BEYOND ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS:

Five Student-Centered Principles to Improve Transfer

A TACKLING TRANSFER REPORT

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TACKLING TRANSFER

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, HCM Strategists, and Sova have joined together through the Tackling Transfer initiative to partner with institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners in Minnesota, Texas, and Virginia to dramatically improve transfer outcomes for baccalaureate-seeking students who begin at community colleges.

This comprehensive effort incorporates policy, practice, research, and strategic communications to foster the conditions for scaled and measurable improvements for baccalaureate-seeking transfer students, including the large number of low-income students and students of color who begin their education at community colleges.

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices and leadership that significantly improve student learning, completion, and employment after college—especially for the growing population of low-income and minority students on American campuses.

HCM Strategists provides support and strategic guidance to help clients form policy priorities and advance organizational success, driving impact in K-12 and postsecondary education and connecting learning and work. HCM is a group of policy advocates and strategists who are committed to working toward equitable and meaningful change. They are seasoned experts who bridge the gap between public policies and the people they affect.

Sova focuses on improving the quality and accelerating the pace of complex problem solving in the areas of higher education and workforce development. Animated by a core commitment to advancing socioeconomic mobility for more Americans, Sova pursues its mission through distinctive approaches to will-building, strategic planning, change leadership and process improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting financial crisis are forcing millions of students to reconsider their educational plans—a development that's likely to increase the number of students transferring among institutions in the years ahead.[1] Affordable and close to home, community colleges in particular are now poised to attract more students seeking bachelor's degrees. But unless institutions improve their policies for transferring credits, especially those earned at community colleges, many of the 550,000 students who move between two-year and four-year schools each year will lose both time and money, increasing their risk of leaving college without a degree.[2]

Transfer outcomes for community college students are stubbornly weak. Only 12 percent of students who entered community college in 2003 completed within six years; the rate had increased to only 14 percent for those who entered in 2013.[3,4]

As a strategy to ease transfer and improve outcomes, states and colleges have traditionally relied on articulation agreements—formal compacts between higher education institutions that ensure that credits earned at one institution will convey to another. Specifically, the agreements spell out equivalencies among individual courses. But these arrangements have substantial limitations. They are costly and time-consuming to develop and maintain, and they don't provide the clarity or assurance that transfer students need to complete their programs without costly delays. The current crisis presents colleges with an opportunity to move beyond articulation agreements so that millions of transfer students have a better chance to succeed now and in the years to come.

This brief offers new approaches colleges can use—alongside articulation agreements—to improve transfer practice and policy. Specifically, the brief:

- Summarizes the benefits and limitations of articulation agreements
- Highlights five key principles that can guide leaders as they consider additional tools to ensure transfer student success
- Showcases partnerships that consistently achieve strong transfer results

This document is based on a review of the literature on articulation agreements and effective transfer practice, as well as on 10 interviews with national, state, and institutional experts on community college transfer.

FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Every year, millions of students enroll in community colleges with the hope of completing a bachelor's degree at a four-year school. Few of them ever make it—largely because there's no clear, consistent path to turn credits into degrees.

80% OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WANT A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

33% OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS TRANSFER TO A FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION

14% OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS EARN A BACHELOR'S DEGREE WITHIN 6 YEARS OF TRANSFER [4]

43% OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' CREDITS ARE NOT ACCEPTED UPON TRANSFER[5]

Defining Articulation Agreements

This brief defines articulation agreements—in their most basic form—as formal arrangements between institutions at the individual, system, or state level that aim to facilitate credit transfer between two-year and four-year schools by specifying:

- Course-to-course equivalencies based on curricular content and/or desired learning outcomes
- Institutional and/or program-level admissions requirements

Building on a foundation of course equivalencies, articulation agreements can be extended to include:

- Lists of courses that indicate whether arrangements for bulk general education, program, major, or credential-level credit transfer (for example, general education certificates, guaranteed junior status, and transfer associate degrees)
- They meet elective, general education, or program or major requirements of the receiving institutions

I

The Pros and Cons of Articulation Agreements

Articulation agreements are the most common way institutions, systems, and states govern the transfer of academic credits from one institution to another. It is standard practice for community colleges and four-year public institutions to enter into these understandings with their most frequent transfer partners.

At a minimum, the agreements specify admissions requirements for the receiving institution and course equivalencies between the two institutions. Beyond institutional partnership agreements, 35 states have policies guaranteeing that, across in-state public institutions, an associate degree will transfer to four-year schools. Similarly, 38 states define a core of lower-division courses that are guaranteed to transfer from public in-state two-year institutions to public in-state four-year institutions. Where state-mandated articulation agreements across public postsecondary institutions do not exist, two- and four-year systems have developed similar policies to govern credit transfer.[6]

Despite their widespread use, articulation agreements and guaranteed transfer policies often fail to boost bachelor's attainment for transfer students or improve efficiency for students who complete the transfer pathway. Whereas 65 percent of students who start at a four-year institution complete a credential at a four-year institution within six years, only 14 percent of students who begin at community colleges do so. And only about 12 percent of transfers who attain a bachelor's degree do so within four years—a statistic that points to persistent inefficiencies in the pathway. Although outcomes need to improve for all students, these clear disparities illustrate the unique disadvantages transfer students face. And, as these data show, outcomes are particularly weak for Black and Latinx transfer students, as well as those from low-income backgrounds.

By exploring the drawbacks and benefits of articulation agreements, we aim to help the higher education community better understand what role such agreements can and cannot play in improving transfer outcomes. This exploration makes clear that new articulation agreements won't suffice if transfer student outcomes are to improve at scale.

EVALUATING ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS AS A STRATEGY TO PROMOTE TRANSFER STUDENT SUCCESS AND EQUITY

BENEFITS

Agreements promote collaboration between community college and four-year staff and faculty

They require agreement on and documentation of course equivalencies that can serve as the foundation for credit transfer.

Course equivalencies can provide useful information that can be used to develop robust program pathways.

Agreements codify rules that govern course-credit transfer that can outlast leadership, staff, and faculty turnover.

Agreements contain information that advisors and faculty can use to help student choose courses.

LIMITATIONS

Collaboration is limited to a specific task—completing the agreement—rather than the long-term collaboration and trust needed to advance transfer student success.

They inadequately address complexity, as hundreds of course equivalencies and articulated pathways are designed for individual institutional contexts and majors.

A focus on courses does not guarantee progression and completion of a degree; that requires consideration of which lower-division requirements count toward academic majors.

Agreements can become outdated without regular, time-consuming, and costly reviews.

They tend to be in formats that are difficult for advisors and students to use.

Articulation agreements promote credit transfer but do not lessen complexity.

While articulation agreements promote credit transfer, there is little evidence that they reduce the complexity of the transfer pathway. A single four-year institution can have thousands of articulated courses and hundreds of articulated program pathways with different community colleges. Moreover, articulation agreements are generally written in complex language designed to hold partners accountable rather than to be readily understood by students. For this reason, the practice of posting articulation agreements as a resource on websites at times leaves students (and even advisors) confused.

Articulation agreements focus on course credit, not program completion.

Articulation agreements are designed to prevent credit loss, but they do not adequately promote timely progress toward a degree. Four-year institutions often allow community college credits to satisfy requirements for general education or electives, but individual academic departments often do not count such coursework toward requirements for a major or program of study.[7] Even when articulation agreements allow bundles of courses to transfer together, there is no guarantee that all of the courses in that bundle will count toward a degree program. Students who are unaware of these limitations before they are accepted to a four-year university may confront a difficult decision: pursue their desired major and lose credits, or change their major to maximize the applicability of credits and reduce the cost of a bachelor's degree.

Articulation agreements require collaboration, but not over a long enough period of time.

Articulation agreements are developed in a single time period during which those engaged work toward the development of a single document. While this collaboration fosters common understanding about course equivalencies, it stops short of building the kind of trust that is the hallmark of successful long-term transfer partnerships. Partners rarely say that the process of developing articulation agreements fosters the conditions through which they agree on aspirational student success goals, coherent program maps, responsive advising structures, and collaborative processes around continuous improvement—the kinds of things needed to improve transfer student success.

Developing articulation agreements requires a significant investment of time and money.

In light of their limited value, it is worth noting the investment required to develop, execute, and maintain articulation agreements. Managing the articulation process can be a full-time enterprise.

In California, for example, faculty spend time figuring out course equivalencies and related matters, while "articulation officers" on every campus of the community college, California State, and University of California systems coordinate with faculty to maintain these agreements. Additional personnel keep up a central database of articulation information across the three systems. On top of that, lawyers are typically involved in the development of articulation agreements. Even with this commendable level of investment and commitment, California's community college students grapple with low transfer rates and long time to degrees.

In the end, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that four-year colleges make decisions about community college coursework—specifically, which credits to accept for degree programs—without really knowing whether student learning from those courses has satisfied requirements for upper-level work. Bias among those who work at four-year colleges against community colleges should not cause transfer students to repeat coursework that they have already mastered. At other times, four-year colleges decide not to apply community college coursework to degree or program requirements for good reason: when it is clear that students' prerequisite courses would not prepare them for success in their intended programs.

Regardless of the cause, too many transfer students face unnecessary costs (and often loan debt), lost momentum, higher probability of attrition, and longer time to degree. Articulation agreements alone will not solve these problems.

SOURCES OF EXCESS CREDIT AND PROGRESSION DELAYS IN COMPLETING DESIRED MAJOR

PRE-TRANSFER

Students do not select a pre-major early enough, leading to course misalignments with their desired four-year program.

Students who declare a pre-major receive inadequate guidance and take courses misaligned to their intended major.

Students take courses, such as developmental or vocational courses, that do not have an equivalent at the four-year level.

DURING TRANSFER

Stringent course equivalency standards at the four-year institution prevent analogous community college coursework from transferring.

Disciplines at the receiving institutions do not allow analogous coursework to meet lower-division requirements for majors or degrees.

POST-TRANSFER

Students have difficulty navigating four-year institution requirements for their chosen degree.

Four-year courses are unavailable during the terms or times of day that will enable transfer students to progress in a timely manner. Students may take alternative courses to maintain financial aid eligibility.

II

Defining Principles of Student-Centered Policies for Credit Transfer

There is, fortunately, an alternative. Five key principles can guide the development of institutional credit transfer policies that are first and foremost student-centered.

Specifically, these principles aim to address common challenges community college transfer students face at their institutions that result in excess credits, progression delays, and inability to complete desired majors. By following these principles when building the necessary partnerships between community and four-year colleges, institutional leaders and transfer practitioners can better understand the appropriate role of articulation agreements—if any—in policies and practices that promote transfer success.

FIVE GOVERNING PRINCIPLES FOR STUDENT-CENTERED CREDIT TRANSFER

1. Understand transfer students' experiences and outcomes.
2. Define a vision and goals for equitable transfer student success.
3. Create clear paths to a four-year degree.
4. Provide clear and consistent transfer information and advising.
5. Commit to routines of collaboration with the goal of continuous improvement.

1. Understand transfer students' experiences and outcomes.

Credit transfer policies should be regularly informed by an understanding of student experiences and outcomes that is based on qualitative and quantitative data. Institutions should regularly engage with current and prospective transfer students to understand what is working in the transfer process and what is not. Colleges committed to developing such understanding have used several methods, such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and dedicated staff tasked with listening to students. Importantly, these interactions should include students interested in transferring to a four-year institution but have not, as well as those who transferred but failed to complete.

At minimum, quantitative data on student outcomes should capture long-term trends in student mobility, completion, credit accumulation, and time to degree. To ensure continuous improvement (Principle 5), institutions should also monitor leading indicators that can inform prompt action, such as semester-by-semester data on credit accumulation, GPAs, and retention. This data should be disaggregated by academic discipline and, critically, by categories such as race and ethnicity and income, because the complexities in transfer pathways have shown to disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color. At a state or system level, policies that require institutions to collect and publicly report key data on transfer student outcomes can help set expectations for data reporting, allow for benchmarking across institutions, and inform statewide credit transfer policies.[8]

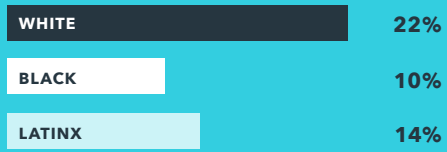
Here are some introductory questions to guide the collection of data and develop important insights into the transfer student experience. Leaders can build on these inquiries, accounting for the unique contexts of their institutions.

- What is the gap between the number of students who say they want to transfer from the community college and those who do? Does this gap vary by race and ethnicity, income level, or other factors?
- Among those who transfer, what is the average total number of credits—earned at both the community college and four-year institution—that it takes to attain a bachelor's degree? Is this greater than for students who begin at the four-year institution?
- What do transfer students say about their experience in transferring, including the guidance they received, the applicability of their credits, and their sense of belonging at the receiving institution? Are there differences for students of color or low-income students?
- How do transfer student outcomes vary by major? Are there disparities by race and ethnicity or income?
- How do transfer students fare in comparison to native students in terms of completion, time to degree, credit accumulation, inclusion, and engagement with high-impact experiences? What disparities exist by race and ethnicity and income?

BROKEN TRANSFER IMPACTS LOWER-INCOME, BLACK, AND LATINX STUDENTS MOST

Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates of Students Who Started at Two-Year Public Institutions by Income, Fall 2012 cohort

Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates of Students Who Started at Two-Year Public Institutions by Race and Ethnicity, Fall 2013 cohort



2. Define a vision and goals for transfer student success and equity.

Leaders of two- and four-year institutions should develop a shared vision for efficient, effective, and equitable program completion for transfer students. That vision typically considers both the institution's mission and context. At the four-year level, tuition-dependent public universities and private colleges often rely on transfer students for substantial parts of their enrollment, while state flagship universities and selective private colleges find needed diversity among transfers. Community colleges understand the need to attract students who aim to attain a bachelor's degree (that they typically cannot confer), and some are in states that fund community colleges for conferring associate and even bachelor's degrees. As detailed in the profiles at the end of this brief, a shared vision often lies at the intersection of institutional mission and long-term success.

Information on student experiences, along with outcomes data, can help leaders translate this vision into concrete, measurable goals for transfer, completion, credit accumulation, time-to-degree, and equity for students of color and low-income students. These goals, ideally timebound to signal urgency and sustain focus, serve to guide subsequent planning and actions on transfer policy and practice.

The process of setting a vision also serves to lay a foundation for continued institutional collaboration that is grounded in a shared understanding and ownership of transfer student success. While articulation agreements also bring two- and four-year stakeholders together, the resulting collaborations are limited (in both time and scope) to defining credit transfer and course equivalency. What is needed for successful transfer partnerships is something more: an agreement on not just the rules of transfer, but on the aspirational goals that result in higher and more equitable levels of student success.

GOAL-SETTING FRAMEWORK

Goals set at the state level help guide and motivate leaders in their vision-setting collaborations. The goal-setting framework outlined below is based on state-level goals that were set by the Tackling Transfer state partners.

- Increase the number or percentage of community college students who complete college-level math or English/writing in their first academic year.
- Increase the number of students who transfer from a community college to a four-year institution, overall and/or in particular majors.
- Increase the percentage of transfers from a community college to a four-year institution who complete an associate degree prior to transfer.
- Eliminate the gap between transfer students and native students in years and credits needed to complete a bachelor's.
- Equalize the above goals so there is no disparity for students of color and low-income students.

3. Create clear paths to a four-year degree.

While each institution must set its own goals for transfer student success, clear and affordable four-year paths to completion should be the gold standard for all transfer practices and policies. Many successful transfer partners (and some states) have operationalized this principle by developing course-by-course maps that clearly lay out the path to completing whole programs, rather than relying on agreements that emphasize individual courses. To build these maps, the relevant faculty from community colleges and four-year institutions jointly identify the course sequences, prerequisites, and extracurricular activities that students should complete to earn their degrees as quickly as possible. Course equivalencies spelled out in articulation agreements can help institutions create these maps, but only within the context of established program-level learning objectives—not as goals in and of themselves.

Whether program maps are in place, creating an overall four-year pathway requires that those making institutional transfer policy understand the barriers to timely progression, then craft policies that either dismantle those barriers or help students overcome them. For instance, to reduce the number of major prerequisites that transfer as electives, faculty and staff could annually examine the impact that transfer policies have on time to degree. Doing so may raise concerns about academic quality, but if managing time to degree is a firm goal the institution is determined to uphold, the question becomes not whether coursework is aligned but how it should be aligned to promote student success.

4. Support clear transfer information and advising.

Students who are poorly guided in community college—or not guided at all—risk accumulating excess credits and delaying their attainment of a bachelor's degree. Early advising is critical to setting them on the right transfer path, and the effectiveness of that advising depends upon strong credit transfer policies and practice. For instance, raw course equivalency lists, an all-too-common product of articulation agreements, are of limited use to prospective transfers, especially when those lists fail to specify how coursework relates to a degree program or whether that coursework will both transfer and satisfy lower-division prerequisites for academic majors.

As institutions develop student-centered transfer policies, it is crucial that they then translate those policies into user-friendly communications and tools for students and advisors, and ensure that students are in fact being well-informed. Equipping advisors with clear tools like program maps can reduce the amount of time they and their students spend deciphering the sorts of complexities embedded in articulation agreements.

With clear paths to programs of study in place, four-year colleges and universities can ensure students and faculty alike have much greater predictability in decisions made about which transfer credits to accept and apply to particular programs of study. At the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, for example, dedicated transfer advisers were trained on making such decisions, trusted by faculty in different programs to ensure that agreed-upon program maps were honored as course acceptance and applicability decisions were made.

With efficiency thus improved, advisors can devote their time to proactively reaching out to students about other important matters, such as academic interests, career goals, and financial aid. While this kind of transfer advising requires additional dedicated resources from both two- and four-year institutions, it promises a strong return on investment.

5. Commit to routines of collaboration with the goal of continuous improvement.

Advancing institutional transfer policy and practice should not be considered a one-time investment. The best transfer partnerships are built on consistent processes of communication at multiple levels: Disciplinary faculty meet first to create and then to periodically update program maps; advisors work together to consider frequent student challenges; deans, provosts and presidents discuss whether transfer goals have been met and what more can be accomplished. Such processes of communication are essential to moving transfer practice and policy across partner institutions—not just isolated disciplines—from the kind of fragmented, often legalistic articulation agreements that are far too frequent, to the kind of trusting relationships that result in higher and more equitable levels of student success.

One of the norms needed to build such trust is sharing reliable quantitative and qualitative data, as noted above. Institutions should monitor results, change practices based on data, and hold themselves accountable to improving outcomes. Given the multilateral nature of student transfer, it is especially important that processes for continuous improvement are explicitly embedded in the reforms and given the resources they need. For instance, partner institutions could regularly convene key stakeholders to discuss the latest reports on transfer student outcomes. By embracing the discipline of continuous improvement, leaders ensure that transfer student experiences and outcomes are not just understood at the outset of reform, but that data on both are continually collected, analyzed, widely disseminated, and used to drive future action.

III

Examples of Excellence

The five principles outlined here are universally applicable but will be operationalized differently based on various institutional characteristics.

For instance, dual admissions, collaborative transfer advising models, and other cross-institutional support structures are examples of student-centered transfer practice and policy that could be adopted in conjunction with the creation of seamless program pathways. This section highlights concrete examples of how these principles manifest in three very different institutional contexts. These models demonstrate what can be achieved in support of transfer students when vision guides practice and when time and resources are focused on deepening trust and collaboration between community college and four-year presidents, staff, and faculty.

Arizona State University

BUILDING A TRANSFER STUDENT-CENTERED ECOSYSTEM

Case Study 1

In 2009, Arizona State University (ASU) set out to comprehensively reform the institution's partnerships with community colleges. Committed to increasing access for diverse students, President Michael Crow was concerned that the numbers of transfer students from the Maricopa Community College District—ASU's largest transfer partner—were slowing. After some initial planning, Crow hired Maria Hesse, then president of one of Maricopa's colleges, into a senior role to help craft a vision for more effective transfer pathways to ASU.

Not long after her arrival, Hesse realized that articulation agreements were not going to be the central means for ASU to revamp its transfer systems. As ASU scaled its practices and began partnering with more community colleges, the articulation agreement process became unfeasible—accruing unsustainable legal expenses and heaps of paperwork for administrators—while not being broadly communicated to community college students and advisors. Moreover, the agreements had been in place throughout the previous decade when transfer student enrollments leveled off. What Hesse and her colleagues wanted were more student-friendly strategies, concrete action plans to increase seamless transfer between the institutions, and success towards degree completion—starting with the Maricopa Community Colleges.

> **When we held student focus groups, over and over we heard that students were unaware of articulation agreements, or they took community college courses that had equivalency to university courses without understanding that those courses may not have been relevant to their major. We felt a real sense of urgency to build clear, easy-to-read transfer pathways that were online and directly accessible to students and advisors.**
>
> DR. MARIA HESSE
> Former Vice Provost for Academic Partnerships, ASU

Over the coming years, Hesse and ASU colleagues worked to build transfer partnerships and systems around shared purpose and trust with Maricopa and other community colleges throughout the state. Hesse met regularly with college presidents and district administrators to discuss what stood in the way of transfer access and success. Faculty collaborated on refining course equivalencies and building program pathways, and advisors met to talk about improving student guidance.

What resulted was an expansion of ASU's existing eAdvisor system and major maps— major-specific curricular pathways from a student's freshman through senior year—to include transfer maps, a dynamic alternative to articulation agreements.

Case Study 1

Arizona State University

BUILDING A TRANSFER-STUDENT CENTERED ECOSYSTEM

The Maricopa to ASU Pathways Program (MAPP) helped students follow cost-effective and time-efficient pathways and gave everyone involved in the transfer enterprise reference points for regular conversations about continuous improvement. Curricular maps for transfer in specific majors and the advising systems developed with Maricopa also served as models and a starting point for conversations and collaborations with community and tribal colleges around the state.

As more partners signed on, new structures of collaboration were necessary. Hesse visited Arizona community and tribal college presidents every semester. Facilitated conversations between faculty and advisors from ASU and community college partners revealed areas for improvement in advising and mapping, as well as in tracking progress toward student success for both associate and bachelor's degrees. The progress of each college was documented in annual partnership reports that contained summaries of programmatic accomplishments alongside data snapshots and trends on transfer student outcomes. The conversations with each college became part of an annual process that establishes goals for ASU's transfer partnerships statewide, reflecting the ideas of its community college partners.

As partnerships grew to include community colleges throughout the country, ASU developed a technology solution to advise students. It eventually became an exemplary mapping system that automatically sequences course equivalencies, helping students and their advisors determine the order in which they should take community college courses. It allows students to identify their prospective major at ASU and any domestically accredited college they are transferring from, and then lays out a sequenced pathway of lower-division coursework that will both transfer and apply to their major. The prospective transfer student also receives an ASU account that provides links to the student's transfer specialist, their academic advisor, and other digital academic and financial planning solutions and resources.

> **This [credit transfer and pathway tool] ensures that every single transfer student who wants to come to ASU can get advice upfront, they can build their pathway upfront—which minimizes their credit loss, ensures applicability to their major, and decreases their time to completion.**
>
> CHERYL HYMAN
> Vice Provost for Academic Alliances, ASU

While the technology ASU has built is impressive, what undergirds it offers the most significant lesson to partners aiming to move beyond articulation agreements. ASU's deliberate effort to build an expanding set of trusting partnerships resulted in continuous improvements in transfer student access, success, and equity. In fact, ASU has more than doubled its transfer student enrollment in the last 10 years, enabling it to successfully educate a more diverse student body.

University of Central Florida

MOVING BEYOND ARTICULATION TO PRIORITIZE TRANSFER SUCCESS

Case Study 2

In 2011, the Florida legislature allowed community colleges to award a limited number of bachelor's degrees, creating the possibility that the state's community colleges and four-year public universities would increasingly compete not just for first-year students, but for students across four years of enrollment. At the same time, many observers were concerned that several of the state's public universities were becoming more selective, excluding many diverse students. Concerned that both trends could hinder their institutions' capacities to fulfill their public mission, University of Central Florida (UCF) President John Hitt met with local community college leaders to discuss a solution.

For over a decade, UCF has worked with six state colleges (formerly community colleges) in the central Florida region on the nationally recognized DirectConnect to UCF program. This program guarantees admission to UCF to all students who have earned associate of arts degrees and articulated associate of science degrees from the College of Central Florida, Daytona State College, Eastern Florida State College, Lake-Sumter State College, Seminole State College, or Valencia College. Building on clearly articulated pathways from community and state colleges through UCF, the partners have developed a holistic and highly collaborative approach to supporting transfer success that extends well beyond articulation agreements.

Specifically, UCF and its state college partners work together to:

- Align curricula to synchronize core content and learning competencies in lower-level and gateway courses to ensure successful progress and transition
- Coordinate personalized coaching so students receive early and high-quality academic, career, enrollment, and financial advice
- Advance continuous improvement and communication through two annual initiatives: the College Access Summit, which brings together faculty, staff, and administrators to discuss transfer student success challenges and opportunities through design systems thinking exercises, and the Curriculum Alignment Conference, which is governed by the chief academic officers of the partner institutions and convenes faculty and advisors to address institutional disciplinary competencies, student success skills, and course level and sequencing data
- Actively share partnership data through feedback reports and a data dashboard available to each partner college detailing student retention, GPA, graduation rates, time to degree by major, and course sequencing data.

This comprehensive model—rooted in a relationship of consistent communication and efforts to build trust—yields impressive results. In the 2018–19 academic year, UCF awarded 8,745 bachelor's degrees to transfer students—62 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded that year.[9] Even with this award-winning strategy, UCF is dedicated to continuous improvement. In its latest strategic plan, UCF redoubled its commitment to transfer student success and set a 75 percent four-year graduation rate goal for its transfer student population, and cited collaboration with community college partners as an essential way to achieve that.[10]

Mount Holyoke College

TRANSFERRING WITHOUT ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

Case Study 3

A student-centered transfer policy should mean that students receive full credit toward their degree and major requirements for comparable two- and four-year courses when their grades meet the receiving institution's standards.

Mount Holyoke College, a highly selective private women's liberal arts college in Massachusetts, has long been a champion of increasing access to higher education. One of the best known means for giving life to that commitment is its Frances Perkins Program, which, since 1980, has been enrolling and holistically supporting older college students, including many community college transfers. Also including those admitted through the general transfer application process, Mount Holyoke has for decades been a leader among selective private institutions in enrolling community college students.

For many years, however, Mount Holyoke's transfer policies were governed through articulation agreements with multiple community colleges across the country. Realizing that the agreements created many inefficiencies that could prevent the college from fulfilling its access mission, the school changed its transfer policy to employ higher-level guidance rather than school-by-school agreements. A new standard was established in policy: "Academic credit is generally granted for liberal arts courses with grades of C- or better." Mount Holyoke also accepts credit for online courses from accredited institutions as long as the content and learning outcomes are equivalent to their in-person counterparts.

Carolyn Dietel, director of the Frances Perkins Program, says that these policies are rooted in the awareness, bolstered by four decades of direct experience, that community colleges offer a quality academic experience. This conclusion emerged not just from faculty's observations but also from student success data: Since 2004, 89 percent of Frances Perkins Program scholars earned a degree from Mount Holyoke, and its alumna are now engineers, film producers, teachers, lawyers, and art conservators (among many other professions).

Freed from maintaining articulation agreements, Mount Holyoke now devotes its resources to developing and maintaining early relationships with prospective transfer students to set them up for a seamless transition. These relationships include advising prospective transfer students on what courses will best prepare them for success, making sure they understand which credits transfer and in what programs, and connecting them to faculty advisors as soon as they are admitted.

While Mount Holyoke's small size does not allow it to serve the number of transfers most public universities can, larger four-year institutions might consider what they can adapt from this approach. One immediate benefit to moving away from articulation agreements is that the process can be operationalized quickly with existing resources. The challenge, especially for leaders of four-year institutions, is securing sufficient support from campus stakeholders to adopt this relatively unconventional approach. Leaders could address resistance by making or renewing strong commitments to tracking transfer student outcomes and adopting responsive processes of continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

For too long, higher education leaders have invested heavily in developing and maintaining articulation agreements without seeing substantial improvements in transfer student outcomes.

The principles outlined here identify the promise of an alternative, student-centered approach to transfer that can be applied at any college or university. Such a shift will require that leaders buck longstanding practice, overcome pushback from internal and external stakeholders, and think in innovative ways. After many years of stagnant transfer student outcomes, it is time for the higher education establishment to accept that articulation agreements on their own are not the answer and explore promising alternatives.

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