

# WT 125 White Paper

## Affiliation Has Its Benefits

### Abstract:

This paper lays out seven potential categories of benefits that could be pursued through affiliations between the panhandle community colleges and West Texas A&M University. The purposes of such agreements would be to develop more effective and efficient transfer of students from community college to university, as well as to support other shared priorities in regional economic development.

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### Introduction:

Formal affiliation agreements are commonplace today within the field of healthcare, among others industries. They serve to provide stable foundations for the two parties to build on each other's strengths to the benefit of the communities they serve (The Advisory Board, 2014). What might be accomplished if such an approach to providing undergraduate higher education was adopted in the Texas Panhandle?

West Texas A&M University, Amarillo College, Clarendon College, and Frank Phillips College already share responsibility for this region's public undergraduate education. All four institutions are supported by Texas taxpayers and live under governance of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) as well as being accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Each institution's talent and assets belong to the public and exist for the common good of Texans.

Further, waning state financial support and the growing student debt burden are pressuring all four institutions to find more efficient ways of operating. Sharing and leveraging resources of various types would seem to be wise for many reasons.

Last, if the affiliations were clearly linked to the need to facilitate movement of baccalaureate-bound students through community colleges to the university, that goal would provide the focus needed to guide the structure of the affiliation agreement; giving it purpose and longevity.

# WT 125 White Paper

This analysis will lay out seven (7) types of collaboration that could facilitate the establishment of guided pathways and bring together the resources needed to be successful. These agreements would be intended as long-term affiliations establishing “deep partnerships” between each community college on the one hand, and WT on the other. Taken together, these would operate as a regional workforce development structure.

To be clear, the assumption of this paper is that the agreements would be bi-lateral, between WT and each community college district separately. That would allow each agreement to contain features that would not be appropriate or desirable with a different community college partner. When it makes sense to standardize particular features of the agreements across all partners, such could also be easily accommodated.

## **Alignment of Curriculum:**

*Guided Pathways* - While much work is now underway to align degree plans from community colleges with those of the universities, this work might be enhanced with an agreement that establishes a “deep partnership.” Issues that presently exist regarding where particular courses are taught (sophomore or junior level, for example) could be decided jointly.

Curricular changes at one or the other institution could be identified and communicated quickly, reducing confusion for transferring students. Joint data-exchange projects could result in automated degree plans that would quickly and clearly show transfer students how their courses would fit into a university degree. [Note: such a database already exists in rudimentary fashion at WT, but could be improved if the project was shared by both partners.]

*Moving from Transfer to Articulation* – The problems of a decade ago pertained to the transfer of courses from the community college to the university. Today, with legislative mandates in existence, there are few challenges getting courses to transfer. But there are new problems. Community college students are arriving with 90 or more credits when they transfer. Virtually all the credits “transfer” but only 42 are necessary to satisfy the “core” in a standard degree plan. This situation results in “excessive credits” (credits that do not apply to the program of study at the university) and have various negative impacts on students. Sometimes community college and university programs of study lack coherent alignment, making it difficult for a transfer student to matriculate smoothly into particular university programs.

## WT 125 White Paper

Deep affiliations should look beyond the 42-hour general education core, to see that the core hours transferred apply in the most efficient manner possible to the particular intended university degree. Advising at the community college could become a more closely-shared task with both the university and community college working together.

*Pipelines through WT to Flagship University Graduate Programs* – While WT is considering expanding its doctoral programs, there will remain the need for some regional students to gain access to professional programs at Texas A&M University or elsewhere. If structured properly WT, as the regional university partner, could become an “on-ramp” for highly competitive students to enter professional graduate programs through specific preferred admission agreements. This program already exists with Texas A&M, assuring WT a guaranteed number of slots in highly competitive professional programs. WT has shown how effectively it prepares outstanding students for these programs, often securing more than the guaranteed number of admitted students. With formal affiliations the existence of local talent pipelines could be even more clearly visible within the region.

### **Facilitated Admission:**

Although many agreements have been developed over the years with the intention to smooth the path between community college and university, little meaningful change beyond core transfer of credits has occurred. With the maturing of the information age and its many capabilities, information sharing between institutions is possible, but such opportunities have not been developed. The “on-boarding” process for transfer students could be substantially improved if the expectation of all parties (student, community college and university) is that students will transfer. This expectations would likely result in information exchange protocols that reduce the burden on students to pass information between the two institutions. For example, the typical university admission process must be initiated by the student, and all necessary information must then be provided by the student, even though almost all of it resides at the community college already. Furthermore, all transcripts of any prior college attendance must be provided by the student to the university, despite the fact that it was likely already provided to the community college.

*Pre-populated Admissions Applications* - With proper approval and data security, information could be pre-populated in a student’s admission application and a considerable amount of information needed to grant admission could be obtained directly from the community college. Perhaps through dual admission agreements the formal admission process could be eliminated at the point of transfer altogether.

# WT 125 White Paper

*Financial Aid Applications* – If dual admission programs were established, financial aid processes could be improved by having one institution process the aid for both sides (as is presently done by Texas A&M University-College Station for certain Blinn College students.) This would better align the process to the actual enrollment patterns of transfer students, who “swirl” back and forth between institutions and often take courses at both simultaneously.

Certainly the opportunities to prepopulate financial aid application information exist. It might be possible to embed scholarship application processes in the aid process, further simplifying the transition for students and clarifying the actual out-of-pocket cost to the student.

## **Instructional Exchanges:**

Small rural community colleges sometimes find it difficult to provide faculty for particular critical, but low-enrollment, courses. These shortages can threaten the existence of certain programs at that college. Through various faculty-sharing approaches the resources of the university might fill that gap. This helps both partners since it assures that the courses (e.g. Physics or Math) will match the curriculum of the university and that students will successfully complete their studies at the community college before transferring.

Use of instructional innovations like “Instructor/Coach” models or “Flipped Classroom” pedagogy could assist this kind of program. Further, to build these kind of opportunities would likely result in tighter working relationships and mutual respect between faculty at both institutions. WT’s *Education on Demand* program has already demonstrated success at such innovations; more widely demonstrating these successes would encourage broader adoption across the university.

## **Student Support:**

With the benefit of a shared vision and stable agreements, the two institutions could share advisors, instructors and even library resources, providing more university services on the community college campuses. Grant programs could be placed on these campuses to address particular needs of 1<sup>st</sup> generation students.

This approach could mature into “mini-branch campuses” on the campus of each affiliated community college that could raise the visibility of the university in that local community.

# WT 125 White Paper

## **Joint Community Development/Fund Raising:**

Communities already provide considerable support to their local high school graduates through scholarships. With an affiliation agreement to underpin the commitment of the two higher education institutions, both could freely share local scholarship campaign goals and facilitate smooth transitions for the students between the community college and university. Money raised in the local communities could track with those students through their community college and on to WT.

The partners could encourage and support local leadership development targeted to outstanding high school students. For example, if a local community established a “Leaders of Tomorrow” program with top high school juniors (focused on understanding how their community works, and how it interconnects with the rest of the world), that program could become a community-supported pipeline that would rally local scholarship support, encourage their top students to study at the partner institutions and therefore support the long-term future interests of the community itself.

This program would need to be led and operated by “locals” but it would also be helpful if interested WT alumni residing in that community were to be active in the effort.

## **Joint Economic Development:**

There is growing awareness across the country of the power of colleges and universities to stimulate economic growth. Aligning the focus of both institutions on this important priority would allow university expertise to join local grassroots efforts with the community colleges serving as conveners. The community colleges have tight relationships with local interests and the university can bring incredible expertise and connections to the table. The result would be a localized impact that could breathe energy and resources into communities that may be stagnant or in decline. Further, the university has a broad, regional mission that can be leveraged to bring together the various community colleges (and the communities they serve) into discussions with much broader reach than presently occurs.

## **Public Affiliation:**

The public message delivered by high-profile attention to such formal affiliations can be powerful, lending credibility to the community college and favor to the university. Community colleges have a local mission; affiliating with a university brings regional gravitas to the college’s reputation. Likewise, universities are often seen as distant and

# WT 125 White Paper

disinterested in matters of local concern. Such visible alliances would be seen favorably by taxpayers and other community members.

**Figure One: Possible wording of public message**



Affiliated with West Texas A&M University

## **Recommendations/Suggested Next Steps:**

Discussions with the three panhandle community colleges might be initiated to assess their level of interest in this approach. There would likely be legal matters to be considered, as well as a need to determine the initial features of the affiliation with each community college.

## **Conclusion:**

In an environment characterized by shrinking resources, expanding needs, and growing public cynicism, affiliations might be the ideal structural development to assure the public institutions of higher education in the Texas panhandle can meet our mission into the future.

## **References/Works Cited:**

The Advisory Board Company. (2014, October, 23). *The field guide to hospital partnership and affiliation models*. Retrieved from <https://www.advisory.com/research/health-care-advisory-board/resources/2014/posters/the-field-guide-to-partnerships-and-affiliations>