A Comparative Analysis of Academic Transfer of Sino-US Vocational Education

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Abstract. Beginning with the functions of academic transfer in American vocational education, this paper reviews concerned researches both in America and China. Taking Austin Community College and Shanghai Technician School as examples, this paper analyzes how U.S. academic transfer differs from Chinese academic transfer. The finding is that China’s academic transfer is relatively less flexible in the transfer pattern, the university to transfer, the time and the specialty suitable for transfer. Finally, some suggestions are put forward to build a pathway allowing flexible movement between vocational and academic education.

Introduction

Academic transfer, also called college parallel, university transfer or college equivalent has been one of the community colleges’ main curricular functions in America from the very beginning to the present. Under the transfer program, community colleges can accept students from secondary schools, provide them with general education and introductory studies, enable them to transfer credit and send them on to senior institutions which will offer them a chance for the bachelor degrees.

Academic transfer is vital to community colleges. It is widely known the more closely the courses of academic transfer resemble university courses, the higher the community college’s status. If a community college is criticized, most of the time, some of the reasons are that it has failed to provide upward mobility or access to higher education. For example, Cosand found that “community colleges were, are, and will be evaluated to a major degree upon the success of their transfer students to the four-year colleges and universities” [1].

Academic transfer is vital to American higher education. Each year, the national mark of the transfer rate in most of the states is about 25 percent [2]. One out of four community students chooses to move to the senior institutions, which contributes to the high enrollment rate of universities. For example, Bogue reported that “60% of the students in the upper division of the University of California at Berkeley, according to the registrar, are graduates of other institutions, largely community colleges” [3].

Though American idea of vocational education is imported from Europe, academic transfer to universities is the Americans’ own creation. To a great extent, it is the academic transfer that ensures the American’s belief: all men are equal and should have the equality of opportunity to rise to the greatest potential. May they be unsuccessful or poor they should be given successive chances to success.

Literature Review

In America, much research has been done on the academic transfer. Almost everything related is studied such as transfer function, transfer rate, transfer policy and its instructional practices [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. However, vocational education system in China is not as mature as it is in America, so is academic transfer. To date few experts do a little research related. For example, Yang Xin analyzed the independent recruitment in higher vocational colleges in America and China by comparing the enrollment objects, test methods and test organizations in 2010. He suggested
independent enrollment in China should enlarge enrollment rate, set up educational counsel agencies, create student resource database and establish social monitor agencies [11]. Sun dong, Wu Zunning and Zhao Hua made an analysis of credit system of higher education in America, Britain, EU and South Korea in 2013[12]. To sum up, academic transfer is just under experiment in vocational education of China; hence, little comparative analysis is done between Sino-US Vocational Education, not to mention the comparative analysis of the academic transfer between the American community colleges and the China’s secondary vocational schools.

Academic Transfer of U.S. Vocational Education

The community college is defined as any institution accredited to award the associate degree as its highest degree. In each state the publicly supported comprehensive institution is its main form. Austin Community College (ACC) is one of them. Founded in the 1970s in accordance with the Texas Education Code, ACC has been providing two-year college education in Central Texas for more than 40 years. It is one of the nationally recognized community colleges in America. One of the keys to its success is its flexible transfer [13].

At ACC, students can transfer to senior institutions after or before completing core curriculum. If students complete the core curriculum in its entirety at ACC, the block of courses will replace the core curriculum in their bachelor’s degrees when they transfer to any Texas public universities. They will not be required to take additional core curriculum courses at their future public universities unless the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has approved an expanded core curriculum at the universities. What’s more, if students transfer before completing the core curriculum, they can still transfer any credits earned to his future institutions.

Although at ACC students are strongly encouraged to complete the associate degree first before transferring to universities, they can still earn their associate degrees through reverse transfer. As long as the university student gets 30 credits from ACC or 60 from both ACC and his university, he can also get his associate degree. What he needs to do is just ask his university to send his postscript to ACC and apply for the degree at any time [14].

Academic Transfer of Chinese Vocational Education

Compared with U. S. vocational education, Chinese vocational education has less mature systems. Dating back to its early years, vocational education system did help satisfy the needs of the national economic development in China. However, these students would hardly get the chance to reach the university level because of the double-track education system: academic and vocational education were parallel and were not transferable. That was the rule. As a result, the vocational students were deprived of the right to go to universities in their early age.

Take Shanghai Technician School (STS) as an example. Ever since it was established in 1951, STS has been enrolling junior middle school students [15]. These students would go to work after 3-year secondary vocational education. However, recently it is not uncommon that in the job market for the senior technicians, many vacancies remain unfilled especially in big cities, while three-year secondary vocational education does not improve the graduates’ employment opportunities. In order to better meet Shanghai’s needs of senior technicians, in 1988 STS and Shanghai University of Engineering Science (SUES) co-founded Higher Vocational-Technical School of SUES (HVTS of SUES) and began to experiment with new programs. Ever since 2013, under new programs, graduates from secondary vocational schools have been able to choose to go on taking not only higher vocational courses but also undergraduate courses. It is scheduled that graduates from secondary vocational schools even can choose to go on taking graduate courses in the near future. Hence, STS, together with SUES, will provide with programs for graduates, undergraduates, higher vo-tech students, and secondary technician students. A pathway is being built for vocational students to transfer to academic education if they choose to, which is a great breakthrough of vocational education in China. (See Table 1)
Table 1. STS’ Three Vocational Education Programs since 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Program 3+0</th>
<th>Program 3+2</th>
<th>Program 3+4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration in the secondary vocational school (STS)</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration in the higher vocational school (HVTS of SUES)</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration in the university (SUES)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Certificate or degree</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Certificate+ Bachelor Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education aim</td>
<td>Junior technicians</td>
<td>Senior technicians</td>
<td>Senior technicians &amp; engineers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

As is shown in Table 1, compared with the U.S vocational education, China’s academic transfer is relatively less flexible:

1. Pattern limited. Students at ACC are entitled not only to transfer but also reverse transfer; while at STS, students can not enjoy reverse transfer.
2. University limited. Students at ACC can transfer to any university; while STS students can only transfer to their own university instead of any other senior institutions.
3. Time limited. Students at ACC can transfer at any time as long as they fulfill the requirements while most STS students can only transfer following their graduation.
4. Specialty limited. At STS, only those students required to master the hands-on ability through long-lasting training are under the programs of transfer, such as engineering technology.

Therefore, to build a genuine pathway allowing flexible movement between vocational and academic education, some suggestions are put forward:

1. Curriculum planning is needed to bridge the programs in STS and any other senior institutions willing to join. Effort should be made to avoid the duplication and omission.
2. Transfer agreements should be reached between STS and its partner out of mutual respect and extensive cooperation.
3. Transfer standing committees should be set up to deal with the enormous diversity and differentiation of systems between STS and its partner universities.
4. Transfer policy and procedures should be clearly written into education codes of Shanghai Municipal Education Commission. If the disagreement occurs, there will be rules to follow.

Conclusion

Secondary vocational students in China used to be screened out at an early stage in the competition to reach university level. However, under new programs, they don’t have to accept that destiny any more. Instead, they will be offered the chance to further their studies in their own university which provides them with a convenient pathway to academic education. However, compared with the academic transfer of the American vocational education, much research and practice is urgently needed to be done to build a more flexible transfer system in the vocational education in China.
References


