

Transferability and Articulation Agreements for Online Science Lab Courses

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The case for articulation agreements

Modern-day consumer culture and increased mobility have greatly impacted higher education. Many students believe that paying for their own education means they should have more say as to how they learn. And because they are more mobile, students want the option to move effortlessly between institutions.

The millions of students taking online courses today provides some evidence that students are aware of the value proposition in flexibility and overall cost savings that online education provides. For instance, increasing numbers of students are choosing to begin their post-secondary education at 2-year institutions. By completing some of their credits at a community college and then transferring to a four-year college or university, students can save on tuition.

However, today's students can be challenged with institutional limitations:

“Note: Transfer credit will not be awarded for a course taken online or at a junior or community college.” (Trinity College, Duke University, 2015)

The credit would transfer as open credit or electives.” (West Virginia University, 2015)

“Currently, on-line versions of all Lab Science courses, International Affairs, Psychology, Economics and courses equivalent to HIST 2111 and HIST 2112 are not eligible for transfer credit consideration.” (Georgia Institute of Technology, 2015)

More than ever, higher education has an opportunity to provide greater access and pathways to degrees and to prepare students to compete in a global economy. Effective use of technology and resources can help make this a reality. The question before higher education essentially is one of balance. The concerns of administrators for sustainability and securing resources, the role of faculty in making academic decisions, the prerequisites of future employers, and the desires of student consumers are all factors to consider.

The appeal of articulation agreements

Because tuition is a primary concern of campus leaders, student consumers have gained a powerful position within the market. Articulation agreements that clearly outline transfer policies for academic programs or degrees have become an important resource for colleges and universities. Students and their parents are more likely to consider schools that have articulation agreements to help students maximize transfer credit, save money, and ease the transition. Most college articulation agreements are either limited to colleges within a specific geographic area or between all of the public community colleges and public four-year colleges in a state's system. However, more recently, there has been an increase in partnerships between community colleges and private non-profit and for-profit institutions.

The presence of an articulation agreement between institutions does not guarantee all courses will transfer, nor does it guarantee the

credit will transfer for an equivalent course. Most recently, battle lines have been drawn between many 4-year partnering institutions as to the acceptable delivery method for credits to transfer (courses delivered online will not transfer). The consequence of this is that 2-year institutions removed the delivery method from student transcripts.

The battle has escalated as 4-year institutions have begun denying transfer credits based on any suspicion that a course may have been delivered online. This battle demonstrates both faculty skepticism for online education and a lack of trust between partnering institutions. Ironically, in some cases, a 4-year institution will offer online courses while denying transfer credits of the same or similar online courses from a 2-year institution. This shows a breakdown in communication between the partnering institutions, with the students caught in the middle. Or are they?

Let's return to the consumer culture and mobility of this generation of students. Both students and institutions are responsible for the shift, feeding off of the prevailing consumer culture of today. Students who opt for programs that will permit transfer of online credits affect the potential growth of the institution unwilling to accept the credits. Institutions responsive to the students benefit with increases in enrollment and revenue growth. This is not to say institutions should accept any credit for transfer simply to boost enrollment and revenue—that leads to the devaluation of higher education.

Given the existing context and pressures facing institutions, it would be advantageous to learn from states, systems, and institutions that are addressing the culture of this generation of students while maintaining the fundamental mission and values of higher education.

Expanding articulation agreements to include online courses

A handful of institutions have found value in coming to the table and expanding articulation agreements to incorporate online course delivery.

Some 4-year institutions have such well-defined articulation agreements that community colleges act as feeder schools for them. These agreements result from strong, well-developed partnerships between the administration and, in most cases, faculty of the institutions involved. Some statewide articulation agreements have come from pressures by state departments of higher education and governors' offices; the results are positive, providing the institutions and students transparent conduits for articulation.

With respect to online lab-based science courses, willingly coming together to openly discuss concerns and options is the first, most significant step toward achieving an articulation agreement that incorporates the acceptance of these course credits. Faculty invited to the meetings will most likely be scientists and customarily judge the validity of a claim based on objective empirical evidence. Accordingly, anticipating questions and providing reputable documentation that addresses concerns is essential.

It is not surprising that most of the concerns among the faculty will revolve around the laboratory experience for students. Developing a robust, detailed plan for incorporating the laboratory experience that includes the majority of the learning outcomes from the opposing institution is valuable. A good rule of thumb is to reach for no less than an 80% match of learning outcomes between the partnering institutions. Integrating well-designed labs using distance learning kits for the hands-on, inquiry component to online science courses will foster the essential lab skills and learning outcomes most programs require.

The state of Colorado is a prime example of articulation agreements that have successfully integrated online delivery of lab-based science courses. The Colorado Department of Higher Education, in conjunction with the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, played an integral role in mediating and bringing together the Colorado Community College System and the 4-year public institutions within the state. Statewide transfer articulation agreements were already in place; however, these were renegotiated to include the online delivery of lab-based science courses at the community colleges.

The key to prospering in this academic environment is for campus leaders to create a nexus between the mobile student consumer and academic requirements while maintaining the fundamental mission and values of higher education. Agreement on mission provides the trust for various stakeholders to work together and move forward.

The national movement to expand and better prepare a STEM workforce is driving more students to the sciences and to online lab-based science courses. Cooperation and innovation between institutions is invaluable. Well-defined articulation agreements featuring courses delivered online provides a lucrative balance for students, faculty, and administrators.

About the Author

Norma Hollebeke brings more than 20 years of higher education experience to Carolina Distance Learning™. Prior to joining Carolina, Norma was the Associate Dean of Science with CCCOnline, a division of the Colorado Community College System, where she was instrumental in building strategic partnerships and negotiating articulation agreements for online science programs. She has a proven track record of developing and directing national STEM educational programs.

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