Controversy and important questions around UConn's proposal to limit outside credits

Submitted by Paul Fain on November 21, 2013 - 3:00am

The University of Connecticut touched a nerve this month with a proposal to limit the number of credits its traditional, non-transfer students can earn at other institutions while enrolled at UConn. The plan drew fierce criticism from community colleges and state lawmakers before being put on hold.

But the flap was mostly a tempest in a teapot. The proposal would have affected few students. Much of the controversy was due to blunt language in a leaked internal memorandum, and to widespread confusion about the proposal’s specifics.

However, experts said the underlying questions the plan touched on -- particularly where credits should come from and which ones should count toward a degree -- are ones higher education has a hard time answering.

“As students are increasingly able to take courses anywhere, they will,” said George L. Mehaffy, vice president for academic leadership and change at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). “Where do you draw the line on what students can’t use?”

The proposal applied only to students who enrolled at UConn as first-time freshmen, not transfer students, as some originally worried.

Administrators at the flagship public university wanted to make changes to the Academic Senate’s bylaws to require students who enroll as first-time freshmen earn a minimum of 90 credits “in residence” as they moved through bachelor’s degree programs, which typically consist of 120 credits.

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Those traditional students could gain UConn credit for only 30 credits earned at other institutions under the proposal, with no more than 15 counting toward general education requirements.

Transfer students would not have been affected, and could still arrive as sophomores or upperclassmen with up to 90 transfer credits under current policies.

“We have a very liberal transfer policy,” said Sally Reis, the university’s vice provost for academic
affairs, who co-wrote the controversial memo.

Also exempted under the proposal were credits earned through Advanced Placement (AP), early college programs, study abroad, and courses students took at the university prior to enrolling.

The changes were aimed only at courses students took at other institutions during their years at the university.

“We believe that students who matriculate at UConn as first-time freshmen should take the majority of their courses at UConn,” a university spokeswoman said in a written statement.

Even so, the plan rankled many around the state.

Cyrus (Ernie) Zirakzadeh, a professor of political science at UConn and chair of the University Senate’s executive committee, said the motion was tabled and will remain under review for at least a few months.

“The committee is expected to reconsider the motion in light of various concerns raised by groups on and off campus,” he said in an email. “A number of questions will need to be answered before the motion is reintroduced.”

‘Easier and Cheaper’

Only a few first-time freshmen at the university earn a large number of credits at other institutions. And five nearby community colleges are the main sources of those outside credits, university officials said.

The traditional UConn student earns an average of eight credits elsewhere. But Reis said 76 in one year’s cohort earned more than 36 outside credits, with a handful earning more than 50.

“We felt it was time to fix the loophole for a very small number of students,” Reis said.

The university conducted focus groups with some of those students. Their feedback contributed to the memo, which Reis and another administrator wrote in response to questions from members of the University Senate.

“Our students are taking easier and cheaper classes elsewhere,” Reis wrote. “And our data trends suggest that if they take a prerequisite at a community college, they often fail the subsequent courses they take here at UConn.”

A local news publication, The CT Mirror, got a leaked copy of the document and ran it in a news article about the proposal.

Many community college leaders and faculty members in Connecticut were upset about the memo, particularly the above quote, which they felt was a low blow.

“I would stack my faculty up against UConn or anyone else for lower-division courses in the undergraduate level,” Barbara Douglas, president of Northwestern Connecticut Community College, told the Waterbury Republican American.

Faculty leaders from Manchester Community College sent an “open letter” to their peers at UConn, criticizing the impact of the changes to the “ecosystem” of the state’s higher education system. They also took on the memo’s language.

“They offer no evidence that classes at community colleges are ‘easier,’ ” the faculty members wrote. “This is a fallacy and distracts from the greater pursuit all of us in academia share: high quality
education.”

The proposal wasn’t designed to target any one sector, according to Reis. “There have been no aspersions cast at anyone about quality at any one group.”

But Reis also said the university is within its rights to ensure that students earn most of their credits at UConn. She stands behind what she said in the memo, and said university data supports the proposal. However, she feels some of the comments were taken out of context.

“It was an internal document. It was not meant for distribution,” Reis said, adding that she wishes she had “read it more carefully and thoughtfully.”

Reis sent a letter of explanation and clarification to all of Connecticut’s community college presidents, and also wrote to members of the Academic Senate at Manchester Community College. But some hard feelings persist.

The Manchester faculty group read the original UConn proposal closely, and were aware that it did not apply to transfer students, said Rebecca M. Townsend, an associate professor of communication at the college and a representative of the Academic Senate.

Their problem was with the university administrators’ assertion that students are taking “easier” courses, including at community colleges, and then failing subsequent courses at UConn.

Townsend said the university has failed to back up that claim. She also defended the quality of the instruction by her peers at Manchester, some of whom also teach at UConn.

“If UConn has a concern about community college classes, we as faculty need to understand the data that drives those concerns,” she said in an email. “How can we make corrections without knowing what needs to be addressed?”

Questions about Mobile Students

Experts on community colleges had mixed reactions to the stalled UConn proposal.

Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, said the university’s decision to mull limits on outside credits gets to tricky dilemmas about the “unbundling” of higher education.

“It’s not an unreasonable question” to ask, he said, as more students may seek to string together credits from various online providers and package them into degrees. “Is that adding up to a coherent education?”

Other experts agreed about the validity of those questions. But some remained concerned about barriers universities put in place that can prevent transfer students from making progress toward degrees.

George Boggs, the former president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges, said the nation’s higher education system was created when most students went to one institution and, if they were successful, tended to graduate in four years. Times have changed, however.

“Today’s students are more mobile and often attended several institutions on their way to a degree,” said Boggs. “The troubling aspect of this is that the institutions have not recognized the changes in student behaviors and make it difficult for students by not accepting credits.”
Mehaffy said he did not know if his association’s member institutions were studying the issue of credit limits for non-transfer students. (UConn is not a member.) But given the growing student interest in “grazing” for credits, he said many universities are sure to wrestle with the issue and related questions in the near future.

Accreditors and the federal government also pay close attention to outside credit accumulation. To participate in federal aid programs and be accredited, colleges must issue at least 25 percent of the credits that count toward the degrees they issue.

But determining what constitutes a college, or even a course, probably isn’t going to get easier.

Another challenge is that colleges don’t know much about the academic rigor of courses their students take at other institutions. Without better, transparent measures of student learning outcomes, said Mehaffy, that dilemma will remain unresolved.

“We don’t know the sources of credits that students bring with them,” he said, adding that the UConn controversy gives a “glimpse of what may be coming.”

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