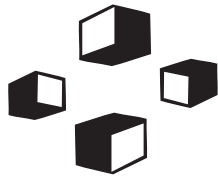


Special Report

FEBRUARY 1998

BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER



The Block Transfer Project: Update

A Special Report prepared for the B.C. Council on Admissions & Transfer by Finola Finlay, Special Advisor to the Council.

AT ITS MEETING of December 12, 1997, the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer passed two motions supporting several principles of block transfer, and initiating an implementation phase for the block trans-

fer project. (See the full text of the motions, below.) These decisions followed almost a year of intensive consultation and debate in the B.C. post-secondary system about block transfer.

Motion 1

In light of the Council's research on block transfer in B.C. and other jurisdictions, and in light of the responses, comments and recommendations received on this topic from the post-secondary system, the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer believes that our current system is working well but can be enhanced, and therefore supports and encourages the development and promotion of block transfer arrangements for arts and science programs and courses that:

[Principles]

1. optimize credit transfer opportunities for students
2. are acceptable on a voluntary basis by both sending and receiving institutions
3. supplement, but do not replace, the current system of course-by-course transfer
4. complement efforts to improve course to course transfer arrangements
5. provide greater flexibility in enabling sending institutions to develop innovative curricular approaches for their courses
6. encompass as many institutions as possible in multi-lateral or system-wide agreements
7. are clear and understandable and published in a form accessible to students and advisors.

[Initiatives]

While not excluding any particular model of block transfer, these initiatives should initially focus on one or more of the following types of activity:

1. increasing the flexibility of first and second year prerequisites and program requirements for transfer students entering receiving institutions
2. developing clearly defined sets of course requirements for particular programs to facilitate student planning
3. providing block transfer arrangements for associate degrees or other equivalent credentials
4. proposing first year transfer programs which guarantee eligibility for admission and a minimum of 30 credits at all receiving institutions in B.C.
5. exploring with the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology the implications of the learning outcomes approach to transfer arrangements.

Motion 2

That articulation committees be informed of this motion and be mandated where appropriate to undertake discussion and actions to achieve these principles and initiatives.

What is Block Transfer?

Block Transfer is the process whereby a block of credits is granted to students who have successfully completed a certificate, diploma or cluster of courses that is recognized as having an academic wholeness or integrity, and that can be related meaningfully to a degree program. Block transfer has been used for many years in the B.C. post-secondary system to facilitate the transfer of professional and applied programs. For example, graduates of a two year college forestry diploma program, designed as a terminal, employment-oriented credential, might receive little or no credit towards a forestry degree on a course-by-course basis. However, under a bilateral block transfer agreement, students from several college diploma programs who have successfully completed the credential are eligible for either one or two years of credit towards forestry degrees at provincial universities. The content of first and second year courses at the sending and receiving institutions is sufficiently different so as to preclude the establishment of equivalencies and hence the granting of credit for individual courses. Nevertheless, an assessment of the entire diploma curriculum can establish whether the graduates are likely to possess the prerequisite knowledge, skills or abilities necessary for success in upper division courses.

In arts and science, course-by-course transfer has been both necessary and functional: necessary

because students can demonstrate that they have fulfilled specific degree and program requirements through courses taken before transferring, and functional because most students transfer without a completed credential. Our transfer system has established and maintains an equilibrium based on a course-by-course model of transfer.

Analysts of our current transfer model, however, contend that this model deprives sending institutions of the flexibility they need to respond to the curricular needs of their students, as the most urgent task becomes the necessity to meet the demands of an increasing number of autonomous and diverse receiving institutions. They have also referenced anecdotal evidence that students perceive that transfer is not always straightforward, and that a number report problems with the process every year.

In response to these concerns, *Charting a New Course*, the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training strategic plan for the college and institute system, assigned to the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer the responsibility for implementing a system of block transfer which would "eliminate the time-consuming process of course-by-course institutional credit assessment." Since no clear definition of block transfer was given in the Plan and since limited information was available on this topic, Council launched an investigation into what block transfer might mean in the context of arts and science degrees in British Columbia. This research and consultation took about a year, culminating in a Block Transfer Forum on October 31, 1997. One main element in the process was the dissemination of *Block Transfer: Issues and Options* for discussion by members of the post-secondary system. Council received over 50 responses from individuals, committees and institutions to the questions posed in this paper.

Flexible Pre-Major

The pre-major is the set of first and second year courses required for acceptance into a major program at the third year level. Some pre-majors are closely planned, others are more open. For example, a major in history at University A requires 18 credits of history in first and second year, of which 9 must be chosen from specific lists. At University B the requirement is 12 credits chosen from any 100 or 200 level course.

A discipline determines that enough commonalities exist between receiving institutions to allow for a common Flexible Pre-Major Transfer Program. Such programs may include a mixture of required and optional elements, appropriate to the discipline. Sending institutions could then offer pre-major programs which a) guarantee that students are eligible to apply to enter the major at any receiving institution with no further lower level coursework and b) include optional courses based on local needs and specialties.

Descriptive Pathways

This model involves the construction of a subject or discipline grid, which outlines a) the requirements at all receiving institutions that offer a particular program, and b) the courses at all sending institutions which fulfill those requirements. Students can see at a glance all information necessary to plan a transfer program. This is a descriptive task, not one that involves agreement over curriculum, program requirements, or transfer regulations.

Detailed analysis of the results of BCCAT's consultation process is available from the BCCAT website (www.bccat.bc.ca). See *The Block Transfer Project: Consultation and Response*, on the publications menu. The original discussion paper, which explains the block transfer models in more detail, is also there.

What You Said

Several themes emerged in responses to the discussion paper and in comments generated at forums, presentations and seminars. A clear majority opinion is that course-by-course transfer will continue to be functional and essential for arts and science transfer, especially since so many students currently transfer with few significant blocks of credit. Block transfer and other transfer initiatives should

be viewed as incremental improvements to our current system, not as a radical departure.

Endorsement of the current system was not universal. Even supportive responses were frequently tempered by comments regarding the need for improvement. In some cases respondents felt simply that the current system is not serving students well. The Canadian Federation of Students' response outlined difficulties faced by "a significant number of students."

Many observations stressed the growing complexity of the system and the problems this has created for students and college faculty. For example, since the first Provincial Transfer Guide was published, the B. C. public system has expanded from 23 institutions of which four granted degrees, to 28 of which 14 now grant de-

grees. This has resulted in a shift of perspective from the majority of institutions viewing themselves as primarily sending institutions, to only half now doing so. However, most respondents who commented on the question of institutional autonomy did so in support of it, and agreed that the interests of B.C. were best served by a highly differentiated system. This diversity enables institutions to develop unique and innovative programs, and affords students optimum choice of degree opportunities. It also creates the biggest practical problem in transfer. As one college put it, "The biggest difficulty present in the current system of transfer is that in many areas the large receiving institutions do not agree on the required content of some of the courses students must take in first and second year." Issues of system and autonomy can collide when institutions construct transfer policy. Respondents are asking how we balance the two, in the interests of B.C. students.

Respondents and Forum participants referred specifically to the high value placed on the articulation process within the current transfer system, and especially on the collegial relationships and the trust that articulation committees can build when they are functioning well. Articulation committees, they insisted, must be central to any changes being contemplated in the articulation and transfer system. Resources for articulation committees to enable them to function more effectively would facilitate their involvement.

Whatever we do, said both respondents and Forum participants, must result in more flexibility for students, not less. An appropriate system of block

First Year Transfer Program

Most students transfer with fewer than 60 credits, and many use first year to establish their interests through course sampling. A First Year Transfer Program guarantees that students have met the minimum requirements for first year arts and science at all receiving institutions and will receive 30 transfer credits. An ideal first year program would provide a guide for planning course selection while still allowing some experimentation. Students would receive credit for all courses passed if each course were transferable to any major receiving institution. Such a program would have to be acceptable to all sending and receiving institutions in BC. It should not undermine the full associate degree program at colleges.

Learning Outcomes

"The learning outcomes approach means basing program and curriculum design, content and delivery on an identification of the knowledge, skills and values needed by both students and society."¹ C2T2 has the responsibility in B.C. for learning outcomes initiatives. The block transfer motion states Council's interest in "exploring with the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology the implications of the learning outcomes approach to transfer arrangements."

1. Battersby, Mark: "Outcomes-Based Education: A College Faculty Perspective" *Learning Quarterly*. B.C. Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology. Feb 1997

transfer, together with course-by-course transfer, might result in optimal flexibility. One observer synthesized the comments of others when he said, "No single system or model can accommodate all situations." All institutions were encouraged to be more flexible in their acceptance of courses, and some participants suggested that acceptance by one of UBC, SFU, UNBC or UVic be the criterion for acceptance of any course for credit at all public institutions in B.C.

Even while expressing support for improvements to transfer processes, respondents from *all* sectors told us to be careful. Pointing out some of the dangers inherent in tampering with well-established systems, they recommended caution and deliberation in considering any change, to ensure *real* improvement.

The block transfer models which had most appeal to both sending and receiving institutions were the Flexible Pre-Major Model, and the Descriptive Pathways Model. The Learning Outcomes approach was supported by many respondents as a method for improving curriculum, and was controversial as a proposed vehicle for transfer. The associate degree, although it had not originally been proposed as a model, emerged from Forum discussions as a strong candidate for block transfer. Since the vast majority of students transfer with less than two year's credit, Council also felt it was important to explore the idea of a first year transfer program.

UNBC Grants Block Transfer Credit to Associate Degree

During the course of our consultations, the University of Northern British Columbia announced that commencing in 1998/99 it will grant block transfer to the associate degree. The wording of their policy is as follows:

UNBC guarantees priority admission and full transfer credit (minimum of 60 credit hours where applicable to the program of study) to students transferring from a B.C. College with a completed Associate Degree with a minimum cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 2.0. Student must still fulfill all lower division requirements for their program not already covered in their Associate Degree.

Next Steps

After extensive deliberation, Council passed the motion highlighted on page 1 of this newsletter. In doing so Council affirmed the principles of voluntariness, flexibility and equity, and its support for the articulation processes and committees which have served this province well. While recognizing that course-by-course transfer will continue to be a main mechanism of transfer for many students, the Council's motion "encourages the development and promotion of block transfer arrangements for arts and science programs and courses" which can improve transfer for students in the B.C. post-secondary system. These options, at first, will include the Flexible Pre-Major, the Descriptive Pathways model, and the investigation of block transfer for the associate degree and for a First Year Transfer program. Additionally, there will be further exploration of the implications of a learning outcomes approach to the transfer process. Any proposed improvements or additions to transfer arrangements in B.C. must be acceptable to both sending and receiving institutions.

BCCAT is currently devising an implementation plan for the various projects that arise from the block transfer motions. Detailed information will be available in the spring. If any group, institution or articulation committee is interested in learning more about block transfer or becoming involved in Council projects, please contact us at the Council offices, or send electronic mail to ffinlay@bccat.bc.ca

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SUPPORTING BC'S
EDUCATION SYSTEM

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