ENVIRONICS RESEARCH GROUP

FINAL REPORT

Learner Progression
Best Practices Research Report

Prepared for:
ACAT Secretariat
Alberta Advanced Education and Technology

February 2010

ENVIRONICS
RESEARCH GROUP

STORMY LAKE

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INTRODUCTION

The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) has identified a need in Alberta for further focus on developing and enhancing progression opportunities for learners so that they can more easily ladder their education and careers. While there is agreement that progression opportunities benefit the learner, greater understanding of what it takes to create such agreements and what steps an institution may need to take if they are exploring this as an option would be an asset to all institutions. This Best Practices Research Project was commissioned to provide information of this type.

Project Objective

To conduct a disciplined, well-grounded and in-depth best practices study of learner progression practices in Alberta.

Background

Our work builds on an ACAT sponsored best practice study of Transfer Review in 2005. That report identified the following eight core areas of best practice.

The best practices in leadership stressed the need for strong support from the senior administration of both the provincial government and the post-secondary institutions. This leadership articulates the vision for the system and manages the central tools such as the Contact Person Website.

1. Operational leadership is required from the Contact Persons which necessitates careful selection, empowerment and resourcing of the position. The position also needs to be strategically placed within institutional structures and processes in order to fulfil the required tasks.

2. Processes of program development and how transfer consideration fit into that process. Best practice institutions included transfer consideration very early in the process and included the Contact Person in the process. They also did not inundate the system with low value transfer agreements.

3. Processing of a transfer agreement proposal once it is received at an institution, and how it flowed between the Contact Person and the subject matter expert making the determination on transfer. Best practice institutions provided clear instructions to the subject matter experts on the process, tracked the process, established performance expectations of the process and explored all transfer alternatives.

4. Maintenance of transfer agreements. Best practice institutions considered transfer implications early in the curriculum change process, gave timely notice of changes to their trading partners and monitored student performance to ensure transfer credit was appropriate.

5. Communication surrounding transfer agreements. Best practice institutions used the Contact Person Website effectively for standard communication and contacted their trading partners through the Contact Person regarding nonstandard issues.

6. Institutions and program areas which were new to the transfer system. Best practice institutions researched which institutions would be the most appropriate trading partners, and engaged in a relationship building process with these potential partners.

7. Communication of transfer agreements to students. Best practice institutions had close communication, through a variety of means, between the staff managing the transfer agreement processes and those advising with students.

Many of these practices are still relevant today, and where our research overlaps them, we have attempted to move to a deeper level of understanding by providing case study examples of how the practices are implemented at best practice institutions.

Approach and Methods

This project was undertaken in three main steps:

- Background Research
- In-depth Case Study Research
- Consultation with Learners

At Step 1, a thorough review of available research and information within ACAT was undertaken along with on-line review of relevant research studies. A preliminary review of current learner progression programs within Alberta was also undertaken as a foundation for the case studies that followed.

This step also included a review of the results of the survey of post-secondary institutions as well as an informal email survey conducted to identify post-secondary institutions in Alberta that demonstrate the best practices identified through the review of literature.

The input gathered through that survey was used to select best practice institutions for the next phases of our study. In addition to this peer assessment process, the selection of institutions was also based on geographic representation around the province, as well as providing coverage by size of institutions, and across the post-secondary sectors.

Representatives of selected best practice institutions were invited to share their ideas and expertise in follow-up discussions – five institutions were selected for individual in-depth interviews, while representatives of another three institutions were invited and participated in a group discussion.

At step 1, six categories of best practice were identified, and these were used as a framework for the subsequent research.

1. Strong leadership and administrative procedures. For example:

- Institution-wide support for the principle of articulation, from leadership through administration to academic experts.
- Adequate resourcing of the administrative function to co-ordinate and track the processing of agreements.
- Provide training and support within institutions to ensure consistency and efficiency.

2. Early planning for transfer:

- Transfer considerations built into the early development of new courses and other business planning.

3. Sending institutions provide well-prepared and useful articulation requests.

4. High level of trust and strong personal relationships. For example:

- Institutions build and support the trust on which articulation agreements depend.
- Develop personal relationships between individuals in sending and receiving institutions.
- Have clear goals for both institutions in the process.

5. Puts students' interests first
   - Clear student-centric philosophy
   - Communicate transfer processes to students, and provide student support.

6. Good maintenance of transfer agreements. For example:
   - Systems and processes are established to maintain the integrity of transfer agreements as courses change.
   - Periodically evaluate the usefulness of an articulation agreement.

The Step 2 primary research began with a series of in-depth, one-on-one telephone interviews with key stakeholders from the selected institutions, and a review of the learner progression programs at these institutions.

We interviewed two or three stakeholders at each of the five selected institutions from among the registrars' office, an administration executive, and/or academic leader. Initial contacts were made through the ACAT contact persons and/or email survey participants and we then requested direction to the most appropriate individuals for the interviews.

Following the in-depth interviews, we organized two group discussions in Edmonton: one with institutional representatives and the second with students. Conducting the discussion groups after the in-depth interviews enabled us to select the most interesting and relevant questions for the group discussions.

Additional input on the student perspective was obtained during our visit to the SAIT Transfer Options Fair where we interacted and asked questions of students and institutional representatives.

This report begins with an overview of the transfer system context and a discussion of how the perspectives of key players in the system differ. This includes a discussion of the terminology used to describe different types of transfers and a consideration of the extent to which there is a system-wide commitment to block transfers.

Following this context, best practices are presented, and these have been organized by the six broad categories of best practice uncovered in the literature review. Readers are encouraged to think about their own institutions as they review the transfer program best practices presented in this report.

The report closes with the some strategic implications and recommendations from the research.

A note on the presentation of case studies and verbatim quotes. Throughout this report, specific case studies have been prepared. These are brief descriptions of what, in the report writers' opinion, represent best practices. These case studies identify the specific institution, and have been reviewed by that institution. The presentation style for verbatim quotes is illustrated below:

> Elsewhere in the report, verbatim quotes from interviews are presented in blue italic text. These are drawn from the in-depth, one-on-one interviews. The institution is not identified.

WHAT KIND OF EMPHASIS ON BLOCK TRANSFER IS APPROPRIATE?

Evaluating best practices in block transfer and laddering benefits from an understanding of the broad context. Elements of that context are presented in this section and the next.

A core issue that emerged through this in-depth research is the extent to which block transfer is an appropriate and constructive area of emphasis in the post-secondary system. This issue has two key facets: (1) block transfer is a generic term used to describe two distinct kinds of transfer; and (2) there appears to be less of a commitment to one of these kinds of block transfer than to the other.

Clearly Defining Block Transfer and other articulation terms

There is a lack of clarity in the post-secondary system about the specific meaning of various types of transfer. The same words would be used, but what was meant by those same words would be different. A critical first step would be for ACAT to develop a common understanding of the meaning of specific terms.

Some of the terminology issues encountered during the course of this study are as follows:

Course-by-course transfer is clearly and consistently understood.

For some institutions, **laddering** is considered to be the progression from certificate to diploma to degree, *within the same institution*. For others, laddering is any transition from one credential to another – at one or more institutions.

Bridging has (at least) two different definitions.

1. It can be used to describe the situation when a student completes course work at a separate institution while pursuing a degree at their primary institution. (i.e. completing two course credits at Athabasca University while attending U of L).
2. Bridging also describes when a student completes a prescribed course of studies at an institution in order to transfer into a specific program. In BC, the Civil Engineering Bridge program, offered by Camosun with the full support and co-operation of the University of British Columbia (UBC), provides access to the third year of Civil Engineering for Civil Engineering Technologists graduates.

Block Transfer also appears to mean two different things:

1. Sometimes it refers to the transfer of an outcome of learning, such that certificate or diploma or a specified period of studies allows a student to transfer fully and completely into the last two years of a program. This type of block transfer might be described as a **2+2 block transfer**. Some participants described these as block agreements with natural ladders, such as accounting diplomas into business degrees, or the common first 2-years of a biological sciences program.
2. Another common usage of block transfer, however, is for agreements that transfer a block of unspecific credits, and not necessarily a block of pre-requisites. These agreements are called block transfer, but are usually managed as course-by-course transfer. They are, in fact, at least as much work to manage as course-by-course transfer, and many players in the ACAT system question the value of these transfers. This type of block transfer might be described as **unspecified block transfer**.

There is still a degree of education that needs to take place with our programs related to what a block transfer means. There are some programs that unpack the blocks to meet their needs. A block transfer is meant to be a block of credit with that idea of not unpacking the block, but of being a cumulative group of learning. This unpacking is a challenge to getting more and more receiving agreements in place.

I think laddering is a big plus at all levels of the education system, going from college to university, undergrad to grad, from different levels in the graduate level. They are talking about laddering throughout the system. I think block is a limitation. It is nice to say to a student, if you are in biological science, and if you know you are going to do nothing else, this will work with you. But if you don't know what you are going to do, block limits their options. Laddering makes perfect sense, but I am not quite as clear about block transfer. Course by course is easier to understand. I have no idea why block is so appealing.

Note, the current definition of block transfer allows for both of the above interpretations:

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 or other credential.

And they [ACAT] could facilitate the discussion between institutions as to what are the specific principles we are looking for when it comes to block agreements. Block agreements are usually based on completed credentials of a certificate or diploma. Having a common commitment and understanding that it is based on learning outcomes and skills that a student has obtained at the completion of diploma. This is what the student can do and this is what the *learning outcomes are. It is the cumulative learning that is important, and not just does this individual course transfer to us as a baccalaureate level course. It is that broader intent.*

We believe the ACAT system would greatly benefit from clearly and consistently differentiating between the different kinds of block transfer, and having clarity around the meaning of various terms used in articulation and transfer. BCCAT has published *Principles & Guidelines for Transfer*, June 2003, and this is an excellent starting point for this discussion.

Commitment to block transfer

Across all institutions that were interviewed, commitment to transfer is strong and student-centric. But commitment to *block* transfer may not be as strong.

To be honest I would push them to move away from block transfer. The problem with curriculum creep within blocks of courses is worse than with individual courses. A block agreement works better if there is an understanding as to how the courses between the institutions fit together as well. Students often transfer without the complete block. They may have taken a slightly different version, or been exempted in the originating program. When they arrive, they may have some issues getting transfer credit. Then you have to fall back on something. If you already understand how the individual courses connect, then you can get a better answer. In the end you always end up doing course-by course transfer. Do they have the right prerequisites? Or how exactly does the two years of credit fit into your larger program requirement? We have a number of general education requirements. Knowing exactly what courses fit in is required for each student. Even in a block transfer we look at the student course-by-course anyway.

It is important to be clear with the student that two years of transfer does not mean that a four year degree will only take two more years. Because if we look at our degree, you can have 60 credits and they are all transferable, but you still need to meet the requirements of the specific program, and it might take more than 60 credits. And if they are clear on that when they start, they are a lot less frustrated, than they get part way through their degree and realize they won't get it done in two years. It comes down to showing them what they have left. Which is either done by me or an advisor.

We don't have any block – we only have course by course. We don't find block all that useful. All you are telling people is they have two years of credits, you aren't telling them what they have…. It is difficult to transfer in with two years and make it difficult to only have two years left.

Block transfer agreements just say 60 credits, but they don't guarantee any more than that. They don't guarantee you only have 60 credits, left. I don't think they can. We just call them transfer credits. And we look at them as course-by-course.

Block transfer offers the benefit of being a simpler concept to communicate, even if the actual articulation is later considered course-by-course.

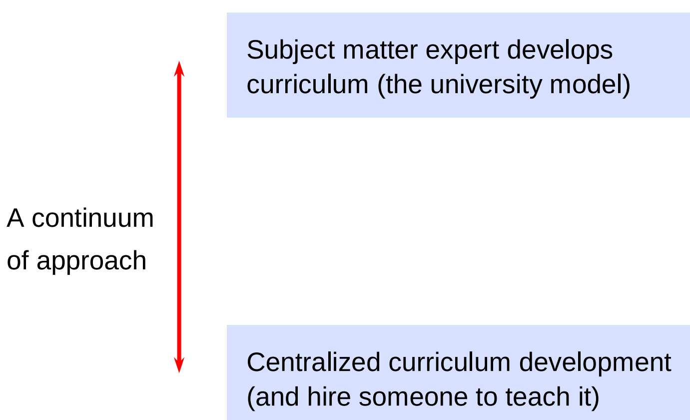
> *People like block transfers. It seems easy up front and easy to communicate to students. But it does not reflect the reality of most degree programs. The fundamental issue is ensuring students have the right prerequisites to be successful in the courses in years 3 and 4.*

Some institutions, particularly the smaller ones, have difficulty aligning their calendar with a smooth 2+2 block transfer process:

> *The way we do it, we do want the students to have what our program requires. That is how the programs were approved when we got accreditation, and we don't want to mess with that too much. And we are a small institution, and our courses are cycled. They are not offered every year. So getting your requirements in can be difficult in just two years, if in your first 60 credits you are missing a prerequisite.*

Distinct views of curriculum

It has been proposed that a key factor underlying various institutional perspectives on transfer is the institutions' approaches to curriculum.



The importance of this distinction is in how courses are evaluated for transfer. In the "university" model, course evaluation is very individual, and involves review of specific course outlines, instructor credentials and the like. In the centralized model, what is to be taught is standardized and controls are imposed – in order to minimize the variation from class to class and instructor to instructor.

One issue is that institutions do not necessarily consider their own approach to curriculum development and how that might align or differ from the approach of a sending or receiving institution. This lack of understanding appears to underlie many of the issues and frustrations in the evaluation of transfer agreements.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT PERSECTIVES OF TRANSFER

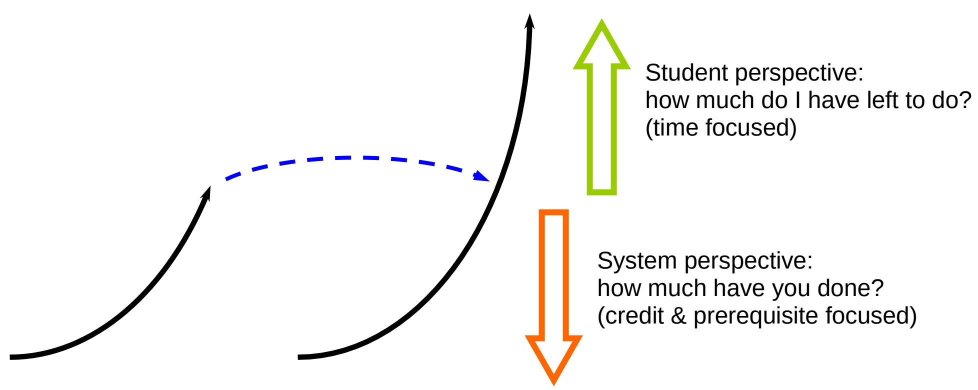
There are two very different perspectives on the transfer system, one from administration and one from students. The following section outlines three key areas where there is a significantly different perspective between students and the "transfer system."

Perspectives

Students and the "transfer system" look at transfer from a different perspective.

Block transfer looks at giving credit for what students have done – it looks from the start of the student journey. This is a very credential- and prerequisite-focused approach.

Students look at how much more they need to do to finish. This is a very goal- and time-focused perspective.



The student and the system perspectives, don't always add up. For example, if a student receives a 60-credit block transfer, they often assume this means they only need two more years to complete. In reality, they may still not have the required pre-requisites to complete their credential in two more years.

While there are specific post-diploma programs that meet these types of expectations, many transfer agreements do not.

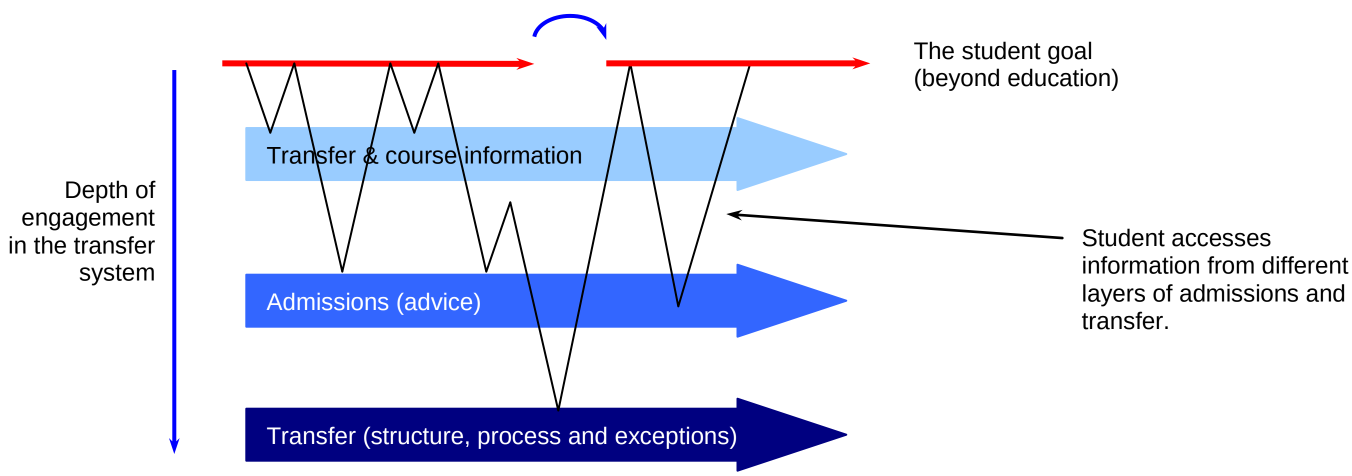
This difference in perspective is one of the reasons that students expectations for transfer may not align with their experiences during and after transfer.

Student layers of engagement in the transfer system

Students often view education as a journey to an ultimate destination beyond their education, such as a job or a career. When reaching their goal means transferring from one institution to another, students require information about transfer processes and requirements – information from the system.

At different points in the education journey, students dip into admissions and transfer systems to different levels. From the student's perspective, the first level of depth is the information layer where they gather course and transfer information. If this is not sufficient, they will seek advice, usually from admissions. If their need and/or issue cannot be resolved through admissions, then students will reach the transfer layer of the system (structure, process, exceptions).

Students are not necessarily clear on what is a transfer issue, versus what is an admissions issue.



A key challenge is that students often do not know where to access the transfer and course information they need, they do not find the answers they were looking for, or they are otherwise left unsatisfied. As a result, students are reported to rely on what others tell them, but these "others" are often other students, who may or may not fully understand the system and its requirements.

Institutions can minimize the students' knowledge gap by ensuring that transfer information is clearly communicated, and transfer expectations are clearly managed, at the information and admissions levels of the system.

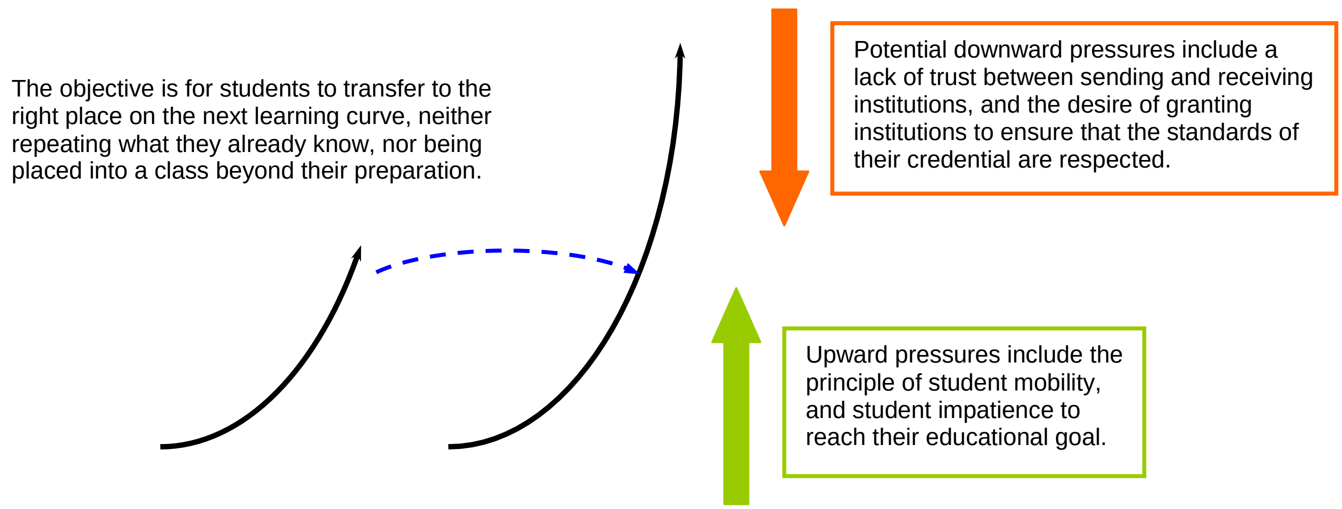
The core principle of articulation and transfer

ACAT offers a vision for articulation and transfer in its statements of principles of the transfer system:

> **Student access to higher education and the opportunity for student mobility among institutions of higher education in Alberta shall be optimized.**
>
> Barriers to student mobility shall be minimized. The integrity of educational programs and certification must, however, be maintained. A student should not be required to repeat previous learning experiences in which competence has been demonstrated nor should more transfer credit be granted than previous learning experiences would warrant for successful completion of the program.

Within this vision, there are two competing pressures that help drive how many credits, and what specific credits, a student is granted at a receiving institution. In trying to understand the transfer system, we found that a "learning curve" image gave us the greatest clarity.

Learning curve model:



While most institutions appear to understand this vision of transfer, few explicitly communicate it to students. We suspect that students are not clear on this objective of trying to transfer to the right place on the next learning curve.

Clearly communicating this overarching transfer principle will help to manage student expectations.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practices have been organized according to the six categories of best practices in transfer and articulation outlined on page 3 above.

Short quotes from participants are used to highlight best practices that are fairly widely shared. Eight specific best practices are highlighted through short-stories. These eight practices contribute significantly to the block transfer and articulation processes at their respective institutions.

The Human Process

As is stressed many times in this report, at its core transfer and articulation is a *human* process. The vast majority of systems and processes are people processes.

And the people involved in articulation and transfer are uniformly passionate, dedicated and committed to the success of students, and success of the transfer system.

As much as possible, the best practices in this report are not about the people, but about the system and processes that enable the people in the transfer and articulation system to succeed.

STRONG LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

Best Practice: Institution-wide support for the principle of articulation, from leadership through administration to academic experts.

Every institution included in this study appears to have strong support for articulation, although, as noted below, this broad support has yet to overcome all of the opposition to transfers. In fact, even within some institutions there are debates over the nature of block transfer.

> *We don't believe that students should have to repeat learning. That commitment goes far enough that even if it is not exactly what we study in our course, if you have covered the general area it is not fair to student to make that repeat their learning. It is driven by student needs.*

> *Having the support of the senior administration, if I am not getting response of faculty, I know it is important to the school so I can put pressure on or ask someone higher up. That is important for me. If there wasn't that kind of support it would be harder to get that sort of thing done.*

> *… Commitment at the top and throughout for the most part. There is some lack of understanding o f the process and the terminology.*

> *At our institution articulation is an element of its strategic plan and it is built into the annual performance reviews of Deans and Academic Chairs.*

> *There is an ongoing debate about the nature of block transfer… High level support is in place, but some others are less accepting…*

This broad support is slightly tempered by the issues raised on pages 9 through 11 above. Also of relevance to this area is the Grant MacEwan University best practice about research and communication of transfer student successes presented on page 31 of this report.

A strong example of a deliberate approach to using principles to guide transfer processes is outlined below:

Clear Institutional Principles surrounding transfer

Grant MacEwan University

To date, Grant MacEwan University has been primarily a sending institution. As MacEwan now grants degrees and has had a name change to 'university', it is a receiving institution as well.

Over the last three years, MacEwan University has undertaken very pointed discussions with faculty and leadership about transfer – what is it, what is required for it, what is working and what isn't, and how to move forward.

One important issue for MacEwan is to ensure that transfer students were from recognized institutions since the transfer credit would also become part of their degree here. Other key questions are related to the review of the course work itself - what kinds of courses? What is the nature of the content and learning outcomes? What would be the strategy for assigning specified versus unspecified credit?

The discussions at MacEwan were intended to develop a uniform understanding of what transfer credit is and what it would mean to the institution. This understanding were built around the core principles of best practices in transfer, as documented by Gordon Preston and published by ACAT.

It is understood within MacEwan that agreements are a part of MacEwan's investment. MacEwan endeavors to be a supportive partner to sending institutions and the transfer principles are part of the bigger picture perspective of Alberta's post-secondary system.

Part of this investment is in an internal and central information system, GRIFFIN, to augment the ACAT on-line system. "Transfer updates are constant and this makes business intelligence around transfer difficult. If MacEwan can do information well, MacEwan can understand transfer better, and then apply that understanding to improve process and outcomes. This is especially critical in times of change, including the move to a new student information system."

Best Practice: Adequate resourcing of the administrative function to co-ordinate and track the processing of agreements.

This is a critical success factor for high-performing transfer and articulation processes. It has been implemented a few different ways across different institutions. Sometimes the articulation coordinator is in an academic role, other times part of the registrar's office. Both work, provided that the coordinator has the time, resources and institutional commitment.

> *It was hiring a transfer articulation coordinator that has made the biggest difference. Prior to that the focus wasn't only on articulation. Now they are focused just on transfer agreements and are in a position to understand curriculum development and the university system, and to make the contacts out there. To make an application, and to pull the information together. Making someone just focused on that element alone.*

> *In terms of our internal processes, one of the best things we did was create a position where the responsibility of managing the process and reviewing and shepherding them through the experts and the building, we created a position for that in the middle 90's, and that really helps for us to have someone who has not 100%, but a large chunk of her job dedicated to that process. The other thing I did was, in our on-line course descriptions we have direct links to the ACAT database, not only how our course is received elsewhere, but how courses elsewhere link to our course. Students can readily find the information they need. That was a simple thing to do, but our students expressed appreciation.*

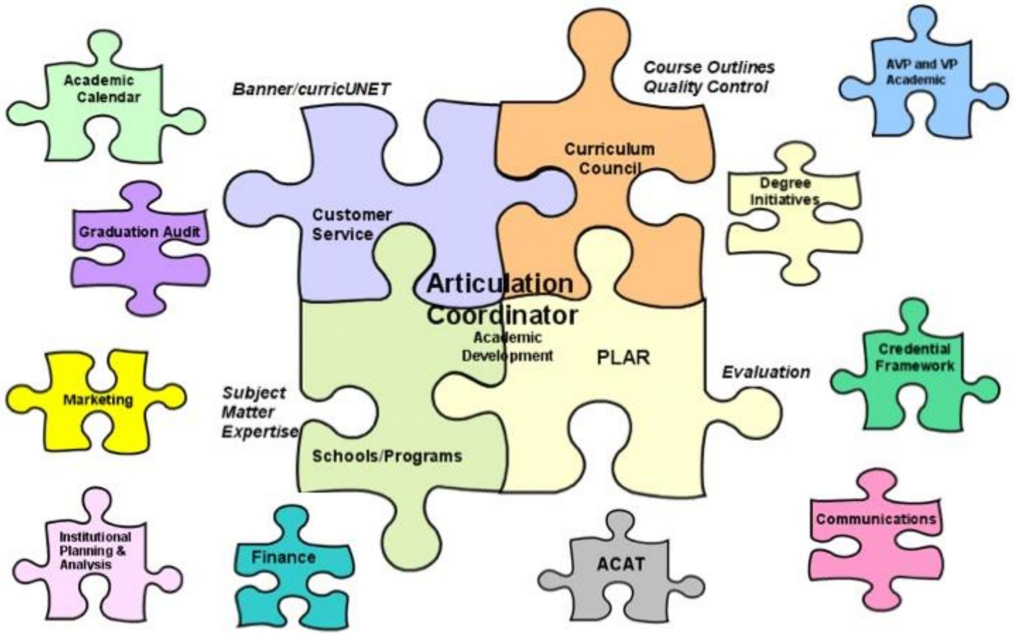
> *Our calendar editor works right in the office, and it is easy to get all of the information I need regarding curriculum change…. They know what I am looking for and how to get it to me.*

Appropriate resourcing to manage the volume of transfer agreement requests was mentioned as a challenge by representatives of several institutions throughout our research.

> *An obstacle is the time to do the legwork and make connections. We could use more dedicated staff (in student services) to help facilitate agreements, scope out requests, look at our courses and see what could be transferred, facilitate and speed up articulation requests.*

> *Institutions need to allocate the resources to do the work – on the ACAT site and in general. ACAT needs to have the ability to censure, if for example, an institution doesn't go on the system regularly, or sends frivolous requests – call the non-team players to account.*

SAIT has taken an interesting approach to having articulation managed through the VP Academic rather than through the Registrar's office. The role of the core position at SAIT is depicted in the following diagram:



Placement, Level, Expertise of Transfer Coordinator.
SAIT Polytechnic

SAIT's Articulation Coordinator negotiates transfer agreements between SAIT and other post-secondary institutions. The Coordinator is heavily involved in monitoring curriculum quality and is consulted about curriculum changes in order to ensure that transfer agreements are not violated.

This emphasis on curriculum is due to the belief that "curriculum is currency," in relation to post-secondary transfers, and "if curriculum is not up to a high standard then the institution has nothing to trade."

The job description and position of the SAIT Articulation Coordinator represent a best practice in that the position requires an incumbent who is knowledgeable about curriculum (what is being taught and what affects that) and understands how curriculum changes can affect transfer agreements. Knowledge about post-secondary education practices is also a significant asset.

The position of SAIT's Articulation Coordinator – reporting to the Associate Vice President, Academic Development – permits the incumbent to gather ideas from the academic units and then do the work to turn those into transfer agreements. The Articulation Coordinator gathers information from and shares information with different departments, service units and councils within the institution related to curriculum, transfer agreements and program development and change.

This positioning also establishes the Articulation Coordinator as a stakeholder in the curriculum change process at SAIT. As such, the Coordinator is able to consider the impact of curriculum changes for articulation agreements and to revise and/or renegotiate agreements as necessary.

A related best practice is that a second administrative position is in place at SAIT to handle the course-by-course requests and the associated paper work and data management. This is important because keeping up with this aspect of the transfer agreement process is key to keeping the system running smoothly.

Best Practice: Providing training and support within institutions to ensure consistency and efficiency.

While training and support may be offered in many institutions, it did not get described as a best practice leading to stronger outcomes.

Rather, the best practice that emerged – as described by the subject-matter experts – is more a matter of what is the institutional background and skills of the individuals assigned to be the subject-matter experts:

> *Interestingly enough, this is a job people normally give new professors and they should not. The fact I have been here 25 years is very useful. Because I not only know what we used to teach as well as what we now teach, I also know from experience where else courses might fit. We have stats and methods course, psych 2320, many students will come asking for transfer credit who have stats course. Well that is only half of our course. But there is a statistics course which I think the math and computer science teach, which is a prerequisite for a lot of stuff in management, so someone who wants a statistics course will get that instead.*

This issue connects quite deeply to the motivation of subject-matter experts to pay timely attention to transfer requests. Two findings emerged: the importance of relationships within the institution, and having a limited set of individual evaluators (rather than committees):

> *It humanizes the process and I don't think you can be in this business and not humanize it, otherwise it is detrimental to the process. You have to recognize the human element. And evaluators do it off the corner of their desk. You need that relationship for them to do that.*

> *I like working better with individual professors. It is more efficient, there is an immediacy to communicate what each other needs. I don't think we lose anything by not having a committee. I don't think one group takes that job any more or less seriously. They don't want to disservice a student. They want to set up the student for success.*

Ultimately, a strong alignment of the core principles of articulation and transfer with the individual core values of the subject matter experts is a tremendous asset:

> *I suppose doing the transfer credit is part of my philosophy of getting what they deserve, but also getting the best education we can give them.*

EARLY PLANNING FOR TRANSFER

Best Practice: Transfer considerations built into the early development of new courses and other business planning.

Many institutions felt this was an area that could be improved, but a few were being engaged early in the course development process.

A best practice example is provided by Keyano College:

Designing Courses Specifically for Transfer

Keyano College

Keyano College has established a number of courses and programs of study that are specifically designed to match the requirements of one or more partner (receiving) institution(s). In fact, this practice has been in place for approximately 25 years.

Keyano faculty reach out to their counterparts in the primary intended receiving institutions in order to discuss options and gather information on the requirements for entry to programs. They then design courses or programs specifically intended for transfer.

This process facilitates the completion of transfer agreements since the discussions have taken place prior to the proposal being submitted. Through dialogue, the sender and receiver "get on the same page" before the paper work begins.

This same personal and proactive approach is utilized in relation to maintaining agreements, as contacts are made on a regular basis to enquire about course changes that may impact the transfer agreements.

WELL-PREPARED AND USEFUL ARTICULATION REQUESTS

Best Practice: Sending institutions are well prepared before sending articulation requests.

This is another area where many institutions report strong practices.

> *I think we have a really consistent process for courses we propose, even just the information we include is consistent. Down to instructor qualifications. If you trust that you know every time it will be the same. And then from our side, from an assessment side, it is trying to be quick with our evaluations of other people's courses, and clear if we deny about why and being open to reevaluating. Then just open communication. Just contact another school and find out why. That has worked for us.*

> *Communications and relationships are key… you have to be able to get on the phone and have a conversation. We don't like surprises (when requests are sent without pre-consultation). Pre-documentation negotiations are a best practice.*

Keyano College has gone a step further in developing forms and templates to ensure consistency of information:

Transfer Agreement Information Templates

Keyano College has created templates to gather the required course or program information before a transfer agreement request is made (these forms are appended to this report).

The requesting department is required to fill out the form in sufficient detail that the transfer credit proposal can be completed. The templates create a situation in which requesting departments know what information they need to provide and the template format ensures that the necessary information is available when the proposal is entered into the system.

Keyano has been consistently using these forms with all departments for one and one half years. The forms rarely require revision by the sending departments, and this procedure is reported to have reduced the time to establish a typical agreement, from months to weeks.

A suggested improvement is to add a requirement for departments to provide updates, in the template, once a course change has been approved.

HIGH LEVEL OF TRUST AND STRONG PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Best Practice: Institutions build and support the trust on which articulation agreements depend.

Trust is pretty good overall, but still challenged in some areas. This trust issue may be related to the various institutional approaches to curriculum, as outlined on page 8 above.

We try very hard to comply with the requirements. There is a bit of debate – one institution has been asking for the content of PhD thesis, and that is what they have been asking for in specific departments. There is a dialogue as to whether I should send that or not. I try to give it the best case I can, they are concerned the person teaching the course have an appropriate background for that course. Except there is certain level of trust that needs to appear in the system. They need to trust that when we appoint a person that our processes have enough integrity to appoint an appropriate person. That is the trust that is lacking. They don't trust we will do it in the generic, they want the specific.

Universities don't want to be senders – drives them crazy when their students go to colleges or technical Institutions – "lower institutions."

We maintain open dialogue – there are many institutions that we deal with on a regular basis, so its an easy flow… informal communications help the process along.

Best Practice: Develop personal relationships between individuals in sending and receiving institutions.

The evidence suggests that personal relationships are an important part of the Alberta transfer system and that this is indeed helpful in making the system work.

Informal relationships foster trust and comfort. Continuity of the personnel is key.

We reach out to other institutions and talk about their requirements and what students need to enter their programs. Relationships and getting on the same page before the paper work stage.

PUTTING STUDENTS' INTERESTS FIRST

The principle of being student-centred is broadly supported across all institutions that were interviewed for this report.

Best Practice: Communicate transfer processes to students.

At some institution and in some programs, informing students about transfer programs is a regular part of the interaction between students and the institution.

> *Transfer is considered at the time of registration… There are also sessions where student services representatives from other schools come and set up booths. Advisors for specific programs will come and speak to our students about what they need to do in order to transfer…*

In other cases, however, transfer system information appears to be something of a challenge.

> *The biggest problem in Alberta is not that the system exists, but that students do not have enough information to take advantage and plan their academic lives around what does exist….*

> *Students are not as aware of the transfer process as the institutions are.*

> *A remodeled ACAT website could help.*

> *Students are very reliant on what others tell them – advisors, instructors, chairs… they don't always (often) look things up themselves… Lots of information is available but its not user friendly.*

> *The real question is if they have transferred, did they know before, had they done the research to know what their transfer credit would be. Do students have the information I think they need before they apply and transfer? We often end up backpedaling. They really have no idea, until we have done their transfer credit assessment. When we actually review their transcripts and apply it to another program.*

A key information gateway to students is an institution's admissions site. This is where students first go to look to see what they need to do to enroll. This is the location where it would be best to clarify students' transfer expectations.

A best practice is demonstrated by SAIT is in the area of communications and outreach to students about transfer options.

Communication to Students

SAIT Transfer Options has a website with a great deal of general and specific information as well as FAQs (http://www.sait.ca/transferoptions), a fan page on Facebook which is also connected to a Twitter page, and an email address to which students can submit their own specific questions. The webpage has a high profile in Google and Bing searches which has resulted in interest in SAIT and email from potential international and national students. As well, students are able to contact the Articulation Coordinator directly for information and advice regarding both sending and receiving transfer processes and procedures.

Communications and outreach to students and faculty are of key importance because if the students don't know about the options available to them, the effort put it into establishing transfer agreements is wasted. To encourage a connection with the SAIT community, Transfer Options participates in various SAIT-wide events such as Fall and Spring Open House, Fall and Winter Orientation, and places frequent notifications on SAITView, SAIT's internal digital signage monitors.

Another communications example is SAIT's recent Transfer Options Fair at which seventeen institutions were invited to set up booths and/or make presentations about some of the degree completion opportunities available to SAIT students.

Best Practice: Provide student support.

In addition to providing information to potential transfer students, another area of best practice is the provision of support to students who have transferred into a program.

Supporting Students

School of Business, Grant MacEwan University

A best practice in the area of supporting transfer students is provided the Grant MacEwan University School of Business.

Students transferring into the program work with an advisor to develop a program of study based on the specific program they transferred from. The advisors track the students' progress, check in with them periodically and monitor their progress.

Different supports are provided when issues arise. In one example, a cohort of transfer students was struggling with a particular course so the program organized a tutor to support the students in acquiring the specific knowledge component that was identified as a gap in their prior studies.

GOOD MAINTENANCE OF TRANSFER AGREEMENTS

Best Practice: Systems and processes are established to maintain the integrity of transfer agreements as courses change.

The single largest area of concern raised by all ACAT contact persons and articulation coordinators was the challenge to maintain hundreds or thousands of transfer agreements.

Maintaining transfer agreements is a very time consuming process – we had a period of time in the past where this was not kept up-to-date and we have been playing catch up…

A missing system in the ACAT / transfer system is a loop back to update agreements when a fundamental change occurs – "no mechanism through ACAT for notification by sender of fundamental [course or program] changes".

I have been pushing for the ACAT database to have built into them services to support agreements that have been in place unchanged for a number of years. We have thousands of agreements. So we are looking for a little assistance from the transfer credit system to maintain agreements.

Maintaining transfer agreements is really difficult. I am not sure that we have been doing it very well. It is hard. We have all of these agreements, and some of them are really old. The system itself has built in if you make a change to your course, it automatically reevaluates the course again. They see your changes, and then they decide if they want to keep the transfer credit they have given you, or give it a different reward. It is the courses that don't get changed. When you run into a specific course, it is paying attention. I know our courses really well, and I can spot when we need to reevaluate our agreement.

We don't really have a process in place to go back and reevaluate transfer agreements. We don't have any process for that. It is kind of an as I go along.

One example of a best practice has been well-established since the early 1990s at the University of Lethbridge. This is a formal, annual process to review and maintain transfer agreements.

Annual Transfer Agreement Update Process
University of Lethbridge

In September a request is sent out to all faculties asking them to review all sections of the current Alberta Transfer Guide and submit to the Contact Person Assistant (CPA), by mid-December, any additions, changes and deletions necessary for the next year's version of the Alberta Transfer Guide (ATG). In the past, a set of printed materials (ATG, sending institutions calendars) was included for reference with this request. As most post-secondary institutions have moved to "on-line" documents, this year we attached electronic versions of these materials or provided links to appropriate websites. The faculty evaluator(s) refers to course descriptions and program descriptions in the sending institution(s) calendar when reviewing each transfer agreement in the ATG.

For each "by course" or "by program" transfer agreement the faculties are encouraged to consider:

- Is the transfer reasonable relative to other transfer arrangements for the same sending institution?
- Is the transfer consistent with arrangements for similar courses at other sending institutions?
- Is the transfer reasonable in the light of recent curriculum changes (e.g. deleted courses, new courses, title changes, course description changes, pre-requisite changes) at the UofL?

The faculties are asked to report to the CPA where an active transfer agreement requires adjustment (including the recommended change), where an active agreement should be terminated, where an anomaly is apparent, and provide supplementary notes as appropriate. They are also encouraged to identify courses (from sending institutions) where no transfer agreement exists but for which transfer credit should be considered.

In December the Documents Unit generates a Course Change Summary report which provides details regarding new courses, deleted courses, and changes to active courses approved by the Curriculum Coordinating Committee. The CPA corroborates the feedback received from the faculties against the Course Change Summary report. This triggers a number of possible actions that are completed on the ACAT Contact Persons database depending on whether the change is deemed non-substantial or substantial, and may include updating a course summary, terminating an agreement, making a substantial change to an agreement, and initiating a new agreement. In cases where a UofL course has been discontinued UofL may ask a sending institution(s) to provide a current outline(s) to make sure the replacement receiving offering being considered is appropriate.

In further discussion with U of L, a few recommendation have been made that would facilitate the maintenance of transfer agreements.

- More electronic evaluations and document imaging. The reduced "paper" will create some efficiencies.
- Staff turnover makes it difficult for some institutions to maintain a consistent level of knowledge regarding the ACAT database and what actions need to happen when, but that is a factor that cannot be controlled. Cross-training can alleviate part of the impact but there is a cost to the benefit of "institutional" knowledge when you have staff turnover.
- Increased participation by the ACAT Secretariat with respect to some of the charts would be helpful. For example, if information regarding secondary curriculum updates/changes for other provinces could be researched/identified/collected by one unit (ACAT Secretariat) and shared with the entire group (CP and CPA) it would save each institution having to research this on their own.
- In prior years, a process existed whereby post-secondary institutions were contacted by the ACAT Secretariat when a course appeared in the calendar that had not been offered for a certain period of time. This process reduced the burden of effort placed upon reviewers when completing yearly processes.
- Time taken to update the block transfer agreements is not reasonable. When institutions submit changes to the ACAT Secretariat, updates need to be incorporated into the tables at the point of request so that institutions do not have to continually follow up/review.

While this transfer agreement process is a best practice, it may be daunting for other institutions to address the backlog of un-maintained transfer agreements.

Best Practice: Periodically evaluate the usefulness of an articulation agreement.

There are many student-focused definitions of success:

> *If we can have more students recognized for their other post-secondary work so they can graduate on-time or earlier, that would be measure of success. And if our graduates can move onto other credentials without redoing the work they did here, that would be successful. And if there are no casualties: emotional, physical or mental.*

There appears to be very limited measurement and evaluation as to whether desired student outcomes are being achieved. Most institutions have not formally evaluated the usefulness of their articulation agreements. One exception is Grant MacEwan University:

Research and Communication of Transfer Program and Student Benefits and Successes

Mike Henry, Associate Dean, School of Business
Grant MacEwan University

A best practice in terms of building trust and support for transfer programs and making these agreements successful is research into transfer student success, including analyses of student completion, of entry and exit GPAs and the communication of the results, particularly those related to transfer program benefits and successes.

This type of research can contribute to the setting of standards – for example the establishment of entry standards based on student success – and to demonstrating commitment to academic rigor. Such research concretely demonstrates levels of student success and makes the case that different educational streams can lead to equivalent learning outcomes.

Additionally, documentation of the benefits of transfer programs – such as the benefits to non-transfer students from interacting with students from varied backgrounds – will also likely contribute to increased acceptance and support for transfer programs.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The background literature review undertaken for this project identified eleven types of best practice across six different categories. Within Alberta today there are examples of best practices for each of these categories. However, there are a few areas that we believe are worthy of further consideration by ACAT.

Increasing complexity

For the majority of institutions, transfer is a human-process, not an IT-process. And the pressures on the human-based system have increased significantly. But two recent decisions will exponentially increase the pressure on the transfer system: Apply Alberta likely will increase the number of transfer requests that need to be considered, and the new relationship with BCCAT will double (or more) the number of transfer agreements that are managed.

As a result, in a time of tremendous fiscal constraint, we anticipate that institutions will be pushed to the limit to manage transfer agreements, and maintenance will fall even further behind.

With this increasing complexity, some of the previous best practices may no longer be able to keep up. This leads to further work being required in information management, and in student enlightenment.

Recommendations

- Create better linkages between institutions' student information databases and the ACAT database.
- Explore every opportunity to have changes to the ACAT database better facilitate the processing and maintenance of transfer agreements. The implication of this recommendation is a significant investment in the IT infrastructure supported by ACAT.
- Every institution should evaluate whether its internal IT infrastructure is prepared to support the increasing number of transfer agreements, and associated maintenance issues.

I think because we are still in our infancy in recording the transfer articulation. We don't have our database quite figured out yet. We need to make sure that we are recognizing students. We only know how to recognize course-by-course so far. The block transfer would not show what they actually completed that we accepted as a block transfer. Our transfer is not articulating that year one at a sending institution included these courses and were equivalent to all these courses here. Then we have to do manual manipulations. This is something I see us improving.

We need to have redevelopment of the transfer guide site to better handle and facilitate the block agreements. There is not the consistency of data and format of data.

And every year people create new courses, they modify courses. And when you offer a large number of courses that task can be significant. If the council could come up with a process to automate the data, integrate our local student info system (which holds the course information) automatically into the ACAT system. Then have that system flag the process. We already have a consistency imposed on us for the transfer system. And the structures of these fields are relatively fixed. At least from my perspective it should not be hard to have the standard for the transfer system that we need to comply with. Then it is your own job to make your system fit.

With stronger systems and/or more consistent information, ACAT might be able to help the system identify areas where student-lead demand indicates that transfer agreements should be put into place. In this idea, ACAT would be able to identify from student transfer patterns where agreements might be needed, or bridging programs might need to be developed.

Clarity of the role and purpose of block transfer agreements

Many "block transfer" agreements are being managed on a course-by-course basis, and what one person means by the term "block transfer" may not be the same as what another person means.

Recommendation

- ACAT should develop clarity about the meaning, role and purpose of block transfers to facilitate leaner progression. This includes developing a clear and consistent terminology for the transfer system, and ensuring that the *meaning* of the terminology is understood consistently.
- Use the BCCAT *Principles & Guidelines for Transfer*, June 2003, as a reference point for this discussion.

Dissemination of Information to Students

The transfer guide is several years past being a readable document for students. We have to help then with tools. We moved a number of years ago from having basically 8 degree granting institutions. Then the number of degree granting institutions multiplied, and any institution could be a sender or a receiver. And now it is hard to print a document, and say here is my institution and here is how it all fits together. We are beyond the ability to print this in paper. The on-line search that ACAT have been providing have been really key to continue to allow students to get the information they really need.

Students appear to have a clear understanding of the concept of transfer, yet they are very unclear of the important details. And the current tools used to educate students about transfer are weak. It is a very difficult and iterative process to use the ACAT website to figure out what your transfer options are. And as the quote above indicates, the transfer guide itself is not very helpful.

As student mobility increases, as the number of transfer agreements increase, and as new jurisdictions align with the ACAT system, the need for simpler and clearer tools for students to understand and investigate their transfer options will be essential.

> *Where I would like it to go is to build on what we already have in Alberta which is a very open and transparent system. Students can find transfer agreements, not hidden behind institution firewalls. I would like us to build on that by expanding the agreements, and going beyond the province, looking at the national level.*

Recommendations

- Clearly communicate the principles and processes of transfer to students, very early in the *application* process.
- Institutions should continue to invest in communicating transfer opportunities, as senders and receivers, to all students.
- As much as possible, communicate to students in terms of time left to achieve their goal – this will align with the focus of their educational journey.

Framing the articulation coordinator role

A key element of success in every institution is the role and capabilities of the articulation coordinator. While this role manifests in many ways, there are a number of key elements of success. Institutions would benefit from considering the following questions as they review this role:

Is the articulation coordinator

- Fully connected to the academic function?
- Closely connected to the person responsible for publishing the school calendar?
- Provided with the support of academic and administration leadership?
- Focused on transfer articulation for the majority of their role (providing them with the necessary time to manage the process and issues)?
- Knowledgeable about curriculum – both in terms of depth of knowledge, and early awareness of proposed changes?

Selecting subject-matter experts

It was reported that in many institutions the subject matter experts assigned to review articulation requests are junior members of faculty. Best practice is to use seasoned experts.

Recommendations

- Select subject-matter experts based on the basis of their deep and long-standing knowledge of the institution's courses and curriculum.
- Annually review the institution's transfer philosophy with the subject-matter experts, and discuss how this impacts transfer agreements with institutions that have very different philosophies.

APPENDIX A – TRANSFER AGREEMENT INFORMATION TEMPLATES

The following templates have been used at Keyano College with all departments for one and one half years. The forms rarely require revision by the sending departments, and this procedure is reported to have reduced the time to establish a typical agreement, from months to weeks.

KEYANO COLLEGE

ACAT COURSE OUTLINE

Course Title:				**Code**		**Number**	
Credit Hours:		**Pre/Co Requisites:**					
Hours of Instruction:			**Lecture**	**Lab**		**Other**	
Instructor Qualifications:							
Duration:							
Model Institution							
Date First Offered:							
Effect Date for Agreements:							

Receiving Institutions and Corresponding Courses			
Athabasca		**Canadian UC**	
Concordia UC		**King's UC**	
U of C		**U of A**	
U of L		**MacEwan**	

Course Description:

Textbooks Required:

Syllabus:
(Topics and Reading)

Evaluation

NOTE: If the course outline does not meet the minimum information required to complete the Transfer Credit Proposal, it will be sent back to the department.

KEYANO COLLEGE

ACAT PROGRAM OUTLINE

Program Title:	
Model Institution	
Model Program	
Date First Offered:	
Pre/Co Requisites	
Effect Date for Agreements:	

Program Description:

Normally the program includes (courses):

Related Category	
Related Credential	
Related Majors	