Improving the Transfer of General Education within Oregon

Background for 2 initiatives: General Education Outcomes/Criteria and ATLAS

- **Elements of an effective transfer system** The two key elements of inter-institutional transfer of academic coursework are:

1. Determining the relationships between specific coursework at sending and receiving institutions.

2. Keeping track of these relationships, once established, and making them readily available to students and academic advisors who are evaluating transfer possibilities.

Of the two, the first element creates the greater challenge because it requires detailed examination of course materials (syllabi, exams, and so forth) by faculty in the relevant disciplines in order to determine whether courses at different institutions are equivalent in content and level. The more advanced and specialized the coursework, the greater the challenge, and the smaller the likelihood of universal equivalency.

In principle, the second element should not be difficult to achieve since it is a problem of organization and book-keeping, rather than judgment. In practice, however, the great volume of transfer equivalency information makes it difficult to handle and inaccessible to most users. Thus, both elements create substantial challenges to a transfer process that maintains academic standards while encouraging thoughtful and deliberate transfer decisions. An ideal transfer system cannot guarantee that a student can begin anywhere and, with the minimum required credits, earn a baccalaureate degree in any field anywhere else, but it should allow a student to accommodate personal interests or constraints, and to take full advantage of the richness of a statewide educational system.

- **Transfer of General Education in Oregon** In Oregon, the transfer of General Education coursework between community colleges and 4-year schools (OUS institutions and some private colleges and universities) is facilitated by the two-year AA/OT (Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer) and AS/OT-Business (Associate of Science/Oregon Transfer) degrees. The AA/OT was created ~15 years ago to respond to the transfer complications created by the varied design of General Education curricula on different OUS campuses. The AS/OT-Business degree is a recent (2003) modification of the AA/OT that prepares students to transfer into 4-year business programs. The OTM (Oregon Transfer Module) was created even more recently (2005) to provide structure and transferability for General Education coursework that corresponds to the first year of college, but is somewhat less than the General Education required for an associate’s degree. Both the degrees and the one-year module take advantage of widespread agreement on the goals of General Education curricula at the lower division – namely, the development of fundamental skills in
communication and quantitative reasoning (through courses in writing, speech, and math), and introduction to the three broad domains of human knowledge: Arts and Letters (Humanities), Social Science, and Natural Science. For simplicity, this document will focus on the AA/OT, but the points apply to both transferable degrees and to the module. The module includes the same areas of General Education as does the AA/OT, and differs from it only in requiring fewer courses (3 instead of 4) in each of the broad disciplinary areas. The legislative mandate associated with the AA/OT requires OUS institutions to allow all of the General Education courses that are part of the degree to transfer as lower-division coursework in the General Education areas in which they were originally taken, rather than simply as elective coursework.

For the most part, this system has been useful. Certainly, it is an improvement over the complex and idiosyncratic situation that preceded it. Imperfections remain, however: some are inherent in the limitations of the transferable degrees; others are the result of flaws in the processes for establishing and communicating course equivalencies. Addressing the procedural flaws is the motivation for two statewide initiatives:

1. The development of widely agreed-upon outcomes and criteria for General Education coursework that can be used to make decisions about whether individual courses merit universal transferability as part of this essential curriculum.

2. The creation of ATLAS, a web-based system that will give instant access to course equivalency information and allow immediate comparison between completed or contemplated coursework and degree programs anywhere in the state.

**Development of General Education Outcomes/Criteria**

- **Rationale** Although the AA/OT degree does a good job of smoothing lower division transfer by emphasizing the common goals and elements of General Education, neither the degree nor the directives for its use address the fundamental question of how courses are to be chosen for inclusion in this freely-transferable curriculum. There are not adequate guidelines on which to base these decisions, nor is there opportunity for input by faculty who are knowledgeable in the relevant disciplines. In the absence of such support, the decisions are made by state education staff in Salem who are conscientious but who recognize the impossibility of the task they’ve been given. For example, a current proposal would include co-operative work experience as transferable General Education, and criteria available to staff for decision-making are inadequate.

We are fortunate that most of the courses currently included in AA/OT degrees are excellent and would pass muster with any college or university curriculum committee. We know this because most AA/OT courses are accepted everywhere on
their own, as General Education courses of particular types, even when they are not part of an AA/OT degree. On the other hand, there are a few courses that are freely transferable as part of an AA/OT, but are not universally acceptable as General Education on their own. For example, many colleges and universities do not allow courses in applied art (ceramics, for example) to count toward their Arts and Letters/Humanities requirements, but they are obliged to accept such courses when they are included in the Arts and Letters part of an AA/OT. This violates the principle of local faculty control of the curriculum, and it creates confusion and resentment among students who observe that the same course counts one way for some students and another way for others. Clearly, what is needed is a set of guidelines for determining the appropriateness of General Education courses that are intended to be freely transferable. That is the purpose of developing General Education Outcomes and Criteria statements that have widespread faculty support.

- **Proposed use of General Education Outcomes/Criteria**
  
  **Which courses will be reviewed?** The first use of the Outcome and Criteria Statements will likely be to examine courses whose transferability is currently disputed – that is, courses that are not universally transferable if they are not part of an AA/OT degree. The exact number of such courses is not yet available, but is probably between 10 and 100. If, as a state, we could come to agreement on the suitability of these courses for General Education, we would have made significant progress. We would be able to reduce confusion and frustration among students and the general public and we would also provide clear evidence of the education community’s ability to work together effectively. After resolving current transfer inconsistencies, the principal use of the Outcomes and Criteria Statements will be to assess newly-proposed courses.

In the past, since the AA/OT degree was awarded almost exclusively by community colleges, it was largely community college courses that were subject to state approval for universal transferability. The situation is somewhat different now, however, since both state universities and community colleges offer the OTM, the one-year module that comprises the bulk of AA/OT General Education. Thus a comprehensive plan for the use of General Education guidelines should include the review of new courses proposed either by community colleges or OUS institutions. Given the frequency with which new lower-division General Education courses have appeared over the last 5 years, we expect that the review work will amount to totals of approximately 30 community college courses and 15 OUS courses per year, distributed over the 6 General Education areas.

**Who will do the reviewing?** An essential aspect of putting the General Education guidelines to use is entrusting that responsibility to an appropriate group of people. At present, the responsibility lies with one or two state administrators, who are able to consult JBAC, but have little opportunity to solicit direct faculty input. Would it be preferable to give the decision-making responsibility to groups of disciplinary faculty? How much faculty time and effort would be required? Based on the above estimate of a steady state rate of 45
new courses/year, a faculty group could expect to review 6-8 courses in its disciplinary area each year. Are there alternatives that would be less demanding of faculty time? Are there benefits to bringing cross-sector faculty together that would justify this use of faculty time?

**Creation of ATLAS**

Sophisticated web-based software, such as ATLAS, have the potential to eliminate the second challenge to effective transfer – namely the book-keeping associated with making course equivalencies accessible, once they have been established. The key contribution of ATLAS will be to link all of the equivalency information from individual institutions and make it both easy to find and convenient to use. Instead of the cumbersome manual system that we now depend on, a computer will read the equivalency tables and determine matches among as many courses and programs as a student and advisor wish to consider.

All OUS campuses utilize BANNER software for their Student Information Systems, and several have implemented either DARS (Degree Audit Reporting System) or CAPP (Curriculum Advising Program Planning) to interface with BANNER and track students’ progress toward baccalaureate degrees. ATLAS software acts at an even higher organizational level, drawing information from DARS or CAPP and making comparisons between a student’s completed or planned coursework and any degree program offered by a linked school. When all OUS institutions and community colleges are connected, ATLAS will allow students and their advisors to use coursework at any of the 24 public postsecondary institutions in Oregon to plan efficient paths to bachelor’s degrees.

**Summary**

We are optimistic that the quality of General Education transfer operations will be enhanced by combining a means for making academically sound equivalency decisions with a powerful electronic tool for organizing and using the resulting information. By itself, one of these advances would not accomplish very much, but together, they promise a system that is both efficient for students and responsive to faculty creativity and judgment. The ideas behind these initiatives are not new, but the impetus of SB342 has translated them into action, and perhaps most important, has maximized their synergy.