RESPONDING IN THE MOMENT

Practices to Advance a Next-Generation Transfer System

COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM
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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

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.

PREFACE

The coronavirus pandemic has introduced extraordinary challenges to college students and higher education institutions in the United States. While long-term enrollment and financial implications are still unknown, one thing is certain: The pandemic has increased student mobility and the attention to transfer students. Unprecedented numbers of students have changed direction and institutions, abandoning their original plans for fall 2020 enrollment, or choosing to transfer to another college for financial or other reasons. Colleges nationwide have been reexamining credit transfer policies to account for millions of courses graded as pass/fail. Moreover, many students enrolled in community colleges have less certainty about if and when they might transfer to a four-year college or university.

Community colleges and the transfer pathway have long offered a gateway to a bachelor's degree and the promise of economic mobility for millions of students, including disproportionately large numbers of students of color and those from low-income households. In reality, the system fails far too many students. Only 13 percent of students who start at community college earn a bachelor's degree within six years, and white community college students are twice as likely as Black and Latinx students to do so. Similarly, only 16 percent of low-income students who start at a community college complete a bachelor's degree, compared to 34 percent of high-middle income and 43 percent of high-income students.

While disruptive in many ways, the current context offers an opportunity to advance transfer student success. This is especially important given the renewed national attention to racial justice, including a focus on systemic inequities within higher education. The current pandemic and subsequent economic fallout are disproportionately affecting Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income student communities, the same students who have, for too long, endured unacceptable transfer outcomes.

In this brief and its companion, _Responding in the Moment: Policies to Advance a Next-Generation Transfer System_, transfer experts offer specific policy and practice recommendations that can be implemented today to advance transfer student success, both in the short-term and as part of a strategy to address structural barriers. Several immediate action steps leaders can employ include:

- **Change academic policies that stand in the way of transfer student success**
  Coupled with the switch to online learning, current rates of student transfer offer an opportunity to make short-term changes to credit applicability policies that could be adopted for the long term. Policymakers at the state and institutional levels can use this opportunity to make several specific changes, including accepting and applying pass/fail credits to programs of study regardless of letter grade requirements as an equity consideration during the COVID-19 pandemic; terminating residency requirements for students close to graduation; and applying credits toward degrees for transfer students who do not complete the full set of courses established in transfer agreements.

- **Communicate clearly to students and their advisors**
  During this time of increased student mobility and uncertainty, state higher education systems and institutions must improve communications to students who have transferred or who are considering transferring. Specifically, colleges and states should clearly and concisely document policy changes related to COVID-19 on existing websites and other platforms; implement student outreach campaigns through multiple communications channels; and communicate these policy changes to and hold trainings for advisors, faculty, and other professionals who support students.

- **Demonstrate that transfer remains a priority in the moment and in the long-term**
  While the surge in student mobility may be temporary, it offers the opportunity to change the narrative about the importance of improving transfer student outcomes. Citing the presence of large numbers of transfer students, their current outcomes, and deep inequities among transfer students of color, campus and system leaders can advocate for change. Among the actions that can be taken are issuing a statement from state and postsecondary leaders prioritizing transfer as a core feature of state reform efforts during and after COVID-19; appointing a transfer commission and committee with a clear charge to make specific recommendations for improving transfer student success before the end of the current academic year; and mandating annual reports on transfer student outcomes.

Fixing the broken transfer pipeline requires both long and short-term strategy at the federal, state, system, and institutional levels. These briefs offer advice on where leaders can start and how they can continue to prioritize transfer. Enhancing transfer student outcomes requires both institutional leaders and policymakers to understand that current issues facing transfer students are not temporary, but rather, long-standing impediments to fulfilling goals around degree attainment, racial equity, and institutional sustainability. As these briefs make clear, actions taken today can help in the short-term while advancing long-needed transfer student success for years to come.
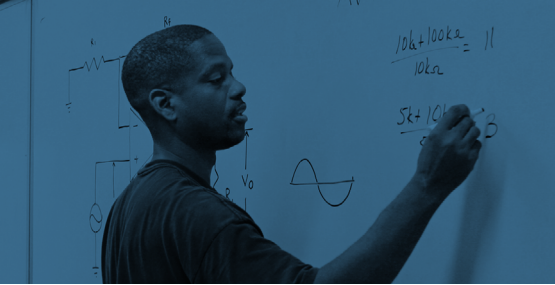
INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the U.S. higher education system. The long-term enrollment and financial implications for colleges and universities are unknown. Still, the potential for lower enrollments, state funding cuts, and other lost revenues will create budgetary shortfalls that may require universities to streamline supports dedicated to student retention. As the coronavirus has ravaged the United States—disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx populations—racial injustice and discriminatory practices have been spotlighted. Protesters call for federal and state governments to address structural abuses that repress equity and inclusion, including some perpetrated on university campuses.

The pandemic and racial justice movements have brought into sharper focus the need to support traditionally underserved students, such as Black, Latinx, and low-income students. However, another underserved group that overlaps with these populations has historically been overlooked by many universities: community college transfer students.

The Aspen Institute has set forth a case for the value of community college transfer students to universities: these students improve a university's ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity while also supporting the institution's financial bottom line. When a university enrolls these students, however, it also takes responsibility for supporting their success to graduation. In this brief, we provide three broad principles to help guide universities in their long-term efforts to improve access and success for community college transfer students, along with concrete steps that universities can take immediately to set them on the path toward those long-term goals.

To prepare this brief, we reviewed research on effective practices to improve transfer student enrollment, retention, and graduation at universities. Unfortunately, research on effective institutional transfer practice is scarce; studies typically focus on identifying barriers to transfer rather than assessing the effectiveness of specific practices designed to overcome those barriers. There is some compelling anecdotal and case-study evidence that provides clues to particular practices that may be helpful; however, college leaders may be reluctant to invest scarce resources in promising but unproven practices, particularly in light of the financial constraints and uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

Thus, we extract three general principles consistent with the body of research: develop receptive and inclusive cultures to support underserved students; empower employees to strengthen partnerships and identify program (in) efficiencies; and commit to flexible and innovative practices to reimagine business-as-usual. For each principle, we offer concrete and relatively low-cost steps that presidents can take this fall.

Develop receptive and inclusive cultures

Across the country, university presidents have vocalized their support of the racial equity movement. As universities reopen for the fall, presidents must be prepared to substantiate their statements of support with definitive action. Institutions that fail to act at this pivotal time in history risk losing the national momentum and a fundamental opportunity to enhance the college experience for millions of marginalized students. As presidents plan their equity agendas for 2020–2021, community college transfer students should be explicitly included.

Transfer students, particularly those from community colleges, are inherently diverse[1] and consistently underserved. Supporting their success contributes to the success of all underserved students; in turn, supporting all underserved students improves the experiences of transfer students. As leaders articulate the segments of their student population which need particular focus in terms of equity—for example, Black, Latinx, APIDA, first-generation, undocumented, and low-income students—community college transfer students should be explicitly included in this list.

Leaders must scrutinize their current institutional practices to understand how each segment of students is included in university communications, represented in leadership roles, involved in university decision-making, and engaged in high-impact educational practices. Addressing these questions is critical to identifying which students are underserved and developing a receptive and inclusive culture for transfer students and other underrepresented groups.

Demonstrate that transfer student success is integral to the university's mission through explicit communications and targeted appointments.

To highlight and strengthen the institution's commitment to transfer students, presidents can include language regarding these students in diversity and inclusion initiatives, strategic plans, and mission statements. Including transfer student success in official documents introduces a level of accountability to the campus community and lays the groundwork for the eventual inclusion of transfer success into the institution's formal goals and metrics.[2]

Additionally, leaders can convey the importance of transfer voices in university decision-making by appointing transfer students (as well as faculty who were previously community college faculty or students themselves) to influential committees or other leadership positions. These faculty and students demonstrate to the community that transfer students can be successful and provide role models and examples for current and future transfer students.

↘ *This fall, establish a task force consisting of transfer students, faculty, and administrators dedicated to incorporating language about transfer student success and related equity initiatives into university guidelines and accreditation documentation; establish transfer champion roles for faculty and students on university councils and presidential advisory boards, select them to speak at orientation and commencement, and incorporate their stories into recruitment materials.*

Conduct an inclusivity audit to identify gaps in services for underserved students.

An inclusivity audit is an opportunity to review programs and services to ensure they meet the needs of all members of the university community. Institutions must ask, "what students are participating in programs and who is being left out?" While most student information systems include easily accessible and linkable data on student race, they do not always include flags for first-generation students, low-income students, or transfer students. Without such flags in the system and accompanying data, it's challenging for administrators and program managers to identify areas where these students are underserved, and to improve practices to support and enhance diversity and inclusion efforts.[3]

For example, implementing a "transfer student" flag in student information systems allows each college within the university to understand how many transfer students they currently enroll and in which academic programs, and to critically evaluate the proportion of those students who participate in key program activities such as undergraduate research or internships. Including separate identifiers for transfer students from two- versus four-year colleges also enables the possibility of novel insights for community college students, who are typically washed out in aggregate reporting.

↘ *This fall, develop two-year and four-year transfer student indicators in your student information system; begin an inclusivity audit by investigating participation in initiatives that research suggests may be beneficial to transfer student success, such as peer mentor programs, learning communities, and undergraduate research.*[4]

Empower employees

Like most highly-complex challenges, transfer challenges must be addressed through a convergence of senior leaders who articulate and support an ambitious vision, and frontline employees who have the practical experience to address challenges and achieve that vision.[5]

University presidents should articulate a broad vision for improving community college transfer. They can highlight that vision by publicly meeting with local community college presidents, as well as by discussing the vision in other community and university venues; however, the tactical design and implementation of the vision should be architected by frontline personnel.

Empowering academic advisors, admissions officers, student affairs administrators, and other employees across the university to embrace the responsibility of supporting transfer student success is a crucial step to initiating and actualizing institutional change. When employees know how valuable their contributions are to organizational effectiveness, they're more creative and motivated to solve complex problems; when they feel part of the solution, they approach their work with improved morale.[6]

Below are two examples of steps presidents can take this year to empower employees to identify program (in)efficiencies and build lasting relationships with sending-institution partners.

Empower academic advisors from your top three transfer programs to develop program maps that improve transfer efficiency and strengthen partnerships.

Transfer students accumulate excess credits at a high rate due to the disconnect between courses taken before transfer and courses required by a university for degree completion.[7] Academic advisors work closely with transfer students to navigate major selection, credit application, and course planning; they're familiar with student missteps, confusions, and frustrations, and often have creative but realistic ideas for systematic solutions. By drawing on their experience and working with advisors at key sending community colleges, advisors can draft program maps that lay out the recommended set of courses for students to take in a given program before and after transfer.

Statewide credit articulation policies—such as those presented in the accompanying policy brief, *Responding in the Moment: Policies to Advance Student Mobility and Next Generation Transfer*—facilitate such processes by creating a common framework on which the institutions can build. Once drafted by advisors, program maps can be edited and approved by program directors and academic deans with limited cost and effort. The resulting program plans will not only be based on practical experience, but will also be well understood and honored by advisors who are tasked with helping students follow those plans to degree completion.

↘ *This fall, start the process of program mapping with your three highest-volume transfer programs.*

Empowering Employees to Support Transfer Students at The Ohio State University

The College of Social Work's undergraduate studies director and academic advisors meet with counterparts at neighboring community colleges every summer to recap the previous year, identify gaps in articulation causing loss of credits, and review the curricula for improvements. These yearly meetings have strengthened cross-institutional relationships and resulted in changes to the academic programs that benefit transfer students, such as allowing students to enter the major early if they are only missing pre-requisites that can be taken concurrently with major-specific coursework.

State articulation policies make the transfer of credits easier for students and can help facilitate conversations between institutional partners, but not all courses are covered by an official articulation agreement. For those classes, the College reviews all transfer courses to determine if they can fulfill a degree requirement.

These small changes and additional effort by empowered employees to support transfer students help mitigate potential barriers of inefficient academic program structures.

Appoint an inter-institutional transfer specialist to help synchronize practices and expand collaborative partnerships.

Transfer students must navigate through a complex bureaucratic process of identifying which credits will transfer to their intended university, which courses meet program requirements, and what articulation agreements even are—let alone how they work. Community college students need someone to help demystify the process.[8]

A specialist at the university who is knowledgeable about the intricacies of transfer cannot advise every community college student interested in transitioning to the university. Still, they can help align information, processes, and services for those students. For example, advisors at the community college may be unaware of key programs at the university that desire more transfer students or the programs in which community college transfer students have been highly successful; they may also be unaware of key tasks and recommended deadlines for students interested in those programs. An inter-institutional transfer specialist can provide targeted information and resources to community college advisors and work with advisors to create systematic processes for informing students about these opportunities or deadlines.

As one example, the inter-institutional transfer specialist can help organize regular FAFSA filing events at nearby community colleges before financial aid deadlines for transfer students. In general, specialists can work directly with key transfer sites to identify and address current pain points in advising, articulation, and pathway efforts while creating sustainable enhancements to these processes.

↘ *This fall, establish an inter-institutional transfer specialist position dedicated to using their expertise to enhance the transfer process and advise students from your top high-volume sending partner.*
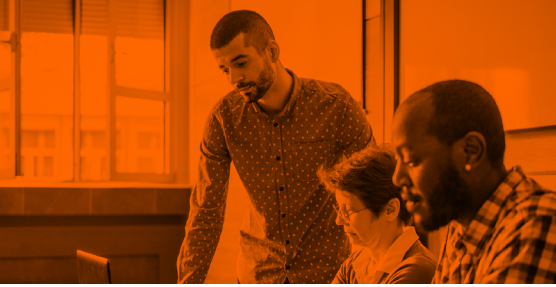
Commit to flexible and responsive practices

The coronavirus pandemic brought a tidal wave of changes to housing, course content, semester schedules, grading policies, and support services during spring 2020. Many institutions demonstrated compassion and flexibility by adopting pass/fail grading policies for current students and test-optional admissions for applicants. Academic programs—most notably health services—adjusted requirements to support degree completion so new doctors and nurses could get on the frontlines to save lives. Universities are still confronting the aftereffects and implications of the spring 2020 coronavirus wave while also planning for an unpredictable future. Much is still unknown about the long-term impact of the pandemic on higher education; however, university leaders must commit to supporting flexible policies and practices and embrace innovative approaches to streamline transfer. Institutions that do not take these steps risk alienating students, not addressing their needs, and introducing additional barriers to success.

Commit to equitable acceptance and aplication of pass/fail grades for major program requirements.

Across the country, spring courses pivoted to remote instruction without the extensive preparation required for successful online learning. Under-resourced students were expected to finish the semester in unconducive learning environments, often with inadequate internet connections and devices.[9] Many universities and community colleges offered flexibility in terms of course grading, allowing students to take courses pass/fail. However, students in community college likely had little or no communication from their intended university regarding pass/fail guidelines. As a result, they may now be met with inflexible academic programs unwilling to consider pass/fail credit |for selective-major admission requirements or to fulfill major-specific coursework. Alternatively, a community college student's advisor may have pressed the student to take all their spring 2020 courses for a letter grade due to uncertainty about the destination university's treatment of pass/fail credit—a tactic which could set the student at a disadvantage vis-à-vis university students who had clarity regarding how pass/fail credits would apply to their degree.[10]

Universities must be equitable in their treatment of transfer students. At minimum, if the university allowed its own students to apply pass/fail credit to a specific requirement, then transfer students must be extended the same flexibility. Ideally, programs should evaluate the student's transcript holistically and extend extra flexibility, with the recognition that transfer students were disadvantaged in terms of clear communication regarding pass/fail guidelines. Policies guiding the minimum level of acceptance and application of pass/fail grades earned during the coronavirus era should also be set centrally by the institution—rather than left entirely to the discretion of individual programs—and those policies must be clear to both transfer and non-transfer students.

↘ *In the fall, institute a university-wide guarantee that academic programs will apply coronavirus-related pass/fail credits to academic major requirements in an equitable way for transfer and non-transfer students*

Equitable application of pass/fail credits for transfer students

Leaders must decide how they want to enact equitable values to best support transfer students, including how pass/fail credits taken in the spring and summer 2020 semesters will be accepted and applied to degree and major requirements. The policies and practices around pass/fail credits during the pandemic are often confusing; statements from universities are fraught with ambiguous or unclear language, leaving many students unsure of the impact of decisions made in the shadow of a worldwide health crisis. University leaders must consider what information was available to transfer and non-transfer students, and the potential long-term implications of not introducing equitable policies and practices to enhance—not hinder—successful transfer.

For example, transfer students applying to a large university system on the West Coast received messaging that pass grades will be accepted "for admissions purposes only" and the individual departments will determine the articulation of courses to degree requirements. Additionally, a large Midwest system is "accepting [pass] grades for prerequisite requirements and [college] major requirements," but the language from some individual departments may dissuade students from taking that option:

> **[The department is] discouraging students from switching to [pass/fail] without careful consideration. [We] recommend students contact their instructors about individual courses and review their current grade plus remaining requirements in order to make an informed decision. There could be other ramifications related to graduate school admission in the future.**

Both examples present problematic scenarios for transfer students. As described in the accompanying policy brief, ambiguity in the application of transferred credits only contributes to the challenges transfer students face. It leaves them without the details necessary to make an informed decision while hoping that pass grades earned during the spring and summer 2020 pandemic were not a waste of time and money. Furthermore, it's unclear and confusing when institutions offer the application of pass grades to degree programs but also publish information from departments discouraging students from taking courses pass/fail.

When deciding whether transfers students' pass grades should apply to degree and major requirements, universities should, at minimum, be consistent in practices between transfer and non-transfer students. They should also consider additional equitable practices that would support transfer student success. University leaders must consider if, how, and when information about pass/fail credits was shared with prospective transfer students and ask:

- Were key transfer partners informed of pass/fail policies so they could effectively advise students?

- Were prospective transfer students who already applied or accepted to the university distributed the same information as current students?

- Were prospective transfer students given the same opportunities to consult university instructors, as individual departments encouraged their own students to do?

- If transfer students did not have the details to make informed decisions about pass/fail courses, should they be penalized, or should equitable practices be implemented to ensure their pass grades are fairly applied to degree and major requirements?

Answers to these questions will help guide universities to enact equitable values to best support transfer students.

Identify transfer-receptive majors to begin conversations and lay the groundwork for dual admissions programs that integrate transfer support practices and establish seamless transfer.

The coronavirus pandemic has upended business-as-usual for colleges and universities. Now is the time to address problematic transfer policies and practices—such as gaps in statewide articulation and credit applicability discussed in the accompanying policy brief—by adopting innovative approaches with high potential.

Dual admission programs (DAPs)[11] represent one such approach. Under a typical DAP, students enroll at a community college but are formally recognized as future students at their transfer destination and target program, to which they are guaranteed admission if they meet program milestones and GPA minimums. DAPs inherently bundle transfer-supportive practices, including academic advising, articulation agreements, program requirement alignment, two- and four-year institutional collaboration, and a culture of support at a programmatic level. Developing a wholesale dual admissions policy between two institutions may be a political non-starter; however, creating a DAP for one or two key programs requires less political capital, is less resource-intensive, and if successful, provides a template for other programs to follow in subsequent years. While research on DAPs is still scarce, the extant evidence suggests that these programs can improve student outcomes.[12]

At first, DAPs may be best implemented in academic programs which are already receptive to transfer students (e.g., social work and applied health sciences), reducing the potential for administrative obstacles and increasing the likelihood of success.

↘ *This fall, identify one or two transfer-receptive academic programs as potential pilot sites for DAPs; authorize program staff and deans to initiate a review of relevant program maps and identify practices or policies which may require revision in order to move forward with a pilot.*

DAP Structures

DAP structures vary substantially across colleges and programs, depending on the contexts and needs of each program. Under some DAPs, students apply to the community college and four-year partner jointly and enter the DAP immediately upon enrollment; under other DAPs, students apply only after successful completion of a first semester or year at the community college. Some programs allow students to take courses concurrently at the two- and four-year institutions, and others allow students to begin courses at the transfer destination only after earning an associate degree.

Regardless of their structure, DAPs are distinct from traditional 2+2 programs due to the coordinated support and communications provided by both institutions. In addition to guaranteeing admission to students' target four-year program, some universities explicitly weave DAP students into the university community prior to transfer, for example, by providing them with a university ID, a university program advisor, or access to the university library.

The University of Central Florida's (UCF) concurrent ASN to BSN program in Nursing is a long-standing example of an effective DAP. Students interested in the program first enroll at a Florida College System institution to take a semester of ASN courses. After completing general education credit hours and all BSN pre-requisites with a minimum 3.0 GPA, they then can apply to the concurrent degree program and start taking courses at the community college and UCF simultaneously. Faculty from both institutions came together to evaluate and develop the coursework to support degree completion and streamline the transfer process while still complying with state-mandated requirements.

Research on 13 years of data from UCF's ASN-BSN degree program found 80 percent of students graduated on time and completed their bachelor's degree up to four semesters quicker than peers in a non-concurrent RN-BSN program. The number of students who withdrew or were dismissed also dropped from 35 percent to 18 percent in the past 10 years.[13]

CONCLUSION

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education has forced a deviation from standard operating procedures and created calls to address the societal inequities implicit in the culture of many institutions. The challenges during this unprecedented time, while exacting, present an opportunity for institutional improvements. In this brief, we present three principles and accompanying concrete, short-term, and relatively low-cost steps that presidents can take right now to improve the college experience for marginalized students. By developing receptive cultures to support underserved populations, empowering employees to strengthen partnerships with key sending-institutions and identify program (in) efficiencies, and committing to flexible and innovative practices to reimagine business-as-usual, institutions will contribute to the long-term success of transfer students.

CITATIONS & ENDNOTES

1   Hussar et al., 2020

2   Kezar & Eckel, 2005

3   Frost, 2014

4   While there are a wide variety of high impact practices and activities that may be beneficial to transfer students, peer mentor programs (Flaga, 2006; Owens, 2010), learning communities (Coston, 2019), and undergraduate research (Townsend & Wilson, 2009) are research-informed starting points for investigation.

5   Cameron & Quinn, 2011

6   Zhang & Bartol, 2010

7   Bailey et al., 2015; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Hodara et al., 2016

8   Bahr et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2009

9   Means et al. (2020)

10   For example, an announcement from a large West Coast university system to their prospective transfer students indicated that the applicability of transferred pass/fail grades to program requirements was not guaranteed: "Pass or Credit grades in major preparation are acceptable as noted above for admission purposes only; articulation of courses with Pass or Credit grades will be determined by the individual department after you enroll at [university]."

11   Dual admissions programs are also referred to as concurrent degree programs in certain disciplines (e.g., nursing).

12   Heglund et al., 2017

13   Heglund et al., 2017

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