National Transfer Landscape Analysis

Over the last decade, equity-minded key stakeholders in higher education have placed increasing focus on baccalaureate completion for learners from low-income backgrounds and persistently minoritized communities. Knowing that these 'new traditional' students are overrepresented in community colleges, and that more than half of all undergraduate students in the U.S. will attend multiple institutions on the way to graduation, credit transfer and community college transfer student success has been an area of significant reform-focused effort.

In recent years, new and emerging approaches to pathways for students and portability of learning have shown significant promise for helping more learners achieve their goals of earning at least a bachelor's degree. This report provides an overview and analysis of the major transfer initiatives

focused on policy and practice improvements. Generated from a combination of research and document review, paired with structured interviews with key transfer initiative leaders and funders, this report includes an overview of major transfer-focused initiatives, emerging approaches in the transfer-improvement landscape and future-forward reflections and lessons gleaned during interviews with key stakeholders from the field.

Major Initiatives: Credit Reclamation and Community College Credit Transfer

In this section, we provide brief overviews of the last decade's major initiatives focused on achieving significant improvements in transfer student experience and outcomes. The foundation-funded initiatives fall into two broad categories: Credit reclamation and two-year to four-year credit transfer. Each overview contains a description of the initiative goals and what is currently known about the outcomes of the effort.

Project Win-Win (2009-2013)

A project of the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), the goal of Project Win-Win was to locate former students, no longer enrolled anywhere and never awarded a degree, who had accumulated enough credit hours to earn an associate degree and award them retroactively. This effort also identified former students who were no more than nine to 12 credits short of an associate degree and sought to find and bring them back to college to complete the degree.

Outcomes and Key Lessons: As of August 2013, 60 of the 61 Project Win-Win colleges had identified nearly 130,000 students who met the initial criteria, completing degree audits for the nearly 42,000 students remaining after removing those who *re*-enrolled or earned degrees elsewhere. More than 6,700 students emerged eligible for the retroactive award of the associate degree, and more than 4,500 have received degrees. Of more than 20,000 students identified with fewer than 12 credits to completion, almost 1,700 have returned to college and another 400 have signaled their intent to return.

In reflection, IHEP Vice President of Planning and Operations Lacey Leegwater shared:

> It was a useful process to see that at minimum you had 4,500 students that had degrees that were just sitting there and not being counted for the student. They couldn't get credit in the job force that they're in, or as they continue on for their bachelor's degree. Or you couldn't get credit for the institution who put resources behind those students and weren't getting acknowledged for those degrees, either. And, you had a whole lot of funding put into those programs, that degree process that the student wasn't getting any benefit from, so we were able to close that loop for those students.

Credit When It's Due (2013)

The Credit When Its Due (CWID) initiative is a national grant program designed to facilitate associate degree conferral for transfer students who meet associate degree requirements while on the way to baccalaureate degree completion at four-year institutions. In addition to seeking to increase associate degree attainment, CWID has focused on impacting transfer and articulation policies more broadly, removing barriers to baccalaureate completion and improving technology infrastructure to support transfer and articulation.

CWID represents a joint venture of several foundations: Lumina Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USA Funds, Helios Education Foundation and Greater Texas Foundation. Since completion, some states and institutions across the nation have continued to employ the program's strategy, which is now generally referred to as "reverse credit transfer" policies and programs.

Outcomes and Key Lessons: A total of 15 states and 412 institutions received grants through the CWID initiative. Research revealed that the initiative awarded over 7,000 degrees to students. One study of reverse credit transfer programs in **Hawaii** and **Minnesota** found that students who received an associate's degree via CWID had higher completion rates of bachelor's degrees. From the student's perspective, a focus group study revealed that transfer students who participated in CWID felt encouraged to progress toward a four-year degree.

However, students also discussed limitations of an associate's degree, such as its limited application to their chosen degree path. Indeed, a similar study from **Illinois** found that while students rated the reverse transfer process as moderately effective, weak partnerships between two- and four-year institutions hampered student participation. Ultimately, research shows promise for reverse credit transfer programs like CWID, but beneficial outcomes for students and institutions are constrained by the current transfer system writ large.

Project Evaluator Debra Bragg explained:

> *I think a lot of what Credit When It's Due did was provide us insights into the way that we viewed transfer historically and how the rules and norms had been established at the state level around systems of transfer. States have created transfer bureaucracies that perpetuate rules and norms, and we really haven't questioned those, and in some respects [sic] assumed that whatever the state created would improve transfer outcomes, close gaps, do all kinds of things that now we know there's not a lot of evidence to suggest are really happening in practice, especially for racially-minoritized and low-income learners.*

Degrees When Due (2019)

A project of IHEP, Degrees When Due "seeks to build expertise, capacity, and infrastructure on campuses across the nation to get near-completers over the finish line." This initiative supports near-completers by providing college staff with access to an online tool and coaching to guide campus-led implementation of degree reclamation strategies. Degrees When Due also builds and facilitates communities of practice among institutional staff and state agencies to promote associate degree completion for near-completers.

While the work is too new for data on impacts related to the time it takes students to earn a degree, credits above what is needed for a degree or overall baccalaureate completion rates, nearly 200 institutions in 23 states are currently involved in the initiative. For the initial cohort of 14 institutions, 9% of students were in the universe of those already eligible for a degree. Among the group of students identified in the first cohort who have some credit but no credential, 28% were within six credits of completing an associate's or bachelor's degree, and another 18% were within seven credits. Research is currently underway to learn more about the role of academic and non-academic barriers facing near-completers, from math to administrative holds on student accounts.

When reflecting on lessons learned thus far, former IHEP Associate Director Leanne Davis said:

> *We still have so many institutions that are doing this by pen and paper. They have legacy systems, so they don't have the updated modules that they need to be able to do a degree audit effectively. You also have people that just are sometimes a little resistant to learning a new technology that might help them be more efficient with their work, because this is the way it's always been done. Sometimes fear of being fully replaced by automation makes some people resistant. These are the kinds of challenges facing institutions trying to do this work. On the other hand, we're starting to see institutions learning how to take their data and use that to advocate for policy and practice change. We've seen some of our institutions change requirements for graduation to make it easier for students to be awarded a credential they've earned, and we've seen institutions write this work into their strategic plan as part of fundamentally rethinking how they treat this group of students.*

Interstate Passport (2016)

Interstate Passport, an initiative lead by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), is a nationwide network of two-year and four-year nonprofit colleges and universities dedicated to the block transfer of lower-division general education courses based on multistate faculty-developed learning outcomes and proficiency criteria. Students of member institutions are promised a seamless, efficient and economical transfer process.

Outcomes and Key Lessons: Interstate Passport has a total of 71 member institutions in 21 states. According to its website, Interstate Passport has awarded over 49,000 passports to students. Given that the Interstate Passport initiative is only six years old, six-year outcomes data are still forthcoming. Early indicators suggest that students who achieve passports have a higher GPA (~3.5 compared to ~2.9 for non-passport transfer students) and accumulate more credits during their first semesters at the four-year institution (~13 compared to ~9 for non-passport students).

When reflecting on lessons learned thus far, WICHE Director of Academic Leadership Initiatives Sarah Leibrant said:

> *States have spent a lot of time negotiating transfer agreements among institutions across systems and continue to do so, and Interstate Passport aligns well with institutions and state general education requirements so it's easy for institutions to implement Interstate Passport. Students can complete a passport and meet gen ed requirements at the same time. But it's important to make sure the requirements are actually comparable and that the messaging is clear and consistent so that students aren't confused and don't have to choose between different transfer initiatives … For institutions, lowering the risk of participation by providing incentives to "first movers" has been helpful for getting institutions to take on the 18-24 months of work entailed in implementing Interstate Passport on a campus.*

Tackling Transfer (2019)

A collaboration of the [Aspen Institute for College Excellence](#), [HCM Strategists](#) and [Sova](#), [Tackling Transfer](#) is a three-year initiative aimed at seeding dramatic improvements in outcomes for baccalaureate-seeking community college students through a comprehensive approach to policy, practice, leadership and communications. Three states were selected (MN, TX, VA) to represent a variety of governance and policy contexts, and the work has included support for system and state policy improvements, as well as improved institutional partnership work focused on implementing practices outlined in the [Transfer Playbook](#). In addition to the state-based work, Tackling Transfer seeks to influence state policy through the Tackling Transfer Policy Advisory Board and shape the national conversation about transfer through a weekly column in [Inside Higher Ed](#).

Outcomes and Key Lessons: While the work is too new for data on impacts related to the time it takes students to earn a degree, credits above what is needed for a degree or overall baccalaureate completion rates, there are some noteworthy leading indicators. The three states have set, publicized, and committed to tracking progress on ambitious statewide attainment and equity goals for transfer student success aligned to the metrics outlined in [Tracking Transfer](#).

All three states have created, modified, or are currently advocating for improved data systems for monitoring and reporting related to transfer student success. At the level of institutional partnership improvement work, 26 improvement-focused partnerships between community colleges and universities across four systems in Texas have been implemented, 30 transfer pathways across the 37 institutions of the Minnesota State are being refined and two systems representing 40 public institutions in Virginia have publicly committed to resourcing a jointly owned position dedicated to improving outcomes and closing equity gaps for transfer students.

Overview of Emerging Approaches: Pathways and Portability

This section briefly describes emerging approaches in the transfer-improvement landscape that adopt a wider lens of credit mobility within the broader student learning journey. These approaches seek to identify levers to shorten the time it takes students to earn a degree, reduce credits above what is needed for a degree, promote student persistence and achieve seamless transitions for learners who attend multiple institutions on their way to a bachelor's degree. These approaches fall under two broad categories: Pathways and portability. Focused on issues that have been historically viewed as adjacent to transfer student success, these approaches point in the direction of future trends in policy and practice.

Guided Pathways

Guided pathways is a national movement more than a decade in the making to help institutions redesign policy and practice to better support student momentum, persistence and completion. The "pillars" of guided pathways include 1) clarifying programs of study (including transfer pathways); 2) helping students create a full academic plan and pass key gateway courses in the first year; 3) providing proactive advising and holistic student supports to help students stay on plan and make progress; 4) ensuring students are provided with high-quality learning experiences that result in timely completion of an associate degree, seamless transfer with junior standing and advancement in the labor market. As of 2018, over 250 community colleges have committed resources to scaling the guided pathways model. In 2015, researchers from the Community College Research Center published Redesigning America's Community Colleges outlining the model and early evidence.

Math Pathways

Math courses represents a major barrier to student success and are a significant contributor to the equity gap at every step in the student journey from enrollment through transfer and completion. Because of the centrality and persistence of challenges related to math within transfer student success efforts, the math pathways movement may be better understood as intrinsically relevant — rather than adjacent — to transfer improvement conversations. A growing body of research evidence from across the country shows that postsecondary math is a primary obstacle to completion and equitable outcomes for millions of students.

Math pathways is a rapidly growing national movement, backed by both leading math associations and a growing chorus of employer voices, that seeks to ensure that all students have access to high-quality math aligned to students' goals. Math pathways seeks to provide alternatives to the use of algebra as a sorting mechanism by aligning math requirements with areas of study and career fields. For example, for many students in non-STEM fields of study, algebra may be less appropriate or relevant than courses in statistics, quantitative reasoning, data science or mathematical modeling. Two organizations lead the field in math pathways: The Charles A. Dana Center and Carnegie Math Pathways.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment refers to arrangements where high school students take courses and earn college credit through a partnership with an institution of higher education. Eighty-two percent of public high schools offer dual enrollment, with more than 1.5 million high school students participating each year (70% of which occurs in partnership with a community college). Pre-pandemic, dual enrollment was the fastest-growing segment of the community college population, accounting for one in seven community college enrollments nationally.

Dual enrollment has tremendous potential for reducing equity gaps in baccalaureate attainment, but the typical approach to dual enrollment tends to reinforce inequity. Racial equity gaps are pronounced in access to dual enrollment, access to advising and early career exploration is lacking in most dual enrollment programs and an absence of strong working relationships between high schools and colleges sap dual enrollment of its potential. Reimagining dual enrollment to serve more intentionally as a vehicle for improving and making more equitable outcomes for transfer students is a growing focus for researchers and policymakers.

Prior Learning Assessment

Prior learning assessment policies, which allow students to earn college credit for knowledge and experience gained outside of the classroom, are promising for promoting greater portability of student learning. A 2017 50-State Comparison found that 24 states have PLA policies, nine states provide guidance regarding PLA-related student fees, 11 states address limits on number of credits that may be awarded for prior learning and eight states allow PLA credits to transfer to other postsecondary institutions. Research shows that students who receive PLA credit accumulate more credit and graduate more quickly and at higher rates than their peers who do not. PLAs can provide an alternative route for transfer students when course mismatch occurs between institutions.

Competency-Based Education

Another innovative way to enable portability of learning and promote student agency is competency-based education for postsecondary education. CBE refers to educational models in which progress toward a credential is determined by a student demonstrating learning and in which curriculum is designed intentionally and transparently around specific, defined competencies. In these approaches, the time it takes a student to earn a degree varies while expectations around learning are held constant. While interest in this approach has been growing for years, ongoing constraints around the use of federal Title IV funds for these programs continue to exist. At the same time, efforts to seed and scale innovation in CBE are growing and hold significant promise for transfer student success. Efforts, like those of Western Governor's University, to convert competency frameworks to credit hours enable greater ease in transferring in and out of CBE programs.

Incremental and Stackable Credentials

While efforts to provide incremental credentials have been made to address attainment concerns, they also afford credit portability to students who have previously left higher education. Many colleges are beginning to offer industry certification independent credentials in response to students' increasing desire to pursue nondegree education programs to gain skills for a new or current career. In early 2020, the Lumina Foundation awarded a grant to SUNY Empire State College to for the Credit As You Go initiative to expand the institution's credentialing system. The aim of the initiative is to encourage institutions and systems to develop transferable credentials beyond the existing certificates and degrees traditionally offered by postsecondary institutions.

Insights and Key Lessons

Across interviews with researchers, practitioners and advocates involved in the major transfer initiatives of the last several years, we found a common set of themes that point us toward the next frontiers of transfer work:

- "Transfer" is itself a word that feels increasingly outdated to many because it signals a clean, linear process that does not comport with the contemporary reality of student mobility. The complex universe of student transitions belies any simple notion of two-year-four-year transfer.

- The equity implications of transfer/transitions remain under-explored and there is significant need for more research — and better use of existing data — to show what is not working for today's students.

- Investment in data infrastructure and effective data use is needed, and institutions/systems are far behind where most assume them to be.

- Work focused on program pathways between two-and-four-year institutions is vital, but the field may benefit from more attention toward systems, states and regions as key units of analysis and change on behalf of more equitable outcomes for transfer students. Likewise, more attention toward the incentives and disincentives driving institutional behavior with respect to transfer students can be a helpful next step.

- While the state remains an important unit of change, the future of transfer student success work may require reformers to look beyond state lines and at the broader ecosystem of postsecondary attainment that exceeds state boundaries.

- Smart use of technology, which includes attention to the human side of change as well as technical capacity for skilled and committed adoption, is an essential piece of the transfer puzzle that requires greater attention.

- Policy barriers are manifold and granular (e.g., transfer student success is not just about formal transfer policy, it's also about things like math requirements, administrative holds policies, 'opt in' policies around applying/paying to graduate and the ongoing invisibility of transfer students with respect to metrics that matter to institutions).

- While next-level policy work is needed, transfer improvement efforts rise or fall according to the quality of implementation. Focused senior leadership combined with empowered teams, strong relationships and strong connections with faculty and staff are important factors in ensuring innovation in policy and practice take root.

- The effectiveness of transfer policy can be impacted by policies in other areas of the student learning journey, and reformers focused on transfer student success can adopt a wider view of available levers.

- Long-term focus and commitment are needed for promising, evidence-based innovations to result in improvements in achieving more equitable outcomes for today's students.

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