

## TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS SERIES

# Transfer Partnerships: The Importance of a Culture of Collaboration



Lia Wetzstein and Theresa Ling Yeh

DATA NOTE 9 | JANUARY 2019

In [Data Note 6](#), we described a variety of institutional transfer partnership typologies (Yeh & Wetzstein, 2018), differentiating those with increasing levels of collaboration and describing aspects of their culture, policy and practices. This Data Note draws upon qualitative findings from the [High-Performing Transfer Partnerships \(HPTP\) study](#) to more fully elucidate a construct described by an interviewee as a “culture of collaboration”, which we found in partnerships that demonstrated the highest level of collaboration.

The HPTP study focuses on institutional partnerships between community colleges and baccalaureate-degree granting institutions that promote more equitable transfer outcomes for underserved student populations. The data for this brief consists of interviews with faculty, staff, and students at seven institutional pairs across three states. A more detailed explanation of the High-Performing Transfer Partnership (HPTP) study is provided in [Data Note 1](#) (Yeh, 2018).

## WHAT IS A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION?

An education partnership model conceived by Amey, Eddy, and Campbell (2010) describes the evolution of community college partnerships through three phases, and highlights what is needed to create and sustain partnerships that align with these phases. The authors discuss the theoretical construct of partnership capital that is seen “when there is networking, when shared beliefs are created . . . and when time spent working as a team results in a sense of shared norms” (p. 342). The authors argue that this form of capital creates a synergistic effect, creating something greater than what individual institutions could create on their own and helps sustain partnerships.

We found an empirical overlap between the theoretical construct of partnership capital and our findings with regard to a certain philosophy and set of practices that was present in some of the transfer partnerships we studied. Most notably, we observed congruence

between our data and Amey et al.’s (2010) focus on the development of shared beliefs, norms and networking. In particular, highly collaborative partnerships embraced beliefs that converged around a student-centered focus and viewed partnerships as a win-win for both students and institutions. In addition, the institutions developed norms that emphasized an equal commitment to the partnership and utilized a web of connections or a network of people to support the partnership. We refer to this collaborative philosophy as a “culture of collaboration”.

## COMPONENTS OF A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Components of a culture of collaboration that emerged in our qualitative research include:

- Student-centered focus
- Win-win perspective
- Equal commitment to the partnership
- Web of connections

**Student-Centered Focus.** Partnerships demonstrating a culture of collaboration shared the value of focusing on what was best for students, which transcended their individual institutions. Many saw their partnerships as essential to enable students to attain a baccalaureate degree. As one faculty member at a two-year institution describes,

I think that we work to serve a common group of students, and that we do share the value of their obtaining and earning the higher degree. We hold that as a shared value, and know that that is really best for the professions they're entering and for the students themselves.

An administrator from a receiving institution explained how they met regularly with faculty from their two-year partner institutions to adjust and align their curricula, "because we're both highly invested in student success." Another interviewee described their multiple visits to each other's partner campuses as welcome environments with open communication, attributing this relationship to the fact that, "we realize that we need to work together for the benefit of the students". These transfer partnerships prioritized a collaborative approach to promoting baccalaureate completion, and many people at these institutions spoke of the partnership as necessary to support student success.

**Win-Win Perspective.** A win-win perspective was also prevalent among partnerships demonstrating a collaborative culture, and many interviewees used the term "win-win" when talking about their transfer partners. This notion came up in a multitude of discussions ranging from space or cost-sharing arrangements to creative curricular pathway options that highlight curriculum offerings across institutions.

In particular, several people spoke about how both the students and institutions win when competitiveness is replaced with collaboration. One administrator from a four-year institution observed,

There's great benefit to the institutions to [work together], and it would be unwise for us to try to compete with [our partner] . . . They do some things that we can't offer, and likewise . . . students can progress from their excellent programs into our programs, so it's a mutually

beneficial arrangement . . . It's a positive and win-win for all parties, students and institutions.

Beyond these mutual benefits, others described their partnership as synergistic, because it created something for their students that neither institution could do on their own. Speaking to the benefits of a synergistic partnership, one administrator who is part of a unique co-branded and co-located partnership stated,

It's an investment in the students' future. It's an institutional, structural design that fosters success . . . I think it's two sister schools collaborating together – 'two can do more than one' kind of thing, so they're collaborating together to create something that they couldn't do by themselves.

These win-win situations involve sharing resources and collaborating in a way that both institutions find beneficial and often by creating something they cannot do on their own. An example of such synergistic efforts include university centers on two-year campuses that provide students with routes to baccalaureate degree completion that would otherwise not exist.

**Equal Commitment to the Partnership.** Demonstration of an equal commitment to the partnership by both institutions was an additional component of a collaborative culture that we observed. Participants described an embracing of the partnership, as evidenced by their openness to trying creative ideas with their partner, as well as their perception that both partners were equally committed to collaborating as is illustrated by this statement from a transfer partnership participant:

From what we've experienced, their faculty and staff have been so open to promoting the partnership - not necessarily just the program, but the partnership between the institutions - that it just makes for [a] conducive environment. That's helped a lot, to where . . . they're supporting it as much as we are.

Several staff and administrators used the analogy of a marriage when talking about their transfer partnerships, pointing out that a transfer partnership requires equal commitment, sustained effort, and a willingness to compromise to sustain the relationship through ups and downs. Echoing this sentiment, one administrator at a

receiving institution said,

It's like a marriage. It's like a union of two people that come together and say, "Yep, we're going to make it work." It's not just a one side, and that's where we have seen the best partnerships. Seeing that two institutions have put in all of that work and effort, and they're dedicated to it.

Like marriage, another interviewee explained that frequent and "real" communication was necessary for an equal effort:

Then, communication, so we have . . . meetings with our various partners, to go through and really talk about, "How is this going? What's going well? What's not going well? What does the future state of partnership look like?" And mutual investment comes with that.

For one institution, partnership was their strategy for growth. This meant they worked together on joint efforts including marketing, programming events, and also creating a joint staff position funded by and representing both institutions. One administrator claimed that joint staff positions are "critical to the success of the partnership overall" because these people are particularly invested in the partnership. When institutions share in the creation and cost of these positions, their equal commitment to the partnership is demonstrated clearly and tangibly.

**Web of Connections.** Many of the people we interviewed spoke to the importance of building a network or web of connections and relationships across institutions. One administrator felt that the biggest influence to transfer success was the culture of collaboration within their partnership, and the multiple people at both institutions who "will make stuff happen and can . . . push to get stuff done".

In some cases, the culture of collaboration was facilitated by faculty, staff, and former students who worked at or were alumni of both partner institutions to help create a web of connections between institutions and individuals. A result of this web was many points of contact that lead to understanding of norms and practices across institutions. Below, an administrator describes how several departments share adjunct faculty as a way to help each other:

We try to build what I like to call a web of connections between the two institutions. It's quite common for us to share part-time faculty . . . [lists several departments with shared faculty] . . . It's not just, "Okay, we did our transfer agreement, we put it online, and our work is done." It's more trying to work together.

Connections were also created, maintained and strengthened through personnel whose specific job was to facilitate partnerships. They were responsible for creating the web of connections and facilitating the partnerships, and they often did so by creating lines of communication to enable greater collaboration. As this interviewee describes,

We have partnership meetings every semester where leadership deans, our administration and deans, and then my [partnership] role and my counterpart actually come together. I think that has also helped define that this is a collaborative move.

This administrator went on to describe how the partnership works toward common goals versus dividing up tasks for each institution to accomplish. This web of connections serves to build a network of bridges between institutions so that students can navigate between the institutions successfully. This web also creates a shared focus that strengthens, sustains, and grows engagement in the transfer partnership over time.

## CONCLUSION

Partnerships between sending and receiving institutions can be enacted in a multitude of ways. This Data Note highlights a culture of collaboration that we found in institutional pairs that exhibit high levels of collaboration that is consistent with the notion of an alliance (see Yeh & Wetzstein, 2018). Amey et al. (2010) described partnership capital as an important factor in sustaining educational partnerships, and this construct aligns with the collaborative culture of transfer partnerships that we observed in our findings. The presence of this culture seems to promote mutual commitment to the other partner in understanding their complexities and capacities to work together, contributing to a synergistic relationship. Understanding what makes for a collaborative culture

between institutions engaged in transfer partnerships is important, as these collaborations provide students with access to resources and opportunities for baccalaureate completion that may not otherwise exist. Providing more opportunities and resources for baccalaureate degree attainment is especially important for students historically and currently underserved by higher education.

## REFERENCES

**Amey, M.J., Eddy, P.L., & Campbell, T.G. (2010).** Crossing boundaries, creating community college partnerships to promote educational transitions. *Community College Review*, 37(4), 333-347.

**Yeh, T. L. (2018, January).** *Introduction to the high-performing transfer partnerships study* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 1). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Yeh, T. L. & Wetzstein, L. (2018, December).** *Recognizing variation: A typology of transfer partnerships* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 6). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

### TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS DATA NOTES

**Yeh, T. L. (2018, January).** *Introduction to the high-performing transfer partnerships study* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 1). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Meza, E. A., Bragg, D. D., & Blume, G. (2018, February).** *Including racial equity as an outcome measure in transfer research* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 2). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Soler, M. C., Meza, E. A., & Bragg, D. D. (2018, March).** *Initial research on multi-institutional attendance patterns and racial equity* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 3). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Wetzstein, L. (2018, June).** *High-performing transfer partnerships and promising practices* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 4). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Yeh, T. L. (2018, August).** *State policy and its impact on collaboration to promote transfer in Minnesota* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 5). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Yeh, T. L. & Wetzstein, L. (2018, December).** *Recognizing variation: A typology of transfer partnerships* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 6). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Soler, M. C. & Meza, E. A. (2018, December).** *Exploring characteristics of students who demonstrate multi-institutional attendance patterns (MIAP) in two states* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 7). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Yeh, T. L. & Wetzstein, L. (2019, January).** *The dynamic nature of transfer partnerships: Catalysts and barriers to collaboration* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 8). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.

**Review the Transfer Partnerships Data Note series at:** <http://www.uw.edu/ccri/research/transfer/>

**Acknowledgment:** *Credit When It's Due (CWID) research is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant (OPP1136274) to the University of Washington Foundation and the Community College Research Initiatives at University of Washington. This work is licensed to the public under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license (see [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org)), which governs the Terms of Use. You are free to copy, display, and distribute this work, or include the content in derivative works, under condition that the work is fully and properly attributed to the authors and to the Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.*

**About the authors:** Lia Wetzstein is a Research Scientist at CCRI whose wide-ranging research interests revolve around education equity. Theresa Ling Yeh is a Research Scientist at CCRI whose research focuses primarily on educational access, engagement, and persistence across the K-16 pipeline.

Follow us on Twitter @CCRI\_UW and LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ccri-uw/>

**Suggested citation:** Wetzstein, L. & Yeh, T. L. (2019, January). *Transfer partnerships: The importance of a culture of collaboration* (Transfer Partnerships Series, Data Note 9). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.