

Setting and Implementing Statewide Policy—USA Lessons for HK
Dr. Linda S. Bowman
Vice President, Colorado Community College System
President Emeritus, Community College of Aurora
Fulbright Senior Specialist

Clearly, setting and implementing state policy is peculiar to each setting, whether it be a state in the U.S., at the U.S. federal level, or in Hong Kong. Lessons from the U.S., where, in general, education policy is the purview of the states, may appear to have limited applicability to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, there are some key messages to be derived once one understands the basic policy framework.

In 2006, then Colorado gubernatorial candidate Bill Ritter, Jr., offered a position paper, “The Colorado Promise,” that set forth his election platform. In education, the candidate set forth a challenge to Colorado: to double the number of post-secondary degrees and certificates in a ten-year period. This election platform tenet later became a rallying call, as newly-elected Governor Ritter put in place a number of policies to help Colorado achieve the “Promise.” Among the policies were legislation to allow a greater number of qualified secondary students to access higher education early, to create a seamless educational pathway from pre-school through graduate school (called P-20 education), to set up statewide student and teacher data tracking systems, and to align the curricula between secondary and post-secondary education.

In the United States in general, and in Colorado in particular, matters of academic policy are taken up, discussed, drawn, and implemented at many different levels: within institutions, within sectors, across sectors, at the state, at the accrediting agency, and at the federal or national level. Federal implementation is generally through the regulation of student financial aid programs, which have a significant impact on state and institutional policies, as federal student financial aid is a major finance mechanism for the operation of higher education in the United States. Although the U.S. President does not control educational policy, the U.S. Department of Education oversees federal financial aid and broadly promotes educational policy.

On the other hand, states have the role and obligation of setting forth and delivering on an education agenda. Oversight of early childhood, primary, secondary, and higher education is a state responsibility. While governors of states communicate and converse, and they play a leadership role, in general the state legislatures and state departments of education and higher education are the most important players.

In fact, setting policy may not lead to implementation of that policy as envisioned. Institutional cultures often drive behaviors in a direction that is not fully aligned with policy. Cultural barriers can be far more powerful than policy barriers. Policies often have unintended consequences. Therefore, policy leaders must carefully examine incentive and disincentive systems in order to drive outcomes.

Policy development is a complex process. As a matter of illustration, this paper will outline the policy process as it operates in Colorado, specific to academic policy and to community colleges.

There are many players in the U.S. academic policy process:

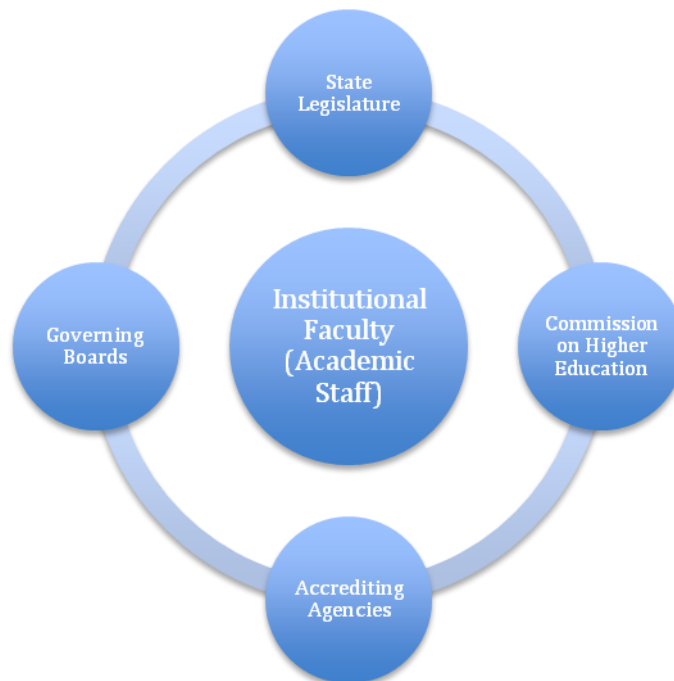
- Colorado Department of Education (CDE): an elected board that oversees primary and secondary education.
- Local School Boards: elected boards that set policy for school districts, primary and secondary educational institutions.
- Higher Education Faculty: as members of individual departments, as personnel of their institutions, and as members of a discipline that operates extra-institutionally, provide curricular structure, delivery, and oversight.
- Statewide discipline groups: organized at the two-year level, four-year level, and across sectors.
- Governing Boards: either appointed by the State Governor or elected by the citizens to make policy and oversee individual colleges or universities or systems of institutions (in Colorado, 13 of the 15 public community colleges have one Governing Board, the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (SBCCOE), established in 1986, whose nine voting members are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. Two non-voting members represent faculty and students.)
- Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE): as the coordinating agency that works across the sectors, two- and four-year public, as well as overseeing the regulation of the private sector.
- Colorado Commission of Higher Education (CCHE): as the policy oversight group for the CDHE and for coordination among the institutional Governing Boards.
- General Assembly, also known as State Legislature: while not an academic policy agency, the State Legislature appropriates funding to public institutions, as well as state student Financial Aid, creates institutions, confirms Governing Board appointments (State Senate only, not the State House), and creates laws that affect education.
- Accrediting Agencies: overseen by an agency of the federal government, these are peer agencies at the regional and national level. Accreditation by a recognized agency is required for an institution's students to qualify for financial aid. In addition to institutional accreditation, some accrediting agencies accredit specific programs, such as business or nursing.
- Public: taxpayers, whose resources support public education and who often express their will regarding how those resources will be expended.

General Education Policy:

General Education requirements, as defined by the Colorado Department of Higher Education in their policy glossary, “represent an institutional statement about the general body of knowledge and skills that the recipient of any undergraduate degree conferred by an institution should possess....”

(<http://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Policies/default.html#aa>).

Higher education policy sources:

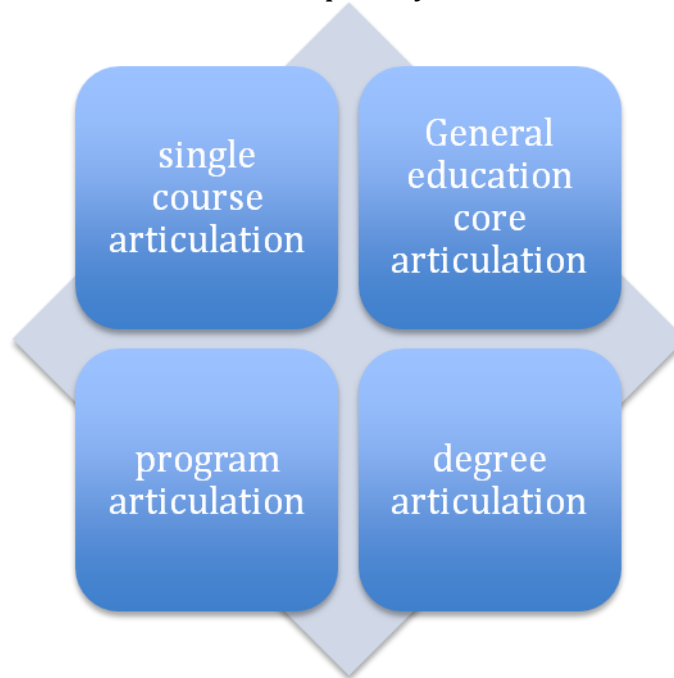


Fundamental control over curricula is the purview of the faculty. In the Colorado Community College System, faculty at each college create courses and programs, which they submit to internal Curriculum Committees, then to the Colorado Community College System. Courses are then checked for substantial content alignment to be added to the Common Course Numbering System (CCNS) or for addition as a new CCNS course. Programs (generally certificate or the non-transfer Associate of Applied Science) require Community College System/State Board approval. Any changes to the transfer Associate of Arts (A.A.) or Associate of Science (A.S.) or Associate of General Studies (A.G.S., which generally is not designated as a transfer degree) also require review at the state level, by the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) staff and approval by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE).

At the curricular and transfer level, faculty at the individual colleges propose approval of courses to become part of the gtPathways system (gt=guaranteed transfer), which is a list of courses approved by the GE 25 Council. The GE 25

Council has representatives from the 25 public, state-supported institutions of higher education in Colorado. These faculty members review the courses for equivalent content and rigor across the colleges and universities. They then recommend courses for inclusion to the Academic Council, which is made up of the Chief Academic Officers of each system of higher education. Final approval is officially granted by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. This faculty activity statewide is coordinated by the CDHE.

Transfer of programs is handled in multiple ways, as illustrated below:



There are numerous articulation agreements between and among programs and institutions. However, the implementation of full degree articulation has been a challenge, not only in Colorado but in many other states as well. Thus comes the role of the General Assembly, which in Colorado has legislated that colleges and universities must come together to determine the content of transferable degrees. In 2010, the General Assembly passed a law requiring that, by 2016, colleges and universities will develop associate degree transfer agreements for at least 14 degree programs. This process is being managed and overseen by the Colorado Department of Higher Education. It is important to note that the General Assembly passed this law because colleges and universities, despite earlier legislation to encourage better articulation and transfer, had not adequately implemented a system that was fair to students and easy to navigate.

In fact, too often, students have had unsatisfactory and costly experiences in transfer. While courses may have been transferred in to the university, they did not necessarily count toward the major or toward graduation. At times, students were required to retake courses, for reasons such as the courses were previously taken in the wrong order or were numbered as lower division in one institution and upper

division in another. This causes students and the public to pay more, as courses must be repeated, and to suffer an extension of time to graduation and therefore lost productivity. Further, because of inadequate assessment of student outcomes, two-year institutions could not demonstrate that their students were adequately prepared for entrance as juniors/third year students to the four-year program.

There are a number of lessons regarding statewide policy to be gleaned from this Colorado experience.

- Policy-makers, in this case especially the General Assembly, set policy around broad objectives, in the case of Colorado, the goal of doubling the number of degrees and certificates awarded in the state in a ten-year period.
- Institutions have the grass-roots responsibility for implementing policies, but compliance to the letter of the law may not equal compliance to the spirit of the law.
- Individual articulation agreements between institutions and their departments are helpful if students know exactly what they want to study and where they want to transfer from the beginning of their matriculation.
- Statewide agreements, however, clarify student pathways, requiring that students choose their “majors,” knowing that by following a defined course of study, they will be able to transfer to any public institution statewide.
- Effective implementation can be carried out only if all of the partners are engaged.

Although the pathway to statewide degree transfer in Colorado has been contentious and challenging, there are a number of encouraging accomplishments.

- Preexisting articulation agreements between institutions and departments are still in existence.
- Faculty/academic staff from two- and four-year institutions are working together to develop the mandated degree transfer pathways.
- To-date, nearly ten degree plans of study have been completed and approved.
- Students who follow these plans of study can transfer their associate degrees to any public four-year college or university in the state without losing credit or progress towards graduation.
- Two- and four-year faculty are working together to define student outcomes and General Education.

The current process for implementation of transfer legislation looks like the following:



This deceptively simple chart reflects hours of discussion, reflection, collaboration, contention, and compromise, in the first arrow. University faculty often opposed transfer, on a number of grounds:

- concerns that students would not be properly prepared
- fears that the best students would opt for the less expensive community college experience for the first two years
- difficulties reaching compromise with other four-year institutions regarding the content for the first two years
- perceived threats to their oversight of the student learning experience
- concerns that they would not be able to accommodate the many transfers in the third year
- fear of “watering down” the university experience

The third arrow, implementation, too reflects a complex process of student advising, of training and development for faculty and support staff, and of promotion of the opportunities to prospective student and their families.

In the U.S., many eyes are on the community college sector to move the country forward by helping to narrow the achievement gaps between men and women, among ethnic groups, and between urban and rural centers. Dr. Jill Biden, community college faculty member and wife of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, has become a national spokesperson for community colleges and for their important role in the higher education landscape. In an article in the April 14, 2010, edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dr. Biden recounts the story of the “typical” community college student, who is indeed an atypical college student: older, working full-time, caring for parents or children, overcoming difficult economic

realities, often the first in his or her family to enter college. “They persevere because they understand that getting an education will change their lives for the better. It will improve their job prospects and enrich their understanding of the world around them.”

In Dr. Biden’s words, “All of us have the opportunity to match the dedication of community-college students with a renewed commitment to their success.” Like the educators in Hong Kong’s sub-degree sector, community college educators in the U.S. are committed to opportunity for students who, without our sector, will be left behind. The struggles of setting and implementing statewide policy are rewarded when students succeed, when they improve their social and economic opportunities, and when their children and future generations attain a more fulfilling, prosperous life.