

The Promise of the Transfer Pathway

Opportunity and Challenge
for Community College
Students Seeking the
Baccalaureate Degree

Summary of Empirical
Analyses, Policy Reflections
and Recommendations

Stephen J. Handel
Ronald A. Williams



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About the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice

In partnership with the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives and the Advocacy & Policy Center, the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice highlights the pivotal role of the transfer pathway for students — especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds — seeking the baccalaureate degree; convenes two- and four-year institution leaders to identify policies and practices that enhance this century-old pathway; and promotes a national dialogue about the viability and potential of transfer to address the nation's need for an educated citizenry that encompasses all sectors of American society.

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About the Authors

Stephen J. Handel is the Executive Director of the National Office of Community College Initiatives and Higher Education Relationship Development at the College Board.

Ronald A. Williams is Vice President of Community College Initiatives in the Advocacy & Policy Center at the College Board.

Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice

George Boggs, Immediate Past President, American Association of Community Colleges, DC

Rita Cepeda, Chancellor, San Jose/Evergreen Community College District, CA

Michelle Cooper, President, Institute for Higher Education Policy, DC

Kevin Dougherty, Associate Professor of Higher Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, NY

Charlene Dukes, President, Prince George's Community College, MD

Emily Froimson, Vice President, Higher Education Programs, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, VA

Donna Hamilton, Associate Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies, University of Maryland, MD

Allison Jones, Associate Vice President (retired), Student Academic Services, California State University Chancellor's Office, CA. (Senior Fellow with Achieve, Washington, DC)

Gail Mellow, President, LaGuardia Community College, NY

Yvette Mozie Ross, Associate Provost for Enrollment Management, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, MD

Robert Templin, President, Northern Virginia Community College, VA

Toyia K. Younger, Assistant Provost, Towson University, MD

For the College Board

Ronald A. Williams, Vice President, Community College Initiatives, Advocacy and Policy Center, The College Board, DC

Stephen J. Handel, Executive Director, National Office of Community College Initiatives and Higher Education Relationship Development, The College Board, CA

Marilyn Cushman, Executive Assistant, Advocacy and Policy Center, The College Board, DC

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A Note to the Reader

This paper summarizes the findings and recommendations of a College Board initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, focusing on the effectiveness of the transfer pathway for community college students seeking the baccalaureate degree. For a comprehensive description of this initiative's methodology, empirical and policy analyses, findings and recommendations, and complete reference list, please see the full report, The Promise of the Transfer Pathway — Opportunity and Challenge for Community College Students Seeking the Baccalaureate Degree, and three supplemental reports, available at advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges.

Foreword

In 2010, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the College Board initiated a project to identify ways of improving the efficiency of the transfer pathway, a century-old mechanism that provides community college students with an opportunity to earn the baccalaureate degree at four-year institutions. Both organizations understand that the national focus on increasing the number of individuals with credentials and degrees will require that transfer play a significant role, especially given the fact that 47 percent of all undergraduates attend community colleges. Now and into the future, the way in which two- and four-year institutions embrace transfer — or not — will influence the educational fate of thousands of students in the United States.

The project's initial efforts focused primarily on collection and review of the extant research pertaining to transfer, including information on the demographic characteristics of community college transfer students and their academic success in two- and four-year institutions, enrollment trends among two- and four-year colleges and universities, and predicted variations in high school graduating classes (nationally and regionally).

The College Board then convened the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, a committee composed of education leaders having special expertise in serving community college transfer students. The Commission's charge was to identify significant and emerging trends that influence transfer, highlight especially promising transfer practices and policies, and delineate a research agenda that would address pivotal empirical questions around transfer. The College Board also engaged the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) to tackle the transfer and degree completion research issues identified by the Commission and to supplement these analyses with site visits to two- and four-year institutions.

This summary, along with the full report and several supplemental reports, describes the transfer process as it is currently applied, identifies major challenges facing policymakers wishing to expand this pipeline, and provides a set of recommendations for states, two- and four-year institutions, and other entities, including the philanthropic and research communities, that are designed to advance transfer as a more effective pathway to the baccalaureate degree. It is our hope that this effort will highlight the importance of the transfer pathway in U.S. higher education and identify ways in which this avenue to the baccalaureate degree can be improved.

Ronald A. Williams

Vice President, Community College Initiatives

Stephen J. Handel

Executive Director, National Office of Community College Initiatives and Higher Education Relationship Development

1. A Look Forward and a Look Back

“With the current emphasis on the [community] college as the institution which will presumably care for an increasing share of this nation’s college freshmen and sophomores, representatives from all types of four-year colleges and from all types of [community] colleges must use all means of enabling the greatest number of transfer students to have a satisfying and successful experience in the next institution ... To date, too much has been left to chance.”

Leland Medsker, UC Berkeley, 1960

Although Leland Medsker’s critique is over 50 years old, it remains as accurate as ever. Transfer has been a primary mission of community colleges since the establishment of these institutions in 1901.¹ It is, by definition, a collective responsibility of community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. However, it has not always been viewed that way. Even at the beginning of the community college movement — a movement initiated by leaders at several of America’s most elite four-year colleges and universities — helping students make the transition from a two-year to a four-year institution was, if not an incidental activity on the part of the senior institutions, then certainly a secondary one. Community colleges also come in for similar criticism as

1. A more extensive discussion of the history of the transfer process can be found in *Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer* (available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>).

these institutions have expanded their mission, forcing educators there to balance transfer against a growing list of other priorities. Today, despite the fact that nearly 47 percent of all undergraduate students are enrolled in a community college, the relationship between two- and four-year institutions is often strained over disagreements about academic preparation, credit transfer, and control of the baccalaureate degree. Not surprisingly, then, despite this 100-year history, transfer has never been a reliably productive route to the baccalaureate degree. Current estimates indicate that the proportion of community college students who transfer successfully to a four-year institution hovers around 25 to 35 percent, a rate reflecting an enormous opportunity for improvement.

The way in which community colleges and four-year institutions have collectively dealt with the transfer of students from one institution to another has created the transfer process we have today; a process that remains frustratingly complex for students, largely opaque to policymakers, and one given insufficient attention by educators at both two- and four-year institutions. Our analysis of the historical record reveals three overarching themes. First, that transfer was designed to be a *shared* responsibility between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities, although the responsibility for transfer outcomes has been placed at the door of community colleges; second, that two- and four-year institutions have almost never been recognized or rewarded for the work they do on behalf of transfer students; and third, that policymakers’ attempts to improve transfer, though earnest and well-meaning, have created a hodgepodge of initiatives that rarely simplify what is an already too complex process.

2. The Transfer Moment

The transfer pathway has never been more important than it is today. Profound national and international trends are influencing U.S. higher education in remarkable ways. The workforce requirements of a knowledge economy and the pressure of international competition on U.S. economic growth has highlighted the need for this nation to raise college completion rates. However, this can be achieved only if we are able to improve academic outcomes among students from underserved groups. Community colleges and the transfer pathway to four-year institutions play a pivotal role in addressing this nation’s workforce needs for the following reasons:

- **Community college students want to transfer.** Transfer has been and continues to be a popular goal for a large proportion of incoming community college students, with as many as eight out of 10 new, first-time community college students identifying transfer as their primary educational goal. Students’ desire to earn a baccalaureate degree has steadily increased since 1989-90 regardless of their racial/ethnic background, age, and income level (see Table 1). Moreover, although students’ educational intentions are often seen as unreliable, the high proportion of entering community college students wishing to transfer has been constant through the history of community colleges.

Selected Student Characteristics	1989-90	1995-96	2003-04
Total	70.7	79.2	81.4
Sex			
Male	71.3	83.0	83.6
Female	70.3	75.6	79.7
Race/Ethnicity			
White	68.6	78.8	79.1
Black	81.7	72.5	83.0
Latino	75.1	86.2	85.4
Asian/Pacific Islander¹	–	–	88.8
American Indian/Alaska Native¹	–	–	55.0 ²
Age When First Enrolled			
18 or younger	80.9	91.1	90.4
19–23	70.3	84.4	83.7
24–29	55	59.8	78.1
30 or older	48.9	46.8	61.3
Income			
Lowest 25 percent	73.9	81.8	84.2
Middle 50 percent	70.3	78.0	82.3
Highest 25 percent	67.6	79.0	76.8

Adapted from Table 1-A, NCES 2012-253, U.S. Department of Education (Horn and Skomsvold, 2011, November).
¹ Some data for Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native not available or unreliable due to small sample sizes.
² Figure represents only those students indicating a goal "above a bachelor's degree."

- **Community colleges are the largest postsecondary education segment and their share of the undergraduate population is likely to increase.** Community colleges enroll more than seven million for-credit students, constituting 47 percent of all undergraduates in the United States. Moreover, student enrollment in public two-year community colleges dwarfs enrollments in all other sectors of undergraduate higher education (see Table 2). Since 2006, community college enrollment has increased 9 percent, faster than any other segment of higher education.
- **The college-going population is changing.** The high school graduation growth rate is expected to stagnate or decline in at least 27 states throughout this decade, compelling four-year colleges and universities to recruit students transferring from community colleges to fill seats that would have otherwise been occupied by 18-year-olds. Moreover, in light of current economic realities,

more middle- and upper-class families than ever before are considering community colleges as a viable postsecondary option for their sons and daughters as a way of leveraging limited higher education resources.

- **Community colleges attract students from underserved groups in significant numbers.** Community colleges enroll significant numbers of African American, Latino, and first-generation students, as well as students from the lowest income level and single-parent families. These numbers are likely to increase because, for example, the population of students from underrepresented ethnic groups is expected to increase substantially in the coming decades. Many of these groups, especially Latinos, are poised for significant growth nationally, which will require two- and four-year institutions to address more effectively an increasing demand for access to the baccalaureate degree.

- **Community colleges cost less to attend than four-year institutions.** As the national debate about college costs intensifies, the relative affordability of community colleges makes these institutions an increasingly attractive option for

many American households. Indeed, increasing income stratification within higher education makes transfer the most important — and perhaps the only — viable avenue for students from low-income backgrounds.

Institution Type	Percentage of All Undergraduate
Public Two-Year Community Colleges	45.7
Public Four-Year Research and Other Colleges and Universities	28.9
Private Four-Year Research, Liberal Arts, and Other Colleges and Universities	12.7
For Profit	9.8
Others	2.9

Adapted from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2012 (<http://chronicle.com/article/Who-Are-the-Undergraduates-/123916/>)

3. Empirical Snapshot for the New Century: Transfer Student Gains and Losses

The importance of the transfer pathway warrants a critical examination of its current productivity and potential for growth. Empirical analyses commissioned for this project focused on the academic progress of new, first-time students who entered a community college in 2003-04, assessing their progress at the end of the 2008-09 academic year (five years later).² These data were compared to data obtained from a similar cohort of community college students who entered college in 1996-97 and whose progress was assessed at the end of the 2000-01 academic year. Major findings include the following:

- **The transfer rate remains steady, but more students transfer:** The national transfer rate of community college students was calculated as 26 percent. This transfer estimate is statistically indistinguishable from a similar cohort of students assessed eight years earlier, which was calculated as 27 percent. Although the transfer rate has remained the same, there has been a net gain of approximately 24,000 transfer students between 1996–2001 and 2004–2009.
- **The transfer rate for African American students increased:** The transfer rate for African American students is 25 percent, an increase of 9 percentage points over the previous cohort.
- **The transfer rate for Latino students did not improve:** The transfer rate for Latino students is 20 percent. Although this rate did not decline substantially from the rate calculated for the previous cohort (less than 1 percent), Latinos have the lowest rate among all students in the current cohort.
- **The proportion of students who indicated an intention to transfer increased but not the proportion of students who successfully transferred:** Sixty percent of the students in the 2004–2009 cohort indicated an intention to transfer, a 16 percentage point increase from the 1996–2001 cohort (44 percent). However, in the 2004–2009 cohort, only about one-third of the students who indicated an intention to transfer actually did, compared to 44 percent of students in the 1996–2001 cohort.

2. A complete description of the research methodology and empirical results can be found in *Understanding the Transfer Process: A Report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy* (available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>).

- **Bachelor's degree attainment lags for transfer students compared to their four-year institution peers:** Nearly 70 percent of rising juniors earned a bachelor's degree at four-year colleges and universities, but only 45 percent of transfer students who were seeking a bachelor's degree had a similar outcome after six years. It is important to stress, however, that 20 percent of transfer students were still enrolled six years after their initial enrollment in postsecondary education. In all likelihood then, the difference in attainment rates would shrink if we continued to track the progress of these students.
- **Little support was found for the effectiveness of statewide articulation policies:** Statewide articulation agreements, which require the

transfer of lower-division course credit from public community colleges to public four-year colleges and universities, show no statistically significant impact on transfer rates.

"Results show the presence of a 'transfer penalty;' i.e., students who begin at a community college are not as likely to earn a baccalaureate degree within six years as students who begin at a four-year institution. But this finding, like similar results in other studies, may be the result of not tracking the progress of transfer students for a sufficient period of time."

Member of the Commission
on Transfer Policy and Practice

Interlude: Challenges to the Expansion of the Transfer Pathway

The empirical results reported in the last chapter reveal a transfer process in distress. Positive findings, such as an increase in the transfer rate for African American students compared to a similar cohort of students assessed eight years earlier, were more than offset by other findings that revealed a stagnant transfer rate for Latino students, little support for statewide articulation agreements in boosting transfer, fewer students who intended to transfer successfully doing so, and the presence of a "transfer penalty" in earning a four-year degree in six years for students beginning at a community college compared to those who began at a four-year institution.

In the chapters to follow, we draw a crosswalk between these empirical findings and the work of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, which was charged with articulating the reasons for this distress and developing recommendations to improve the process. The Commission used two strategies. The first strategy focused on a description of the transfer process as viewed by community college students. The results of this analysis are presented in *Transfer*

as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective (available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>). The Commission's second strategy was to identify the most important challenges facing policymakers who wish to improve the transfer process, guided not only by the empirical data compiled for this project but relying also on the research literature more generally. The Commission identified five challenges:

- Unknown capacity of the transfer pathway to accommodate more students;
- Lack of institutional incentives to support transfer;
- Ruptures in the transfer pipeline where most potential transfers are lost;
- Discontinuities in financial aid that do not support transfer students; and
- Distinct and sometimes contrary academic cultures of two- and four-year institutions that compromise transfer student progress.

4. Transfer Capacity: Black Box or Black Hole?

The major empirical findings derived from this initiative — a transfer rate that has not budged in a decade, an increased number of students who want to transfer, but, for whatever reason are unable to do so, and the persistence of the “transfer penalty” — raise a number of questions about the capacity of the current higher education system to educate more students for the baccalaureate degree using the transfer pathway.

- Does the static transfer rate over the past decade indicate that the nation has reached a ceiling in accommodating students who wish to enter a four-year institution and earn the baccalaureate degree?
- If such a ceiling exists, what are the causes? If there is less room at the receiving institutions, what kinds of incentives should be in place for four-year colleges and universities to admit students from community colleges?
- What is the relationship between enrollment demand and public resources that are available to accommodate that demand?
- Are community college students preparing for transfer majors that are already at capacity?
- Does the fact that a lower proportion of students

with transfer intentions who were successful in enrolling at a four-year institution, as compared to a similar group of students surveyed a decade earlier, imply that there is a problem with transfer advising at the two- and/or four-year institutions?

The research and policy literature surrounding capacity raise more questions than answers; this, despite the historical preeminence of the transfer mission for community colleges, the implicit obligation of four-year institutions to accommodate transfer students, and community college students’ sustained preference for transfer over many decades. Without better information that regularly tracks the trajectory of students in the higher education system, a thoroughgoing analysis of the transfer process — and its capacity in fulfilling national needs for baccalaureate degree holders — is almost impossible. As a result, expanding the transfer pathway to meet explicit national numerical goals becomes something of a guessing game. This is especially true since capacity is dependent on a series of countervailing, at times contradictory, variables, such as the availability of public resources in the form of subsidies to two- and four-year institutions; the availability of state and federal student financial aid, and the degree to which four-year institutions *want* or *need* transfer students from community colleges.

5. Incentives and Accountability

The second barrier that interferes with an expansion of the transfer pathway is the lack of institutional incentives for both community colleges and four-year institutions to boost transfer, as well as the multiplicity of transfer definitions that make accounting for progress difficult to measure.

- ***Despite the centrality of transfer for community colleges, two- and four-year institutions almost never receive credit for the commitment they make to the transfer process.*** Under current federal reporting guidelines, transfer is not a measure of institutional productivity, nor are any measures used to assess how well community colleges prepare students for transfer. Similar to community colleges, the federal data collection guidelines do not represent accurately the efforts of the four-year institution in providing a pathway to the baccalaureate degree. Under current regulations, a four-year institution that confers a bachelor’s degree on a student who has transferred in from a community college receives no credit for this effort,

“Transfer should be a performance indicator for community colleges and for four-year schools ... Having transfer students be a part of the way the universities are judged is a wonderful way of improving retention.”

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since the transfer student was not part of the four-year institution’s original first-time, full-time cohort.

- ***There is little evidence that statewide performance accountability mechanisms have any influence on institutional behavior, such as persistence or graduation rates.*** Nevertheless, policymakers have implemented accountability mechanisms that attempt to encourage — or mandate — increases in the number of students who transition from a community college to a four-year institution.

- **Accounting for the effectiveness of the transfer pathway requires a collective understanding of what we mean by “transfer,” yet there is no common agreement about how a transfer rate should be calculated.** The effort to find a “true” transfer rate methodology has resulted in a

maddening array of transfer definitions and transfer rates. In a 2001 analysis of transfer, for example, the U.S. Department of Education identified no fewer than eight different definitions, calculating transfer rates that ranged from 25 to 52 percent.

6. Complexity and Casualties

Far more students entering community colleges wish to transfer than actually do. Where do we lose those students who wish to transfer but who are not successful? Is the failure primarily within community colleges or at the point of transfer to the four-year institution? There are many reasons why students never transfer despite their intention to do so and many cannot be controlled by two- and four-year institutions. Still, some institutional processes — combined with the complexity of transfer, as currently practiced — leave students vulnerable to dropping out despite their best efforts to make progress through the system.

- **The complexity of the current transfer process inadvertently stymies student progress.** Transfer complexity refers not only to the difficulties that students face in dealing with two- and four-year institutional structures and processes; it also includes results from a decentralized system that offers students extraordinary choice but insufficient guidance with regard to program planning, major selection, or other academic decisions.
- **Inadequate academic guidance makes it difficult for students to work through an already complicated process.** The current transfer process, coupled with the multitude of programs and majors offered by two- and four-year institutions, exacerbates what is already endemic to many colleges and universities: the lack of adequate guidance, especially for students who

need it most. This leads students to initiate their own guidance, which, especially in the case of transfer, often leads to costly choices that are not detected until the student applies to the senior institution.

“What does the transfer pipeline look like — as a comprehensive structure? There is leakage at several points that is really problematic. I don’t think we have a very good sense at all of how many credits get lost. I think there’s a tremendous leakage that undermines transfer ambitions.”

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- **Institutional policies and practices may inadvertently discourage transfer.** Both two- and four-year institutions employ policies and practices that inadvertently discourage students’ academic advancement. These include excessive bureaucratic hurdles, inflexible course scheduling, academic policies that reward students for academic behavior known to undermine academic momentum, and the failure of four-year institutions to anticipate the impact of changes to majors and programs on prospective transfer applicants.

7. Problematic Financial Aid Policies and Practices

Although research is not plentiful about the specific effects of financial aid policies on transfer students, some trends have been identified:

- **Rising tuition and fees at two- and four-year institutions also affect transfer students.** While headlines publicize the rise of tuition and fees at four-year institutions, increases at community colleges have also been recorded. And although community college transfer students pay less in

tuition and fees than students who begin at a four-year institution, they face significant sticker shock once they transfer to the four-year institution.

- **Transfer students do not have an accurate estimate of the costs they will incur in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.** Few community colleges and four-year institutions coordinate their financial aid practices to serve community college transfer students or supply information in which students

“There’s this perception of community colleges as low cost. This is because families focus only on tuition and fees. They often do not recognize all of the other education-related costs that are necessary, such as the cost of books and supplies, transportation, and other expenses. When they come to the point of transferring and look at the cost of the four-year institution, there’s sticker shock.”

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could estimate their financial commitment across four-years of college (and the aid they would likely receive).

- **Transfer students work more hours while attending school than students attending a four-year institution.** Students who work more than 20 hours per week to finance their

college education threaten their academic progress. Compounding this, such students may be penalized for this strategy when it comes to applying for financial aid at the four-year institution because their job-related assets — which they will likely forgo at the four-year institution — give an inaccurate snapshot of their income level.

- **Transfer students are less likely to apply for financial aid.** This leads to choices that undercut students’ academic progress, such as working an outside job more than 20 hours per week and attending college on a part-time basis.
- **Transfer students are often last to be packaged by four-year institutions.** Community college applicants to four-year institutions are usually evaluated after the freshman class has been assembled. Unless an institution has reserved financial aid specifically for transfer applicants, these students are likely to receive less grant aid and more loans.

8. Conflicting Academic Cultures

Community colleges and four-year institutions have different academic cultures and this poses problems for transfer students. While both types of institutions deliver postsecondary education, they have different origins, attract different kinds of students, place different responsibilities on faculty, receive funding in different ways (often from different sources), offer different types of curricula, maintain different kinds of physical plants, and are governed by different political processes.

This difference in academic cultures often stymies transfer students and undermines the effectiveness of the academic pathway. For example, two- and four-year institutions differ radically with respect to whom they admit. Community colleges gain a measure of moral authority (though little prestige) by opening their doors to all students, while four-year institutions, especially highly and moderately selective institutions, gain prestige by maintaining admission requirements that restrict entry to their colleges and universities. Such differences in admission policy create campus cultures focused on different things. Four-year institutions devote most of their academic and student service resources to first-year students. That’s because the academic success of first-year students is the measure by which these institutions are judged (by the federal government, as reflected in IPEDS data, and the culture at large, via publication such as *U.S. News and World Report’s* annual college rankings). Although a four-year institution may admit transfer students, the institution’s reputation hardly ever depends on the success of these students.

“There is a lack of information sharing [between community colleges and four-year institutions] because we’re different cultures; we’re different kinds of institutions.”

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Community colleges, on the other hand, are almost entirely transient, nonresidential communities that pride themselves on providing extraordinary higher education access to individuals from almost any background. Although the completion rates of community colleges are gaining increasing attention as an accountability measure, it is the access these institutions provide that drives academic and institutional culture. In many instances, the campus culture is less competitive and less cohesive than four-year institutions.

Differences in academic culture have bred misperceptions that undermine the transfer process. The most prominent of these misunderstandings include the following:

- **A belief that community college students are not prepared well for study at four-year colleges and universities.** Given that community colleges are open access institutions, there is a perception that the curricula of these institutions are less

rigorous than those of four-year colleges and universities. As a result, it is argued, community college students are insufficiently prepared for the upper-division. In support of this contention, critics point to high rates of remediation at community colleges, low transfer rates, and transfer shock (a decline in transfer students' GPA after the first term at the receiving institution). Yet community college faculty respond that their emphasis on teaching and pedagogy make up for deficiencies in student preparation and that smaller classes and greater personalization are adequate to the task.

- **A belief that four-year institutions are reluctant to accept community college credit for application to the baccalaureate degree.**

The reason transfer students struggle to have credits applied toward the four-year degree probably has more to do with the complexity — and capriciousness — of the transfer process than anything approaching a scheme by four-year institutions to shortchange students. Most four-year institutions accept community college credit, but how they apply this credit toward the baccalaureate degree, especially in the absence of an explicit articulation agreement, is often haphazard.

- **A belief that two- and four-year institutions are unable to work well together to improve the transfer process for students.** State policy-makers have stepped in aggressively with a number of policy interventions to “encourage” recalcitrant (or simply disinterested) community college and four-year institution leaders to cooperate with one another to improve the transfer pathway. These interventions are designed largely to standardize course credit transfer practices through the assignment of common course numbers across all public institutions; to systematize inter-institutional curricula by approving blanket or block articulation agreements that establish a single general education (GE) curriculum for an entire state; or guarantee admission to the receiving institution for all students who complete an associate degree. Despite these efforts, however, the benefits in advancing student progress from what we know thus far are mixed.

- **The belief that four-year institutions create artificial capacity restraints at their institutions to prevent more community college students from enrolling.** Transfer rates (current and historical) indicate that most students who want

to transfer do not. Analyses carried out for this project indicate that only about one-third of students who intend to transfer are successful in making the transition to the four-year institution. The discrepancy between student goals and student success has led some to believe that there is necessarily a ceiling established on the number of students that four-year colleges and universities are able to admit.

There is an emerging appreciation that although two- and four-year institutions possess different, sometimes even incompatible, academic cultures, both kinds of institutions must still seek ways of serving students who must make the transition from one institution to the other. Researchers are investigating the elements that characterize “transfer-affirming” cultures; that is, campus environments in which community college students are supported in their efforts to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a baccalaureate degree.

What does this mean in practice? According to higher education leaders in two- and four-year institutions, a transfer-affirming culture:

- Envisions transfer as a shared responsibility between community colleges and four-year institutions;
- Views transfer and attainment of the bachelor's degree as expected and attainable;
- Offers curricula and academic support services that make transfer and degree completion possible;
- Provides students with the transfer social capital they need, while leveraging the social capital that students bring to college — linguistic, familial, aspirational — in service to their educational goals; and
- Includes transfer as an essential element of an institution's mission and strategic vision.

“The trust issue among two- and four-year institutions is very important. People need to be in more contact with each other, because we know that people build up all sorts of expectations that can be quite wrong. Providing opportunities for regular contact is crucial.”

Member of the Commission
on Transfer Policy and Practice

9. Concluding Thoughts

The empirical and policy findings gathered for this initiative suggest the following:

- **Transfer continues to be a popular route to the baccalaureate degree, but the transfer rate has not improved despite more students wishing to transfer.** New, first-time community college students want to transfer. Most of them do not. In addition, data suggest the continued presence of a “transfer penalty;” that is, students who begin at a community college appear to have less chance of earning a baccalaureate degree compared to students who begin at a four-year institution. (Again, it is worth noting that the magnitude of the penalty will likely shrink if the progress of students still in the pipeline continued to be tracked.)
- **The transfer process is too complex.** We think part of the reason more students do not transfer is because the system is unnecessarily complicated. Despite efforts to streamline the process, such as the implementation of common course number systems, most efforts have a patchwork quality that adds a new layer of regulation for students to negotiate.
- **The effectiveness of statewide articulation policies in boosting transfer has not yet been established empirically, but transparent transfer credit policies remain essential for student success.** That this study found no empirical support for statewide articulation efforts is consistent with the findings of other researchers, but we also note that that literature is relatively recent and not deep. Still, even if the literature were more definitive, some sort of mechanism is necessary to communicate to students how community college course credit transfers to four-year colleges and universities.
- **Community colleges and four-year institutions are rarely acknowledged for the work they do on behalf of transfer and, where transfer-related metrics exist, they are often imprecise, inadequate, or misapplied.** Community colleges are rarely judged on the number of students they prepare for transfer, and four-year institutions are almost never given credit for the community college students they enroll and graduate. If the transfer pathway is to succeed, education and policy leaders must delineate specific goals for transfer and develop methods of effectively tracking progress.
- **Community colleges and four-year institutions are different academic cultures that create barriers for students already struggling to maneuver through a too complex system.** Two- and four-year institutions are more different than they are alike and failing to address this openly does not make these differences go away. Despite differences in mission, history, curricula, and admission criteria, both types of institutions cross paths when it comes to transfer and, as such, must work together more effectively in service to students preparing to make the transition from one institution to the other.
- **Financial aid policy is an essential element for an effective transfer plan, but it is often not aligned with other initiatives to boost transfer.** Financial aid is important for all students with need, but especially so for students attending community colleges since these institutions are more likely to enroll students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. What two- and four-year institutions lack is a comprehensive financial aid strategy across institutions. Such a strategy would delineate for students the tuition, fees, and other costs they face for the entire baccalaureate degree and the ways in which they might manage these costs at the community college and the four-year institution.
- **We do not know the capacity of the current transfer system and this impairs our ability to meet the nation’s college completion agenda.** We lack compelling information about the ability of two-year institutions to prepare additional students for transfer and the baccalaureate degree and the capacity and willingness of four-year institutions to admit more community college students to the upper-division. National education trends offer some insight, but, on balance, portray great uncertainty about the future viability of the transfer pathway.

10. Recommendations

The empirical and policy findings gleaned from this initiative invite the following set of recommendations targeted to leaders of state governments, two- and four-year institutions, and the research, policymaking, and philanthropic communities. (Figure 1 summarizes the recommendations described in brief below.)

1. For community college and four-year institution leaders:

Create a transfer-affirming culture that spans your respective campuses, providing a pathway for community college students to advance toward the associate and baccalaureate degrees. Develop partnerships, such as dual admission arrangements or transfer contracts. Develop similar partnerships to help students understand their financial aid options. Share information with one another on student goals and intentions, student academic performance, course equivalencies, and changes in programs and requirements with the overarching intention of providing students with an academic road map and a simpler and more coherent transfer process.

2. For community college leaders:

Honor and support the intentions of your new, first-time community college students, most of whom overwhelmingly want to earn a four-year degree, by making transfer and the associate degree the default curriculum, unless they opt for a different educational goal. Help students get a good start in higher education by providing them with a mandatory orientation program before their first term in college and/or a student success course in their first term, the product of each being a program of study leading to the associate degree and transfer.

3. For four-year institution leaders:

Establish an authentic and equal partnership with community colleges focused on transfer. Elevate transfer as a strategic, rather than tactical, objective of your institution's enrollment plans. Evidence this by insisting that enrollment targets be separate from those for freshmen. Share the responsibility of preparing students for transfer by reaching out to community college students in their first year of college with information about academic preparation, financial aid, and credit transfer. Cultivate these students with the same intensity and commitment that you cultivate your high school prospects and demonstrate this

commitment by providing them with first-priority in the admission process over other transfer applicants.

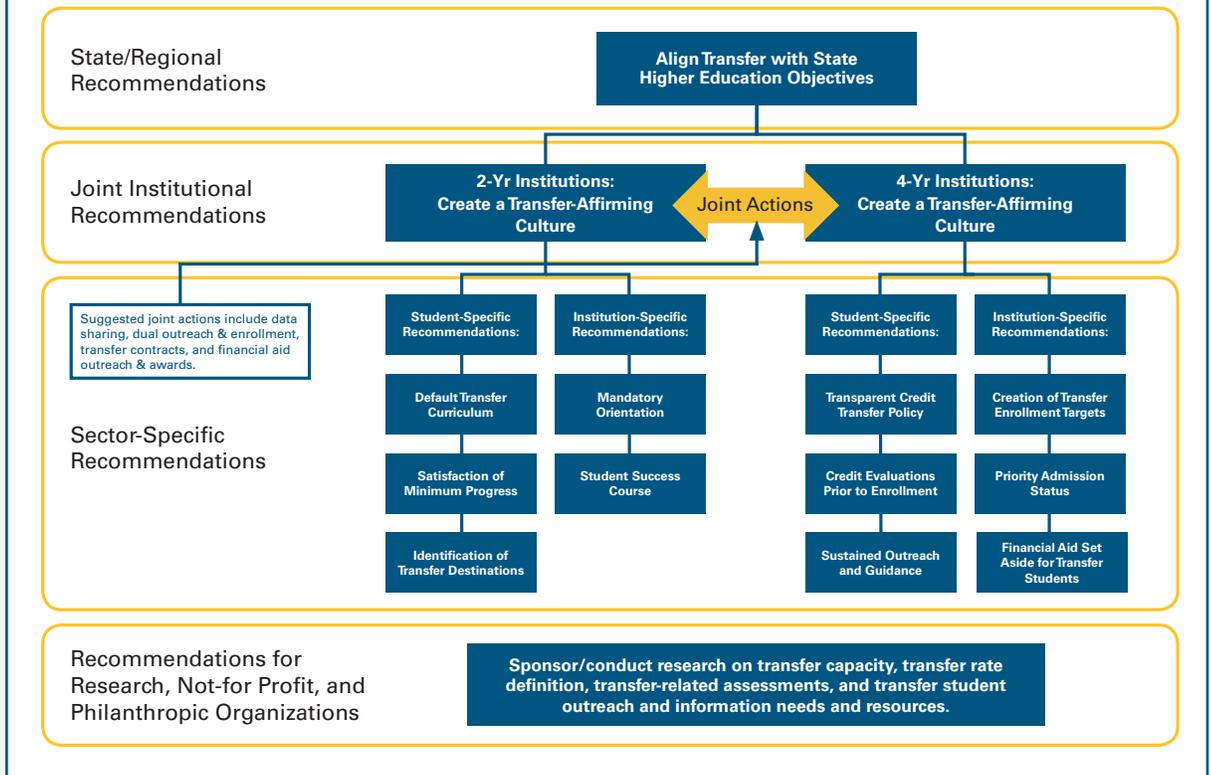
4. For state government leaders:

Create a coherent transfer strategic plan that aligns with the state's overall higher education objectives. Incentivize the joint activity of community colleges and four-year institutions to serve community college transfer students, but also hold them accountable with reasonable and meaningful metrics that best assess what each type of institution does best.

5. For research, not-for-profit and philanthropic organization leaders:

Develop research methodologies that allow policymakers to assess the capacity of the transfer pathway nationally. Create a definition of transfer that two- and four-year institutions can use to meaningfully assess their progress. Build Web-based college-search and other informational databases for community college students preparing for transfer that are at least as sophisticated as those for high school students. Develop new evaluation methods that can measure students' learning outcomes and thereby allow them to demonstrate competency in lieu of completing specific course work that may not have been articulated between any given two- and four-year institutions.

Figure 1
Summary of Recommendations for State Governments, Two- and Four-Year Institutions, and Research, Not-for-Profit, and Philanthropic Organizations



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