



Hot Topics in Higher Education

State Policies to Improve Student Transfer

By Brenda Bautsch

January 2013



Many students attend more than one institution of higher education before they earn a degree. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, one-third of students move from one college to another during their postsecondary career. Students transfer from two-year colleges to four-year institutions, transfer across colleges in the same sector, and sometimes transfer from four-year colleges to two-year schools. Among the reasons students transfer are family responsibilities, tuition costs, college fit and availability of online courses. Most community colleges have significantly lower tuition costs than four-year universities; thus a growing number of students who aspire to earn a bachelor's degree see community colleges as a more affordable place to begin their college career. States can help students successfully earn degrees by implementing transfer and articulation policies that prevent loss of already earned credits and valuable time. Transfer policies also help states save money because fewer tuition subsidy dollars are spent on students who can efficiently transfer between colleges without losing time and credits.

Legislators can strengthen the pathway between community and four-year colleges by developing effective state transfer and articulation policies. Such policies can create a coherent, statewide procedure for transferring; establish a common course numbering system throughout the state higher education system; identify a general education core that is accepted by all institutions; and facilitate direct transfer of a two-year degree to a four-year university. Other strategies states are considering include maintaining a website to host information about the transfer process, establishing a reverse transfer policy and creating transfer pathways. This brief reviews these state policy options and discusses the benefits of such policies to colleges, students and the state.

Common Course Numbering

Common course numbering systems apply the same titles, identification numbers and descriptions to comparable courses at public two- and four-year colleges within a state. This eases the credit transfers between state institutions of higher education. When students transfer between two colleges that participate in the common course numbering system, a course taken at the original college transfers with full credit to the receiving institution. In many states, the common course numbering system is used only for freshman- and sophomore-level courses. In these cases, the goal of the policy is to eliminate confusion about transferability of lower-division coursework, easing the path for students who move from technical or community colleges to universities.

Fifteen states—including Arkansas, Louisiana and North Carolina—currently have laws creating common course numbering. An additional 15 states—including Idaho, Kansas, Michigan and Montana—have enacted common course numbering systems through boards of regents or community college policies.

Transfer of Two-Year Degrees to Four-Year Universities

Also referred to as AA or AS degree transfers, “2 plus 2” articulation agreements guarantee admission with junior standing at state universities to community college graduates who earn an associ-

This brief is part of the series “Hot Topics in Higher Education,” written for state policymakers.

Discussed in this brief:

- Common Course Numbering
- Transfer of Two-Year Degrees to Four-Year Universities
- General Education Core
- Transfer and Articulation Websites
- Reverse Transfer
- Pathways
- The Politics of Transfer Policies

ate of arts (AA) or associate of science (AS) degree. Such agreements are a popular state policy option. Twenty-three states—including Connecticut, Florida, Nevada and Oklahoma—have laws regarding 2 plus 2 degree transfers, while another 23 states—including Alaska, Hawaii, Vermont and Wyoming—authorize 2 plus 2 transfer through board of regents or state agency policies, or through institutional agreements.

Florida's Statewide Articulation Agreement, for example, delineates a 2 plus 2 policy that guarantees students who earn an associate of arts degree from a Florida college can transfer all 60 credits to a state university and count those credits toward a bachelor's degree.¹ Most Florida independent colleges and universities recognize the transfer policy. Florida also has a common course numbering system in place and has developed a Transfer Student Bill of Rights (see Figure 1). Not all states have statewide participation in the articulation policy. Delaware has institutional agreements for transferring specific two-year degrees to four-year colleges, but participation is not mandatory for institutions. Nebraska colleges are encouraged, but not required, to participate in the state articulation policy.

Minnesota and North Dakota offer an example of a bi-state articulation agreement. The two states joined together through their public university systems to create a general education transfer agreement in which an associate degree or general education credits earned at any institution in the North Dakota University System or the Minnesota State Colleges and University System are transferable to all other Minnesota or North Dakota colleges.

General Education Core

A general education core curriculum consists of freshman- and sophomore-level college courses. As a part of a statewide agreement, these courses typically transfer from one college to another as a group of credits meant to fulfill the general education requirement. The number of credit hours considered to be part of a general education core ranges among states from 27 credit hours to 64 credit hours.

Laws in 23 states—including California, Florida, Oregon, and Texas authorize the transfer of a general education core curriculum. Seventeen states have implemented a transferable general education core through a board of regents policy, a state agency policy or a voluntary agreement among a network of institutions.

Figure 1. Florida's Transfer Student Bill of Rights

Students who graduate from Florida colleges (previously known as community colleges) with an AA degree are guaranteed the following rights under the Statewide Articulation Agreement (State Board of Education Rule 6A-10.024):

1. Admission to one of the 11 state universities, except to limited access programs;
2. Acceptance of at least 60 semester hours by the state universities;
3. Adherence to the university requirements, based on the catalog in effect at the time the student first enters a Florida college, provided the student maintains continuous enrollment;
4. Transfer of equivalent courses under the Statewide Course Numbering System;
5. Acceptance by the state universities of credits earned in accelerated programs (e.g., CLEP, Dual Enrollment, AP, IB, and AICE);
6. No additional general education requirements;
7. Advance knowledge of selection criteria for limited access programs; and
8. Equal opportunity with native university students to enter limited access programs.

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2012.

Transfer and Articulation Website

Helping students understand how various state policies work is an important part of improving transfer success. In 29 states—including Indiana, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania—transfer and articulation websites help disseminate information to potential and current students. Once a website is activated, it is necessary to advertise its existence so students can take advantage of the resource. Indiana, for example, has put much effort into letting students know about the web resource through college counselors and outreach campaigns.

Reverse Transfer

Reverse transfer agreements allow students to combine credits earned at two-year colleges with those earned at four-year institutions to receive associate degrees. Students may transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college with 40 credits, for example, then proceed to earn 20 more credits, making them eligible for a 60-credit associate's degree. The policy then allows these students to obtain the degree they have earned. Reverse transfer agreements also allow community colleges to take credit for awarding associate degrees,

which they often cannot do with transfer students. This policy was a focus in 2011 and 2012 legislative sessions, and laws were passed in Colorado, Missouri, Tennessee and Texas. An additional 11 states have reverse transfer agreements in place or are in the process of developing them.

Pathways

Transfer pathways provide students with a clear schedule of courses to take for a particular program or major that begins at a two-year college and ends at a four-year institution. The Tennessee Transfer Pathway program, for example, lists all the courses necessary to earn an associate’s degree at a community college. When a student takes those courses and transfers to a four-year college or university, the transcript will indicate that the pathway has been followed. The student then is guaranteed that all the community college courses will count toward completion of a bachelor’s degree in the designated major. Transfer pathways make it possible for students to make a seamless transition between lower- and upper-level colleges, provided they stay in one program of study. Figure 2 provides an example of lower-level courses in a transfer pathway for business administration. After completing the community college courses, a student then would take upper-level business courses at a four-year college or university.

The Politics of Transfer Policies

Community colleges, four-year institutions and state legislators may have different interests that make it difficult to enact transfer and articulation policies. Nonetheless, higher education leaders and policymakers have found several mutual benefits of such policies.

Community colleges can use clear transfer and articulation policies to market themselves as a stepping stone to a bachelor’s degree. Because tuition costs are lower at community colleges, many students are finding them an attractive place to begin their college education before transferring to four-year institutions.

Universities, on the other hand, benefit from enrolling the diverse group of students who transfer to them from community colleges. Low-income, minority and first-generation students are more likely to attend community colleges, and universities are attempting to reach these underserved groups to increase campus diversity. In addition, students who may not be academically prepared to start at a four-year college can take classes at a community college to prepare

Figure 2. Example of Transfer Pathway for A.S. in Business Administration

A.S. Degree	
General Education Requirements	
Communication	9 hours
ENGL 1010 Composition I	3 hours
ENGL 1020 Composition II	3 hours
SPCH 1010 Fundamentals of Speech Comm or other approved speech/communication course	3 hours
Humanities and/or Fine Arts (at least one course in literature)	9 hours
Social/Behavioral Sciences	6 hours
ECON 2010 Macroeconomics	3 hours
ECON 2020 Microeconomics	3 hours
History	6 hours
Natural Sciences	6 hours
Mathematics	3 hours
Math 1630 Finite Mathematics	3 hours
General Education Total	41 hours
Area of Emphasis Requirements	
ACCT 1010 Principles of Accounting I	3 hours
ACCT 1020 Principles of Accounting II	3 hours
MATH 1530 ⁹ Introduction to Probability and Statistics	3 hours
MATH 1830 Calculus	3 hours
INFS 1010 Computer Applications	3 hours
Electives (guided)	4 hours
Area of Emphasis Total	19 hours
Business Administration Total	60 hours

Source: Tennessee Board of Regents, 2013.

them for upper-level courses. Administrators at the University of Michigan have found this to be the case and are impressed with the quality of students who transfer from community colleges.

Community colleges and four-year institutions also recognize that collaborating on transfer and articulation policies can improve completion rates and help meet workforce demands. The University of Colorado system, for example, implemented a transfer policy in 2011 that guarantees admission for all community college students in the state who have earned at least 30 credits and a 2.7 grade point average. In discussing the policy, University President Bruce Benson, said: “For our state to be competitive [in the nation], we need an educated workforce, and this program will help achieve that.”² Like the University of Michigan, the University of Colorado also has found that students who transfer from community colleges are well-prepared and graduate at the same, if not a better, rate as students who start in the four-year system.



In Ohio, the Board of Regents views its state-mandated transfer and articulation policy as an opportunity to both improve college affordability and increase enrollment. An Ohio Board of Regents study found that the percentage of students who transferred within the Ohio system increased by 21 percent from 2002 to 2009; the increase was due in part to increased enrollment. The study also estimates that students collectively save \$20.1 million a year by beginning at a community college then transferring to a four-year university.³ The Board of Regents sees its commitment to supporting student transfers as a way to meet the state's overall higher education goals of improving college affordability and bolstering graduation rates.

State legislators can play a key role in these discussions by bringing together the various higher education sectors to focus on the challenges and opportunities of transfer policies. In Louisiana, state Senator Ben Nevers began the process of creating a statewide transfer policy by sponsoring 2009's Act 356, which required the creation of a transferable associate degree. In response to the act, the Louisiana Board of Regents worked with legislators and the Southern Regional Education Board to create a Statewide Articulation and Transfer Council. The council worked diligently to involve faculty members from across the state to provide advice about creating the transfer degree. Garnering faculty support initially was a challenge, but once they became involved in designing the intricate details of the transfer

program, this support became key to the ultimate success of the statewide transfer policy. Faculty members worked with the Board of Regents and higher education leaders to market the new transfer policy to students and parents. In Louisiana, strong political support in the Legislature was an important factor in the passage of a statewide policy. In addition, engaging faculty members and promoting the policy to students were central components of the strategy.

Summary

Transfer and articulation policies are essential to improving college completion as more students begin their post-secondary studies at two-year colleges and transfer to four-year institutions to complete a bachelor's degree. Knowing that one-third of all students will transfer between colleges at least once, states can design a variety of policies to ease and facilitate the transfer process and to ensure that students will not lose credit or time as they continue on their college path. Although there are several policy options for legislators to pursue, the goal is to create a clear, transparent process that is easy for students to follow and in which all public higher education institutions in the state participate. State legislators play a key role in garnering support for a statewide policy by helping to balance the interests and concerns of the state, the colleges and students. Establishing strong transfer policies can benefit both two- and four-year colleges, can improve college affordability for students, and can help states reach degree attainment goals.

Notes

1. Florida Virtual Campus. *College Transfer Center: About Transferring*.
2. CU guarantees admission to community college students with 30 hours and 2.7 GPA - The Denver Post.
3. *Transfers in the University System of Ohio*. State Initiatives and Outcomes 2002-2009.

Resources

- Southern Regional Education Board, *Clearing Paths to Degrees: Transfer Policies in SREB States*, 2007.
- Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, *Articulation, Transfer and Alignment*, 2011.
- Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, *Promising Practices in Statewide Articulation and Transfer Systems*, 2010.



State Transfer and Articulation Policies

State	Transferable General Ed Core, via legislation	Transferable General Ed Core, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	Common Course Numbering, via legislation	Common Course Numbering, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	2+2 Transfer Degrees, via legislation	2+2 Transfer Degrees, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	Transfer and Articulation Website	Reverse Transfer
Alabama	√						√	
Alaska		a		√		a	√	
Arizona	√		√		√		√	
Arkansas	√		√		√		√	√
California	√		√		√		√	
Colorado	√		√		√		√	√
Connecticut	√			c	√		√	
Delaware						d	√	
Florida	√		√		√		√	√*
Georgia		a		a		a	√	
Hawaii		a				a		√
Idaho		b				b		
Illinois		b			√		√	
Indiana	√		√		√		√	
Iowa		d				b	√	√
Kansas				a		a		
Kentucky	√		√		√		√	
Louisiana	√		√		√		√	
Maine				a		a	√	
Maryland		b		a		b	√	√
Massachusetts	√				√		√	
Michigan		d					√	√
Minnesota	√		√			a	√	√
Mississippi				c		a		
Missouri	√					b		√
Montana		a		a		a	√	
Nebraska		d				d		
Nevada				a	√			
New Hampshire						d		
New Jersey					√		√	
New Mexico	√		√					
New York		d				a		√*
North Carolina	√		√		√			√*
North Dakota		b		b		b		
Ohio	√				√			√
Oklahoma	√		√		√			
Oregon	√		√		√			√*
Pennsylvania	√				√		√	
Rhode Island						b	√	



State	Transferable General Ed Core, via legislation	Transferable General Ed Core, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	Common Course Numbering, via legislation	Common Course Numbering, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	2+2 Transfer Degrees, via legislation	2+2 Transfer Degrees, via other policy (a, b, c or d)	Transfer and Articulation Website	Reverse Transfer
South Carolina		b		b		b		
South Dakota	√			a	√		√	
Tennessee	√		√		√		√	√
Texas	√			√			√	√
Utah	√		√		√			
Vermont						d		
Virginia	√				√		√	
Washington		b		c	√			
West Virginia		b				b		
Wisconsin							√	
Wyoming		d		d		d		

a = Board of trustees or board of regents policy (i.e., a board that governs or coordinates a public higher education multi-campus system)

b = State agency policy (e.g., state board of education, state higher education commission)

c = Community college system policy

d = Institutional agreements (i.e., typically a network of institutions that voluntarily participate in a transfer agreement)

*Only some higher education institutions currently participate in the reverse transfer agreement.

This brief was written by Brenda Bautsch, NCSL senior policy specialist, who covers higher education issues.

The author thanks Alison Suzukamo for her contribution to this brief.

NCSL gratefully acknowledges Lumina Foundation for its financial support of this brief.



NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES
The Forum for America's Ideas

National Conference of State Legislatures
William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place
Denver, Colorado 80230
(303) 364-7700

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., #515
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 624-5400

www.ncsl.org

© 2013 by the National Conference of State Legislatures. All rights reserved.
ISBN 978-1-58024-682-8