports (LaViolet et al., 2018). Partners should align and share curriculum and support service programs across partner institutions (Clemetsen, 2005). All students should have access to supports and special programs (Blaney & Barrett, 2021), such as summer projects (Phelps & Prevost, 2012) and study abroad (Hyatt, 2019). Transfer-receiving institutions should offer outreach and resources that focus on the needs of transfer students (Jain et al., 2011), including internship opportunities for transfer students in local industries (Phelps & Prevost, 2012). Additionally, implementing equitable transfer partnerships requires tailored, quality, and early advising support. Advising at community colleges should be transfer-specific (Fink & Jenkins, 2017) and comparable to advising experiences at the transfer-receiving institution (Hyatt, 2019). When necessary, partnerships may share advisors (Carlsen & Gangeness, 2020). Early advising (LaViolet et al., 2018) and early connections with faculty at the transfer-receiving institution is also encouraged (Wang et al., 2020). Moreover, partnerships should focus on helping students understand their financial aid options (Handel & Williams, 2012). Further, aligned with the practices above, we encourage partnerships to design intake and advising processes that are asset-focused (Bailey et al., 2017).

7. Provide broad and consistent access to transfer information. One of the most persistent challenges in implementing transfer partnerships is providing consistent and accessible support to students. Partnerships should take the time to learn about and implement practices and policies that can address student knowledge gaps in transfer and articulation information that are contributing to inequities (Worsham et al., 2021). Partners should be sure to share resources at each participating campus (Bontrager et al., 2005). Agreements and transfer information need to be readable and student-friendly (Schudde et al., 2019; Taylor, 2019), easy to navigate (Crisp, 2021), and digestible (Hyatt, 2019). Moreover, partnerships should help promote transparency in the transferability of courses, including helping students understand the difference between course transferability and courses applying to their selected bachelor's degree (U.S. GAO, 2017).

8. Promote belongingness at the transfer-receiving institution. When implementing transfer partnerships, findings from our review suggest that it is critical to foster a sense of belonging at the transfer-receiving institution (ideally prior to students transferring; Jain et al., 2011). Transfer partnerships can play an important role in fostering students' sense of belonging in college—in particular for students of color as well as all students in STEM fields (Blaney & Barrett, 2021). For example, transfer partnerships can support belongingness by identifying and connecting students with transfer-friendly spaces at the receiving institution (Laanan & Jain, 2016).

9. Offer professional development for faculty at community colleges to become transfer champions. Aligned with practices for designing equity-focused partnerships, offering professional development for faculty to become transfer champions is critical for success (Dowd et al., 2013). When implementing a transfer partnership, partners are encouraged to identify and build in opportunities for transfer champions to become agents of equity (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). We also encourage opportunities for faculty and staff to learn from peers at partner institutions (Blaney & Barrett, 2021).

10. Ensure continuous communication. As one might expect, our review uncovered numerous transfer studies and reports that support continuous communication as a best practice in implementing transfer partnerships. Specifically, researchers suggest building in processes for open and continuous communication (DeChano-Cook & Casey, 2020; Schudde et al., 2019), including communicating and collaborating around action items (McNair et al., 2020) or advising structures (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). Partners are also encouraged to commit to routines of collaboration (LaViolet & Wyner, 2020).

PRACTICES FOR EVALUATING EQUITABLE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

Finally, our review identified four practices specific to assessing transfer partnerships that are grounded in equity.

1. Promote continuous improvement through evaluation. Partners should work together to develop a shared measurement system (Kania & Kramer, 2011) that supports continuous improvement through evaluation (Carlsen & Gangeness, 2020). Transfer partnerships should be dynamic “living systems” that continuously evolve, change, and improve (LaViolet & Wyner, 2020; Yeh & Wetzstein, 2020).

2. Harness data for transformational change. An important element of evaluating partnerships is sharing data among partners (Wyner et al., 2016). We acknowledge that developing a culture of data sharing between partners is difficult and time-consuming work. However, tracking and sharing student data across partner

institutions is critical to identifying and tracking inequities and racial-transfer gaps (Crisp et al., 2020). Partners are encouraged to develop data-sharing agreements to be used to track students and for evaluation purposes (Taylor, 2016). When possible, we recommend data sharing agreements include transcript exchange, degree audit, tracking services, and advising information.

3. Develop and evaluate common metrics. Another critical practice in evaluating transfer partnerships is developing and evaluating common metrics and benchmarking (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Ideally, partners should develop a framework to assess transfer outcomes when the partnership is being developed (Jain et al., 2011). We also recommend that the evaluation include performance indicators for all partner institutions (Xu et al., 2018). Metrics and methods should highlight inequities in serving students (Xu et al., 2018) while focusing on the ways in which policies and practices impact student outcomes (Bragg, 2020).

4. Collect and use student and other constituent feedback. A final best practice in evaluating partnerships is to collect and use student and other constituent feedback throughout the program implementation (Carlsen & Gangeness, 2020). Partners should take the time to listen to students, learn from their experiences, and improve the partnership based on both formative and summative assessments (Clemetsen & Balzer, 2008).

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this research are expected to guide partners in identifying policies and practices that need to be changed or created to make transfer partnerships more equitable. Institutions should identify what already exists and focus on developments and improvements. It is important to acknowledge that there are many examples of successful transfer partnerships. As an additional pre-step, institutions can use Yeh and Wetzstein's (2018) typology to identify the levels of dual institutional commitment to partnerships. For example, are existing transfer structures, practices, or processes more appropriately described as mere cooperation or as collaborations or alliances? Possibly the most important takeaway from our comprehensive, equity-focused review of the literature on transfer partnerships, though, is the reality that transfer partnerships—and the equity goals essential to their effectiveness—must be explicit to be successful. Throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation phases of the partnership, all parties must be engaged. For example, although more research is needed to fully understand the effectiveness of statewide transfer policies, one possible explanation for their inability to increase transfer rates is that they sometimes do not involve specific and deep engagement between particular institutions with unique needs, resources, and student populations. Our research suggested that targeted, explicit, and deliberate

partnerships among institutions are needed to create transfer supports that meet the needs of all students.

Literature on transfer partnerships also has underscored the importance of identifying, interrogating, and adjusting the practice architectures that support both current and future transfer practices. Practice architectures, defined by Mahon et al. (2017) as the “particular cultural-discursive arrangements, economic-material arrangements, social-political arrangements that together make possible, and shape, [a] practice,” have the potential to either strengthen or weaken transfer partnerships (p. 24). The process of making a transfer partnership successful and equitable must involve demystifying the implicit arrangements on which it depends. As Kemmis et al. (2014) noted, “for a transformation of practices to be achieved and for it to be sustained, the practice architectures that hold the practice in place must also be changed” (p. 58). In the case of transfer partnerships, institutions must reckon, at a minimum, with policies, organizational structures, institutional identities, costs, communication strategies, and student support efforts to truly change the arrangements that might be making transfer unworkable for students. As institutions rebuild these practice architectures, they will gain a shared vision of the student transfer experience and how to make it more equitable. Without this shared lens, collective action and equity are not possible (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

While reckoning with the practice architectures that underpin transfer policies and practices, institutions may find that certain “best practices” actually work against equity goals. For example, a focus on vertical transfer alone may be easy to evaluate and lead to outcomes that are, on the surface, more positive. However, an equity-focused transfer partnership must question the value of “positive” results over “doing the good.” In this case, such an inquiry might involve using data to understand whether a focus on vertical transfer unintentionally privileges the transfer needs of White students or students with more financial means. Other similar practices for reevaluation include requirements that students earn associate degrees prior to transferring or the limitation of transfer partnerships to community colleges with an academic or transfer focus. Also worthy of reconsideration is the potential for partnership between non-profit and for-profit institutions, which tend to have higher numbers of students of color and other minoritized groups.

Similarly, our findings on transfer partnerships raise interesting questions for admissions and retention professionals. If institutions agree that transfer is a key indicator of educational opportunity and equity (Chase et al., 2014), they may need to find new ways of sharing resources to get students to graduation. Institutions may need to leverage their partnerships to request state-level resources for offering more cross-institutional supports for students. While higher education professionals

understand the real need to ensure financial solvency within institutions, the true success of institutions may lie in their ability to share both students and resources. Admission professionals may need to develop creative collaborations that prioritize transfer or co-enrollment and persistence over retention, and retention professionals may need to develop success metrics that involve using data from other institutions. Such arrangements disrupt practice architectures that prevent student success and sharing among institutions is a strategy for improving equitable outcomes within a community.

We conclude with key recommendations for future research. In particular, additional research is needed to evaluate the benefits institutions may reap through the development of transfer partnerships that prioritize equity. Critical participatory action research methods for evaluating partnerships, for example, could create conditions for practice partners to understand and develop their practices, speak a shared language, develop communities of practice, and transform the conduct and consequences of their practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). Additional research on transfer behaviors is also important to this work. Current national datasets make non-vertical transfer and co-enrollment behaviors of students difficult to understand, and more data specifically on the populations key to improving transfer equity is needed.

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