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CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE TRANSFER FUNCTION: INTRODUCING A TRANSFER RECEPTIVE CULTURE

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In California, the majority of students of color who enter postsecondary education do so in the community colleges. However large numbers of them leave and do not transfer to four-year institutions; in particular to highly selective public four-year colleges and universities. By using the theoretical perspective of critical race theory, transfer can be seen as a dual commitment between both the sending and receiving institution as we put forth the conceptual framework of a “transfer receptive culture.” We define a transfer receptive culture as an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully—that is, to navigate the community college, take the appropriate coursework, apply, enroll, and successfully earn a baccalaureate degree in a timely manner. We outline five elements, informed by critical race theory, that are necessary to establish a transfer receptive culture and outline specific strategies within each element that practioners can employ on their home campuses.

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Representing the largest system of higher education in the world (California Community College Chancellor's Office [CCCCO] 2010), community colleges in California are the primary postsecondary institution for all ethnic groups in the state (California Tomorrow, 2002; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). While students of color consist of the majority, a great quantity of them leave college and do not transfer to four-year institutions; in particular to top tier public colleges and universities such as the University of California (UC) (Handel, 2007; Shulock & Moore, 2007). In accordance with the California Master Plan for Higher Education of 1967, the UC is considered the top tier academic institution in the state and provides undergraduate, graduate, and professional education (University of California Office of the President [UCOP], 2007).

Within the Master Plan, "the transfer function is an essential component of the commitment to access" (UCOP, 2007) between community colleges and four-year colleges. However, access to the University of California for transfer students of color has been a difficult goal to accomplish. For example, in 2006, the percentage of all transfer students attending a UC campus were 12% African American; 14% Latino; 18% Native American; and 36% Asian American (California Postsecondary Education Commission [CPEC], 2008). One approach to help strengthen the transfer function and to change these numbers is to revise how students, faculty, and administrators view transfer, both at the two-year and four-year level.

In this paper we argue, by using the theoretical perspective of critical race theory (CRT), that transfer should be seen as a dual commitment between both the sending and receiving institution as we put forth the framework of a transfer receptive culture (TRC). We define a transfer receptive culture as an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully. Central to the concept of a transfer receptive culture at a selective institution is the belief that students will be successful *because* they are transfer students. This is in opposition to the belief that they are successful *despite* being a transfer student.

Several scholars have examined transfer through complex processes involving student aspirations, achievement, competing missions, and policies (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). While these approaches are useful in framing how we examine the factors that facilitate and prevent educational opportunities for students of color; they often leave out the sociohistorical context of how students of color are racialized in the U.S. and how racial constructs determine how these students

experience education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). By utilizing the framework of critical race theory we are able to add to a theoretical body of work that addresses inequities in education for students of color. Specifically, we employ the five tenets of a CRT in education to explore this disconnect in our intersegmental system.

We first introduce critical race theory as framework to be used in how we view the traditional relationship between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. We then provide a review of the community college literature that focuses on the experiences of transfer students as they progress through the education pipeline. Next we introduce the conceptual framework of a transfer receptive culture. Lastly we conclude with the practical, theoretical, and policy oriented implications of a transfer receptive culture and its contributions to the practice of higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine the critical connection between community colleges and public selective four-year colleges and universities, we turn to CRT. Originating from critical legal studies and drawing on an interdisciplinary foundation of law, ethnic and women's studies, and sociology, "a critical race theory in education challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses, and insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context" (Solórzano, 1998, p. 123).

According to Solórzano (1998), there are five themes, or tenets, that form the basic perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy of a critical race theory in education: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective. We expand on each tenet and how it can inform a transfer receptive culture.

The first tenet, the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, allows us to see transfer as a racialized phenomenon. As stated earlier, although students of color comprise the majority of community colleges nation-wide, they are in the minority for transferring. Despite these students' high aspirations, the rate of transfer has remained at nearly 25% for the last decade (Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004). In addition, colleges with a higher percentage of either Latino or African American students have lower transfer rates; even after controlling for academic preparation and socioeconomic status (Wassmer et al., 2004). What this shows is that an analysis

of race cannot be absent while examining transfer and the commitment by highly selective four-year colleges and universities to receive these students.

The second tenet, the challenge to dominant ideology, allows us to reconsider transfer as something that only the community college is responsible for facilitating. By examining transfer from a four-year college's perspective, we see it as a two-way process by making an explicit commitment to value transfer students. Often these students are seen as intellectually inferior to their four-year counterparts (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996), and by actively seeking transfer applicants, we demonstrate how they are a talented pool that can make major contributions at a research-based university.

The third tenet, the commitment to social justice, enables us to visualize transfer as a social justice tool. For many underrepresented students of color, the ability and opportunity to transfer becomes salient in their pursuit of upward mobility (Rendón, 1993). As students of color are increasingly transferring to for-profit private colleges and universities (Van Ommeren, 2009; Linehan, 2001), or not transferring at all, we believe encouraging transfer to a public selective four-year college—and holding these institutions accountable to all students—is a commitment to social justice.

The fourth tenet, the centrality of experiential knowledge, allows us to seek students, faculty, and staff's perspectives on improving the transfer pipeline to selective four-year institutions. The voice of those who transfer and those who assist them in this process is crucial to acknowledge as we receive these students. Only by soliciting their feedback and listening to their counter stories (Delgado, 1989) are we able to assess how we, on the four-year side, can strengthen our commitment to transfer.

The fifth tenet, the interdisciplinary perspective, allows us to draw on other fields of study as we examine the necessary elements of a transfer receptive culture. By drawing upon theories and methodologies provided by ethnic studies and women's studies (Butler & Walter, 1991) we are able to provide a multidimensional view of a transfer receptive culture that includes issues of sexism and racism. With these concepts in mind it is important to draw from other academic fields, along with CRT, that can contribute to a thorough conceptualization of a transfer receptive culture.

Overall, CRT has been widely used in research centered on secondary and postsecondary education; however it has not been used extensively to examine issues of transition between two-year colleges and four-year colleges (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004; Villalpando, 2004; Rivas, Perez, Alvarez, & Solorzano, 2007). CRT assists us in

foregrounding issues of race and racism while putting forth a framework of a transfer receptive culture and to acknowledge that students of color are not transferring to highly selective four-year public colleges within California or beyond. Our aim is to transform how universities perceive and receive transfer students and to put forth a conceptualization of a legitimizing transfer receptive culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The transfer of students from two-year colleges to four-year colleges has received widespread attention from higher education researchers throughout the years (Adelman, 1999; Bailey, 2005; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Turner, 1992). In addition, much has been written regarding transfer adjustment, or transfer shock, to explain community college students' transition to university life (Laanan, 2007). Although an extensive body of literature exists regarding transfer, few studies have examined it from an elite public university's frame of reference (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008). To date, a limited body of literature has examined the organizational culture necessary to transfer to an elite university such as the University of California (Handel & Herrera, 2003).

Eggleston and Laanan (2001) found that "a limited amount of research has been done to study the transfer student's adjustment process, once he or she has reached the senior institution" (p. 87). They found that four-year colleges and universities overall are not meeting the needs of transfer students and stress that a demonstrated commitment by higher education is required to address the increasing numbers of transfer students throughout the nation.

Dowd et al. (2007) provide a comprehensive perspective on the transfer of students to selective institutions, although the majority of the report focuses on transfer to elite private colleges and universities, their findings are congruent with our theoretical perspective of a transfer receptive culture. In particular, the authors provide recommended practices to promote transfer access for low-income community college students to highly selective four-year institutions.

Handel (2007) discusses the *Memorandum of understanding* (Nussbaum, 1997) signed between the University of California and the California Community College systems in which the UC publicly pledged to increase its enrollment of transfer students by 33% by the end of the 2005–2006 academic year. This was largely in part due to then recent legislation that banned the consideration of race in

college admissions (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta., 2003). The UC succeeded in this goal and at times surpassed this number.

Through Eggleston and Laanan (2001), Dowd et al. (2007), and Handel (2007) we see the beginnings of a body of literature that focuses on the four-year institution's perspective towards transfer students. The goal of this paper is to add to this literature by introducing the ideology of a transfer receptive culture and how it is informed by critical race theory. In addition, we aim to highlight the theoretical framing of the acceptance, matriculation, and graduation of community college transfer students by a highly selective public four-year college.

TRANSFER RECEPTIVE CULTURE

Without the seminal work of scholars in the college access field (McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 2002; Tierney & Haggdorn, 2002), the theoretical foundation for a transfer receptive culture would not be possible. Most notably, McDonough's (1997) work on a college-going culture, which is the culture necessary to establish college preparation as a normalized expectation in high school, has been central in extending this concept to community colleges and four-year universities.

A transfer culture, or a transfer sending culture, at the community college level can be seen as an institutional effort to normalize the transfer function so that all students who seek to transfer are able to do so (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004). Extending the definition of a transfer culture to a four-year campus, we define a transfer receptive culture as an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully—that is, to navigate the community college, take the appropriate coursework, apply, enroll, and successfully earn a baccalaureate degree in a timely manner.

Not only does the community college have to foster a strong transfer culture at their home campus; but the selective four-year campus is also responsible for developing a strong receptive culture. Both institutions must work collaboratively to foster a transfer process that supports and validates students as they make this critical transition in the education pipeline (Turner, 1992). This transition can become treacherous for students who are the first in their families to go to college, come from low-income backgrounds, and have been historically underrepresented in higher education (Rendón, 1994). By viewing a partnership between two and four-year colleges through the

lens of CRT, we are reminded that dominant ideologies of meritocracy, colorblindness, objectivity, and race neutrality must be challenged in order to unmask the historic and contemporary privilege of dominant groups that can prevail in higher education discourse (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997).

As we introduce this model, operationalized through CRT, we outline five elements that are necessary for elite public colleges and universities to establish transfer as a normalized process to their campus. An integral concept to a transfer receptive culture is that the foundation to receive students begins prior to them arriving at the institution; such a culture cannot be simply limited to efforts when the student arrives. Preparing for transfer students before they arrive ensures that transfer becomes a collaborative process that is developed between the two-year campus and four-year campus before the student applies and enrolls at the university. In addition, similar to a transfer sending culture, a transfer receptive culture must be institutionalized throughout the campus and not limited to a handful of offices on campus. The five elements of a transfer receptive culture, divided by efforts that are pre- and posttransfer are as follows:

Pre-transfer:

1. Establish the transfer of students, especially nontraditional, first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students, as a high institutional priority that ensures stable accessibility, retention, and graduation.
2. Provide outreach and resources that focus on the specific needs of transfer students while complimenting the community college mission of transfer.

Post-transfer:

3. Offer financial and academic support through distinct opportunities for nontraditional/reentry transfer students where they are stimulated to achieve at high academic levels.
4. Acknowledge the lived experiences that students bring and the intersectionality between community and family.
5. Create an appropriate and organic framework from which to assess, evaluate, and enhance transfer receptive programs and initiatives that can lead to further scholarship on transfer students.

Element One

The first step is to establish the transfer of students as a high institutional priority that ensures stable accessibility despite enrollment fluctuations. In the definition of a transfer receptive culture, transfer students should not be used to backfill freshman admission numbers. The admission of transfer students to a selective four-year campus cannot be susceptible to the often-changing landscape of freshman college admissions.

To illustrate this first element we turn our attention to the University of California Los Angeles, the flagship transfer-receiving institution in the 10 campus UC system. This commitment to transfer students is evidenced by the fact that for the past 15 years, approximately 40% of all new undergraduate enrollees are transfer students (UCLA Office of Analysis and Information Management, 2011). This shows a remarkable longitudinal admission trend for a highly selective public university (Handel, 2007). This admissions rate has occurred despite events and policy decisions that have impacted admissions over time such as budget cuts and the passage of Proposition 209.

It is also important in element one to centralize the demographics of a transfer student population as it adds further diversity to an incoming undergraduate class of competitive first-time university students. A four-year institution must recognize and honor the various experiences that transfer students bring to their campuses as nontraditional students. By using a critical race framework, we use an asset based approach when considering the diverse experiences that these students can bring to a four-year campus (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Element Two

The second element is to ensure that information and resources are focused on the specific needs of transfer students that compliment the community college mission of transfer. This message can come in the form of outreach programs, admissions literature, and training for counselors and other transfer agents. Outreach programs that provide academic development should facilitate students with an opportunity to become familiar with the university prior to the application term with a goal of developing a sense of belonging.

Transfer literature (in print and web form) is important to provide to transfer students, addressing their specific experiences. This is because most college admissions information is geared towards freshman rather than transfer applicants (Handel, 2007). Within

these publications, the diversity of the institution as it relates to transfer students should be reflected. Lastly, academic residential summer programs, such as those hosted by UCLA, have proven effective for the adjustment of transfer students both in terms of recruitment and retention (Ackerman, 1991). Again, these outreach and recruitment efforts should be shared by the institution at large and not the responsibility of just one campus department.

Element Three

The third element is to offer both a financially and academically supportive environment that is distinct for transfer students. A financial commitment is expressed through the establishment of scholarships and other financial aid opportunities specifically for transfer and reentry/nontraditional students. Often transfer students fear the cost of tuition associated with four-year college prices (Dowd et al., 2007); thus, the establishment of transfer specific scholarships could alleviate some apprehension.

In addition, transfer students should be academically supported where they are stimulated to achieve at high levels. The academic needs of transfer students are unique in that they typically enter the university and experience transfer shock which can result in an initial low grade point average (Laanan, 2007). Support programs should exist at the four-year level that help reassure students that they are more than academically capable of handling the rigors of university academic life. These support programs should be based on “pedagogy of excellence” models such as academic counseling, peer tutoring, and reciprocal learning techniques that are grounded in the belief that all students have the right to an education, have the capacity to learn, the potential to excel, and are “at-potential” rather than “at-risk” (Bermeo, 2007; Lumina Foundation, 2004).

Element Four

Element four acknowledges the lived experiences that students bring to campus and recognizes the intersection between community and family. In alignment with CRT, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal, 2001) are important frameworks to this element. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model puts forth the notion that students possess familial capital which consists of “those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (p. 79).

One such way to honor familial capital is to create a physical space where transfer students feel welcomed to bring their families and that their community backgrounds are honored. The establishment of physical spaces that are designated for transfer students on four-year campuses are sparse, although research has shown that such spaces could increase a sense of belonging (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003).

It is important to stress to transfer students that family ties do not have to be severed once at the four-year institution and that children, parents, grandparents, and extended family are welcomed at both on and off-campus events. In addition, family housing should be offered for students who are married, in domestic partnerships, and/or students who have children. Lastly, an on-site preschool and childcare assistance should also be available within these housing environments.

Element Five

The fifth element is a reflective and analytical process. It aims to create a transfer specific and appropriate framework that takes into account the complexity of the transfer process, distinctly different from high-school college-going culture models, and four-year institutions college success models for students who enter the university directly from high school. Often, transfer programs, either sending or receiving, are forced to fit within the limits of a traditional high school to university process, thereby ignoring the specific challenges and successes of these programs.

These programs are assessed narrowly within the confines of a traditional high school framework of students homogeneously moving from the freshman up to the senior year in a yearly sequential fashion with a very similar curriculum and set of standard circumstances. Thus, measurements of success are often expected to be similar to the benchmarks for high school students: completion of courses each year, performance in college preparatory courses, examinations, and extra- and cocurricular activities. However, community college students tend to be a very heterogeneous group of students that represent a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and aptitudes that defy conventional high school models. For example, a large portion of community college students attend college part-time (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2009), which would make it impossible for them to complete their “freshmen” year within one year. In addition, their responsibilities to home, employment and community, often require a juggling that results in students taking more time to complete the necessary requirements to transfer.

Stakeholders of the success of transfer-sending and transfer-receiving programs often, and mistakenly, expect a seamless two-year transfer process dismissing anything but a transfer outcome after two years as a failure. In reality, many factors make it rather certain that the two-year transfers are the exception and not the rule. In order to better assess and refine transfer programs, it is important to create appropriate tools that gage the realities of students at the community college and after they transfer, including the intersections of race, gender, and class. As argued elsewhere here, community college students of color experience education differently, and evaluation tools need to take into account these experiences.

CONCLUSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Viewing transfer from a four-year perspective is a significant theoretical contribution to the research, policies, and practice surrounding the transfer function. Often the onus to increase transfer is on the community college, yet through this paper we shift the gaze to the four-year college. This is a self-reflective gaze as we are alumni, practioners, and faculty from the University of California, Los Angeles, having worked with transfer students and experienced this phenomenon for several years. By viewing the transfer process through the lens of CRT, the necessity of both community colleges and four-year colleges working closely together to increase the degree attainment of first generation, underrepresented, low income, and students of color becomes essential.

Through the five elements of a transfer receptive culture we are able to illuminate the necessary strategies to accept transfer students as a priority for highly selective public colleges and universities. These elements of a transfer receptive culture are crucial to maintain and establish as the California Master Plan for Higher Education continues to stratify access to the top tier of the state's higher education system (Hayden, 1986). Precisely due to this stratification, it is imperative that more CRT-based research focuses on the impact that the Master Plan continues to exert on the transfer function and its implication at the receiving institutions. Specifically, research can elucidate the way different populations perceive and experience four-year institutions prior to and after transferring: how students of color negotiate the stratified system of higher education, their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, in elite institutions.

The analytical framework has to shift to explicitly include receiving institutions as it pertains to transfer students. We advocate for

policies, as mentioned by Handel (2007) that prioritize the transfer function but advance the notion to include four-year institutions' responsibility in creating a welcoming environment for transfer students; particularly for students who already feel stigmatized by both real and perceived disadvantages. Such policies must advance a transfer receiving agenda that places transfer students not as an after-thought but, instead, centralizes the community college experience seamlessly into the context of a baccalaureate degree. Thus, it isn't sufficient to enact policies that influence enrollment; such policies must be comprehensive in what it means to maintain and successfully support the diverse and racialized experiences that community college students bring with them.

The following are questions to consider: Do four-year institutions know the needs of the students they are admitting? Have they considered how existing programs contribute to the success (or failure) of transfer students once enrolled at the university? Only with comprehensive policy that takes into account all five TRC elements can universities begin to provide effective services to the students they are admitting, enrolling, and graduating.

Transfer receiving policy can potentially create the impetus for more transfer-student centered practices at four-year institutions through strong collaborations with two-year colleges. The transfer receiving culture elements must permeate through all aspects of the university and must be incorporated in the daily practices of administrators, faculty and staff. Departments—from academic entities, to student support offices—across institutions must develop, revise, and/or maintain a plan that takes into account transfer students' varied needs and contributions. Learning from the community colleges that the mission of a transfer sending culture is not only the responsibility of the transfer center, the transfer receiving institutions must implement their practices broadly to integrate transfer students into university life.

Working in collaboration with community colleges, highly selective public four-year colleges can complement the efforts to strengthen the transfer function as delineated in the Master Plan and to mitigate the stratification and racialized effect that the plan has created. The transfer receiving culture elements provide a framework that can shift the perception and realities of transfer students at four-year institutions and expand access to nontraditional students by centralizing and normalizing their experiences. Through the implementation of these elements, we can truly begin to realize the critical role transfer students play in increasing and maintaining a diverse institutional culture, the importance

they play in shaping the university, and the success they share with their communities.

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