

Emerging Solutions

Improving Institutional Collaboration and Student Outcomes Through the Texas Transfer Alliance



The University of Texas at Austin
Charles A. Dana Center

Emerging Solutions — May 2020

Introduction

The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin has long prioritized student transfer and the applicability of academic credits to specific programs of study as central to its goal of systemically implementing and scaling multiple mathematics pathways.¹ The Dana Center's early mathematics pathways work began in Texas, where the greatest progress continues to this day. Much of the Dana Center's work was, and continues to be, driven by the need to improve student transfer outcomes in the state.

In a 2017 joint report, the Community College Research Center and the Greater Texas Foundation argued that "Texas transfer policy fails to adequately address" obstacles to student persistence and success in the state.² As proof of this failure, they detailed the low transfer and graduation rates of community college students, in addition to the accumulation of excess credits that leads to wasted time and money for both the student and the state. The report concluded that "[w]hile two- to four-year transfer does not work well in many other states, in Texas it seems to be especially inefficient."³

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020, there is even greater urgency to address issues related to the future delivery of higher education in Texas and across the entire country. The "status quo" as it relates to admissions, placement, and transfer is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of students in an increasingly complicated world. Predictable, consistent, and effective transfer will need to be a key component of any strategy for how students, faculty, and institutions move forward in the coming years.

This brief summarizes recent work by the Texas Transfer Alliance, a collaboration of universities and community colleges in Texas led by the Dana Center since 2018. The brief further highlights some emerging practices from institutions in the state that show promise in improving student success and social mobility.

This brief is intended for policymakers, practitioners, and other education stakeholders interested in improving transfer student outcomes, cultivating effective cross-institutional collaboration, and creating more efficient and equitable systems of higher education. While this brief focuses specifically on Texas, the emerging practices resulting from the transfer partnership work in the state can serve as a model for other states, systems, and regions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The first phase of Texas Transfer Alliance work is an effort to create a strong foundation and structure to help institutions in the state scale and sustain effective, equitable transfer and applicability strategies and outcomes to improve student persistence and success.
- The Texas Transfer Alliance responds to ongoing state legislative and policymaker interest in student transfer and completion outcomes.
- With the rapidly changing landscape of higher education due to the current COVID-19 crisis, it is of paramount importance that efficient and effective transfer strategies consistently meet student needs in the coming years.

The Texas Transfer Alliance

Transfer—the movement of students from one institution to another—plays a central role in the work of the Charles A. Dana Center. The alignment of courses and pathways with students’ individual academic and career interests are embedded within the [Dana Center Mathematics Pathways principles](#). The Dana Center has likewise stressed *applicability*—ensuring that transfer credits count towards degree requirements in a specific program of study.

The Dana Center has convened numerous regional stakeholders for intensive, day-long workshops, providing opportunities for institutional representatives to engage in facilitated discussions with their transfer partners. Participants examined institutional-level data and identified mutual challenges and opportunities related to transfer and applicability and the impact of those challenges on student persistence and success. This focus on transfer and applicability, collaboration, and systemic change has informed the work and ongoing direction of the Texas Transfer Alliance.

History

The Texas Transfer Alliance formed in Fall 2018 with the intention of improving transfer student outcomes through a collaborative of community colleges and universities across the state, including:

- Texas A&M University System
- Texas Association of Community Colleges
- Texas State University System
- University of North Texas System
- University of Texas System
- The Charles A. Dana Center

The Alliance is supported in part by a grant from the Trellis Foundation and operates in conjunction with Tackling Transfer, a three-state effort to improve transfer outcomes that is led by the Aspen Institute, HCM Strategists, and Sova Solutions. Texas, along with Minnesota and Virginia, was selected through a competitive process to be a part of the initiative. The Tackling Transfer partners chose the Dana Center to lead the work in Texas due to the Center’s expertise and success in working across all sectors of higher education. The

partners provide the Dana Center with advisory support, data analysis, and national insights.⁴ Tackling Transfer is made possible through the support of Ascendium Education Philanthropy, ECMC Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and The Kresge Foundation.

Goals

The Alliance's efforts are purposely aligned to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30xTX plan,⁵ a roadmap that aims to have at least 60 percent of Texans aged 25–34 earn a degree or credential with workplace value. Specifically, the Alliance seeks to attain the following goals through a coordinated state effort, guided by these metrics:

- Increase the six-year transfer-out rate from 21 percent to 33 percent, eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
- Increase the four-year bachelor's completion rate of community college transfers from 58 percent to 67 percent, eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
- Decrease the average number of attempted credits to degree from 142.9 for transfer students and 136.4 for native students to 135 credits for both groups, while eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
- Decrease the average time-to-degree for transfer students from 7.6 years to 6.5 years and eliminate all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
- Increase the percent of Texas community college students completing college-level math and writing in the first year to 45 percent (from 19 percent and 33 percent, respectively) and eliminate all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.

Progress to Date

In less than two years, the Texas Transfer Alliance has made significant progress, including convening key stakeholders, conducting research and data analyses, creating a data working group, developing a dedicated website, and expanding its outreach through a long-term strategy.

In early 2019, in-person convenings for institutional transfer partners were held in every region in Texas, with 93 percent of the state's public two- and four-year colleges sending faculty and administrative staff to the six in-person meetings. A series of virtual convenings were also held, featuring institutional representatives who discussed innovative and promising practices on their campuses. The Alliance further conducted research, interviews, and analysis of institutional self-assessments to determine what Texas institutions need in order to improve transfer student outcomes.





Further, of key importance for the long-term impact of transfer reform in Texas, the Alliance formed a data working group, comprising system leaders and research experts. The group begins its work by advising institutions on the creation of leading data indicators for assessing the effectiveness of transfer partnerships. Over time, the group will consider undertaking efforts such as developing a common statewide definition of “transfer student” that can be used across all institutions, and advising institutions on data analyses that can help address the applicability of transfer credits.

The Tackling Transfer partners developed an “Institutional Practice Framework and Tools” website. This site outlines four stages to guide the collaborative work (see Figure 1) and provides resources and activities.

In October 2019, the Alliance expanded its efforts across the state with the selection of 26 two- and four-year postsecondary institutions in Texas to implement the **Transfer Partnership Strategy** (TPS). The TPS comprises a cohort of institutions committed to one year of deep, collaborative work with their local transfer partners. The TPS seeks to expand on and deepen the work that began in the first year of the Texas Transfer Alliance through intensive technical assistance and a move towards the scaling and sustainability of the Alliance’s early accomplishments.

Key components of this **strategy** include in-region technical assistance; customized data resources highlighting transfer student outcomes; and an in-person statewide convening focused on fostering communication and collaboration, capturing the student perspective, and implementing the requirements outlined in S.B. 25, a transfer policy passed by the Texas Legislature in 2019.

While it is still too early to gauge the long-term impact of these initial efforts, the Texas Transfer Alliance and its partners have shown promising preliminary outcomes and emerging practices from their work.

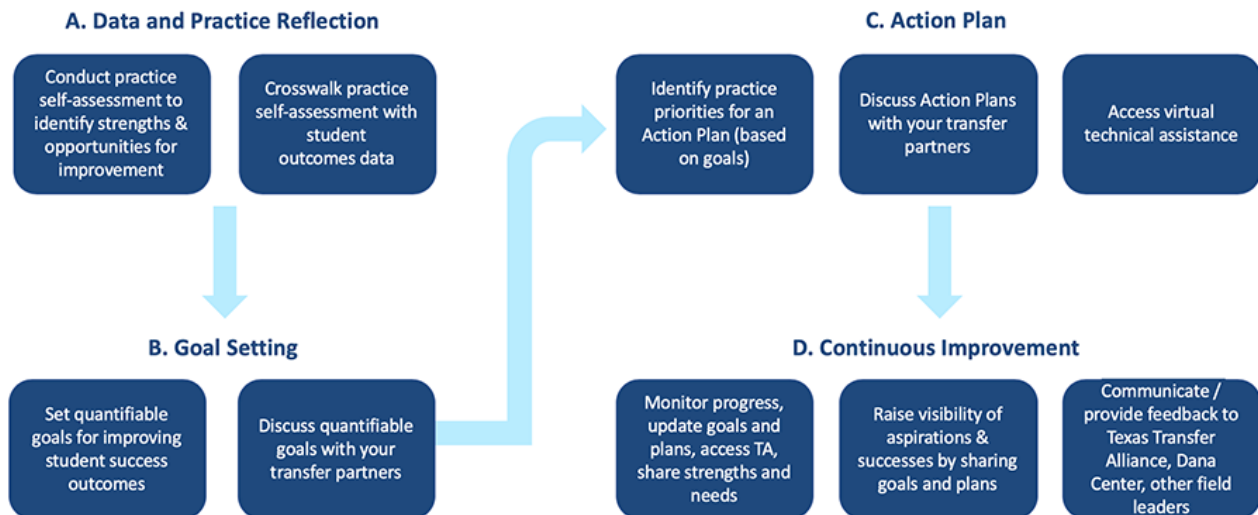
“ **To make large-scale change involves not just individual institutions, but all institutions working together. The Alliance provides an opportunity for institutions to hear each other’s concerns and ‘meet in the middle.’ The way we can prove large-scale change [to legislators and policymakers] is through collaborative work, like the work we are doing through the Texas Transfer Alliance.** ”

Jessica Murphy
Dean, Undergraduate Education
The University of Texas at Dallas

Emerging Practices in Texas Transfer

Dr. Bill Crowe, interim director of Higher Education Strategy, Policy, and Services at the Charles A. Dana Center and the Texas Transfer Alliance lead, often speaks of the “three P’s of transfer: policy, practice, and professional relationships.”⁶ These areas are represented in the institutional practice framework developed by the Tackling Transfer partners (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Texas Transfer Alliance’s Institutional Practice Framework



The first stage of the Alliance work involves **data and practice**. During a series of regional transfer meetings in Spring 2019, institutions reviewed customized student outcomes data and were introduced to the institutional transfer self-assessment process. The self-assessments, which institutions were encouraged to complete, are organized around four “Essential Transfer Practices,” which were originally outlined in *The Transfer Playbook*, a joint publication by the Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute. The following essential practices are designed to help two- and four-year partners improve transfer outcomes:

1. Prioritize transfer student success
2. Create clear program pathways aligned with high-quality instruction
3. Provide tailored transfer student advising
4. Build strong transfer partnerships⁷

Institutions ranked their progress towards each essential practice on a scale from 1 to 5: 1) not present; 2) beginning; 3) emerging; 4) established; and 5) advanced.⁸ Twenty-five institutions completed the assessments: 15 two-year institutions and 10 four-year institutions. In analyzing these transfer assessments, the Alliance found that while both two- and four-year institutions indicated that approximately 27 percent and 33 percent, respectively, of senior leadership at their institutions prioritized transfer student success, there were some discrepancies and areas of need in other categories.

- **Program Maps:** While 64 percent of four-year institutions considered their programs of study as clearly mapped, 40 percent of two-year institutions are still building program maps.

- **Advising:** Ninety-four percent of the two-year institutions are in the “beginning” or “emerging” stages of monitoring their at-risk students and providing them with support for transfer, while 55 percent of four-year institutions reported that they are still building access to high-quality advising before students matriculate.
- **Transfer Partnerships:** The greatest discrepancies, and the greatest need for improvement, appear in this category, with four-year institutions reporting higher adoption of cross-institutional faculty work and two-year institutions indicating a greater need for two- and four-year faculty to meet more often. In fact, 44 percent of four-year institutions reported they are “emerging” on building joint-shared services and strategic initiatives with two-year institutions, but this was not reflected in the responses by two-year institutions. Joint-shared services between sectors is crucial in order to meet the needs of transfer students.

Stage two involved **goal setting** within institutions and across sectors. During a January 2020 convening in Austin, institutions that are part of the TPS developed goals for their own institutions and with their transfer partners. They crafted their goals based on their individual context, or by following statewide metrics developed by the Alliance for improving transfer (highlighted above in the “Goals” section). These goals included making improvements related to equity, mobility, completion, excess credits, time-to-degree, and barriers to success in math and English courses.

Institutions engaged in the TPS are currently in stage three of the work. This stage involves the creation of realistic and attainable **action plans** to improve student transfer outcomes and meet the goals set during stage two of the process. During the January convening, institutional participants completed their 90-Day Action Plans, aligned with their transfer goals. Institutions will revisit their action plans in Summer 2020 to assess their progress and, in stage four, continue to revisit and revise annually as part of continuous improvement. The Alliance is considering ways to support additional institutions across the state in developing action plans.

As members of the Texas Transfer Alliance continue to work towards that last stage, **continuous improvement**, institutions have already demonstrated promising practices, which are highlighted in the next section.



Examples of Promising Institutional Practice

The following institutions have shown promising practices related to student transfer and applicability in Texas. These efforts were underway prior to the formation of the Texas Transfer Alliance, but the Alliance can help to highlight and share these activities, thereby strengthening the work moving forward.

North Central Texas College

As the sixth largest transfer institution in the state, North Central Texas College (NCTC) has been working on the issue of transfer and alignment for a number of years and has developed successful strategies for improving student outcomes. NCTC’s focus on improving completion led to the adoption of strategies that

included “completion coaching,” the articulation of degrees to pathways at multiple institutions, and the adoption of a guided pathways model before it became widely used at other institutions.⁹

Because of these efforts, the college has seen positive results, including dropout rates falling from 12 percent to nine percent between 2014 and 2018 and excess credits being reduced from 87 to 79 in the same four-year period.

The University of North Texas

As the third largest transfer institution in the state (and tenth largest nationally), the University of North Texas (UNT) has actively promoted transfer through partnerships (including one with NCTC) and support programs for students. As part of its ongoing efforts, the university created “seamless” degrees in which 100% of completed credit hours apply for programs in Consumer Management (B.S.), General Business (B.S.), Learning Technologies (B.A.S.), and Applied Arts and Sciences (B.A.A.S.).

More programs of study will be added over time. UNT has also created “Comprehensive Learner Records” to determine the quality of the learning across the transfer continuum.

The University of Texas at Dallas

In an ongoing effort to become a more effective transfer partner in the North Texas region, the University of Texas at Dallas (UT–Dallas) developed both an external and internal approach that prioritizes student transfer across the entire campus, and fosters better communication and understanding across the entire region. The current assistant provost is responsible for community college relations and outreach, working closely with the sending institutions in the region and with departments across the institution. This public-facing position works in tandem with the university’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which is solely focused on improving the student experience and success of new transfer students. Part of the QEP includes a transfer mentoring program that cultivates a sense of belonging for new transfers and helps them navigate their chosen pathways.

This two-pronged approach created a sense of ownership among institutional stakeholders and instilled a sense of responsibility across the entire campus to improve transfer alignment and outcomes. As a result, UT–Dallas, along with other institutions in the North Texas region, is well positioned to help create large-scale structural change and improve student success.

Austin Community College and Texas State University

The Austin Community College (ACC) and Texas State University systems worked together as transfer partners for a number of years, but with mixed results in student achievement. A lack of alignment between the mathematics requirements in a number of popular programs meant that many students were unable to effectively move between the systems. After joining the initiative, ACC and Texas State focused on collaborating to create specific action steps designed to help students navigate their chosen academic and career pathways.

As a result of their work with the Texas Transfer Alliance, both systems collaborated to identify the current entry-level mathematics requirements for the top 12 transfer programs and pinpoint areas of misalignment. This information is now under review with partner discipline chairs and faculty, who will provide feedback on how to appropriately and consistently align requirements and better advise students on what courses to take. The next step is to jointly create detailed program maps for those 12 programs of study, thereby ensuring that students have a clear understanding of what steps they need to take to transfer and graduate successfully.¹⁰

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic put higher education in a state of flux. Colleges and universities can no longer do “business as usual.” Making sure students are able to reenroll, receive credit for the work they completed before the pandemic, and help displaced workers retransition into the higher education pipeline will be extremely important once the crisis ends. Effective transfer will need to be a key component of any strategy for how students, faculty, and institutions move forward from this disruption.

States and systems can learn from some of these early practices in Texas, and use them to collaborate across institutions and create systems that are more responsive to student needs and interests.

The work of the Texas Transfer Alliance will continue to grow and respond to the needs of students over time. The ultimate goal is to integrate the practices established and the lessons learned over the past two years into normative, sustainable practice across the entire state.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- ¹ Charles A. Dana Center, 2018a, 2018b.
- ² Bailey, Jenkins, Fink, Cullinane, & Schudde, 2017, p. 2.
- ³ Bailey, et al., 2017, p. 1.
- ⁴ Aspen Institute, Community College Research Center, Public Agenda, & Sova Solutions, 2017.
- ⁵ Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2020.
- ⁶ B. Crowe, personal communication, March 30, 2020.
- ⁷ Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ For more information about guided pathways, see Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015.
- ¹⁰ J. Fabianke, personal communication, April 28, 2020.

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About this resource

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About the Dana Center

The Dana Center develops and scales math and science education innovations to support educators, administrators, and policy makers in creating seamless transitions throughout the K-14 system for all students, especially those who have historically been underserved.

We focus in particular on strategies for improving student engagement, motivation, persistence, and achievement.

The Center was founded in 1991 at The University of Texas at Austin. Our staff members have expertise in leadership, literacy, research, program evaluation, mathematics and science education, policy and systemic reform, and services to high-need populations.

For more information about the Dana Center Mathematics Pathways (DCMP), see www.dcmathpathways.org.

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