

## INTRODUCTION

# Starting the Journey



This book is about the journey to establish Pathways, a set of policies designed to facilitate students' transfer of credits among the colleges of The City University of New York (CUNY), a complex university consisting of many different colleges. This journey was filled with controversy and conflict, frequently played out in the media, with struggles primarily between administrators and faculty.

The size and complexity of CUNY provided a large landscape within which the conflict and controversy occurred. CUNY, a public university with relatively low-cost programs, is the third-largest university, and the largest urban university, in the United States. It encompasses 24 colleges and freestanding professional schools (19 of them serving undergraduates), which together enroll over 270,000 students in credit-bearing courses (over 240,000 of these students are undergraduates), along with about 250,000 more students in non-credit-bearing courses. There are over 7,500 full-time faculty, over 11,000 part-time faculty, and over 13,000 staff.<sup>1</sup> In sum, well over half a million people are formally associated with CUNY at any one time. There are close to 1.3 million CUNY alumni/ae.<sup>2</sup> Speak with anyone living in the New York metropolitan area and either that person or a relative or a friend of that person is or has been associated with CUNY.

CUNY has always provided a route to the American dream for many thousands of New Yorkers, New Yorkers seeking to step up through education. Currently, the CUNY undergraduate student population consists of 58 percent students from underrepresented groups (black and Hispanic), 45 percent students for whom English is not their first language, 42 percent students who are the first in their families to attend college, and 58 percent students who are recipients of the federal financial aid known as Pell Grants<sup>3</sup> (i.e., these students' families have significantly limited financial resources).

CUNY is a critical piece of the foundation of New York City, providing education, research, and service to New Yorkers.

Yet the story of CUNY is not all positive. Although they are rising, current undergraduate graduation rates are low. Currently, a total of 54 percent

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of students who enter CUNY's bachelor's-degree programs receive a CUNY bachelor's degree within six years, and for associate's-degree programs, which are intended to take two years, only 18 percent of students graduate within three years. The low associate's-degree rate is partly due to students transferring to CUNY's bachelor's-degree programs before earning their associate's degrees. But even six years after entry, only 32 percent of CUNY students who started in associate's-degree programs have earned either an associate's or a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup>

These graduation rates are similar to those of other urban public colleges and universities around the United States. But that doesn't make them acceptable. In the words of William G. Bowen and Eugene M. Tobin in their insightful book *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education*, "If we are going to increase the fraction of the population with college degrees to as much as 60 or 70 percent . . . and provide meaningful opportunities for upward mobility, the heaviest lifting will have to be done by the less privileged and less well-resourced institutions that serve so many of our students."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, similar to the great majority of institutions of higher education in this country, CUNY is continuously trying to find ways to increase graduation rates while simultaneously maintaining or raising standards.

For decades CUNY has targeted what happens to CUNY students' credits when they transfer within the system as an important factor in CUNY's graduation rates. Chapter 2 of this book describes the history of the attempts to facilitate credit transfer at CUNY, and the particular events leading up to our (the CUNY central administration's) 2010 decision that a new attempt was needed. Chapter 1 describes a pivotal moment in the project—the June 2011 approval by the CUNY Board of Trustees of the resolution establishing the Pathways policies, the formal start of the project. That chapter introduces most of the people who played significant roles in the Pathways Project, and in the associated controversy, as well as introducing the content of the Pathways policies. Chapters 3–10 describe how that resolution was formulated and then how it was carried out. These chapters also recount how, along the way to full implementation, and even afterward, there was significant faculty resistance, in addition to some significant support from faculty, students, administrators/staff, and members of the higher education community outside CUNY. Chapter 11 describes the legal actions taken against the Pathways initiative and their outcomes, and chapter 12 gives my views regarding what can be learned from the Pathways Project. Finally, the epilogue describes some of what has happened in the higher

education community, at CUNY, and among the main people involved in the origins of Pathways since the full implementation of Pathways in fall 2013.

In telling what happened during the establishment of Pathways (e.g., in chapter 1), I have chosen to present the material as a narrative, told from my point of view. At other times, in providing background for and interpretation of the initiative (e.g., in chapter 2), I have chosen to present the material in a more formal way, similar to the approach that would be taken in an academic journal. This use of different styles in the book arises from my wish to present as full as possible an accounting of what happened and why it happened. Events are not separable from the people who create and witness them, and thus understanding the interactions of people with their environments and with each other is key to understanding the events in which these people are involved. Such information can often best be conveyed as a nonfictional narrative that attempts to convey the experiences of the story's participants. This information then becomes the source material—the raw data—for the book's, and readers', more academic analyses and interpretations of the lessons learned and policy implications of the events.

Two early chapters—2 and 3—contain much information about why we formulated the Pathways resolution as we did—the history and events at CUNY that helped to shape the resolution. Here in this introduction it may be useful to give a brief description of the national context for our work, as well as how little we, and others, actually knew about transfer at the time that we started formulating the Pathways resolution in the fall of 2010.

At that time, as well as before and since, looming over public higher education in the United States was the urgent need to find ways to compensate for the continuing decline of state funding. At least since 1990, across the United States, state funding per college student had decreased, particularly following the start of the recession in 2008. Public institutions of higher education were compensating for these decreases with increasing tuition<sup>6</sup> and by becoming more efficient. Awareness of the low graduation rates of these institutions was also increasing,<sup>7</sup> putting state funding of these institutions in further jeopardy. Tying funding to target graduation rates—performance-based funding—was therefore being instituted in many states.<sup>8</sup> Putting some courses online was seen by some as one way, under some conditions, to deliver effective higher education at lower cost. However, many faculty were questioning the ability of these courses to deliver a learning experience as effective as that provided by face-to-face courses.<sup>9</sup> Adding further pressure to this situation, research was predicting an increasing need for college degrees in the workforce.<sup>10</sup>

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Awareness was just beginning to dawn in higher education that more effective credit transfer could offer another way to increase degree production without increasing funding per student. As of June 2011, when the CUNY Board of Trustees passed the Pathways resolution, transfer had certainly been discussed nationally, although it was not a top-five subject on almost anyone's list. National surveys of transfer policies had been conducted.<sup>11</sup> Researchers had observed that students who began in an associate's-degree program at a community college were less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than comparable students who started in a bachelor's-degree program, but it was not yet entirely clear why.<sup>12</sup> Other researchers were examining what sorts of students transferred and under what conditions.<sup>13</sup> There was some publicity about a few states, such as California, instituting transfer policies,<sup>14</sup> and researchers were starting to look at the effect of articulation agreements on credit transfer.<sup>15</sup> One timely publication presented best practices for facilitating credit transfer. These best practices included making the transfer credit rules simpler and more transparent and standardizing the curriculum, both for general education courses and for a major's initial courses at different colleges.<sup>16</sup> All of this information was useful. However, it was not absolutely convincing that reviewing and overhauling their transfer policies needed to be near the top of every college's and university's priority list.

As a result of the increasing funding constraints and the pressures on degree production, at the time of Pathways' inception some leaders were calling for significant change in higher education. Yet there was concern about the ability of higher education to make the changes needed.<sup>17</sup> Supervision of higher education faculty has long been described as "herding cats," and there is that old joke: "Question: How many faculty members does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Change?"<sup>18</sup> Shared governance, a foundational concept for most nonprofit colleges and universities in the United States (see chapter 12), has meant that at least some faculty, as well as some of their administrators, have seen the faculty as having a say, or even a final say, in all academic decisions. Such decisions include those about how to make degree delivery more efficient and/or effective. Similar to most people, in some situations, some (and that some can be a big number) faculty resist change. But whereas in other employment sectors an employee can be overruled by his or her supervisor, higher education faculty—who are frontline in the classrooms and who, because of tenure, outlast most administrators—are in an unusual situation: if they really don't want something to happen, sometimes it doesn't. Thus there were concerns that the changes higher education needed to make would not, and perhaps could not, be made.

At CUNY in the fall of 2010, when we first started formulating the Pathways resolution, we were aware of, and influenced by, all of these pressures for change in higher education. We certainly expressed the need to provide better education for more students at the same or a lower cost. And we certainly had some awareness of how difficult making such changes could be. However, when it came to Pathways, the primary driving force for us was a much more specific one—a concern for the welfare of our students who were being harmed by an often nonfunctional credit-transfer system—and we were determined to remove that harm no matter how difficult that might be.

Nevertheless, comparable to the extent of knowledge about transfer across the United States, our specific knowledge about transfer at CUNY at that time was rather limited. For example, we knew that, at CUNY, approximately ten thousand students were transferring among our colleges each fall alone,<sup>19</sup> and we knew that many of their credits were not transferring as they were supposed to transfer (as general education or major credits), or they were not transferring at all (students were not receiving any credit for many courses taken prior to their transferring). However, we had no idea how big “many” was.

We also knew that everyone said that lack of credit transfer was the biggest student complaint and had been for decades. But “everyone said” does not constitute evidence. Further, we knew that there had been many attempts to institute policies to fix the alleged problems. But just because some people have been trying to fix something doesn’t mean that it needs fixing. We knew that New York State Education Law required that CUNY “maintain its close articulation between senior and community college units . . . [and] maintain the university as an integrated system and . . . facilitate articulation between units,”<sup>20</sup> and that our major accreditor and the Chair of the New York State Assembly Higher Education Committee Deborah Glick had said that we had a problem that needed fixing, but none of that constituted evidence that there was a problem. In fall 2010 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* had published a diagram showing what many people would call breathtaking inconsistencies in how a single course would transfer among the different CUNY colleges.<sup>21</sup> But that was one course at one college, and no one knew how many people had tried to transfer that course to each of the eighteen other colleges and what had been the actual result.

All we knew about CUNY’s situation when we started working on Pathways was pretty much contained in the report that Associate University Provost Julia Wrigley had written<sup>22</sup> (discussed further in chapter 3). That report showed that

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when transfer students were awarded bachelor's degrees, they tended to have more excess credits than so-called native students, but the difference was small and there were a number of possible explanations for that difference. The report also gave many examples of courses whose credits, according to specifics listed in CUNY's transfer software system, would transfer inconsistently among the different CUNY colleges. However, as with our limited knowledge about the course in the *Chronicle* diagram, we didn't actually know how often those course transfers occurred, nor did we know the actual result (we were looking at what the software said should happen, not what actually happened). Julia's report also discussed the existing policies' inconsistent treatment of students in different degree programs, the fact that the entire credit-transfer system was built on a principle of subjective judgments as to whether courses from different colleges matched, and the delays students experienced in trying to get their credits evaluated when they transferred to a new college. Much of this information came from focus groups that Julia convened, as well as from some discussions with faculty. The report also emphasized that articulation agreements were too piecemeal to deal with the problems, which needed a comprehensive solution.

In summary, at the beginning of the project, there was an overwhelming amount of smoke, but little in the way of visible, quantifiable fire. Little quantitative evidence. And no rigorous quantitative evidence. We talked many times about how to obtain such evidence. We thought we needed to have someone study hundreds of students' transcripts one by one to see what sort of credits the students did or did not retain when they transferred. But this would have taken months of work by a highly trained and dedicated person, working only on that task, and we didn't have such a person to spare for that amount of time.

In February of 2011, CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, headed by University Dean David Crook, released critical data (obtained by Director of Policy Analysis Colin Chellman using linear probability models and logistic regression) demonstrating that, all else being equal (i.e., taking into account all measurable demographic and performance characteristics), CUNY's transfer students were at a disadvantage in terms of graduation compared to native students. Transfer students' credits weren't propelling them to graduation as much as was the case for native students. More specifically, a one standard deviation increase in credits accumulated led to a 38 percent greater chance of graduating for native students compared to only 20 percent for transfer students.<sup>23</sup> These data strongly suggested that transfer students'

credits weren't counting as effectively toward graduation requirements as were those of native students. But there were other possible explanations (e.g., transfer students might have been more likely to change their major, so that credits they had taken in their first major wouldn't help them to graduate), and in any case we didn't yet have these data when we wrote the first draft of the Pathways Board of Trustees resolution.

Not only were we lacking extensive data supporting our beginning work on Pathways, we also had little idea of how we were going to carry out what we were planning. From the first draft of the resolution in the winter of 2010–2011, we planned to establish extremely large faculty committees, drawn from all the undergraduate colleges, to approve CUNY-wide general education courses. We also planned to support many other faculty in their recommending CUNY-wide eligible general education courses, and in their changing some general education and major programs. Though we did consult with people who had taken similar actions at other universities, none of us had ever done anything quite like this before, and no one had ever done anything like this at CUNY. We knew where we had to go, but not exactly how we were going to get there. We had to trust in ourselves that we would figure it out as we went along, taking one step at a time. As it turned out, there were many surprises along the way for which no one could have been prepared.

In many ways, what we did and why we did it entailed a leap of faith, faith that was certainly not shared by everyone. In retrospect, the amount that we knew about transfer at CUNY was barely sufficient to have justified our embarking on the Pathways journey that resulted in such a huge conflagration. However, in truth, though we realized that there would be significant resistance to what we were doing, none of us realized how much.

By the time the project was over, the national situation had changed significantly. Funding for public colleges and universities was still decreasing,<sup>24</sup> and there was still deep concern over low graduation rates.<sup>25</sup> None of that had changed. However, as described in the epilogue, credit transfer has become a much-discussed and much-investigated national topic in the drive to increase graduation rates while maintaining or decreasing the cost of higher education for students, institutions, and taxpayers. Further, most people at CUNY now accept that, pre-Pathways at least, CUNY had a transfer credit problem that needed fixing. We in the CUNY central administration certainly did not set out to provide an example of why change is needed in higher education, and how such changes might or might not be made, but in the end that is what we did.

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*Pathways to Reform* focuses on what happened from 2010 through 2013 when we were establishing the Pathways policies. My account of these events is based on my memories, backed up by documentation as much as possible (in addition to this book, please see my website, <http://awlogue.com/>, for many examples of this documentation and for additional resources concerning Pathways and transfer). And not only is much of what I report here from my own memory, but I have far too many memories to include in one book. Therefore I have had to be selective in what I have reported here and what I have not. As an experimental psychologist I am only too aware that memories can be distorted in myriad ways, and that my selections of what to report can be unconsciously, as well as consciously, biased. For all of these reasons, along with the fact that I wrote this book after I left the CUNY administration and became a CUNY research professor—with no interactions with anyone at CUNY regarding the book until after it was completed—any errors or misinterpretations or distortions in the book, as well as all views expressed, are entirely my own. I do not speak on behalf of CUNY in this book. But to the best of my ability, my report here is accurate. In some cases I have withheld people's names in order to help protect their confidentiality, but I have not changed any names. In cases in which I have used quotation marks, I have reliable documentation (not just my own memory) regarding what was actually written or said. When I have had access to a recording of an event or meeting, as well as a written transcript, I have relied on the former. Any grammatical or other errors in the quotations accurately represent errors in the originals. In cases in which I lack a recording or reliable written documentation, I have chosen not to use quotation marks and instead to paraphrase what I believe someone said. I have used endnotes only for publicly available documentation, not for my own memories, email content, or other informal documents. I also try to distinguish clearly between events and my opinions.

This book can be useful in helping readers to understand the issue of credit transfer—why it is important and what facilitates and hinders it, along with the sensitivities surrounding general education requirements. This book also provides considerable information about CUNY, an institution that has both similarities to and differences from other institutions of higher education. But it can also be helpful in elucidating why change is difficult to effect in higher education, the struggles over the authority to make change, and the ways in which change can be hindered or facilitated at our colleges and universities. I hope that this recounting of the Pathways journey will be useful to you.