



POLICY MATTERS

Developing Transfer and Articulation Policies That Make a Difference

Today, more and more baccalaureate-seeking students enter the postsecondary pipeline through a two-year institution and the majority of those who earn a bachelor's degree attend multiple institutions along the way. It is important now more than ever that states develop effective policies to support the transfer of students and streamline credit transfer.

Context

While 71 percent of entering community college students anticipate earning a bachelor's degree, only 25 percent transfer to a four-year institution. This is troubling, given that community colleges increasingly serve as the entry point into higher education for baccalaureate degree seekers, particularly low-income and minority students. The ability to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, a critical requirement for middle-class status, has become a key access and equity issue.

In addition to planned transfers, it has become common for students to exhibit irregular attendance patterns—attending multiple institutions simultaneously or sequentially, enrolling intermittently, and taking advantage of new technologies and providers (e.g. online learning, for-profit institutions). Student progress

and eventual success are increasingly dependent on the smooth transfer of credits.

For more than a generation, institutional leaders, state policymakers, and others have worked to improve the transfer process, but students continue to face many barriers. A major obstacle stems from the attitudes of faculty and administrators at more selective institutions about accepting general education credits from “lesser” institutions, especially community colleges. A second problem is assuring that students complete the necessary prerequisite courses so that they can proceed smoothly to junior-level work in their majors. Third, many institutions question the rigor and comparability of courses taken in technical/vocational programs or nationally-accredited, for-profit institutions. A final set of difficulties relates to getting appropriate information to students and encouraging and supporting them through the transfer process.

Though 33 states monitor the progress of transfers, there is much room for improving data and accountability systems. States generally focus on the transfer performance of two-year institutions and need to look more at transfer responsibilities of four-year colleges. They need to build transfer goals into institutional missions and develop better performance measures.

States can offer institutional financial incentives for accepting and graduating transfer students, currently a rare approach. They can use financial aid as a policy tool—such as requiring aid recipients to earn the associate degree, complete certain courses, or maintain a certain grade point average—to maximize the likelihood of future success. Arizona, Massachusetts, Texas, and Virginia link funds to the decision to transfer. States can offer other incentives to students including guaranteed admission to a four-year college if they complete the associate degree.

Research has found that states with stronger governance systems, better use of data, state-level feedback to campuses, and other supportive structural and financial policies produce better transfer performance. Florida and Ohio offer examples of comprehensive approaches that other states might emulate.

Initiatives of several national associations help clarify and promote better transfer policies.

AASCU, in partnership with the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), implemented the Access to the Baccalaureate project, designed to identify barriers to transfer, to make recommendations for removing such barriers, and to work at implementing solutions. AASCU and AACC also co-sponsor the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), a consortium of over 1,800 institutions, to facilitate transfer of credit and degree completion for servicemen and their families.

Since 1978, the American Council on Education (ACE), the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) have maintained “The Joint Statement on Transfer and Award of Credit,” a guide for institutions that emphasizes standards for evaluation of transfer credit. A recent revision to the statement states that transfer decisions should not be based solely on the source of accreditation of the sending program or institution.

In 2001, the leaders of seven national associations, including AASCU, created the National Articulation and Transfer Network (NATN) that supports improving transfer and articulation, especially for its network of minority-serving institutions. NATN has designed College Stepz, a web-based database on transfer policies and agreements for students and advisors.

The proposed College Access and Opportunity Act of 2005 (H.R. 609) addresses a limited set of transfer issues and does not significantly address fundamental public policy issues related to transfer.

H.R. 609 requires public disclosure of each institution’s current transfer of credit policies and forbids institutions from having transfer policies that base transfer decisions solely on the basis of institutional accreditation. The second requirement of the Act is similar to the ACE/CHEA/AACRAO Joint Statement recommendation, though H.R. 609 is prescriptive rather than merely a guideline. A third provision, requiring annual reporting of several transfer measures, was eliminated from the bill. Primary support is from for-profit colleges whose credits are often rejected by four-year colleges and universities.

AASCU opposes the direct involvement of the federal government in regulating inter-institutional academic practices such as transfer of credit. It

supports federal efforts that encourage states and institutions to improve their transfer of credit policies.

Conclusion

The nation has moved a long way from a time when transfer decisions occurred behind closed doors at the sole discretion of institutions, but many obstacles and inefficiencies remain. States can and do play important roles in affecting transfer success, but no state is fully utilizing all available policy options that promote seamless transfer.

The process of bringing together so many different kinds of institutions and programs into common agreement will never be easy, but will remain an essential goal as student mobility increases and options multiply. With support, but not interference, from the federal government, states, systems, sectors, and institutions must continue to work together to iron out their differences and create smooth working models that encourage student success.

Resources

Several papers discuss public policy issues related to transfer and articulation policy:

American Association of Community Colleges and American Association of State Colleges and Universities—*Improving Access to the Baccalaureate* (2004)
www.pathtocollege.org/pdf/Lumina_Rpt_AACC.pdf

Education Commission of the States—*Improving Articulation Policy to Increase Transfer* (1998)
www.communitycollegepolicy.org/pdf/2265_articulation.pdf

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Institute for Higher Education Policy—*State Policy and Community College-Baccalaureate Transfer* (2002)
www.highereducation.org/reports/transfer/transfer.shtml

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education—*State Financial Aid: Policies to Enhance Articulation and Transfer* (2005)
www.wiche.edu/Policy/Changing_Direction/documents/Financial_Aid_and_Articulation_000.pdf

There are two primary sources summarizing the transfer policies in the fifty states:

Education Commission of the States—*Transfer and Articulation Policies* (2001)
www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issuesPS.asp

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education—*State Policy Issues Database Online (SPIDO): Articulation and Alignment*
www.wiche.edu/policy/SPIDO/index.asp

The National Center for Education Statistics offers transfer data:

Community College Transfer Rates to 4-year Institutions Using Alternative Definitions of Transfer (2001)
nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001197.pdf

The Road Less Traveled? Students Who Enroll in Multiple Institutions (2005)
nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005157.pdf

Other sources on transfer include:

American Council on Education, Council on Higher Education Accreditation, and American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers—*Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit* (2001)
www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CLLL&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=7837

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce—Hearing on “College Credit Mobility: Can Transfer of Credit Policies be Improved?” (May 5, 2005)
edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/109th/21st/creditmobility050505/wl050505.htm