

Formulating a model of a 2/4 transfer program

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ABSTRACT

The American Council on Education (2021) estimates that 38% of fall 2019 undergraduate students will change schools within six years. Of that group, only 13% are projected to earn a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2019). Clearly, there is a disjoint between the goals of transfer students and the programs that are in place to help them meet their goals. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine: (a) the progress of state legislatures in eliminating barriers to student transfer success, (b) the most recent empirical research regarding the recommended components of transfer programs, and (c) the interactions among those components. The research question guiding this examination is: what are the recommendations for a quality transfer program and how do these recommended components interact for student transfer success? The findings of this research result in the framework for and the suggestion for a model of 2/4 transfer programs.

Keywords: 2/4 community college, transfer, transfer model, transfer program, college transfer

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BACKGROUND

Barbara Townsend (2001) identified six transfer patterns, namely transfer: (a) between two-year and four-year institutions, also known as 2/4 transfer, before completing an associate degree; (b) from a community college to a four-year institution after completing an associate degree; (c) between two-year and four-year campuses, sometimes repeatedly, commonly referred to as reverse transfer; (d) dual enrollment credits from a two-year college while entering a four-year institution; (e) two-year courses taken during the summer while enrolled at a four-year institution; and (f) two-year courses earned concurrently while they are enrolled at a four-year school (DuPont, 2010; Taylor, 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 81% of all first-time beginning community college students indicate that their goal is to complete a bachelor degree or higher (LaVigna, 2020), yet only 13% achieved that goal (NCES, 2019). Clearly, given these transfer options, barriers exist which prevent students from fulfilling their goals.

In an earlier work, DuPont (2010) identified the primary efforts of state legislatures to remove barriers to student success in 2/4 transfer programs. These efforts, and the number of states incorporating these efforts in parentheses, included:

- “transfer and articulation policy written into legislation through statutes, bills, or resolutions” (30 states).
- “statewide articulation agreements between institutions of higher education” (40 states).
- “collecting and reporting transfer data on a regular basis” (33 states).
- “financial aid, guaranteed transfer of credit, or priority admission to transfer students” (18 states).
- offering “descriptions of transfer requirements and answering student questions regarding the transfer process” (26 states).
- working to eliminate confusion created when “separate institutions require different core courses to fulfill graduation requirements” (23 states).
- creating a common course numbering system students may concentrate on transferable credit courses (8 states).

Given these advancements, state lawmakers were encouraged to continue working “toward implementing programs that increase students’ access to four-year colleges and universities” through common course numbering of lower division core courses and increasing the opportunity for students to reverse transfer earned credits to obtain their associate degree after completion of the required coursework prior to achieving their bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution (DuPont, 2010).

DuPont (2010) also indicated that the recommended components of transfer programs from existing research included:

- providing students with “advising services from both the community college and the four-year institution” such as university and program specific articulation agreements.
- offering students “orientation programs” in anticipation of transfer.
- providing students with “access to academic clubs, student organizations, peer mentoring programs” from the four-year institutions and offering “special networking sessions at both the community college and the four-year university.”
- developing a” method of tracking the transfer student’s performance through graduation of the baccalaureate program.”

- ensuring “internet access” for all students.

These actions help create a favorable institutional organizational culture and ideology, at both the 2-year college and at the 4-year college. This organizational cultural can influence the commitment of transfer students and in turn influence the success of the transfer function (Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Sadly, given these efforts over a twenty-year period, more than 31 million students enrolled and left college without a certificate or degree (Rockey et al., 2021). The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine: (a) the progress of state legislatures in eliminating barriers to student transfer success, (b) the most recent empirical research regarding the recommended components of transfer programs, and (c) the interactions among those components. The research question guiding this examination is: what are the recommendations for a quality transfer program and how do these recommended components interact for student transfer success? The sections that follow provide an overview of the findings, a suggested model for transfer programs, recommendations for policy implementation, and recommendations for future research.

METHODOLOGY

As DuPont (2010) utilized “the integrative review process, as posed by Jackson (1980) and Cooper (1982),” this method again provides the basis for examination of the research of 2/4 transfer programs. “Computer aided literature searches of journal articles, governmental agency documents, and non-profit organizational documents” again formed the basis of review for this research (DuPont, 2010).

FINDINGS

The Education Commission of States (2009) indicates that 65% of all community college students transfer before earning an associate degree. For all students entering public two-year colleges in the 2011-12 school year, 8% earned a certificate, 18% earned an associate degree, and 13% earned a bachelor degree by the Spring semester 2017 and 46% had not earned a credential and were no longer enrolled in any institution (NCES, 2019). “Of the 2.9 million undergraduate students who enrolled in fall 2019, the taskforce projects that roughly 1.1 million of them will transfer to another institution at some point over the next six years” (American Council on Education, 2021).

Earlier, the primary efforts of states were reviewed. The methods of support for transfer that have been the focus of states through 2019 and the number of states using these methods to address the transfer issue are presented in Table 1 (Appendix).

The Education Commission of the States (2020) identified the methods of support for student transfer that have been the focus of states through 2019 as:

- the creation of a transferable core of lower-division courses.
- establishing and maintaining a statewide common-course numbering system.
- guaranteed statewide transfer of an associate degree.
- providing statewide reverse transfer opportunities.

Since 2000, fifteen additional states have required transferable core courses, and ten additional states have required common course numbering systems.

With additional state level initiatives in place, the American Council on Education (2021) took aim at “improving transfer and award of credit practices to spur student success and reduce the cost and time to complete a degree.” As a result, American Council on Education (2021) made the following six recommendations:

1. “Prioritize the award of transfer credit and credit for prior learning, and its application to degree requirements, as an essential component of student success. Embed this priority throughout the culture of your institution.”
2. “Adjust your institution’s end-to-end policies and practices to improve the ability of students to receive credit for learning already acquired, including removing unnecessary obstacles that prevent students from accessing their transcripts to continue their education at another institution.”
3. “Leverage innovative technologies to facilitate the review of credit, to provide greater consistency across credit award determinations, and to increase the efficiency and timeliness of the process.”
4. “Improve transparency by making clear upfront what credits will be awarded and how they will be applied to a student’s degree pathway.”
5. “Dedicate the resources necessary to ensure quality advising that provides students with early, knowledgeable, and personalized information and guidance at key points throughout the course of their learning pathway. Implement a cross-institutional advising approach with key transfer partners to the maximum extent possible.”
6. “Partner with your most frequent sending or receiving transfer institutions to implement articulation agreements and structured pathways to increase the transfer and award of credit toward degree requirements.”

The American Council on Education suggests that transfer is a cultural issue for colleges and universities in the 2/4 transfer process. State legislated policies and the research is clear about recommendations for 2/4 transfer programs and many address the concerns of the American Council on Education. One piece of the puzzle remains to be identified; what does the recommended transfer program look like? This is a serious problem for several reasons. Without a clear model of a recommended transfer program: (a) there is a lack of standards for judging the quality of transfer programs, (b) it is difficult to make accurate comparisons among various transfer programs, and (c) it is difficult to monitor the evolution of transfer programs over time (Wellman, 2002).

THE TRANSFER MODEL

Detrick (2008) advised that “seamless transfers and genuine collaboration between community colleges and public and private four-year institutions are essential for academic excellence” in higher education (DuPont, 2010). Since 81% of all first-time beginning community college students indicate that their goal is to complete a bachelor degree or higher (LaVigna, 2020) and 38% of all students entering the system as undergraduates will transfer before graduation (American Council on Education, 2021), it may be wise to have a transfer model in place (DuPont, 2010).

Figure 1 (Appendix) provides a model for transfer programs. The model incorporates the findings of this research and revolves around the transfer center which is ideally located within

the community college. The transfer center's position within the community college lends itself to intensifying a culture of student transfer success within the community college which may flow to the university over time.

Students may enter the transfer system through the university or the community college. Students referred from the university, identified by the community college as potential participants, or current community students declaring an intent to transfer may be offered an opportunity to enter the transfer program. Students then formally accept the offer to participate in the transfer program and their success is tracked as they advance through the program. There are three paths indicated in the model: (a) students entering the community college with the declared intent to transfer to the university (solid line), (b) students entering the community college for the express purpose of earning an associate degree or students returning for the award of an associate degree after completion of all required work at the university (dashed line), and (c) students returning to the community college from the university as reverse transfer students (dotted and dashed line).

Participants are then directed to the transfer center to receive advising from both community college and university advisors based upon their academic goals. As indicated earlier, the transfer center is a collaborative effort of the community college and the university to assimilate students into the university system. Transfer centers help develop and maintain strong community college and university cultures and partnerships to support the transfer function (Kisker, 2007) and provide a centralized effort to implement, update, and maintain the efforts recommended from researchers, legislatures, and interested outside entities that are listed throughout this paper (Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Transfer students attend classes at the community college based upon recommendations from community college and university advisors. While attending community college classes, students may also be offered opportunities to participate in networking opportunities with university faculty and staff, university sponsored peer mentoring programs, university sponsored academic clubs, and university sponsored student organizations. If available, transfer students may also be provided an opportunity to secure university housing (based upon availability). When the time arrives, pre-transfer programs coordinated through the university advising offices are provided through the Transfer Center.

After a predetermined course of study, participants may choose to graduate from the community college and transfer directly to the university or transfer directly to the university without graduation from the community college, all after receiving a pre-transfer orientation. Those transferring students then continue to receive advisement from the university advisors they had relied upon through the Transfer Center during their community college studies. Participants attending university classes may continue to participate in the same university clubs, organizations, and programs they received through the Transfer Center during their community college enrollment. Ideally, all transfer students will successfully complete a bachelor degree in short order.

While pursuing university studies, some students may, due to transfer shock or other causes, decide to return to the community college to complete an associate degree without returning to the university for completion of a bachelor degree. Students may also decide, after completion of the required coursework at the university, to obtain their associate degree and then continue to complete a bachelor degree at the university. Both situations are commonly referred to as reverse transfer.

Upon completion of their university studies, participants receive their baccalaureate degree and may choose to enter the workforce, pursue additional baccalaureate degrees, or pursue a graduate degree. If the graduate chooses to reenter the community college, perhaps to gain a specific certification, they receive advice from community college advisors only as they complete the requirements for an associate degree. Upon graduation, from the community college, students may enter the workforce, pursue additional baccalaureate degrees, or pursue graduate degrees.

CONCLUSION

As Barbara Townsend (2001) indicates, student transfer between two and four-year institutions may take many forms and become terribly complicated depending on the program that is in place. Legislative and research efforts to help create and ensure smooth transitions and student success are established and evolving over time. Even with these efforts, the success rate remains dismally low.

One of the main goals of this research was to establish a model for a transfer program that is based upon researcher recommendations. It is hoped that the model presented in figure 1 (Appendix) provides a solid starting point for future research.

Over time, it is hoped that advancements in the transfer process will lead to multiple dividends. On the state level, the benefits may include: (a) long-term decreases in per degree expenditures (DuPont, 2010), (b) an overall increase in the education level of the workforce (DuPont, 2010), (c) an increase in the attraction of new industry to the states, and (d) a narrowing of the equality gap identified in political circles in recent years.

At the collegiate level, it is hoped that the benefits from advancements in the transfer process will lead to: (a) cultures of support and encouragement for transfer students, (b) increased collaborations between institutions that ultimately promote the success of transfer students, (c) increased enrollments and tuitions to institutions, (d) increases in the diversity, equity, and inclusion of the student bodies, and (e) an increase in the number of associate and bachelor degrees awarded. It is also envisioned that efforts may “strengthen public trust in higher education and reaffirm its value as an engine of economic and social mobility and justice” (American Council on Education, 2021).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Research suggests that the lack of consensus regarding the measurement of transfer programs is a major concern. Measurement of transfer programs is essential to determine the success or failure of these programs related to the graduation rate of program participants. Consistent measurement is also needed to compare the quality of various transfer programs and to observe the growth and transformation of transfer programs over time. Special emphasis should be given to tracking participants that move through multiple institutions as they work toward their goal of attaining a baccalaureate degree. The measurement of transfer programs should be investigated from a local, state, and national level.

It is recommended that researchers from all disciplines examine the model presented in this paper, choose, and focus their attention on a single component to formulate a method to make accurate measurements that represent the success or failure of each component. Over time, it is foreseen that we may collectively achieve a methodology which will allow us to accurately

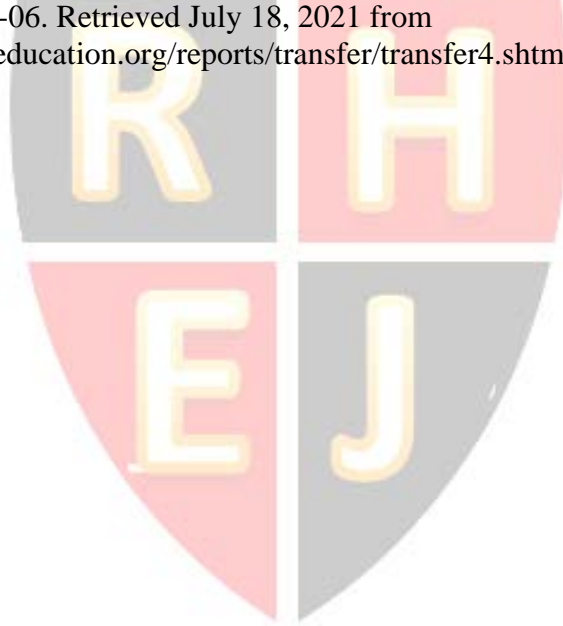
determine the effectiveness of our efforts. Accurate measures will also allow us to identify weak areas and make informed recommendations for improvement.



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APPENDIX

Table 1: Summary of statewide efforts to aid transfer students.

Transferrable Core Courses	Common Course Numbering	Guaranteed Transfer of Associate Degree	Reverse Transfer Opportunity
38 States	18 States	35 States	22 States

Source: Education Commission of the States (2020)



Figure 1: Transfer Model

