

A Practical Solution for the 3-Year Degree Debate: Bridge Programs

(A mythical dialogue with television's Andy Rooney of "60 Minutes" fame.)

by Glenn S. Berman

AR: Y'know, what with changes in domestic demographics, I've noticed lately that a number of graduate schools have developed a process which will permit foreign applicants whose college-level documents/degrees are not regarded as equivalent to an American bachelor's degree to enroll as graduate students. Many schools refer to this as a "bridge" program. D'ja ever wonder why?

I did. So I went to Webster's and under 'bridge' it has "a structure spanning and providing passage over an obstacle." Gee, now it's much clearer! Something else I've noticed is that not all schools offer such a program. For example, on my desk I have catalogs from three different schools in New York. This first school never had one and doesn't want one; number two used to have one, but now doesn't, and the third has had one for the past three years. So, to try and make more sense of it all, I've invited a representative of this third school, the New York Institute of Technology, to join me today. Okay, Mr. Berman, why call it "bridge?"

GB: Actually, Andy, the definition really explains it better than you may realize. In order to qualify for our bridge program, a student must hold a terminal document from the home country that validates completion of a given program that's usually three years in length. Sometimes it's a diploma, but in other cases, it's called a bachelor's degree. In either case, this usually means that the home country authorities would refuse a visa/passport request from such a student if it was for the purpose of entering the United States as an undergraduate transfer student. The premise here is that these students, in the eyes of their own governments, have already completed a first degree. And the fact that we don't recognize it as equivalent to ours doesn't change that feeling. Therefore, if they weren't issued graduate-level acceptance, they would probably not be able to get here at all. There's also a second important point you left out. While the student is accepted into the graduate division, she/he is required to complete 30 credits, the approximate equivalent of one undergraduate year, before beginning any graduate work. Generally, these consist of both undergraduate and prerequisite courses and, where necessary, courses in English.

AR: Fine, I think I understand. So since it's a way to attract more students, why don't all schools have one?

GB: You're really dealing with two separate issues. The first is whether or not the school has the desire to offer a bridge program. Often, it's a question of whether the program would

"fit" into both current and long-term plans and policies.

At NYIT one of our missions is to provide access and opportunity to students who are seeking entry or re-entry into education. Therefore, developing this program for international students was really an extension of that philosophy.

The second issue deals with the ability of graduate school officials to administer a bridge program. You've got to consider questions such as: will it apply to all graduate programs or only to a selected few? (Some programs may have the desire, but may find themselves unable to consider such candidates in order to maintain accreditation from one or more external sources.) Who decides whether a student's credentials qualify him/her for the program? Who will have the responsibility for determining the additional credits students need to complete? And, two further critical concerns: first, will the program be supported by graduate school or program deans and faculty if implemented, and secondly, will the college be able to provide the level and types of services required by this larger pool of international students.

AR: Gee, this is absolutely fascinating. I had no idea. Please, continue and tell us why it's working at your school.

GB: Well, it's due to a number of factors, but I'll try to condense them and make it short.

To begin with, NYIT is a private institution and, unlike public systems where certain decisions are not made at the campus level, once we received the go-ahead from our president, we were ready to begin.

Secondly, about five years ago we adopted a modified centralized admissions system at the graduate level. That means that all applications for any of our eight master's programs are received and initially reviewed by my office. We determine whether a particular student is a possible candidate for a bridge program offer using criteria established in concert with the dean/director of each program. And, that's another thing. Rarely does a student apply directly for the extended program, but rather for acceptance directly into a graduate degree program. In reviewing an application we consider the school that issued the diploma/degree, the type of program completed and the individual grades achieved by the student. In addition, the student must have a TOEFL score of 475. If the applicant meets all of these conditions, we send an offer letter which explains the program parameters. We then require that the student acknowledge acceptance of the offer by signing and returning one copy of the letter before we proceed any further.

The most important reason it's been successful is the level of cooperation between each program and the graduate admissions office. We all know our roles and responsibilities. For the most part, the departments rely upon us to determine whether the

candidate qualifies for admission and we, in turn, ask the departments to make final decisions on any borderline cases and to choose the additional courses that must be completed in the bridge program. In the latter instance, the department advisors may choose to wait until after they've met a student in person. This is especially true for students with TOEFL scores of at least 475, but below our graduate requirement of 550. These candidates must take our in-house English examination before they are permitted to register for any courses and the amount of English required is determined by these test results. Academic pre-requirements are then added to ESL courses, which may mean that some students end up taking more than 30 credits in total.

AR: I see. And thank you so much for making it "short." I couldn't help notice that you've also brought a series of those ever-present, oh-so-interesting and often irrelevant charts which contain the fact-filled and supportive "hard data" which any good case study demands.

GB: Yes, but I only have three, and they're just to offer a better idea of what we've done and how well we're doing. Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of offers made, acceptance and enrollment by programs between Fall 1988 and Fall 1990.:

Figure 1

Program	Offers Made	Accepted I-20's Issued	Enrollments Total Current	
Computer Science	44	29	18*	14
Business Adm.	6	3	0	0
Comm. Arts	6	5	4**	3
Train/Learn Tech	1	1	0	0
Clinical Nutrition	3	1	1	1
Resource Mgmt.	1	1	0	0
Human Relations	0	0	0	0
Energy Mgmt.	0	0	0	0
Total	61	40	23	18

*Four students began programs, but never completed.

** One student began program, but did not complete.

It should also be noted that of the 21 offers which have not been accepted or completed, nine were for either Summer or Fall 1990 and one is for Spring 1991. Any or all may still become students. And much the same holds true for the 17 who were issued I-20s but have never enrolled. Some may have experienced visa problems and may show up at a later time.

This second chart shows the countries of origin and programs of study of 61 candidates admitted to the program.

Figure 2 Countries

Program	Taiwan	India	China
Computer Science	21	19	4
Bus. Admin.	0	6	0
Communication Arts	1	5	0
Training/Learning Tech.	1	0	0
Clinical Nutrition	0	3	0
Resource Mgmt.	0	0	1
Total	23	33	5

And lastly, Figure 3, which is probably the most important of all, illustrates the academic progress achieved by the 14 current students who had completed courses prior to the Fall 1990 semester.

Figure 3

Student	Major*	Country	#Credits	GPA
1	CS	India	12	2.50
2	CS	India	16	2.73
3	CS	India	39	2.84
4	CS	Taiwan	9	3.00
5	CS	Taiwan	16	3.06
6	CS	Taiwan	49	3.30
7	CA	Taiwan	37	3.30
8	CS	Taiwan	50	3.40
9	CS	China	21	3.44
10	CA	India	53	3.49
11	CA	India	9	3.66
12	CS	India	6	3.70
13	CS	Taiwan	20	3.85
14	CS	Taiwan	7	4.00

*CS = Computer Science; CA = Commercial Arts

If students are carefully selected and placed, they can indeed succeed.

AR: Thank you so much. This has been a truly enjoyable experience. In fact, I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. But I see that our time is almost up and we have to say goodbye. Before we do, however, can you briefly offer some recommendations for schools who may be thinking about starting such a program?

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GB: 1. Be realistic. Know your institution, its goals and plans and everything which may limit what you can reasonably expect to achieve. Don't make recommendations for changes or programs that you know won't be approved. (If not all schools/programs want to participate, don't fight for or demand unanimity. Begin with those who are supportive and see what happens.)

2. Be patient. If experience is truly the best teacher, mine has taught me that this type of program won't happen overnight. In our case, even with a high level of departmental cooperation and administrative support, it still took almost two years to develop a structure that everyone would accept. And it took another year to get the program description to appear in our catalog.

3. Take advantage of colleagues and professional international organizations. Find out which schools in your area have an existing program and ask for guidance and assistance. Also, join and participate in professional organizations such as NAFSA to

become more skilled in understanding and evaluating international credentials and educational systems. And lastly, become familiar with the types of services offered by professional credential evaluation groups such as World Education Services.

And, if your school has, for whatever reasons, decided against offering an international bridge program, you might also take the time to find out which local schools have one available. In this way, instead of simply rejecting such an applicant, you can offer the student this alternative.

AR: Thank you again. Y'know, the world of academia is certainly intriguing. Perhaps we can explore other avenues sometime. For example, d'ja ever wonder whose idea it was to attach those stupid tassels to graduation caps? I do. □

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