Education Outlook

You Can't Get There from Here: Five Ways to Clear Roadblocks for College Transfer Students

By Peter P. Smith

Over half of today's college graduates transfer to another school at least once during their academic careers. With each transfer, students lose some of the academic credit they have earned due to school policies that make it difficult for students to transfer credits from one institution to another. The net drain on the economy in lost time and money reaches into the billions of dollars. In spite of increasing attention to college costs and completion rates, there has been little action taken to address the issue of academic portability. A simple system could be established to help postsecondary students and institutions navigate the transfer process. This system would grant credit based on students' performance rather than preemptively penalizing them for changing schools.

You may have heard the old story about the traveler who lost his way on a back road in Maine. He pulls his shiny new Ford up beside an old farmer sitting at the side of the road on his equally old, beat-up John Deere tractor. The traveler, in a cheery voice, hails the farmer, "Which way to East Vassalboro?" The farmer, looking out from under his weather-beaten hat, thinks for a long moment and replies, "Well, son, you can't get there from here."

Now imagine that you are driving across the country to seek your fortune. Your plan is to get to California as soon as you reasonably can, but in West Virginia, your car breaks down, costing you a few days. You stay a little longer than anticipated in Des Moines to help some cousins repair their home; by the time you get to the Colorado border, you are pressing hard to finish the trip. In Colorado, some border agents stop your car and note that you have made some unintended stops

and are running behind schedule. As a penalty, they will not let you into Colorado until you back up five hundred miles and approach the border a second time. After traversing the same ground a second time, they wave you on through. Though arbitrary, unfair, and frustrating, there is nothing you can do about it. The same thing happens at

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Key points in this *Outlook*:

- It is the norm for college graduates to transfer schools at least once during their academic careers, but many colleges do not give full credit for courses completed at other institutions.

- Rather than forcing transfer students to retake classes they have passed elsewhere, colleges should grant transfer credits based on students' performance in subsequent courses.

- A web-based academic portability system would enable students to navigate their academic journeys without losing time and money.

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the Nevada border and again in Needles, the desert entry point to California. Nearly broke, you stop in eastern California and take the first job you can get, staying there three years before finally moving on to the coast.

Though the core proposition of each story—that "you can't get there from here"—is preposterous, too many college students encounter their own version of the farmer or border agent when they attempt to transfer from one school to another. In spite of progress made at their original institutions—courses passed and competencies demonstrated—transfer students often run into administrators at their new schools who tell them, "You can't get to your degree from here; you'll have to start over." These institutions erect and maintain obstacles that prevent millions of students from transferring credits they have honestly earned and paid for. This is one reason more than 40 million American adults currently have some college credit but no certificate or degree. Since more than half of today's college graduates attend two or more institutions on their journey to a degree, this is a serious problem, and it poses a major challenge for our national goal of increasing postsecondary completion.[1] If we are to promote the economic well-being of the nation by raising completion rates and producing a twenty-first-century labor force, we must rethink the transfer system to better reflect the needs and circumstances of students.

Building a Degree from the Bottom Up No Longer Makes Sense

Over half of college students today enroll in a *minimum* of two different degree programs, even if those programs have the same name.[2] Yet most degree programs are written from the bottom up, assuming that students will spend their entire college career in the same school. Each degree program is peppered with requirements that are particular to the college and faculty in question. Within schools, all students also encounter a bewildering thicket of freshman requirements, general-education requirements, prerequisites for majors, and major requirements. Often, these are embedded in other graduation requirements that must be satisfied before the degree is awarded.

At each turn, students who switch programs at the same college or who transfer to a new college lose some of the academic credit they have earned. If they want to finish their journeys at a new school, they have to enroll, pay again, and either repeat or do additional work to satisfy the degree requirements. It is the college version of the

road trip to California. The route is well mapped if the journey goes smoothly, but if you get knocked off schedule for any reason, you have to go back five hundred miles at every border crossing. And in today's postsecondary world, more than 65 percent of all the people who initially enroll in college get knocked off schedule.[3]

A reader on the Rethinking Higher Education blog expressed her frustration with the transfer process:

> I have had many classmates of mine drop like flies, transfer from one college to the next, pay a truck load of cash and the end result is that not all of your credits transfer. So you have to take the material that YOU ALREADY KNOW all over. For what? I am currently attending college in Medical Office Management, and I want to transfer to another school when I graduate. They told me that I have to take certain classes over because they require them. Because of this, I now have to pick between choosing another BA program or waste my money and more importantly my time. I mean, if it's money that they want, why don't they figure out some other way to scam it out of us. But time, we cannot afford to waste.[4]

Using the "not completed here" stamp to discount successful, legitimate learning completed at another accredited college is a waste of time and money, yet that stamp is used millions of times per year, prolonging the time it takes to earn a degree, increasing the expense, and, in some cases, ending the educational journey entirely. For those students who ultimately find their way—like travelers on the road to East Vassalboro—the journey takes longer, costs more, and is repetitive, all of which postpone the pursuit of their goals. It also consumes scarce federal and state financial-aid dollars while adding revenue to the treasuries of the colleges that deny the credit.

Transfer Obstacles Impose Costs on Students and Taxpayers

Let us take a look at the students who fight their way through the system, pay for the redundancies and delays, and get their degrees. In 2005, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a study on college-credit transfers that indicted most current university practices.[5] The report reveals not only that higher-education institutions actively frustrate easy transfer and conversion of academic credit, but also that the costs of sustaining this

practice saddle students and taxpayers with an extraordinary financial burden.

The GAO report confirmed that 60 percent of students attending a college or university will transfer at least once prior to receiving an undergraduate degree. This adds up to 2.5 million college students transferring each year. Student transfers reflect a concept dubbed "swirling." This means that, as well as occurring between two-year and four-year institutions, transfers frequently occur within sectors (from one four-year institution to another or one two-year institution to another) and across sectors in reverse (from four-year to two-year institutions). Moreover, even within institutions, many students "swirl" between different programs of study, lengthening their time to degree and increasing the cost of their education.[6]

Swirling, combined with institutional obstacles to transferring credit, requires transferring, degree-seeking students to attend one additional semester at a minimum, each time they change institutions. In many cases, it requires an additional year in school or more. AcademyOne, a company specializing in transfer effectiveness, estimates that the additional time and personal cost for most transfer students is at least 15 percent, or between one and two extra terms, every time they change institutions.[7]

But the damage does not stop there. Swirling increases student debt, consumes scarce federal and state student aid, and delays students joining the workforce and becoming taxpayers. These increased costs overflow to all sectors of higher education and the government, as well as to the economy as a whole.

AcademyOne estimates the following costs of swirling:[8]

- Over $7 billion per year for credits that do not help a student move toward a degree.

- Nearly $14 billion per year lost in state subsidies that reduce public costs for tuition and fees; such a loss also reduces the institutions' capacity to serve more students and creates artificial demand.

- $5 billion per year of student financial aid for credits taken and not counted toward an eventual degree—assistance that could otherwise be used to serve more students.

- $6 billion per year in delayed tax revenue since additional semesters in school delay career advancement.

Some quick arithmetic reveals that for the transfer students who actually proceed to a degree, the redundant costs for them, the institutions, and the governments involved approach $30 billion per year. Even allowing for some duplication of counting in these preliminary estimates, this is a staggering loss of money, time, and productivity.

In addition to the students who eventually earn a degree, there are approximately 40 million people with some credit and no credential. A Gates Foundation study found that more than 50 percent of all annual higher-education spending in the United States, including financial aid, funds services for people who never receive a certificate or degree.[9] These are the travelers who stopped in Denver, Nevada, or Needles. They are a natural resource of enormous value, waiting to be discovered and recognized for the learning they have done. We need their knowledge and skills recognized in the workforce.

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On top of the real costs, the opportunity costs of lost income and tax revenue that these "travelers" represent are significant. Although a precise cost is difficult to calculate, the estimates provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show the difference in annual earnings between a high school graduate and a bachelor's-degree holder is over $20,000 and growing.[10] Using that number, for every 1 million Americans caught in this trap, the annual impact is $20 billion. The lost tax revenue and productivity add up quickly. These costs have a negative impact on students and taxpayers, as well as on U.S. economic stability. We are foreclosing on meritorious learners, people we need for our twenty-first-century workforce.

Streamlining the Transfer Process Could Reform the Portability Problem

In spite of increasing attention to college costs and completion rates, there has been little action taken to address the issue of academic portability comprehensively. Without adopting a student-centered focus, giving full credit for prior learning, and certifying the skills and knowledge that students bring with them from other places, we will

be hard-pressed to move the needle on completion rates. This helps explain why, although federal student financial aid and veterans educational benefits have increased, as have enrollment rates at postsecondary institutions, the degree-completion rate has remained flat and the country's international rank has declined. Millions of students have decided to stop fighting the system.

I first encountered this problem as president of the Community College of Vermont (CCV) in the 1970s. The college was accredited and part of the Vermont State Colleges system, but when our first graduates applied to one of the upper-division schools in the system, they were told they would have to redo all their courses. Why? Because CCV was outcomes-based, using learning outcomes as the basis for evaluating learning and awarding degrees, and the senior colleges would not accept those credits.

Recognizing that we calculated and represented learning in different ways, we did two things. First, we negotiated a solution. CCV graduates would be allowed to enroll and participate as juniors in the programs for which they had prepared. If they were successful academically, then CCV would work with the senior institution to create a better translation of our credits to the receiving college's degree structure. If our graduates were not successful, then we would go back to the drawing board and redesign our program.

Because the Vermont system is small and we focused on whether our graduates could successfully complete upper-level academic work (the only issue that should matter), we broke the impasse. Our graduates did well, proving that success in college is not necessarily a function of taking the curriculum from the bottom up.

Second, we developed an upper-division degree program, the external degree program, designed explicitly for returning adult students. This program was designed, among other things, to integrate with the lower-division outcomes-based approach. We then placed the program at one of the state colleges, where it still operates as a primary outlet for returning adults and community-college graduates.

Today, postsecondary-education institutions, systems, and even some states are reluctant to address how academic-credit portability could be managed via methods outside of their control. Doing so would require a commitment to designing programs and courses aligned with the reality of what students need as they compete for jobs. Colleges and universities would have to accept less revenue from transferring students because increased program efficiencies and credit portability would reduce the transfer tax. In addition, institutions that are concerned about protecting their self-contained curricula would have to embrace policies that allow students to transition between programs and locations in a timely fashion without incurring unnecessary penalties and costs.

Colleges could streamline the transfer process by negotiating specific agreements that stipulate the exchangeability of general-education courses and use elective credits as resources to help incoming students.

Many postsecondary-education institutions are limited by their policies, practices, and lack of automation. They have not adjusted to the new reality of enrollment patterns, namely the "swirling" of millions of students per year. Some colleges, however, have negotiated individual articulation agreements with other institutions to pave the way for transferring students. But these articulation agreements, often written between community colleges and their upper-division counterparts, leak like an old boat when applied in real time. In fact, in a recent report issued by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the authors found that "the *presence* of a state articulation and transfer policy does not increase the transfer rate of community college students to four-year institutions."[11] They went on to assert that the effect of these transfer barriers was disproportionately large for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and for minority students, the very people who benefit the most from a college degree and who are crucial to raising college-completion rates. The authors also concluded that "institutional factors"—policies and practices peculiar to the institution—play an important role in whether students complete a transfer between sectors.

Some states have created articulation agreements with one another, developing common course-numbering systems to support credit portability. For example, the New Mexico legislature mandated a common course-numbering system for most freshman and sophomore courses at the state's public institutions. This will facilitate credit transfers within the state, but these steps alone will not solve the problem. There is no systematic way of creating, maintaining, and displaying course equivalencies at the national level with one authoritative source.

A simple system could be established to help postsecondary students and institutions navigate the transfer process. This system, designed to help students navigate their academic journey, would work across state and institutional boundaries, just like traveling by car on the Interstate highway system. States and institutions would be adopting common transport and standardized delivery of services that address the issue of student mobility in their efforts to earn a degree.

What might this look like in reality? First, there would have to be a consistent commitment to standards that govern learning outcomes and their assessment, overseen by the accrediting agencies. Second, using recently developed software, institutions would agree to accept credit from courses successfully completed at other accredited colleges at full value, pending the student's performance in the follow-on course. The latter clause is one of the key strengths of this approach: schools can base the decision to grant transfer credit to students coming from a particular institution on the actual performance of those students in subsequent courses. This approach would be a web-based version of the highly personalized model we put together at CCV.

Take, for instance, a student who has completed one of the basic prerequisites to a business degree, Accounting 1, but is interested in transferring to a different school. Using a web-based national course atlas, the student could find and compare all Accounting 2 courses, look at their outcomes, determine his readiness by comparing the outcomes of the course he took with those of the receiving college, and even select a target college to which he wants to transfer. Upon transfer, if a student had completed the Accounting 1 course successfully, he would be admitted to the Accounting 2 course automatically. If a later evaluation showed that a preponderance of students from a specific college was not succeeding in the Accounting 2 course, the receiving college would notify the sending college and change its intake and portability rules accordingly. This approach respects accreditation and adapts admissions procedures to the actual performance of incoming students, rather than penalizing them preemptively.

This web-based approach would allow for further transfer friendliness by triangulating students' performances at three or more colleges. So, if a student has transferred from college A to college B and passed Accounting 2 at college B, and a student who transferred from college C to college B has done the same, the registrar can be fairly confident that a student going from college A to college C will be able to pass Accounting 2. By tying transfer to performance—in learning outcomes and in the receiving college—colleges would become fairer, more student friendly, and more efficient. Meanwhile, the country would get a system of standards and evaluation that was not encumbered by the heavy-handed monitoring of a state or federal regulatory body. Making transferring easier should make the schools that participate in such a system more popular with transfer students, thereby putting pressure on others to enter into the same arrangement.

This approach also addresses course equivalencies whether or not one has received a degree, enabling the student to move from one college to another secure in the knowledge that credits already earned at one institution will not be discounted by the receiving institution. Such a system will reduce the level of student debt, lower the costs of a degree to the state and the student, and improve the chances that these individuals will enter the workforce and become taxpayers in less time.

What practices and policies need to be in place for this type of system to work? Five basic elements come to mind, none of which are prevalent under the current portability regime.

Create Agreements among Colleges That Streamline the Transfer Process. Under the status quo, individual schools can often tell transfer students that credits earned elsewhere do not meet their academic standards or fulfill their specific requirements, but colleges could streamline the transfer process by negotiating specific agreements that stipulate the exchangeability of general-education courses and use elective credits as resources to help incoming students. For students considering a transfer, the important information is not whether their credits will be accepted, but whether those credits will count toward the degree.

Establish a National, "Student-Facing" Course Database and Transfer Information System in Higher Education. In the same way that drivers with different driving histories living in different locations can comparison shop for car insurance on many websites, college students looking to transfer should be able to comparison shop for the school that will provide them with the most credit for their prior learning. To get there, colleges must participate in an integrated, transparent exercise located on their websites that allows potential students to see how their credits will be treated on transfer. This would

allow transfer students to see which school is the best fit, given their needs, priorities, and prior learning. Schools looking to attract transfer students will benefit from engaging in such transparency, as it will make them a more desirable destination.

Improve the Management and Quality of Postsecondary Data for the Administration of Credit Transfers. There is no centralized, coherent method for collecting student-level data on credits completed and what competencies those credits signify. Using a common course template with learning outcomes, and using consistent standards for the exchange of information, institutions that wanted to compete for transfer students could create consistent data that could be evaluated using course equivalencies.

Automate the Processing and Evaluation of Transfer Credits. Each school has an administrator or set of administrators who determine whether transfer credits will count toward a degree at their institution. This may have made sense when transferring was relatively rare and ad hoc, but it makes no sense in an era when transferring is the norm. It is time to take the processing of transfer credits out of the hands of these clerks and to automate it. Many of the judgments that penalize transfer students, despite negotiated articulation agreements, are made subjectively by evaluators in the registrar's office acting independently. Automating this process would make it less capricious.

Create an Interstate Database of Current Course Equivalencies.[12] Our goal should be to eliminate or reduce the costs to students that stem from increased fees, costs, and time spent as a result of moving from one institution to another, as well as the increased costs to governments and others who finance higher education. Universities throughout Europe have begun to move in this direction through a negotiated arrangement called the Bologna Process. The process offers enhanced transparency and portability to the 16 million students studying at institutions in the participating European Union countries. The Bologna Process is responsible for the design and implementation of a common course-evaluation architecture based on learning outcomes. Coupled with other agreements on degree structure and common conceptions of progress toward the degree, the common course architecture provides far greater latitude for participating students. We should find ways to achieve a similar outcome in the United States.

Institutions and state systems of higher education must develop policies that make the transfer of credit fairer, more efficient, and more accurate. Nero earned his place in history by fiddling while Rome burned. Will the United States continue to dither while students are denied credit when transferring between colleges and successful students, already in the workforce, are denied the true value of their learning?

We have the capacity today to bring millions of capable postsecondary students into the economic mainstream if we decide to do it. Many of these students, left by the wayside in the Denver or Needles of their college journey, were defeated by the transfer policies of higher education. Changing these practices will improve graduation rates in higher education while saving taxpayers' dollars and students' time.

Notes

1. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Transfer Students: Postsecondary Education Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation*, 108th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, DC, October 2005).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Comment from a reader on the Rethinking Higher Education blog sponsored by Kaplan Higher Education, available through www.rethinkinghighereducation.com.

5. GAO, *Transfer Students: Postsecondary Education Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation*.

6. Ibid.

7. AcademyOne, "An Academic GPS" (Philadelphia, PA, 2008).

8. AcademyOne, "The Cost of College Transfer" (Special Report 11, Philadelphia, PA, August 2007).

9. Claudia Wallis, "Bill and Melinda Gates Go Back to School," *Fortune*, November 26, 2008.

10. Roberts T. Jones, "The New American Workforce: Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education," Education Workforce Policy LLP, available at www.educationworkforcepolicy.com/papers.html (accessed May 4, 2010).

11. Betheny Gross and Dan Goldhaber, "Community College Transfer and Articulation Policies: Looking beneath the Surface" (working paper, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, Seattle, 2009), 1.

12. AcademyOne, "Report of the Advisory Council on Student Financial Assistance" (testimony, Philadelphia, PA, May 2008), 100.