

ACCREDITATION AND TRANSFER-OF-CREDIT PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS STUDYING IN TWO OR MORE INSTITUTIONS AND/OR COUNTRIES

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Abstract --- *The lack of common standards for accreditation of educational institutions or programs, and transferability of credit between institutions, greatly complicates the lives of students who attend more than one institution. The manner in which schools are accredited around the world differs greatly, especially with respect to admission criteria and transfer-of-credit between institutions. Although there are some movements by groups to establish a dialog on global accreditation possibilities, there are, at this time, no official agencies empowered to accredit schools on a worldwide level. The paper emphasizes how problems grow in complexity when working within a worldwide system. The problems colleges and universities face in assigning value to their courses can be very complex and is discussed in some detail. The paper stresses the student's responsibility to control her/his own information and presents practical ideas to improve their chances for maximum value for their education time, effort and money.*

Index Terms—Accreditation, international study, student responsibilities, transfer-of-credit problems

INTRODUCTION

On a recent trip to Germany, I rode along with several college students from Canada. They were touring Europe while on break from their studies in France. I asked them how they fared studying in a foreign country. The biggest problem they reported was the difficulty in transferring credit taken in Europe to an institution in their home country. One student testified that she had taken a full year of study, only to find that she could transfer just three credits to the University “at home” to which she had intended to go. Obviously this is an extreme example, but it does illustrate how crucial it is to understand the inherent problems involved with inter-institutional transfer of college credit. Experiences encountered while integrating international students into Saint Louis University has also brought to light serious problems encountered by international students. Due to a lack of any common standard in the structure of courses, transferring credit between educational institutions around the globe is complex and difficult.

TRANSFER OF CREDIT AND ACCREDITATION CONSIDERATIONS

Differences in the structure of courses

A lack of consistency exists among technology programs everywhere. The very nature of the structure and content of courses is purely arbitrary. It depends completely on the subjective will of the writer of curriculum for any given subject. Though the basic principles of a discipline are constant, the manner and order in which they are presented can vary greatly, even between courses of two different instructors at the same institution. The manner in which a course is titled is also arbitrary and, therefore, a great source of confusion to students and educators everywhere. Where in the scheme of a degree program a course is taught is also arbitrary. For example, some schools assign electrical engineering courses to their physics department while others may include them in a separate electrical engineering department. The availability and variety of texts for any given subject rise into the thousands, with new editions being published constantly. This multiplies the problem of matching courses to each other. Computer technologies present many difficulties. Keeping abreast of new technological developments and processes proceeds at different speeds, even within the departments of a single institution. Constant updates and rolling developments in computer hardware and software available keep educators and students stressed to learn new systems and techniques. This is multiplied when considered on a global level. One school may use the engineering software “PRO-E” where another uses “MATHCAD”. If a student transfers from one institution to another, he/she may be required to take the specific computer program course, regardless of the similarity of the course content. Credit for the original course may be denied. At this time there is no common standard of acceptability for these courses.

Administrative differences in transferring credit

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The academic positions of the personnel who analyze and allot transfer credit also vary arbitrarily. For example, Saint Louis University assigns the Department Chair and/or the Dean of the School or College to determine transferability of credit. At Webster University, within a few miles of Saint Louis University, the Registrar and/or the Dean of the School or College perform the same responsibility.

Institutions differ greatly with each other and within their own institutions over time. At our University, while one person was Department Chair he required students to take Physics I, II, and III from a local community college in order to receive credit for his department's Physics I and II. The following Department Chair accepted Physics I and II at the community college as credit for Physics I and II at our school. Such is the independent nature of the University Professor's position. There are differences in the way schools value transfer credits. Some schools will allow six hours for an "A" grade where others may allow only three. Some schools recognize grades with + or - appended. Within those schools the value allotted will vary.

Logistical and philosophical differences in transferring credit

Especially on the international level, there is difficulty sending and receiving requested transcripts between institutions. The need for original, unaltered transcripts, required by many institutions around the world makes delivery via postal services or delivery companies necessary. Time delays in processing requests and in the mailing process make the expedient receipt of transcripts and course descriptions cumbersome. Some schools cannot or will not provide the necessary information. Course preview for transfer may involve study of a course description, a course syllabus with the title of the course textbook or other criteria. Some evaluators are open to discussing the course content with the student. Some are not. Now that many schools publish much information on-line, it is easier for both students and administrators to obtain some information, but; information may not be available for many reasons.

National instability and civil war are not beyond the realm of possibility as problems. They could make the transfer of records extra difficult. The destruction of official records by wars or natural disasters also adds to the difficulty of getting records from other countries. This is a problem we faced personally when trying to help an international student at Saint Louis University some years ago. It is possible that the policy of a school is to issue only one official document, making it necessary for a requesting institution to accept a certified photocopy of a student's original documents. The strict guidelines held by some schools in the United States make the use of photocopies for the transfer of credit quite difficult. It is likely that international school records will be received in a language other than that spoken locally. It may be difficult or

impractical to translate transcripts and course descriptions. There is also the problem of inconsistency in the recording of records. Some institutions use a transcript while others issue a diploma or certificate. This is a problem at both ends of the process. If a school issued a diploma as an official record, and the school to which the course is transferred accepts only transcripts, problems arise. The reverse is also obviously true.

One school may accept 40 hours of credit with 25 hours relevant to the student's degree. Another school may accept 10 hours with all of them relevant to the student's degree and allow a student to request exemption exams for other courses not directly transferred. Some will give 10 hours with no other grace. These problems lead to what are called "shoppers." These students shop around looking for the best deals. This is a greater problem when schools will not evaluate transfer credits until a student actually makes an application. The manner in which an institution organizes its courses can differ completely from one country to another. In China, for example, students begin high school and complete study equal to an associate's degree. All their records are kept on one transcript without an indication of their level. An evaluator must know to count semesters back. Since in this case the record is entered by years as opposed to semesters, this is not intuitive. Some courses appear to be repeats but are, in fact, upper division college courses.

Global differences in accreditation practices

Another problem is that the manner in which schools are accredited differs around the world, especially with respect to admission criteria and transfer of credit between institutions. Schools in the United States accredit schools regionally. The United States Department of Education lists agencies that are acceptable by them to accredit institutions. Within regions there are divisions of categories of schools, such as Aviation, Nursing, etc., that have their own accrediting bodies. International schools, as a general rule are accredited by their country's Ministry of Education. At this time there are no agencies empowered to accredit schools on an international level. It is unlikely that such a body will soon come into existence. These many inconsistencies between countries complicate transfers.

One agency, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars & Admissions Officers (AACRAO), serves as an example of some of the problems that exist in the realm of accreditation. It has an office of international education services whose responsibility is to determine admission of international students to United States schools and the transferability of credit from international institutions. Problems encountered by this group are common to other educational situations. Publications to process the necessary information are extensive and expensive. Since this agency, (and others world wide) is supported by members, its funds are limited. This leads to other problems. Instead of

purchasing new documents, old ones are kept and used until obsolete and filled with outdated material. Lack of funds leads to a lack of sufficient personnel to process the number of requests they receive. It takes little imagination to realize the staggering complexity involved in running such an agency and why they are limited in their ability to help students.

Another agency, World Education Services (WES) provides some guidelines for the transfer of credit between international schools. Most of their work is with student exchange programs. This service, however, can be quite expensive to students.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER STUDENTS

All of the above factors, and untold others, make the job of evaluating course transferability difficult at best and impossible at worst. Difficulties are especially complex for international students. This is true both whether evaluation is requested prior to admissions or after admission. Regardless of the difficulties, each student is responsible for receipt of his/her own documents. As pertaining to international transfer of credit and accreditation, the difficulties make it appear nearly impossible to study outside one's country or culture. The lack of a universal standard causes the ultimate responsibility to fall heavily on the student, who may be left totally alone to face the situation should it arise. It becomes imperative then, that students be encouraged to keep careful record of the content of courses, the title and edition of the texts used and a copy of an

institution's catalog for the date of enrollment. If a student knows that he/she will be transferring to a second institution, she/he should request from the second institution a list of the courses taken at the first institution that will transfer to the second. This should be done in writing. The use of the World Wide Web has greatly simplified receiving and analyzing information for transfers. Students should be encouraged to use institution websites for gathering information, though; at the international level this may be complicated again by the lack of websites in one's native language.

International Student Centers on their campus can be a great source of help and support for students. These centers provide "experts" who can aid Deans, Departments of Accreditation, etc. in ascertaining course descriptions and the level of completion required by a foreign institution.

CONCLUSION

With the growth of worldwide transportation and communication, meeting the needs of students studying in foreign countries will continue to be a pressing need. I have found it is possible to deal with the problems encountered in inter-cultural technology education. The problems encountered are numerous but not insurmountable. If adequate faculty can be found with the desire and concern to work through the difficulties, understand the needs, and develop programs to solve the problems, international technology education will grow to take advantage of the increasingly integrated global community in which we now live.