

Policy Considerations for Improving Transfer: A Primer for Discussions

As part of an ongoing partnership between the Aspen Institute, the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Public Agenda and Sova Solutions, this document was created to complement the design and facilitation of state-level Transfer Workshops being held in 2017 for teams of two-year and four-year institutions in three states: Ohio, North Carolina and Washington. [The Transfer Playbook, published in May 2016](#), serves as a jumping-off point for the workshops and the [Tracking Transfer](#) report, published in January 2016, serves as the evidence base for this work.

This resource, while primarily focused on state policy, was created to help foster more thoughtful deliberation about the role of state and system policy in efforts to improve outcomes for baccalaureate-seeking community college students. **It is important to stress that the organizations partnering in the creation of this document do not seek to advocate on behalf of specific policies, and the policies included in this primer do not amount to a set of recommendations. Rather, our goal is to inform and enrich collaborative problem solving by helping state, system and institutional actors think more carefully about the place of policy in broader efforts to significantly improve experiences and outcomes for baccalaureate-seeking transfer students.**

Every state context is unique, with issues of governance, funding, geography and demographics shaping the terrain in which two-year and four-year institutions operate. These factors also lead to an imprecise understanding of the effectiveness of a given policy. Because of these points, we strongly encourage that this document be used to frame and foster deliberation within and across state agencies setting policy *and* within and across institutions tasked with implementing state policy. The content herein reflects lessons learned from a broad policy and literature scan, as well as in-depth interviews with nearly a dozen policy experts. While our goal is not to advocate for specific policies, we do seek here to help state actors involved in design and implementation of student success policies impacting transfer students to think holistically and realistically about key policy considerations around transfer. Therefore, we pay special attention to factors that lead to strong and effective as well as weak and pernicious policy when it comes to supporting baccalaureate-seeking community college students.

We suggest thinking about these policies and their associated considerations under larger umbrella goals, such as: improving transferability and applicability of credits; increasing financial aid for transfer students; encouraging colleges to provide college exploration and guidance to high school dual enrollment programs; spurring stronger regional collaboration between two- and four-year institutions; and encouraging two- and four-year colleges to align offerings with regional labor market needs.

It is also important to explicitly acknowledge that community colleges serve a large percentage of Black, Latino/a, Native American and Pacific Islander students, and thus transfer is intrinsically an issue of equity.¹ With this in mind, we recommend readers take an [equity-minded approach](#) to any policy considerations and actions on behalf of transfer students.

¹ In Fall 2014, researchers reported 56 percent of Hispanic undergraduates were enrolled at community colleges, while 44 percent of Black students and 39 percent of White students were at community colleges (College Board, Trends in Community Colleges, 2016). According to NCES Digest of Education Statistics, in fall 2015, 37% of Pacific Islander students and 44.7% of American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolled at community colleges (NCES Digest of Education Statistics, Table 306.50; See also: National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: Facts, not Fiction: Setting the Record Straight*, 2008)

Level-Setting Conversations about State Policy

Productive conversations and collaborations around policy-making start with the recognition that states and public institutions of higher education have a responsibility to work *together* on policy design and implementation. Because policy deliberations can easily veer into debates about governance, autonomy, and resource allocation, we suggest beginning with an honest stock-taking of the opportunities afforded by policy and, importantly, the limits of policy as a lever for change. Below we offer three considerations that orient our work, and that we recommend orienting yours.

- **Attend to incentives, accountability and unintended consequences.** For policy to have its intended effects, it must be crafted by a coalition that understands and attends to both creating incentives *and* holding institutions accountable for results. Balancing incentives and accountability measures is best achieved in settings where policymakers and practitioners have strong channels of communication aimed at identifying and mitigating against pernicious unintended consequences.
- **Incorporate purposeful attention to equity.** Given that historical and persistent inequities in higher education raise additional barriers for Black, Latino/a, Native American, Pacific Islander, and marginalized Asian American students, an [equity-minded approach](#) should inform the design and implementation of policy. An equity focus is one that is deliberately color-conscious, challenging practitioners and policymakers to evaluate how current and proposed policies can be changed to dismantle rather than reinforce structural racism. An equity focus also recognizes that though race and income both impact educational opportunity in the US in ways that often overlap, the historical legacies of policies that reproduce race and class-based disadvantages are distinct—requiring different metrics for diagnosis and different interventions. Purposeful attention to equity in state policy prioritizes reforms of institutional practices which endeavor to eliminate race- and income-based disparities in educational outcomes for students from underrepresented and underserved populations.
- **Recognize that implementation makes or breaks policy.** Policy that attends to the collection and sharing of data related to student progression and completion is essential for raising awareness and setting statewide priorities. But to move effectively from raising awareness to making sustainable change, policy design must also attend to the conditions for implementation. In practice, this means that policy design should include attention to creating the infrastructure for institutional collaboration, and it must address incentives structures that shape institutional response to policy.

State Policies

The set of policies that a state chooses to pursue is likely informed by the political and higher education landscape within the state. Policies with the same goal—such as increasing the proportion of community college students who successfully transfer to the state’s public four-year colleges—may take different forms in two different states. With that in mind, the policies presented below speak to a variety of ways in which a policy may attempt to shape institutional behavior, but the exact design of the policy will depend on both the above considerations and the context in which the state’s higher education institutions operate. Policies are separated into seven distinct categories, though there exists some overlap across these categories.

Embed Transfer in the State Policy Framework to Signal That it is a Priority

Potential Strategies:

- Incorporate transfer student success directly into the state master plan for higher education.
- Mandate the collection and reporting of data on transfer student mobility and success, using common metrics statewide.
- Communicate the importance of reforming transfer as a key strategy for increasing the efficiency *and* equity of the state’s educational system, such that higher education is an effective path to social mobility for everyone and that no talent within the workforce is left unrealized.
- Aim for state policy that creates a clear, overarching transfer framework rather than encourages more individual articulation agreements.
- Make it a state priority to communicate to students about transfer in a user-friendly manner.

Considerations:

- It is widely recognized that prioritizing transfer ‘on paper’ is not sufficient. It is also important that transfer been seen as a priority in the governor’s conversations and is a factor in budget decisions made by legislatures.
- Given the racial demographics of the transfer student population (disproportionately Black and Latino students), and that most students who depend on transfer as the pathway to four-year attainment are likely to be first-generation and/or from lower-income families, it is important to embed equity goals explicitly in state postsecondary attainment goals and plans. For additional guidance on how best to take such an approach, we recommend the Center for Urban Education (CUE) and Lumina Foundation’s [“Addressing Equity Gaps in State Goals for Postsecondary Education Attainment”](#) as well as CUE’s [“Protocol for Equity Mindedness in State Policy.”](#)

Streamline Credit Transfer

Potential Strategies:

- As an initial step, mandate common course numbering across two- and four-year public institutions.
- Create a transfer core that applies to all two- and four-year public institutions, meets general education requirements, and ensures that students who complete the core are able to transfer with junior standing in major.
- Require that faculty create field-specific statewide transfer agreements/pathways for most/all fields of study (or meta-majors) and, when pathways are followed, guarantee in-major credit transfer.
- Incentivize regional transfer partnerships between two- and four-year institutions.

Considerations:

- While most acknowledge that common course numbering is a good starting point, states that are taking transfer seriously appear inclined to move beyond this strategy because it alone does not lead to seamless transfer. In states where collaboration is deep and wide, this is viewed as a lower priority than strategies aimed at creating program-specific transfer pathways (see next bullet) and providing clearer guidance to students about which courses will transfer seamlessly in these pathways.
- Creating a transfer core can eliminate a substantial amount of the guesswork for students and advisors alike. However, the risk in stopping with the creation of a transfer core is that students will not be able to earn junior standing *in their major*, with the result being a delay in time to graduation and an increase in overall costs.
- In contrast to a general education transfer core, creating major-specific pathways can be tough because public universities often differ in their major requirements and may want to prioritize a varied set of transferrable lower-division coursework. Strategies that instead focus on broader areas of study may prove to be a promising middle ground (see next bullet).
- State level efforts to develop transfer agreements by field (or meta-majors) are an increasingly common strategy for advancing transfer-related progress. These efforts are most likely to be found where Guided Pathways work is also occurring at both the institution- and state-level. Examples of this work include the following:
 - The [AACC Guided Pathways project](#) is supporting community colleges as they create holistic pathways for students from intake to completion with embedded academic and nonacademic supports. The project has shown initial promising feedback, and we recommend considering this framework when creating pathways for transfer students.
 - The [Charles A. Dana Center's Math Pathways project](#) is helping institutions build transfer student academic pathways that more deliberately consider which math skills and courses should be required. Their work is a good place to start thinking about properly aligning math courses along the pathway.

Create Incentives for Transfer through Tuition and Financial Aid

Potential Strategies:

- Create tuition incentives for students to complete associate degree before transfer.
- Require that public four-year institutions treat transfer students in the same manner as non-transfer students in financial aid distributions.
- Create state-funded need-based transfer scholarships for community college students who transfer to an in-state four-year institution, targeting most directly those students who complete associate degrees.

Considerations:

- Unless the state funds the tuition incentives for associate degree completion, the community college is left attempting to fund this incentive itself.
- At public four-year institutions, treating transfer students in the same manner as non-transfer students may be more complicated than anticipated due to differences in admission timelines and could ultimately divert resources away from non-transfer students with financial need. In light of these potential complications, how might new policies surrounding financial aid allocation protect against the unintended consequence of unnecessarily diverting resources?
- While there is demonstrated value in obtaining a credential prior to transfer, students in certain programs of study, for example engineering, might be better served by transferring prior to associate degree completion. We recommend looking at the population holistically, and not creating blanket policies that have the potential to serve students inequitably. Reverse transfer may serve as one avenue to address this balance.
- Incentives towards an associate degree without explicit efforts to help students minimize accrual of excess credits may be insufficient in helping transfer students earn a bachelor's degree.

Mandate Four-Year Slots/Capacity

Potential Strategies:

- Guarantee slots at state universities for students who earn associate degrees at in-state community colleges, and coordinate guaranteed slots between two-year and four-year institutions within the same region if possible.
- Set transfer targets that explicitly or indirectly attempt to influence transfer student enrollment patterns at state universities or state four-year systems (i.e., Washington's

Considerations:

- As with tuition incentives for students who complete an associate degree prior to completion, policies that guarantee slots at state universities for students who complete an associate degree have the potential to negatively affect students in fields of study where they are better served by transferring earlier, as is often the case with engineering.
- In some states, where quotas for community college students already exist, practitioners expressed concerns that mandating certain targets may create an

transfer student quotas and California's 60/40 ratio target for upper classmen vs lower classmen).

incentive for institutions that exceed the target to reduce the number of community college students they accept.

- Though, during our conversations, interviewees at institutions and state-level associations showed a strong preference for incentives rather than mandates, many also noted that the slow pace of improvements in transfer rates has caused them to acknowledge the value of mandates as a call to action.

Create Incentives for Joint Ownership of Bachelor's Degree Attainment

Potential Strategies:

- In outcomes-based funding systems, create incentives for partnerships between two- and four-year institutions to deliver bachelor's degrees jointly with minimal credit loss
 - Reward community colleges for the number of students they transfer to four-year schools and, of those, the number that graduate;
 - Reward four-year institutions for the number of transfers they admit and graduate;
 - Consider tying funding to efficient completion of the bachelor's degree (120-132 credits, no credits lost).
 - Reward institutions for addressing racial and socioeconomic equity gaps.
- Provide state funds, incentives, resources, and/or expertise to establish joint admissions among regional partners

Considerations:

- As with any metrics included in outcomes-based funding systems, transfer-focused metrics face challenges associated with definitions and differences in institutional missions. Definitions that align well with one institution's mission may be viewed as a deviation from another institution's mission. Likewise, funding incentives that seek to change institutional behavior may be viewed as welcomed by one institution and an infringement on institutional autonomy by another. For example:
 - Community colleges that are historically more transfer-oriented may stand to benefit from the introduction of transfer-related metrics, while those that offer primarily terminal degrees in vocational fields may feel that the system does not adequately account for their mission;
 - Four-year colleges may argue that efforts to tie funding to efficient completion of the bachelor's degree place pressure on four-year colleges to accept credits for transfer that the institution does not feel align with degree requirements.
 - Likewise, funding incentives for efficient bachelor's degree completion may dissuade four-year colleges from accepting and serving students who enter with excess credits.

Align Dual Enrollment and Early College with College Course Requirements

Potential Strategies:

- Provide opportunities for career exploration before high school students begin dual enrollment courses or at the beginning of their dual enrollment coursework.
- Incentivize two-year institutions to work with local high schools to market their programs and to help students explore degree programs leading to in-demand careers, opportunities for transfer, and further education at local universities.
- Incentivize community colleges to work with high schools to create dual enrollment programs that are linked to college career exploration and subsequent degree selection. Doing so allows for dual enrollment programs to be marketed as a natural and productive step in the high school to college transition. .

Considerations:

- Even in states where work has been done to better align DE coursework with college course requirements, students still accumulate excess credits which do not count towards their degree programs. As an example, Ohio recently committed to better aligning dual enrollment, but practitioners have found that students still struggle to figure out which math course they need.

Direct Resources to Prioritize Building Institutional Capacity to Support Transfer Students, Including Using Technology as a Tool

Potential Strategies:

- Encourage institutions to build the advising and student supports capacity needed to ensure transfer student success.
 - For example, state leaders can use the power of the pulpit to recognize institutions that are doing especially well.
- Fund uniform or compatible state-wide technology and/or data systems to promote sharing of information such as transfer student data and electronic student records between many partner institutions.
- Encourage institutions to regularly measure, analyze, and share transfer student data, with specific attention to

Considerations:

- Institutions often have their students transfer to multiple institutions, and/or have students transferring in from multiple institutions. In these cases, technology and data systems that are compatible with one another can save time and resources for institutions
- Technology and data systems that are able to disaggregate for race are important when taking an equity-minded approach to state policy. Read about the [Center for Urban Education's \(CUE's\) equity-minded approach to policy.](#)
- The tendency to view technology as a silver-bullet solution to complex human problems, such as transfer, is a form of potentially dangerous wishful thinking. Therefore, any attention to technology should be accompanied by equal attention to conditions for skilled and committed use and adoption.

outcomes disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status in order to track progress towards eliminating achievement gaps. For ideas of which metrics to use, and how to run institutional data reports, please see CCRC's "[How to Measure Community College Effectiveness in Serving Transfer Students](#)"

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