

# Smooth Transfer

## A Once Mundane Administrative Issue Re-emerges as a Key Tool for Equity

FRANCESCA B. PURCELL

Undergraduate transfer is a messy and too-often frustrating part of college for faculty, staff and, above all, the students themselves. Students are discouraged by unclear and complicated curriculum requirements. Faculty are reluctant to accept courses from another institution and question the preparedness of transfer students. And advisors are diverted from assisting students by the administrative minutia of course equivalencies and articulation agreements. As a result, transfer is often perceived merely as a bothersome technical procedure and so it is devalued.

Yet transfer is a growing and increasingly complex trend across the country that has serious equity implications. A report released this past February by the U.S. Department of Education found that nearly 60 percent of students from the high school class of 1992 attended more than one college and, of this group, 35 percent crossed state lines in the process. Moreover, although the most common type of transfer continues to be the vertical move from community or junior colleges to bachelor's degree-granting institutions, increasing numbers of students are transferring laterally to institutions at the same level or reversing direction and transferring from a university back to a community college. Some students find themselves caught in a "swirl," transferring credits from one institution to the next without much direction.

This article focuses on vertical transfer from community colleges to senior institutions because community college students still constitute the majority of transfer students and because community colleges play a crucial access role for students underrepresented in higher education. Community colleges are lauded for their financial affordability, geographical accessibility, and open admissions policies which attract students who may not have otherwise considered higher education. National studies indicate that low-income students, first-generation college students, African-Americans and Latinos enroll in two-year colleges at higher rates than their higher-income and white counterparts.

Indeed, underrepresented students stand to gain the most from improved transfer. As Jane Wellman at the Institute for Higher Education Policy observes: "Improving the effectiveness of two-four transfer will be the key to national progress in closing the gap among racial groups in degree attainment—and it will affect far more students than affirmative action policy." Although many students from underrepresented groups arrive at college despite the odds and look forward to eventually earning a bachelor's degree as a critical first

step toward greater social mobility, the reality is that their chances of doing so are slim.

Half of all undergraduates who start at a community college with the intention of obtaining a bachelor's degree and about one-fourth of those who start with the intention of earning only an associate degree go on to transfer to a four-year institution within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education. These statistics do not take into account the formidable social, financial and educational barriers many community college students bring through the doors or the reality that many students do not go to community college for the purpose of transferring. Nevertheless, the higher education community would have a hard time arguing that community college students are setting and achieving their educational aspirations at optimal levels. Even for those who successfully transfer, not all graduate with a bachelor's degree.

One problem relates to difficulty in transferring credits from a two-year to a four-year institution. To be sure, some credits may not transfer toward a bachelor's degree for legitimate reasons; a course may not apply to the program of study at the four-year institution or may have been completed so far in the past that the content is no longer relevant, or the student might have earned a failing grade. But in many cases, four-year institutions require transfer students to take additional courses to meet specific institutional requirements or do not count a student's credits toward their major. Whatever the reasons, the unfortunate result is that transfer students who earn a bachelor's degree take approximately 7 percent more credits than students who attended only one school, according to Education Department analyst Cliff Adelman. Extra course-taking costs time and money for the transfer student, as well as the institution and relevant funding agencies. (In addition, research published by Vanderbilt University higher education professor William R. Doyle in the May/June 2006 issue of *Change* magazine suggests that transfer students who have all their credits accepted are about twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree in six years as those who only have some credits accepted.)

Community college students can transfer successfully, earn bachelor's degrees and succeed. But it's easy to get pushed off the pathway. A 2004 report by the American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities found that transfer students face barriers in perceptions, practices and policies. For example, some four-year institutions question the quality of courses offered

at two-year institutions or the academic preparedness of incoming transfer students. Community college transfer students often find that their new schools are not as adept in supporting students who work full-time and raise children. And at the system and state levels, policies and incentives are often inadequate and inconsistent.

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The New England states have reason to be attuned to the benefits and obstacles associated with transfer, because both the number and the proportion of students enrolled in the region's 62 community and "junior" colleges are on the rise. The number of New England community college students rose from 161,660 in 1998 to 190,018 in 2004, representing an 18 percent increase, while the proportion of all undergraduates enrolled in the region's two-year institutions rose from 24 percent to 28 percent. With tuition and costs of living rising, this trend is likely to continue.

The six states share some approaches to transfer. For example, all implement articulation agreements wherein community college students who successfully graduate from a particular program with their associate degree will either be automatically admitted to a four-year "receiving" institution or assured that all their credits will transfer. For example, Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass., has articulation agreements with more than 20 colleges and universities in New England, including private institutions such as Bryant University in Rhode Island and Unity College in Maine. A student graduating from Bristol with an associate degree in environmental science, for example, will be admitted with junior standing to Unity College's bachelor's program in environmental science.

Most of the states have also instituted statewide policies mandating that such transfer agreements are uniform and widespread. The 35-year-old nonprofit New England Transfer Association provides professional training and development opportunities for individuals who directly assist students in the transfer process. In the business of transfer, it is essential to stay updated on curricula and programs that are continually in flux.

Several New England states have responded to transfer issues with more cutting-edge strategies. In Vermont, all grades earned from any public higher education institution appear on a single transcript and count toward the student's final grade point average. This arrangement relieves students of the nuisance of forwarding transcripts (a frequent transfer impediment) and more broadly, connotes a confidence in the comparability of course

quality across the system's institutions.

Maine, recognizing that the majority of community college students transfer prior to earning a degree, uses an online course equivalency system whereby a student can enter the courses he or she completed at the community college and then easily determine how these courses would be applied to degrees at Maine's public four-year institutions.

Massachusetts is one of the few states in the country to attach a financial incentive to transfer. The state's community college students who graduate from certain programs with a 3.0 grade point average or higher are entitled to a 33 percent reduction in their tuition at a public state college or the University of Massachusetts.

While all these initiatives are valuable in smoothing the transfer process, there remains room for improvement within states and across the region. A regional online transfer course equivalency system could alleviate the confusion and stress that students and their advisors routinely face when trying to determine how course credits would be applied at a transfer institution. Such a system would be especially helpful for those students who cross state lines. Ongoing regional collaboration among faculty and institutional leaders would greatly assuage the misperceptions and miscommunications that often accompany the transfer process. Reliable follow-up data from the four-year colleges could help dispel the myth that students who transferred in from community colleges do not perform as well.

Though students who transfer from community colleges earn bachelor's degrees at rates similar to classmates who begin college at four-year institutions, many community college students don't stay long enough to transfer. Many states are now exploring ways to encourage community college students to earn 20 credits during their first year in order to gain enough momentum to complete their bachelor's degrees at rates comparable to their four-year counterparts. As most students transfer prior to attaining an associate degree, systematic efforts should be made to keep them moving toward a four-year degree.

These are just a few of the practices and policies that could improve transfer rates for community college students to bachelor's-degree granting institutions. Transfer will continue to grow and become increasingly complicated. Although often viewed as a tangential issue, transfer cuts to the center of any institution's work, raising concerns about the quality and comparability of its courses and its ability to educate a diversity of students. Transfer is a crucial pathway toward a bachelor's degree especially for underrepresented students. Yet, because of cumbersome transfer strategies, many of the students who can least afford to go without a bachelor's degree are pushed to the sidelines of higher education.

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*Francesca B. Purcell is associate director for academic policy with the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. Email: FPurcell@bhe.mass.edu.*