**INTRODUCTION**

**The Challenges for Effective Transfer and the Role of the Degree Qualifications Profile**

We are pleased to present this report from Quality Collaboratives (QC): Assessing and Reporting Degree Qualifications Profile Competencies in the Context of Transfer, a project developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) with funding from Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. This project was part of a multifront national effort to support greater levels of student success in broad-access institutions.

Quality Collaboratives was a large-scale effort to road test Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as a useful framework within which faculty and institutional state representatives could facilitate transfer between two-year and four-year institutions and redefine student success in terms of student learning in addition to graduation rates. The DQP creates a framework for educators to see college learning as a progression through curricula and educational experiences that help students achieve a broad set of learning outcomes at progressively more complex and sophisticated levels of proficiency as they pursue degrees (see appendix A). The goals of the project were to (1) field-test the DQP in the context of transfer, (2) help community colleges and partnering four-year institutions assess student learning outcomes in the context of transfer, and (3) explore ways in which faculty can take the lead on transfer through collaborative assessment of actual student work.

Representatives of nine state systems and ten dyads of two-year and four-year transfer partner campuses (twenty total campuses) that share significant transfer student populations participated in the QC’s exploration of the DQP in the context of transfer assessment, faculty collaboration, and public policy. The participants brought to the project multiple institutional lenses for examining the utility of the DQP, reflecting the diversity of American higher education. This publication focuses on the integral entwining of direct assessment of student learning and faculty leadership that is central for successful student transfer. A separate publication, *The Quality of a College Degree: Toward New Frameworks, Evidence, and Interventions*, focuses on policy implications for states and institutions.

The QC project addressed three elements that are often absent in the national discourse on student success. The first is a clear focus on the components of a quality education, which, in effect, define the learning students need to achieve. This project and the DQP begin with the notion that “completion” is not synonymous with “success.”

The second is the recognition that quality learning must be a shared or collaborative responsibility. An ever increasing number of college students, especially

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1 A “beta” version of the DQP was introduced in 2011 and tested in a family of major, nationwide projects. The first edition, revised according to feedback from college and university campuses and from national associations, was released in 2014; see www.luminafoundation.org/resources/dqp.
community college students, do not attend a single institution. Therefore, quality can no longer be defined institution by institution or course by course.

The third element is a strong emphasis on faculty collaboration—both within and across institutions—to increase student success, which must be defined as student learning and completion rates.

Readers concerned with increasing student success in public higher education will learn from this report that there are ways to create collaborative, cross-institutional partnerships that promote successful student transfer. Drawing directly from in-depth work on twenty campuses in nine states, the QC project demonstrated that there are ways to build from a diverse range of existing practices toward a shared understanding of student proficiency. The QC project also demonstrated that faculty can and do play an essential leadership role in defining and developing evidence of student learning achievement that can be shared across institutions and used to facilitate transfer.

Context

AAC&U has worked for almost two decades with faculty, administrators, other educators, community partners, and employers to identify the student learning outcomes that are most essential to success in the workplace and life and that prepare college graduates to contribute in a global society. Through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, AAC&U has codified these outcomes as the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) (see appendix B). The question driving the QC project was whether the DQP could help educators ensure these outcomes in a transfer context.

Prior to the start of the QC project, all nine participating state systems and most of the QC institutions had embraced the LEAP ELOs as guiding goals for learning. The DQP, which incorporates the LEAP ELOs, organizes learning categories in order to demonstrate how degree programs of all levels and their component elements can help all students both develop and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes of the program.

A key premise of the QC project is that higher education is in a long-term shift from credit hours to demonstrated proficiencies as the building blocks of college degree programs. The QC project showed what it will take to move proficiencies into the center of higher education’s efforts to focus on what students have learned and how they can apply their learning to complex, unique projects and problems. Such a move could go a long way toward demonstrating to the general public how higher education works and help students achieve sought-after

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3 AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider is a coauthor of both the Essential Learning Outcomes and the Degree Qualifications Profile.
proficiencies. As Paul Gaston notes in a recent article in Change magazine, much of the ill will toward higher education in the United States results from confusion around two key questions: “First, what do universities do and how well do they do it? Second, what do degrees mean in terms of what students know and are able to do?” When it comes to answering these questions, Gaston continues, “the two most productive initiatives have been those undertaken respectively by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and by Lumina Foundation. . . . Taken together, these two largely complementary undertakings are important steps towards a shared vocabulary of college degrees and what they are meant to signify.”

Today, as educational professionals and policy makers alike worry about the numbers of students who get derailed when they transfer back and forth among two-year and four-year institutions, it is more important than ever to focus on helping students move from place to place and still obtain quality credentials in a timely manner. In this context, AAC&U and the state systems and campuses participating in the QC project hypothesized that the new DQP framework could help faculty and administrators work more effectively together on behalf of their students. As educators move toward agreement on a profile of the learning that ought to be achieved by the time a student completes a degree, we must ensure that these shared expectations will help institutions agree on common learning goals without limiting students’ capacity to take different pathways to achieve those learning outcomes.

Two Strands of Work: Assessment and Faculty Leadership

The QC campus dyads of established two-year and four-year transfer partners were in very different stages of thinking about their existing transfer processes and whether alternative approaches might be useful. Most participants had little experience with the DQP, but many were familiar with the LEAP ELOs. The earlier work many of these institutions had conducted with each other as transfer partners, and their previous involvement with the LEAP initiative, enabled their team members to more readily understand the purposes of the QC project and to more quickly develop collaboration, mutual respect, and trust among themselves.

The QC project set out to test the usefulness of the DQP framework for re-envisioning existing transfer practices to see how they might affect transfer assessment, faculty engagement, and state- and system-level policy. In addition, the QC project leaders worked with state-level systems leaders in order to explore the ways in which they might influence policies and practices that could bring the work of the participating local campus experiences with the DQP and LEAP ELOs to a larger set of institutions and stakeholders, and encourage broader attention to the importance of demonstrating student learning in ways that go beyond the use of narrow measures as proxies for learning, such as credit hours.

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QC project participants started by exploring ways to modify existing transfer policies and practices so that they would be based on demonstrated proficiency of learning outcomes, rather than on course completion and grades alone. In Indiana, for example, the transfer work revolved around a newly mandated state general education transfer curriculum; in Massachusetts, it evolved in the context of an annual statewide report on student performance; and in Kentucky and Utah, the project focused on bringing expected levels of performance on learning outcomes for majors into alignment with broader institutional outcomes expected for all students.

One focal point for the QC project was the assessment of transfer students’ proficiencies in relation to the DQP descriptors of expected learning at each degree level. However, as explained in chapter 1, faculty leadership and judgment proved critical to determining the assessment strategies to emphasize across institutional cultural contexts. The project participants did not develop new assessment tools to measure student progress. Instead, they adapted approaches and assessment instruments already in use at their institutions in order to shift the focus of institutional measurement from the accumulation of seat time and credit hours, which often are divorced from any actual demonstration of learning, to what students can do with their learning.

Transfer articulation agreements too often treat the course credit as an “island” on its own, rather than as a place where learning outcomes and student abilities are achieved and demonstrated. Ultimately, the DQP prompts educators to move from counting courses to determining proficiency through evidence drawn from the assessment of authentic student work. If faculty and institutions were to focus on the transferable nature of learning and the development of outcomes over time as students progress from lower to higher levels of performance, then transfer, completion, and such functions as placement and advising could be based on students’ demonstration of proficiencies as well as credit and course accumulation.

What Follows
This report identifies both assessment of student learning proficiency and faculty leadership development as foundational to student transfer reform, and each requires the other to be successful. However, it does so in a way that allows readers to follow each strand. In addition to the multiple campus and state-level examples that are included in the following chapters, AAC&U’s website contains additional resources from the QC project that may be useful to anyone wishing to explore the DQP, LEAP, or faculty leadership development and assessment of student learning (http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/projects/quality-collaboratives/resources-for-participants).

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5 AAC&U’s Faculty Collaboratives project is creating a set of dynamic hubs developed and curated by faculty in ten separate states that have been actively engaged with the LEAP initiative for many years; the goal is to share with a nationwide audience the local work that has been successful in enhancing student learning and faculty leadership development.
Chapter 1 focuses on a pervasive theme among the QC campuses: the centrality of faculty in any effort to utilize or implement a proficiency-based approach to student learning outcomes, including the use of learning outcomes as a basis for student transfer. The role of all faculty members (tenured, tenure track, adjunct, contract, full time, and part time) was recognized and explored across the project. The QC project revealed a set of opportunities for institutions and states to engage faculty members, regardless of their rank or status. The QC project participants employed a range of actions, strategies, and professional development practices that helped faculty recognize the potential value of the DQP as a useful framework for collaborative work related to student transfer and learning.

Chapter 2 shifts to an examination of the strategies used by the QC participants to facilitate collaboration to improve student transfer assessment practices. The participants began by considering their institutions’ existing practices. This chapter identifies a variety of approaches for measuring learning and engaging faculty in order both to enhance cross-campus collaboration and to use the DQP to stretch or expand the conceptualization of assessment and its role in transfer. Using the principles of the DQP framework to reconceptualize the assessment of student learning was a challenge for participants who had built transfer articulation structures on the credit hour and course catalog categories, but promising approaches emerged through the QC project.

Chapter 3 addresses the opportunities and challenges that arise when faculty are no longer defined as solo actors, but rather as part of a shared community entrusted with constructing purposeful educational pathways and determining the key learning expectations of degree programs. Just as student learning is a social activity conducted within a broad community, faculty leadership is a social process within a community of colleagues. The twin concepts of shared responsibility and collective sense-making are central to faculty leadership and critical to students’ attainment of learning competencies.

Finally, the concluding chapter looks specifically at how the DQP was used on different campuses and highlights recommendations for introducing the DQP in ways that enhance faculty engagement. A flowchart depicting the overarching themes, components, and key dimensions that emerged from the QC project provides a visual guide to the learning process (see fig. 1, page 6). Two companion booklets have been developed from the flowchart; one focused on the action steps associated with collaborative change, and the other on assessment strategies that work.

One of the key discoveries of the QC project was that, in different yet complementary ways, the DQP and the LEAP ELOs both encourage greater emphasis on actual student work that demonstrates what students can do with their learning. The project produced a rich array of practices and resources that may help others as they consider alternatives to credit accumulation and seat time as proxies for the learning all students—including transfer students—need to succeed.
INITIATING A PROJECT
Set a collaborative tone early in the process

ACTION STEPS AND PROCESSES TO EFFECT CHANGE WITHIN AND ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

• Include project faculty and staff in the grant application process
• Schedule early conversations with multiple project stakeholders

INTEGRATED AND MULTISTAGE PROJECT DESIGN

Build a team that...
• seeks balance with different types of participating faculty and includes senior academic leaders who can help build intracampus and intercampus support
• schedules formal and informal convenings to strengthen existing relationships across departments, campuses, etc.
• connects its work to other top strategic priorities and plans and starts with work already valuable and familiar to faculty and staff
• helps faculty move from “my students” to “our students”

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

OUTCOMES

Increased levels of respect and trust among colleagues
for Advancing Transfer Student Success

Proactively coordinate and connect multiple initiatives

- Conduct an institutional inventory of similar initiatives and relevant campus structures and goals
- Clarify for faculty, staff, and policy makers how project work fits with existing work

Maximize engagement based on assessment and collaborative capacity

- Inventory faculty and staff who are familiar with campus change mechanisms
- Begin with a small team of enthusiastic leaders who can lay groundwork for expansion
- Define expected project outcomes as a team

Intentionally calibrate the work of multiple initiatives by organizing a project that...

- aligns with disciplines already engaged in similar work
- is anchored in data-sharing agreements and learning management systems to propel the work forward
- repeatedly uses statewide convenings to connect initiatives
- leverages funds from other projects

Design a project, with end goals in mind, that...

- repeatedly emphasizes and clarifies the overall project goals, and that introduces change slowly and deliberately
- intentionally structures relevant activities (e.g., curriculum mapping work) to build faculty capacity
- scaffolds faculty/staff workshops and other project activities over time (i.e., assignments ➔ assessments ➔ student pathways and program design)

Sustainable, scalable projects embedded in and connected to institutional goals and other related initiatives

Increased understanding and new avenues to extend project work more broadly, engaging larger groups of stakeholders