



THE TRANSFER PLAYBOOK

SECOND EDITION

**A Practical Guide for Achieving Excellence
in Transfer and Bachelor's Attainment
for Community College Students**

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Authors


Tania LaViolet, Kathryn Masterson, Alex Anacki, Josh Wyner
(The Aspen Institute)

John Fink, Aurely Garcia Tulloch, Jessica Steiger, Davis Jenkins
(CCRC)

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The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

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The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to strengthen higher education leadership and practice to improve student outcomes—with the ultimate goal of advancing economic mobility and developing talent for the good of all people and society as a whole.

Community College Research Center (CCRC)

ccrc.tc.columbia.edu 

The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for more than 25 years. Our work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.

Many community college entrants aspire to earn a bachelor's, and yet, for the past decade, fewer than **one** in **five** were successful. What would it take to **double** or **triple** our current transfer outcomes?



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KEY IDEA:

This icon indicates the key ideas of an essential practice



FIELD EXAMPLE:

This icon indicates a field example of key ideas associated with an essential practice

INSTITUTIONS STUDIED

2-YEAR INSTITUTIONS:

Arizona Western College, Yuma, AZ
College of Southern Maryland, La Plata, MD
Durham Tech Community College, Durham, NC
Imperial Valley College, Imperial, CA
Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA
Northwest Vista College, San Antonio, TX
Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD
Tallahassee State College, Tallahassee, FL

4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS:

CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, NY
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC
George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
Northern Arizona University-Yuma, Yuma, AZ
San Diego State University, San Diego, CA
San Diego State University-Imperial Valley, Calexico, CA
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR
University of North Texas, Denton, TX
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

Foreword

Dear Readers,

Increasing the number of community college students who transfer and earn bachelor's degrees should be a national priority. Each year, hundreds of thousands of new community college students aim to earn a bachelor's, but only a small percentage eventually achieve that goal.¹ Meanwhile, improving bachelor's attainment rates could strengthen our country in many ways: helping fill persistent shortages of teachers, engineers, nurses, and other professionals; developing the talent that could lead to the next major advancements in public health, international peace, and the arts; and fostering a more engaged citizenry. More bachelor's degrees would also increase economic mobility and opportunity for more Americans by opening doors to the majority (and growing number) of high-paying, family-sustaining jobs, including careers in research, management, business ownership, and leadership in every sector.

There is immense potential in the dreams and ambitions of bachelor's-intending community college students—and the many who may have counted themselves out but have the ability to complete a bachelor's and expand their career horizons. This Playbook outlines how colleges can help foster and actualize those dreams and ambitions by engaging in practices that dramatically increase the number of students who transfer and complete bachelor's degrees.

The second edition of the Transfer Playbook is the culmination of two years of quantitative analysis and qualitative fieldwork that builds on the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center's 2016 Playbook and subsequent work with thousands of higher education leaders and practitioners nationwide. It aims to empower change agents to more fully develop the many talented students at our nation's community colleges.

The examples featured in this Playbook come from colleges in cities, suburbs, and rural America. Our conclusion: Transfer excellence is within reach of every school; no institutional characteristic prevents leaders, staff, and faculty from achieving it.

This work could not have been done without the hundreds of educators and students who shared their time, insights, and expertise with us over the last two years. We've witnessed the power of practitioners and advisors who transformed student experiences, faculty members coming together to align expectations and deliver excellent teaching, and presidents and senior administrators making transfer student success a top priority so their institutions could create lasting, systemic change.

We hope you, too, find inspiration in their work.

With optimism and hope for the future,

Tania LaViolet (The Aspen Institute) and John Fink and Davis Jenkins (CCRC)

¹ Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya-Guevara, Davis Jenkins, and Tania LaViolet, *Tracking Transfer: Community College and Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (New York: Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2024), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/Tracking-Transfer-Community-College-and-Four-Year-Institutional-Effectiveness-in-Broadening-Bachelors-Degree-Attainment.html>.

Introduction

Every year, millions of students enroll in community colleges, and many of them strive to transfer to a university and earn a bachelor’s degree. Their motivation: the life-changing economic opportunity that degree confers.

Their aspirations are rooted in evidence. According to the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, a growing proportion of jobs in the future will require at least a bachelor’s degree.² In 2031, among “good jobs” that will pay family-sustaining wages, the center projects 66 percent will be held by workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher, up from 59 percent in 2021.

Students who attend community college have a lot to gain from attaining a bachelor’s degree—and so does our country. A national strategy to improve transfer outcomes could create great societal benefits, while also uplifting those historically farthest from educational and economic opportunity and mobility.

Nearly three-quarters of community college students come from families in the lower half of income distribution.³ And nearly 50 percent of all Hispanic undergraduates, 43 percent of Black undergraduates, 49 percent of first-generation students, 42 percent of military-affiliated undergraduates, and 40 percent of students from rural areas are enrolled in community colleges.^{4,5} These students are more likely than four-year college students to be parents, come from foster care, and represent a diversity of ages and life experiences.^{6,7}

Behind these statistics are compelling life stories, and we learned many of them during our research: students who overcame homelessness, drove for hours to get to class, and worked several jobs to make ends meet. We heard stories of grit and persistence and of trusted advisors and faculty members working with students to help them attain bachelor’s degrees when others might not have believed it possible. We met students with talents that could take them anywhere, but they chose to stay close to home and their support networks and, after graduating, to give back to their families and communities.

Unfortunately, many community colleges and universities have not adequately addressed the myriad obstacles—many created by the institutions—that stand in the way of transfer students’ success. Navigating current transfer pathways relies too heavily on the determination of individual students and their supporters.⁸ The result: The national bachelor’s attainment rate among students who start college at a community college remains below 20 percent.⁹ Bachelor’s completion rates are even lower for low-income, Black, Hispanic, and adult community college starters, which range from 6 percent to 11 percent. Efforts to improve outcomes overall will be difficult, if not impossible, without a strong focus on ensuring every student—regardless of their background—has the opportunity to achieve success unencumbered by undue institutional burdens.

² Jeff Strohl, Artem Gulish, and Catherine Morris, *The Future of Good Jobs: Projections through 2031* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/goodjobsprojections2031>.

³ Aspen analysis of NPSAS:20 data using collapsed Carnegie Class to approximate community colleges and \$68,703 as median income.

⁴ Aspen analysis of 2021-22 IPEDS Fall Enrollment survey data. (for race)

⁵ Aspen analysis of NPSAS:20 data. (for rurality and military service)

⁶ Judy Havlicek, Amy Dworsky, and Elissa Gitlow. “Using Research to Improve the Postsecondary Educational Outcomes of Community College Students in Foster Care.” University of Illinois School of Social Work, January 24, 2023

⁷ Aspen analysis of NPSAS:20 data (for age and parenting status)

⁸ Xueli Wang. *On My Own: The Challenge and Promise of Building Equitable STEM Transfer Pathways*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2020.

⁹ Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya-Guevara, Davis Jenkins, and Tania LaViolet, *Tracking Transfer: Community College and Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor’s Degree Attainment* (New York: Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2024), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/Tracking-Transfer-Community-College-and-Four-Year-Institutional-Effectiveness-in-Broadening-Bachelors-Degree-Attainment.html>.

The field should strive not only to make improvements but to achieve excellence in transfer and bachelor's attainment rates.

Even students who transfer and earn a bachelor's can face barriers that delay progress toward their degrees and increase costs. Indeed, while colleges often tout the savings that can result from “2+2” pathways (i.e., two years at a community college's tuition rate and two years at a university's), only 18 percent of transfer students complete their degrees within two years of transferring and realize those savings. The good news: Better outcomes are within reach.

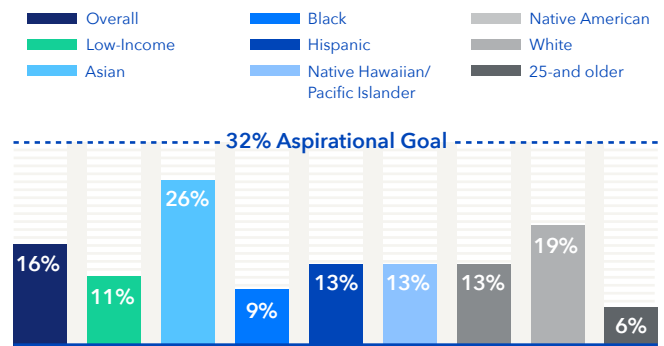
In our research for this Playbook, we found exceptional institutions by looking at data and interviewing college leaders, administrators, practitioners, and students. We synthesized our findings into a practical, three-part framework that can be adapted by leaders, practitioners, and faculty members on community college and university campuses. In the coming years, we hope this Transfer Playbook will help colleges strengthen transfer pathways and, in turn, transform millions of lives.

Raising the Bar for Transfer

Transfer and bachelor's attainment rates for students who start in community colleges have remained virtually unchanged since we started tracking transfer in 2015.¹⁰ The field should strive not only to make improvements but to achieve excellence in transfer and bachelor's attainment rates.

At the time of this research, colleges with the strongest overall transfer outcomes—those in the top 10 percent—exceeded transfer rates of 52 percent, while colleges with

Figure 1 Bachelor's Attainment Rate for Community College Students in the U.S.



the strongest bachelor's completion outcomes for transfer students exceeded rates of 61 percent.¹¹ These outcomes show it is possible for community colleges to successfully transfer the majority of their students, who then earn bachelor's degrees at rates comparable to those who start directly at four-year institutions.¹² If community colleges and universities across the nation achieved this level of excellence in transfer, they could double the bachelor's attainment rate of community college students from 16 percent to 32 percent (*Figure 1*).

What would it take to get there? The second edition of the Transfer Playbook provides practical guidance rooted in a data-driven study (*Appendix 1*) of the practices community colleges, universities, and transfer partnerships used to achieve relatively strong outcomes overall, and specifically for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students (*Figure 1*). These schools' successes demonstrate that doubling the bachelor's attainment rate for community college students is within reach.

It is important to note that none of the institutions or partnerships we researched exhibited the full suite of practices outlined in this Playbook. However, we hypothesize that by combining the exemplars' efforts into a comprehensive, idealized framework, higher education leaders and practitioners can adapt it to meet their students' needs and achieve strong outcomes for all—and at scale.

¹¹ The top 10 percent of transfer and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates nationally, from CCRC analysis of National Student Clearinghouse data, 2015 entering community college cohort

¹² https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_326.10.asp?current=yes

¹⁰ *ibid*

Three Strategies for Achieving Excellence in Transfer and Bachelor's Attainment

This Playbook is organized around three broad strategies we observed in exemplary community college and university partnerships.



Prioritize Transfer at the Executive Level to Achieve Sustainable Success at Scale

President-led, team-based, well-resourced partnerships

End-to-end redesign of the transfer student experience

Routinized, transfer student-centered systems and processes



Align Program Pathways and High-Quality Instruction to Promote Timely Bachelor's Completion within a Major

Four-year sequences that promote learning and major progression

Systematized translation of maps into individualized education plans

Strengthened instruction, academic support, and curricular alignment



Tailor Transfer Advising and Nonacademic Supports to Foster Trust and Engagement

Early, sustained, and inevitable advising systems

A trained, knowledgeable, and caring advising corps

A transfer-specific approach to holistic success

Consistent Themes Across the Framework

Our research gave us a clear understanding of what set exemplary colleges apart and why their practices were so powerful. Some consistent, underlying themes included:

★ Institutional proximity can be leveraged.

Many students want—or need—to stay close to home, highlighting the importance of local pathways between community colleges and four-year universities that serve students at scale. Unfortunately, too many neighboring community colleges and universities leave barriers to transfer success unaddressed, passively enrolling students who rely on the proximity of their institutions. Exemplary partnerships in our research took advantage of their institutions' physical proximity and created regionally relevant pathways and supports that could grow the number of students they enroll and graduate, especially among populations least likely to pursue any college credential.

★ All students need ready access to systems that help them navigate high-stakes choices, delivered by people who care.

For many community college students, missteps in course, major, or transfer destination selection can have financial and opportunity costs that determine whether they complete their degrees or stop out indefinitely. These high-stakes choices are best made by students with the support of advisors and other staff who can empathize with students' unique and often challenging circumstances to personalize guidance. At most institutions, many staff members do this exceptionally well. However, an approach that relies on their individual initiative and understanding instead of a universal, coordinated system will inevitably result in some students getting left behind, often those who need support the most. The exemplars in our research built systems and tools that ensure most students—not just those who seek help—receive timely, accurate guidance by staff trained to be welcoming, encouraging, and empathetic.

★ The strongest partnerships include universal systems and initiatives, often informed by what works for historically underserved student groups.

Our research and fieldwork found that many programs that aim to help specific populations achieve strong outcomes and minimize, if not eliminate, disparities for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. However, too few of these programs reach students at scale. The exemplars in our research use these programs to test and prove what is effective for supporting students who face considerable challenges, and they incorporate key programmatic elements into their universal systems, such as technology, advising, and academic and nonacademic support offices.

★ Leadership is needed at both the mid and senior levels.

Our interviews revealed that strong outcomes for some students could be achieved through the efforts of one or a handful of transfer champions, often student-facing staff or faculty members. When their grassroots movements were recognized, elevated, and invested in by presidents and senior leaders, they could be brought to scale and institutionalized in such a way that transfer efforts were resistant to the disruptive effects of turnover. Unfortunately, our research also revealed the opposite can happen: When scaled transfer models have not been built and institutionalized before key transfer champions left, their work—and impact—did not continue.

Strategy 1: Prioritize Transfer at the Executive Level to Achieve Sustainable Success at Scale



Summary: This strategy comprises three essential practices, each featuring several key ideas:

President-led, team-based, well-resourced partnerships

KEY IDEAS:

- > Shared, president-led vision for the partnership’s impact, clearly communicated with key stakeholders
- > Individual and shared investment, including funding and dedicated staff
- > Cabinet-supported teams that advance strategy, implementation, relationship-building, and collaboration

End-to-end redesign of the transfer student experience

KEY IDEAS:

- > Transformational transfer models that extend beyond credit articulation
- > Strategies tailored to regional needs and demographics
- > “Every student could be a transfer student” approaches
- > Increased attention to affordability and financial aid

Routinized, transfer student-centered systems and processes

KEY IDEAS:


- > Automation, technology, and predictable processes to improve student experiences at scale
- > Actionable, disaggregated data to promote accountability, support case-making, and inform continuous improvement

Achieving much stronger transfer outcomes overall as well as for those least likely to attain a bachelor’s degree often requires major institutional and partnership reforms. That explains why we found prioritizing transfer at the executive leadership level—especially the presidency—was common among the colleges featured in this research. The following section explains what this looks like in practice.

Essential Practice 1

President-led, team-based, well-resourced partnerships

Presidents who lead effective transfer partnerships prioritize transfer student outcomes, charge senior-level staff to mobilize teams that collaborate and implement major transfer reforms, and allocate personnel, financial investments, and their own time to advance those reforms.

 **KEY IDEA:** Shared, president-led vision for the partnership’s impact, clearly communicated with key stakeholders

At the institutions we researched, both community college and four-year presidents understood the central role transfer student success played in both accomplishing their educational mission and achieving their business and enrollment objectives. They routinely called attention to transfer reform initiatives and emphasized the importance of transfer partnerships to their institutions and regions. They collaborated with presidents at their partner institutions to develop a shared vision for what they wanted to accomplish together, fostering a sense of common purpose and laying a solid foundation for successful transfer reform.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Arizona Western College sets a “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” with the support of Northern Arizona University

The presidents of **Arizona Western College** (AWC) and **Northern Arizona University** (NAU) share a priority: More local students must attain a bachelor’s degree if the economies of their regions and their state are to thrive. The two institutions, which have shared space on AWC’s Yuma campus since 1988, paired up to pursue AWC’s “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” of doubling the rate of baccalaureate attainment in Yuma and La Paz counties by 2035.¹³

Undergirding the goal is a growing need among employers and workforce development partners in the two rural counties for workers with bachelor’s degrees. For example, the Yuma Proving Grounds, a military operation near AWC/NAU-Yuma, needs mechanical engineers to work at its military facilities. And Yuma’s agricultural industry needs civil engineers for the region’s growing transportation infrastructure. The college presidents also know that too many people in the region live in poverty and too few have bachelor’s degrees. By working together to increase bachelor’s attainment, the colleges can connect more residents to those good-paying jobs.

Achieving this “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” is a centerpiece of AWC’s strategic plan. And because AWC’s leaders

¹³ <https://www.azwestern.edu/strategic-planning/2025>

decided achieving it would require strong university partnerships, they chose not to offer bachelor's degrees (in contrast to other Arizona community colleges). The goal is core to NAU's strategic agenda, too. One of its priorities is to "set NAU on a path to awarding high-value credentials to over 100,000 people by 2035 and ensure that at least two out of three NAU graduates work and live in Arizona." To do that, NAU needs more community college transfer students to enroll and graduate.

These shared goals have translated into substantial opportunities for students and the region. One example: NAU-Yuma now offers mechanical engineering because the presidents of AWC and NAU jointly lobbied the Arizona legislature for \$5 million to start the program.¹⁴ And while all the funds went to NAU, the AWC president saw it as a victory for all. "If you are keeping score by who got the money, that was wasted time," he said. "If you're keeping score by [if] we have a mechanical engineering program here on campus, then...we won."

Presidents in Virginia expand and elevate a longstanding partnership to meet regional workforce needs

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and **George Mason University** have a long history of transferring thousands of students between them each year. Yet, for years, too many students encountered unnecessary barriers to transferring their credits and finding the right support services to help them reach their goals. As a result, too many students who could have transferred didn't. Beginning in the early 2000s, presidents at both institutions began to recognize the pipeline had untapped potential that could be unlocked with the right investments and improvements. The NOVA and George Mason presidents began to meet more regularly to

understand each other's priorities and challenges. Over multiple presidencies, the two institutions prioritized working together on transfer, leading ultimately to the creation of a program that has become a national model and is profiled throughout this Playbook.

The institutions' regional context gives a clear sense of why transfer rose to be among the top of their presidents' priorities. At both NOVA and George Mason, transfer students' success is closely tied to the institutions' and partnerships' pivotal roles in meeting regional workforce and talent demands. The two schools have large campuses in Fairfax County, Virginia—a densely populated, diverse community just outside Washington, DC. The region is home to many technology, financial, health care, and government-contracting companies that predominantly hire workers with (at least) a bachelor's degree. Local student enrollment reflects this demand. Most of NOVA's 52,000 degree-seeking students (over 70 percent of those who have declared a program of study) are enrolled in transfer-oriented programs. George Mason enrolls over 40,000 students and plans to add 5,000 more by 2030, including transfer students from community colleges.

NOVA and George Mason created ADVANCE to improve bachelor's attainment and increase economic mobility among low- and middle-income individuals and families in their region. ADVANCE is designed to admit thousands of students to both colleges at the same time—often referred to as a dual admissions program—while providing robust student supports and clear academic pathways aligned to high-wage, high-demand jobs. The leaders of NOVA and George Mason structured ADVANCE around four student-centered goals that research shows contribute to students' success: 1) increase the number of students who attain both an associate and a bachelor's degree, 2) decrease students' time to graduation, 3) decrease the cost of a degree (by completing the first

¹⁴ FY2023 Arizona Legislature

60 credits at NOVA's lower tuition rate and preventing students from taking excess credits), and 4) improve advising and supports for transfer students. These goals set a clear North Star designed to take an already longstanding, successful partnership to a new level.

The 2017 event that publicly announced ADVANCE communicated the importance of the re-envisioned partnership. The governor of Virginia joined the presidents of George Mason and NOVA, along with major business leaders. At the time, ADVANCE was merely a concept—not a single pathway or structure had been built. Nonetheless, the presidents announced that students could enroll in the program starting the following year. This made it clear that the presidents expected the idea to become a reality, and quickly. Because everyone understood this was a presidential priority, ADVANCE grew from enrolling 129 students in fall 2018 at NOVA to nearly 5,400 in 2024 at NOVA and George Mason.

ADVANCE's success rates and strong outcomes have made it a national example. Students who transfer to George Mason through ADVANCE take less than two years to complete their bachelor's degree, on average graduating with seven fewer credits and in one-and-a-half fewer semesters than non-ADVANCE students. Furthermore, these outcomes are promoting economic mobility and opportunity, in particular for underserved groups: Nearly 40 percent of ADVANCE students are eligible for Pell Grants, and 60 percent identify as first-generation college students. And ADVANCE shows no signs of slowing down. At the time of this research, the presidents of NOVA and George Mason continued to meet monthly, discussing opportunities to improve student outcomes and further their institutions' partnership to meet their shared mission priorities.

Integrated strategies and relationships among top educational leaders in rural California improve transfer and bachelor's attainment rates for an entire region

In California's rural Imperial Valley, improving economic opportunity and vitality is a shared goal among leaders of three major educational institutions: **Imperial Valley College** (IVC), San Diego State University's local campus, and the county office of K-12 education. Together, they have increased bachelor's degree attainment in the region and, along the way, enhanced the value the community sees in college-going and degree attainment.

The region, which is heavily agricultural and 85 percent Hispanic, has a poverty rate nearly 60 percent higher than the national average.¹⁵ Education and community leaders concluded that improving economic opportunity required increasing the number of residents with bachelor's degrees so more could secure good-paying jobs in public safety, education, and other service fields and the region could attract more good jobs. They decided to work together to increase the college-going aspirations of high school students while also strengthening transfer pathways between **Imperial Valley College** (IVC) and **San Diego State University-Imperial Valley** (SDSU-IV), the only two higher-education institutions in the region.

SDSU-IV was established in 1959 as a satellite campus to broaden college access for Imperial Valley residents who would not or could not travel to pursue their bachelor's degree. At the time, the closest public universities were over 100 miles away. Programs were designed to meet regional workforce needs—teacher training, nursing, administrative justice, and other fields. Yet, the presence of IVC and SDSU-IV alone was not enough to improve


¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2023). Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months. *American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1701*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S1701?q=povetry rate in imperial county&g=010XX00US_040XX00US06_050XX00US06025](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S1701?q=povetry%20rate%20in%20imperial%20county&g=010XX00US_040XX00US06_050XX00US06025).

When presidents prioritize the success of community college transfer students, charge senior-level staff to mobilize their divisions to collaborate, and allocate necessary time, personnel, resources, and visibility to transfer initiatives, they set their partnerships up for success.

the bachelor's attainment rate in the region, which stubbornly hovered around 13 percent for decades after SDSU-IV's creation. Students were confused by uneven academic advising and unclear information about educational paths and credit transfer.

Collaboration has helped change this. The superintendent of the Imperial County Office of Education (ICOE), the president of IVC, and the dean of the SDSU-IV campus now meet at least once a month to discuss opportunities to strengthen the region's education outcomes and ecosystem, including better transfer pathways, processes, and student success rates. The relationships and conversations have led to innovative and robust high school outreach and advising systems that set a strong foundation for improving transfer from IVC to SDSU-IV (described in *Strategies 2* and *3*).

Since establishing a common purpose and coordinating stronger and more regular communication and collaboration among educational leaders, the bachelor's attainment rate for the region has increased to 17 percent.

 **KEY IDEA:** Individual and shared investment, including funding and dedicated staff

The budgetary decisions of college leaders reflected in this research make clear that transfer student success is a priority. Presidents and senior leaders at these exemplars ensure they invest in their institutions and partnerships to support timely implementation and long-term sustainability of their transfer initiatives. These

investments often include funding for staff positions, student financial aid, technology, and facilities.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

By investing in transfer-focused staff, Virginia Commonwealth University sets the stage for major transfer reforms

Institutions can move the needle on major transfer reforms by investing in transfer-focused staff and giving them the authority to make bold moves. At **Virginia Commonwealth University** (VCU), the president created the role of associate vice president for transfer initiatives and programs and elevated an experienced administrator to the position. VCU also hired a new senior associate vice president for student success who had a track record of improving transfer.

Those two transfer leaders, with support from the provost and the vice president for enrollment management, established a Transfer Center at VCU that provides advising for prospective transfer students in community college. They also spearheaded the development of transfer maps that outline four years of coursework between VCU and its community college partners (more on *page 39*). In addition, when VCU decided to invest millions of dollars in professional advising to improve outcomes for new students, transfer leaders made sure the unique needs of transfer students were considered and included in their new processes and systems. (See more about VCU's advising system in *Strategy 3* on *page 39*).

Together, these major investments and reforms have contributed to VCU's strong and improving transfer student outcomes. In 2019-20, VCU's transfer students had a 74 percent four-year graduation rate, up from 69 percent in 2015-16.¹⁶

¹⁶ <https://research.schev.edu/feedback/transfer/TR05.asp>

Co-located Arizona Western College and Northern Arizona University-Yuma campuses ease access to bachelor's degrees and key academic and nonacademic supports for rural students

Northern Arizona University's Yuma campus was established in 1988 to serve the rural southwest Arizona city and surrounding U.S.-Mexico border region. One of its defining features: It is centrally located on **Arizona Western College's** largest campus, providing community college students access to an in-person NAU degree without traveling to the main campus in Flagstaff, 300 miles away.

This access to a bachelor's education is crucial for rural learners seeking to stay in the area. The bachelor's programs offered are tailored to regional workforce needs to ensure the local community has a home-grown, competitive labor force and graduates can thrive. NAU-Yuma offers programs in high-demand fields such as nursing, education, and logistics and supply chain management, as well as programs aligned to the needs of the border region, such as justice studies and social work.

To deliver these programs and a robust set of student services, NAU-Yuma occupies three buildings on AWC's campus—requiring a major investment for both institutions. The dedicated space is structured to ensure students have access to key experiences and services that would be available on the main campus. For example, in addition to classroom space, NAU faculty have office space so students can meet with them outside the classroom. The shared spaces also allow for AWC and NAU faculty to align learning outcomes for transfer students. In the Nursing Skills Labs, AWC Nursing Program students prepare for the work they will do in NAU's Bachelor's of Nursing program. Additionally, beyond the classroom, the shared spaces provide students with easy, in-person access to NAU administrators and



Northern Arizona University–Yuma is centrally located on Arizona Western College's Campus, with several integrated services and supports.

staff who provide a holistic range of student services, from financial aid to academic advising, tutoring, and mental health services. And at the Academic Library, another shared space, librarians support both AWC and NAU-Yuma students, who have access to the same online resources as students at the NAU Flagstaff campus.

The Arizona Board of Regents (the governing board for Arizona's four-year public universities), approved a specialized line item in NAU's operating budget for NAU-Yuma as part of its promise to increase postsecondary access and attainment for Arizona students. In 2006, nearly 20 years after its establishment, the regents approved NAU-Yuma as an official branch campus. That allowed NAU-Yuma to seek and receive designation by the U.S. Department of Education as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, opening the door to additional federal funding to further enhance its programs that serve students in Yuma and the surrounding area.

The longstanding and continued investments in the co-located campuses are essential to student success, especially for place-bound students. While AWC graduates can transfer to any NAU campus, including the flagship in Flagstaff, 65 percent choose to enroll at NAU-Yuma.¹⁷ However, over the course of their 35-plus-year partnership, AWC and NAU leaders recognized

¹⁷ Five-year average (2020-2024)


that proximity alone was insufficient to fully meet the needs of their transfer students, who are predominantly first-generation, lower-income, and Hispanic. In recent years, these leaders have collaborated to create a more seamless transition between their institutions, integrating student services like advising and academic supports, strengthening alignment and clarity in their academic pathways, and coordinating their communication with students. See *page 47* to read more about the Yuma Educational Success program, which provides one example of how these leaders are making these enhancements.

NOVA and George Mason's large-scale investments in the ADVANCE program backed by financial analyses

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and **George Mason University** both invest significant resources in shared ADVANCE staffing, as well as technology and marketing for the program.¹⁸ At the time of this research, ADVANCE had 21 full-time positions, including eight that NOVA and George Mason split the costs for (six academic coaches at NOVA, an associate director of admissions at George Mason, and the executive director of ADVANCE, who reports to leaders at both institutions). These staff support the success of nearly 5,400 students—a number projected to grow.

The investment in adequate staffing levels was made possible because, from the outset, the institutions understood the potential value of the partnership. In the early stages of ADVANCE's design, the two institutions conducted a financial analysis that projected upfront costs for NOVA in the program's first two years would be offset by increased retention and completion of associate degrees (historically, most students transferred before

they completed their associate degree). The analysis also projected that George Mason would begin to see a return on its upfront investment in year four of the program, assuming they increased the transfer class by 5 percent—a target the university has since exceeded. A long-term forecast showed both partners growing their enrollments—and revenue—and enabled institutional leaders to establish buy-in for substantial investments from key stakeholders, including both institutions' boards and faculty.

 **KEY IDEA:** Cabinet-supported teams that advance strategy, implementation, relationship-building, and collaboration

At exemplars studied for this Playbook, leaders established cabinet-supported teams both within and between partner institutions to develop strategies to advance the vision and goals for transfer, implement major transfer initiatives, and ensure the maintenance and continuous improvement of those initiatives. The institutional and partnership teams meet routinely and frequently, and their strong relationships allow them to speak candidly about and address key challenges.

These cross-institutional teams also provide other benefits. First, they ensure clear staff ownership and accountability for implementing transfer reforms while promoting collaboration. Second, team structures distribute responsibility for transfer student success, which helps implementation efforts withstand staff turnover. And their regular meetings create a consistent space for academic and student affairs leaders to work together, fostering a holistic approach to addressing the needs of transfer students across institutions.

¹⁸ The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, HCM Strategists, and Sova. *The Transfer Opportunity Calculator*. 2021. <https://tacklingtransfer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Transfer-Opportunity-Calculator.pdf>.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

At Arizona Western College and Northern Arizona University, senior leaders and their teams collaborate to advance large-scale reforms

For several years, **Arizona Western College** (AWC) and **Northern Arizona University** (NAU) have convened a team of senior leaders and practitioners to advance significant transfer reforms that meet their presidents' major goals while also addressing transfer students' day-to-day needs.

This robust collaboration started soon after a new president took the helm of NAU. His second trip, after meetings in the state capital, was to Yuma and AWC. He and the AWC president spent time together, one-on-one, discussing their shared priorities to connect more local talent to high-wage jobs that require bachelor's degrees. Because both leaders knew they needed staff to see these priorities through, the NAU president brought along his leadership team to meet with the AWC president's leadership team.

The teams—clear-eyed about their mandate—split into working groups to address such challenges as recruitment, program offerings, partnership communications, and more. Their discussions helped them develop bold new initiatives, such as a “universal admissions agreement” in which students who were not immediately accepted to NAU could begin at AWC and expect to transfer without an additional application. They also devised a new partnership structure and communications expectations. For example, the enrollment and advising teams from both institutions continue to meet biweekly, which enables them to quickly resolve challenges and maintain consistent support for students.

Over time, this collaboration has resulted in stronger day-to-day operations and additional investments in the partnership and beyond. For instance, AWC created a dedicated university partnership manager position responsible for supporting students interested in local transfer options, including NAU-Yuma, while NAU added a pre-transfer advisor position. The leadership teams continue their partnership work while also broadening their impact through the NAU-led Arizona Attainment Alliance (A++). The alliance, a collaboration across nine of Arizona's community college districts and the Arizona Commerce Authority, aims to increase the state's college attainment rate. AWC was NAU's founding alliance partner.

NOVA and George Mason sustain success through a shared governance structure for ADVANCE

In designing ADVANCE, **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) and **George Mason University** created an overarching governance structure that has fostered longevity and success with direct lines to both program and top institutional leaders. In the early years of the program, three committees that included members from both institutions met monthly—student engagement, operations, and policy.¹⁹ These committees handled the details of implementing and maintaining ADVANCE and reported to the ADVANCE executive committee, which meets each semester and is managed by the program's executive director. The executive committee provides a direct line to the provosts and other senior leaders at both institutions, who then report back to NOVA and George Mason's presidents. At least once a year, the ADVANCE executive director or members of the executive committee support the presidents in reporting to their respective boards.

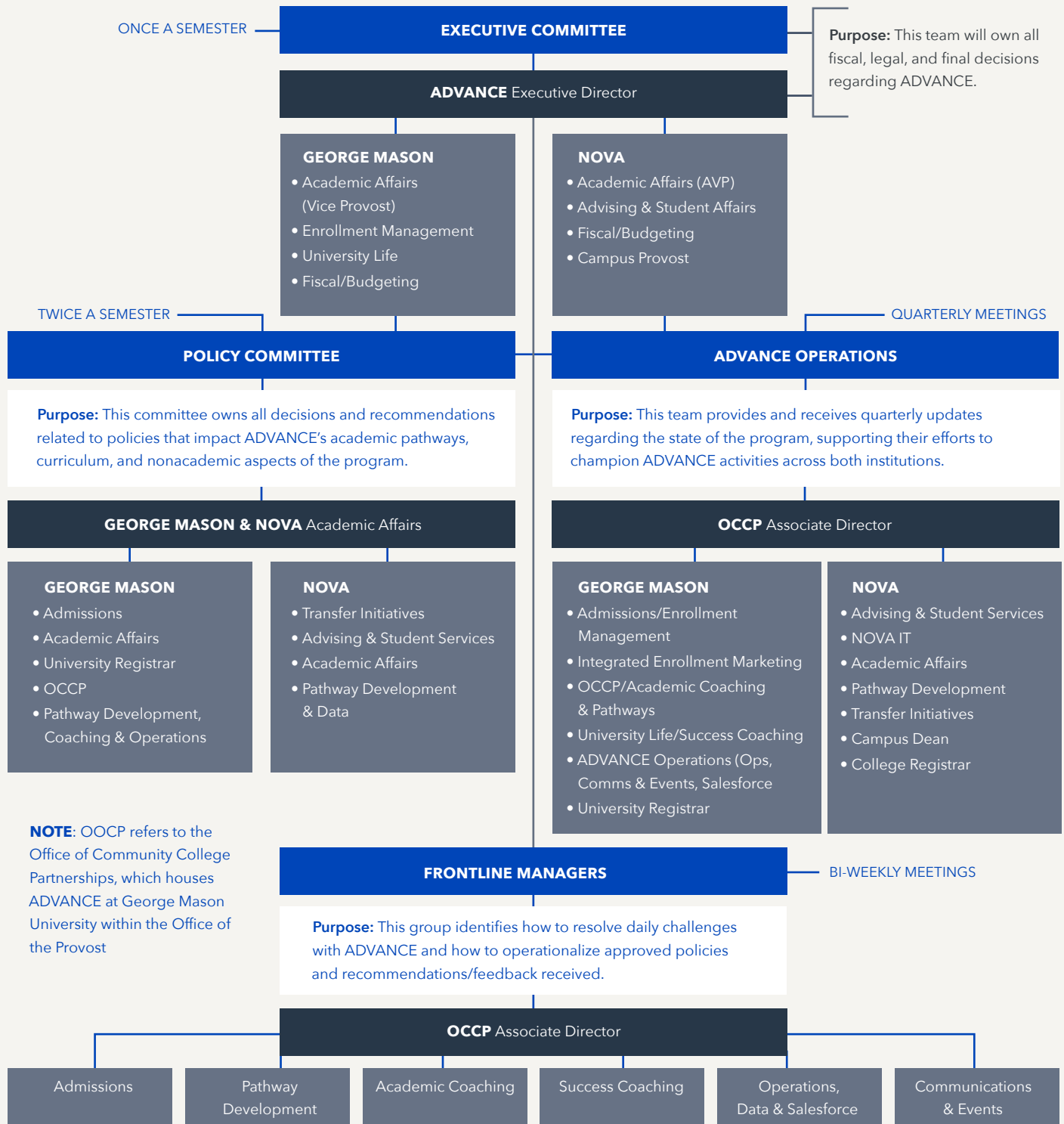
¹⁹ NOVA and George Mason's official name for the committee focused on academic and nonacademic policies that impact ADVANCE students is the curriculum committee. We've renamed it for clarity.

Despite other day-to-day responsibilities, staff carved out the time because, as one [person] put it, “I knew it was a priority of my provost and president.”

The cross-institutional governance structure touched on key components of the student experience, such as building and maintaining ADVANCE pathways, advising, and other key operational details, including data-sharing and processing financial aid for students in co-enrollment courses. Also important: The formal governance structure allowed ADVANCE to become institutionalized, so even when staff or college leaders leave, the program remains. Although George Mason and NOVA experienced turnover at the president, provost, and program-level staff during the program’s first five years, ADVANCE continued to meet its goals and expand.

Over the years, ADVANCE’s governance structure has evolved as the program matured and needs changed (reflected in the figure on the next page that depicts ADVANCE’s governance structure for Fiscal Year 2025). For example, now that policies related to ADVANCE are more established, the Policy Committee has reduced its meeting frequency to five times a year, including in the summer. Leaders at NOVA and George Mason expect the ADVANCE governance structure to endure, ensuring that the activities of the program’s 21 dedicated staff are aligned with the latest developments, including leadership turnover, financial forecasts, changes to technology systems, and lessons from regular program evaluation. As both NOVA and George Mason continue to respond to evolving regional needs, this governance structure will ensure the ADVANCE program can keep pace.

ADVANCE Governance Structure FY25



Essential Practice 2

End-to-end redesign of the transfer student experience

For more community college students to earn a bachelor's degree, institutions need integrated systems that address the range of transfer student needs: guidance selecting a pathway aligned to student goals, advising and supports to help students make timely progress to degrees, systems that ensure credits transfer to degree programs, and financial aid to make degrees more affordable. Often, colleges working to improve transfer find that effective provision of this range of services and supports requires that they move away from piecemeal structures and supports and reimagine a single model that meets students' needs from the time they enter college (or before) to the day they graduate with a bachelor's degree.

KEY IDEAS:

- Transformational transfer models that extend beyond credit articulation
- Strategies tailored to regional needs and demographics
- “Every student could be a transfer student” approaches

Successful institutions and partnerships we studied moved away from a reliance on course articulation agreements as the main tool for helping students transfer and instead adopted comprehensive models that cover the transfer student experience from beginning to end.

These approaches aim to remove confusion and uncertainty by making transfer between two- and four-year institutions seamless and a highly visible or default choice (through guaranteed or dual admissions), promoting an “every student could be a transfer student” mindset. These comprehensive models differ from traditional ones that require students to self-identify as potential transfer students—one of the likely culprits behind disparities in outcomes for historically underserved students. They also sometimes visibly connect transfer pathways to local,

high-wage jobs, so students have more reason to persist along the clearer pathways.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

CUNY Justice Academy employs an “every student could be a transfer student” approach by making transfer the default choice through auto-enrollment

At New York City's **John Jay College of Criminal Justice**, one out of every two undergraduates is a transfer student, and they attain bachelor's degrees at high rates. These strong outcomes can be attributed primarily to the **CUNY Justice Academy (CJA)**, which graduates 68 percent of its students within four-years after transfer (compared to 52 percent nationally). CJA is a guaranteed admissions program that provides wraparound support and cohort experiences that enable participants to graduate into in-demand jobs. CJA began with a single major and one community college partner; today, it boasts nine majors and seven partners.

One of the keys to the program's success is engaging every potential CJA student with a transfer pathway early. As soon as students enroll in a CJA-affiliated major at one of John Jay's partner community colleges, they receive notice they have been automatically enrolled in CJA, which means guaranteed admission to John Jay after completing an associate degree. While students can opt out of CJA, the automatic-enrollment approach ensures that all students in these majors—regardless of their background—understand that attaining a bachelor's degree is a realistic option. The notification outlines clear instructions for how to complete the pathway, including four-year major maps that detail courses needed to complete an associate degree, transfer, and graduate with a bachelor's from John Jay in a timely manner (see more on *page 29*). CJA program leaders train advisors and professors at partner community colleges so they can

answer students' questions about the program and help them develop tailored education plans based on the four-year major maps.

CJA also ensures the transition to John Jay is as convenient and straightforward as possible. From the students' perspective, that means minimal administrative burdens and guesswork about next steps. John Jay's Student Academic Success Programs (SASP) office collaborates with partner community colleges to identify students who are close to completing an associate degree—meaning they have earned at least 55 credits and a 2.0 GPA. Those students are invited to confirm “transition” to John Jay through a short, online form. SASP sends weekly lists of confirmed students to John Jay's admissions and evaluation offices, where evaluating students' credits can take six to eight weeks but is usually done more quickly. Next, students receive an email about scheduling an appointment with a John Jay academic advisor. In this 30-minute session—required before classes start—advisors work to resolve any credit transfer issues and help students enroll in their first-semester classes based on the four-year major maps begun at community colleges. After research showed that students were more likely to meet program requirements and degree milestones when they received advising upon entry to John Jay, the college implemented it across the undergraduate population in fall 2023.

CJA got its start with private and federal grant funding. Once the program proved successful for students, the college sought to make it more permanent with funding from its core budget. Others outside the college are also taking note of CJA's success. The model is beginning to be replicated elsewhere in the CUNY system, such as the BMCC-Baruch Business Academy, a partnership between the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Baruch College.²⁰

East Carolina University's tailored bachelor's program serves working adults seeking career progression

At **East Carolina University** (ECU), a longstanding Bachelor of Science in Industrial Technology (BSIT) transfer program aims to increase bachelor's attainment for working adults looking to progress in their careers. ECU's BSIT program offers important insights for the field because national data show that only 48 percent of community college transfer students over age 25 complete a bachelor's degree four years after transferring (versus 59 percent of all transfer students).²¹ The BSIT program focuses on students with an associate of applied science degree (AAS), often considered a “terminal” degree that makes it hard to transfer credits to a four-year bachelor's program. As a result, AAS graduates can enter the workforce quickly but typically face substantial delays as they pursue bachelor's degrees needed to progress into management positions.

The BSIT program allows students to transfer up to 60 credits from an approved AAS degree, and its concentrations, schedule, and modalities are tailored to the needs of adult students and regional employers. Every year, the university convenes an industry advisory board with regional employers who help ensure that program concentrations align with workforce needs. At the time of this research, the program offered eight concentrations designed to help graduates move into managerial positions (e.g., Distribution and Logistics, Information & Cybersecurity Technology, and Industrial Management). Potential transfer students are encouraged to meet with BSIT advisors, who are trained to ensure that students choose the right program and courses. BSIT's structure is flexible, designed for the 88 percent of the program's students who work. For example, six of the eight concentrations can be completed part-time online, and

²⁰ <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/departments/business-management/bmcc-baruch-business-academy/>

²¹ Velasco, Fink, Bedoya-Guevara, Jenkins, and LaViolet, *Tracking Transfer*.

all eight can be completed in person at ECU. For students who prefer in-person classes but can't make it to ECU's campus, ECU offers some BSIT concentrations at night at Wake Tech Community College and some BSIT courses at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point.

ECU's data show strong outcomes for students over age 25 who transferred with an AAS. The four-year graduation rate for those students is 58 percent—10 percentage points higher than the national average for older transfer students.²² While these data are not limited to BSIT students, the BSIT program is a major contributor to ECU's impressive results. Two-thirds of BSIT graduates are over age 25. Despite the majority of students enrolling part-time to accommodate work schedules, the average time for BSIT students to complete a bachelor's is 2.5 to 3 years from starting the program.

How Arizona Western College engages high school students in dual enrollment to reach bachelor's attainment goals

The two counties in **Arizona Western College's** service area have very different college-going rates: 57 percent of high school students from Yuma County attend college the year after graduating, while only 34 percent of students from La Paz County do so (the average in Arizona is 48 percent). Yet, neither boasts a strong bachelor's attainment rate: Yuma's is 16.4 percent, and

La Paz's is only 12.4 percent, less than half the rate across the state and the nation (both 33 percent). These data points led AWC leaders to conclude that achieving the "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" of doubling bachelor's attainment rates in La Paz and Yuma counties by 2035 would require working across the educational pipeline, from high school through bachelor's completion.²³

One of their bets was on dual enrollment. And it was a good bet: Research in the state demonstrates that high school students who take dual enrollment courses are twice as likely to enroll in college than others, and they have stronger first-year retention rates.²⁴ To make dual enrollment more accessible and appealing, the AWC's District Governing Board in 2017 approved a \$25-per-credit-hour tuition rate for students 18 and younger in dual enrollment courses—compared to \$97 for other AWC students. Since then, AWC has increased dual enrollment by 617 percent.²⁵

Initially, dual enrollment courses were based on high school partner requests. Now, to increase the likelihood that dual enrollment courses directly connect to degree pathways, AWC and its partners at Yuma Union High Schools are moving toward offering eight specific courses—known as the "elite eight"—at all seven feeder high schools. Each of those eight dual enrollment courses connects to either a workforce credential or a pathway to transfer at a four-year partner.

²² The University of North Carolina System Interactive Data Dashboards: https://myinsight.northcarolina.edu/t/Public/views/db_transfer/GraduationPersistenceRates?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y

²³ <https://www.azwestern.edu/strategic-planning/2025>


²⁴ Kimberly Lent Morales, Eric Hedberg, Momoko Rai, Rebecca McKay, and Ian Hickox. *Brief: Dual Enrollment in Arizona Update*. Helios Education Foundation, February 2023. <https://www.helios.org/media/m5oegog2/brief-dual-enrollment-in-az-update-date-february-2023.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.azwestern.edu/news/awc-local-university-branches-experience-enrollment-growth>

Transformational Models Combine Reforms that Redesign the Transfer Student Experience

Examples illustrate reforms that can be advanced by partners or individual institutions

Partnership-Driven Examples of Transformational Models and Their Components		
<p>NOVA & GMU (ADVANCE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Dual admissions > Academic coaches in community college > Major-specific four-year pathways > Limited set of George Mason courses available to NOVA students when community college equivalent is unavailable (co-enrollment) > Access to George Mason resources (e.g., library, social events) while enrolled at NOVA > Holistic success coaches at George Mason complement academic advising > Free tuition for Pell-eligible ADVANCE students 	<p>AWC & NAU-Yuma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Co-location of NAU on AWC's campus > Robust, pathway-connected high school dual enrollment > Wraparound supports that start in high school > AWC-bound students commit to NAU transfer pathway before high school graduation > AWC scholarships incentivize academic and nonacademic behaviors associated with transfer success > Collaborative, four-year advising plan from AWC to NAU 	<p>John Jay & Six CUNY Community Colleges (Justice Academy)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Auto-enrollment in dual admissions for specific majors > Major-specific four-year pathways > Systematic advising across transfer experience, including mandatory appointment before matriculating at John Jay
Institutionally Driven Examples of Transformational Reforms		
<p>East Carolina (BSIT)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Specific bachelor's pathways for AAS completers > Dedicated, trained advisors > Most concentrations can be completed in person or online > On-site delivery at satellite locations with high demand (e.g., local community college, military base) > Employer-informed, career-connected learning 	<p>Tallahassee State College</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Systematic new student onboarding to create tailored education plans by the end of the first year > Major-specific, four-year pathways (developed with partners) with pre-populated plans/schedules > Direct registration from tailored plans 	<p>Imperial Valley College</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Robust, pathway-connected high school dual enrollment > Advisors guide admitted high school students in developing a starter degree plan that reflects transfer and/or career goals > Advising campaign aims for every student to have a tailored degree plan through to graduation/transfer by the end of the student's first year

 **KEY IDEA:** Increase attention to affordability and financial aid

Among students we interviewed for this Playbook, college affordability was often the reason they started postsecondary education at a community college. So, it should come as no surprise that many students intending to transfer worried that higher tuition and fees (and possibly room and board) at a four-year institution would make earning a bachelor's degree unaffordable. Small scholarships from community colleges and transfer destinations helped ease some students' concerns. The university partners in our research were particularly attentive to providing transfer students with robust financial aid and making sure students knew about it.

 **FIELD EXAMPLES:**

Arkansas Transfer Achievement Scholarship addresses key transfer student concern

For students at community colleges in the University of Arkansas System, financial worries about higher costs after they transfer are eased by a scholarship program from the **University of Arkansas Fayetteville** (UAF) that holds tuition at community college levels if students transfer to the state flagship. Students are eligible for automatic admission to UAF and the scholarship if they (1) complete an associate degree, (2) have GPAs above 2.0, (3) transfer immediately after associate completion, and (4) enroll as degree-seeking undergraduates in a face-to-face program (which can include online courses). By maintaining good academic standing and continuous enrollment, transfer students can renew their scholarship for up to 10 terms or completion of a bachelor's degree, whichever comes first.

Mason Virginia Promise Grant removes financial uncertainty for low-income ADVANCE students


About 40 percent of ADVANCE students enrolled at **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) are Pell Grant-eligible. For these students, a financial aid program called the Mason Virginia Promise Grant (MVP) covers all their remaining tuition and fees after other aid has been applied. This grant helps eliminate uncertainty for lower-income ADVANCE students about whether they will be able to afford to transfer to **George Mason University** and complete a bachelor's degree—allowing them to focus more on their studies and less on how to pay for tuition.

With the success of ADVANCE, George Mason has expanded the program to five additional community colleges in Virginia, and low-income students from those colleges are eligible for the MVP grant.

Essential Practice 3

Routinized, transfer student-centered systems and processes

In our research, we observed that many high-performing transfer partners routinize important improvements in the transfer process, such as credit transfer, data sharing, and applications. These routines seemed to (1) increase the chances those practices were maintained at a scale needed to substantially improve student success (even in the face of staff and leadership turnover) and (2) create more consistency by reducing reliance on individual students, staff, or faculty members' knowledge to complete key steps in the transfer process.

 **KEY IDEA:** Automation, technology, and predictable processes to improve student experiences at scale

Transfer can be administratively burdensome for students. In addition to filling out new admissions applications, they can face multiple requests for transcripts for credit evaluation. And at their new institutions, they encounter new systems for choosing a major, registering for courses, and accessing financial aid. Some of the exemplars we studied used information technology to reduce the administrative burden on students and, in some cases, faculty members and advisors. Automated and predictable transfer processes were easier for students to navigate.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How University of North Texas reduces human error and bias in credit evaluation

A well-documented impediment to transfer student success: Too many credits do not transfer or transfer but don't apply to degree programs when students move from

community college to a four-year institution.²⁶ Aware of the delays and financial burdens this causes transfer students, the **University of North Texas** (UNT) aims to maximize credit mobility as part of its broader priority of promoting affordability.

To uphold academic rigor, UNT invests in staff and has established clear processes for determining whether prior coursework adequately prepares students for success. UNT has three full-time staff who, among other responsibilities, coordinate the development of four-year degree maps for every major. Each college and department are responsible for updating the maps in collaboration with their community college counterparts, a process made easier by the Texas Common Course Numbering System, which is mandatory for community colleges and voluntary for universities.

UNT also convenes at least three faculty experts, a program administrator, and a curriculum review committee when credits from a course or applied/technical program, or credits for prior learning are being reviewed for the first time. Together, the group works to reduce the chance of bias or human error while balancing two goals: maximizing credits that will transfer and ensuring the quality of credits UNT accepts.

With nearly 37 percent of its graduates completing 30 or more credits in community college, UNT recognizes that it must make sure its efforts to maximize credit applicability support students at scale.²⁷ Once any credit is articulated, the rules associated with that credit are integrated into the university's degree audit system (e.g., the credit applies to degree requirements for specific programs, it transfers as an elective, etc.). That way, students or advisors with the same question about credit applicability have quick access to the answer.

²⁶ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-574>

²⁷ Texas Public Higher Education Almanac, three-year average (2022-2024)

How NOVA and George Mason's investments in IT and automation benefit students at scale

When **George Mason University** and **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) leaders designed ADVANCE, they projected that several thousand students would enroll. They knew they had to create standardized, repeatable processes, so they invested heavily in

developing data sharing and workflows across both institutions, each of which utilized different student information systems (SIS), customer relationship management (CRM) platforms, and other technology systems. As a result, NOVA students can easily join the ADVANCE program, identify a program of study, gain admission to George Mason, and get access to ADVANCE academic coaches while at NOVA.

The ADVANCE Declaration, Admissions, Pathway Selection, and Matriculation Standard Operating Procedures

Declaration:			Admissions:		
<p>New NOVA students receive emails and other communications inviting them to participate in ADVANCE.</p>	<p>Students submit their declaration to apply for ADVANCE by logging into NOVA's student-facing web portal. The declaration submission integrates with data from the NOVA SIS, drawing on information already shared by students in their initial applications to NOVA. The declaration includes a FERPA²⁸ release, allowing NOVA and George Mason to share data while the students participate in the program.</p>	<p>During the fall and spring admissions cycles, NOVA IT sends daily batches of declarations through a secure file transfer protocol to the George Mason Admissions Tech Team (ATT).</p>	<p>ADVANCE admissions staff review declarations. For each student admitted to ADVANCE, an active, nondegree record is created at George Mason, allowing NOVA students to access George Mason's services and resources, such as the library.</p>	<p>In the rare circumstance a student is denied admission to ADVANCE, they are encouraged to contact George Mason's Office of Transfer Services.²⁹</p>	<p>Students admitted to ADVANCE are automatically assigned an ADVANCE academic coach and receive a pathway selection form.</p>
<p>²⁸ Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act</p>			<p>²⁹ The vast majority of students are admitted to the program. Most who are not have accumulated too many college credits to participate in the program's clear 2+2 course sequences</p>		

The comprehensive ADVANCE process described below required substantial upfront investment of money and staff time. Despite other day-to-day responsibilities, staff carved out the time because, as one IT professional put it, “I knew it was a priority of my provost and president.”

While not every transfer partnership has the scale or resources to implement all of these systems, it is worth considering which of the automated processes the ADVANCE partners implemented can be replicated at other institutions.

The ADVANCE Declaration, Admissions, Pathway Selection, and Matriculation Standard Operating Procedures

Pathway Selection:

Students are encouraged to meet with their academic coach before selecting a pathway.


When students use the pathway selection form to identify their degree of choice at George Mason, the corresponding NOVA degree will auto-populate. Students are directed to the ADVANCE pathway website to review their program of study and its milestones prior to official submission.

When a student submits their pathway, it locks in their catalog year (protecting them from future pathway/course changes).

Matriculation to George Mason

One of the benefits of being in the ADVANCE program is not having to submit a separate application for admission to George Mason. When students approach completion of their associate degree, they fill out a standard NOVA graduation application, which is then forwarded to George Mason’s ADVANCE and admissions staff. This prompts admissions staff to review the application and approve it to be moved to the George Mason Admission Tech Team, which duplicates students’ nondegree applications into degree-seeking applications.

ADVANCE students receive an admissions decision, are recorded as degree-seeking in George Mason’s student information system, and begin progressing through George Mason’s standard new transfer student onboarding process, including receiving their transfer credit evaluation, registration ticket, and invitation to transfer orientation.

 **KEY IDEA:** Actionable, disaggregated data to promote accountability, support case-making, and inform continuous improvement

Colleges studied for this Playbook prioritized collecting and sharing data on transfer students disaggregated by key demographic factors such as income, working status, and race/ethnicity. This helped administrators, faculty, and staff make informed decisions about how to improve pathways and support for transfer students.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Durham Tech uses process-level data to identify opportunities to improve engagement with the Transfer Center

At **Durham Tech's** Transfer Center, prospective transfer students have access to dedicated advisors, workshops, and other resources to navigate their university applications, financial aid, and degree planning. Durham Tech works to consistently improve those services for all student groups.

One example: The leader of the college's Transfer Center disaggregates the center's utilization rates by student demographics and includes that analysis in an annual report the college uses to make improvements. For instance, a recent report noted that Hispanic students were making good use of the Transfer Center, but Black students were not. In response, Transfer Center staff reached out to Black student affinity groups to promote the center's services and alerted advisors so they could increase referrals to the center. These and other efforts had an impact at Durham Tech, where the percentage of Black students visiting the Transfer Center went up 5 percentage points in two years, from 26 to 31 percent.

University of North Texas data dashboards use leads to greater understanding and support for transfer students with financial need

The **University of North Texas** (UNT) consistently collects and reports disaggregated data on transfer student outcomes through its Insights Program. The university-wide initiative, launched in 2015 by UNT's then-president, tracks metrics on enrollment, financial aid, grading patterns, retention, graduation, and student engagement. The program can disaggregate all metrics by transfer status, allowing UNT to make strategic decisions to improve transfer students' outcomes when gaps are identified.

Use of the Insights Program dashboards—accessible to all faculty and staff—has resulted in concrete improvements for transfer students. For example, UNT leaders used the dashboards to determine that (1) financial need was contributing to community college transfer student attrition and (2) transfer students were more likely to work longer hours and take fewer credits than other students. So, UNT leaders invested in additional financial aid for transfer students, including extending scholarship eligibility from two semesters to four.

Insights Program leaders conduct regular training across departments, resulting in increased data literacy and more widespread data use in transfer and other strategic focus areas.

Data-driven strategies like these enabled UNT to increase its four-year community college transfer student graduation rate from 57 percent in 2014 to 65 percent in 2023.³⁰

³⁰ Analysis of Texas Public Higher Education Almanac Data (2015-2024) <https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/agency-publication/almanac/>

NOVA and George Mason use student feedback to improve ADVANCE

While quantitative data can help colleges understand transfer student successes and challenges, qualitative data are usually needed to shed light on student experiences and what institutional practices may be contributing to or hindering students' success. However, even exemplary institutions were less likely to use qualitative data to understand student perspectives than they were to use quantitative data on transfer outcomes. For the few that gathered information systematically, qualitative student experience data informed strategic investments or cuts to less effective programming.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and **George Mason University** regularly survey ADVANCE students and use that information to improve support services and transfer pathways. Among other things, survey results help program leaders track the use of services. One year's survey showed that while over 90 percent of ADVANCE students responding to the survey engaged with their academic coach and accessed curricular pathways, far fewer knew about other services, such as George Mason's free shuttle bus. So, ADVANCE added a coordinator of events and communications to increase student awareness and use of valuable tools and services. ■

Strategy 2: Align Program Pathways and High-Quality Instruction to Promote Timely Bachelor's Completion within a Major



Summary: This strategy is characterized by three essential practices, each featuring several key ideas:

Four-year sequences that promote learning and major progression

KEY IDEAS:

- > Create and maintain clear, term-by-term, four-year maps within each major that set expectations for timely completion and are adjustable for part-time students
- > Frontload courses that inspire early major exploration, commitment, or changes
- > Expect at least one major-specific course each term in community college
- > Embed college-level, program-specific math and English in the first year

Systematized translation of maps into tailored education plans

KEY IDEAS:

- > Set systems to ensure plan development within the first term
- > Create customized plans that support timely completion while accounting for students' work and family responsibilities
- > Embed maps and plans into student information and degree audit systems
- > Adjust course schedules and modalities to enable students to complete plans

Strengthened instruction, academic support, and curricular alignment

KEY IDEAS:

- > Create space and routines for faculty to build cross-sector relationships, develop and maintain pathways, and align and strengthen curriculum and instruction
- > Include content on transfer students' needs in faculty professional development
- > Support success in gateway courses, writing, and STEM through enhanced instruction and robust academic services at the community college and university levels

For transfer students to succeed, they need clear, high-quality academic pathways from community college entry through bachelor's completion. College exemplars studied for this Playbook achieve this in three ways: First, they work to ensure that each pathway includes strong academic preparation and is designed for timely transfer and bachelor's completion. Second, they create schedules that suit students' individual needs and life circumstances. Finally, they consistently encourage faculty to foster a culture that supports transfer student success both in and outside coursework.

Essential Practice 1

Four-year sequences that promote learning and major progression

The strongest partnerships develop and maintain clear, program-specific, and structured transfer pathways to support timely degree progress within a major. Ultimately, these pathways address what students care about most—achieving their career goals and affording the cost of college. Clear pathways also ensure that any community college student can see whether they are on track to a bachelor's degree. For college leaders, faculty, and staff the ultimate standard for transfer pathways includes academically rigorous course sequences that can be realistically completed in four years.

KEY IDEA: Create and maintain clear, term-by-term, four-year maps within each major that set expectations for timely completion and are adjustable for part-time students

The concept of a four-year map is simple: the sequence of courses (or options) a community college student needs to take to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree at a specific university in a specific major within four years of full-time study or an equivalent number of credits (most often 120).

Hundreds of community colleges have developed program maps as part of guided pathways reforms—an effort to clarify, simplify, and strengthen programmatic pathways, academic advising, and other supports to improve student outcomes.³¹ A smaller number of four-year institutions have followed suit. Most often, community college maps cover one or two years of coursework, reflecting what students should take to complete a certificate or associate degree. In contrast, the colleges in our research created well-thought-out, four-year maps that are pressure tested and maintained by faculty and can be readily customized for individual students.

In addition to helping community college students, the four-year maps provide a clear benchmark for success during faculty-to-faculty collaboration to develop or refine transfer pathways (discussed in *Essential Practice 3* in this section). Maps that cover all four years to a bachelor's degree make it easier for faculty and staff to identify when students are taking excess credits or misaligned courses.

While the standard four-year map assumes two years at a community college and two years at a four-year institution, some look different. Alternatives such as 1+3 (one year at a community college and three years at a four-year institution) and 3 +1 programs can be considered when issues such as the availability of

³¹ <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research/guided-pathways.html>

“They literally give you a sheet of paper with the classes you need to take so you can transfer and get that bachelor’s degree. It just makes it so simple and stress free.”

— Transfer Student

equipment, faculty, and courses at one institution in a partnership pose barriers to the typical 2+2 model.

Ultimately, four-year maps provide students clarity, consistency, and reassurance that courses will transfer and apply toward a degree without excess credits. If they are carefully constructed, embedded into technology systems, regularly updated, and used by both students and advisors, four-year maps should save students time and money.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Our research discovered several examples of strong four-year maps, including at the **University of North Texas** (UNT), **Virginia Commonwealth University** (VCU), and the ADVANCE program at **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) and **George Mason University**. Each map had its own unique features. For example, ADVANCE provides a list of NOVA and George Mason courses that students can arrange to fit their schedules, while UNT presents specific courses, term by term. At VCU, major maps include not just course recommendations but also steps students should take to explore careers. While the development of many of the four-year maps featured in this research was led by four-year institutions— independently or in partnership with community colleges—we also found examples of community colleges leading the mapping process. However, without collaboration with four-year faculty, those maps often

incorporated fewer major-specific courses, which could lead to challenges once students transfer.

The example highlighted below is based on the four-year degree plans from **CUNY Justice Academy** and **John Jay College of Criminal Justice**, which incorporate the key components of strong maps identified in the following section.

KEY IDEAS:

- Frontload courses that inspire early major exploration, commitment, or changes
- Expect at least one major-specific course each term in community college
- Embed college-level, program-specific math and English in the first year

The quality of four-year maps ultimately depends on the strength of the academic programs they portray. So, to develop quality four-year maps, many colleges need to strengthen transfer programs. At the community college level, many transfer-oriented associate degree programs overemphasize general education requirements. While this can help students accumulate credits that can be applied to different majors, it often creates barriers for students by delaying their choice of major and failing to engage them in major-specific content. Conversely, at the university level, many transfer pathways reflect an expectation that associate degree graduates will complete upper-division degree requirements at a faster pace than those who would have started as first-year students or, for the reasons described below, take longer to graduate.

The exemplars in our research went beyond designing degrees and pathways that transferred or satisfied general education requirements. They created programmatic pathways, starting in community college, that ensure credit applicability and timely progression within a major.

The example highlighted below is based on the four-year degree plans from CUNY Justice Academy and John Jay College of Criminal Justice that incorporate the key components of strong maps identified in the following section.

A clear, term-by-term, major-specific four-year map. The use of summer and winter terms provides flexibility for part-time students.

CS/CSIS FOUR-YEAR ACADEMIC PLAN

Student Name: _____ Student ID: _____ Major: Computer Science AS/Computer

YEAR 1 AT CUNY COMMUNITY COLLEGE									
Summer		Semester 1				Semester 2			
		M MATH 101 (Pre-Calculus)*	4	M MATH 201 (Analytical Geometry & Calc 1)	3				
		G ENGL 101 (English Composition)	3	G ENGL 201 (Intro to Literature)	3				
Frontloaded courses that inspire early major exploration, commitment, or changes.		G CSC 101 (Principles in Info Tech & Comp)	3	M CSC 11 (Intro to Programming)	3				
		G Flexible Common Core**	3	G SPE 100 (Fundamentals of Speech)	3				
		G Flexible Common Core**	3						
		Total Hours	16	Total Hours	16				
YEAR 2 AT CUNY COMMUNITY COLLEGE									
		Semester 1				Semester 2			
		M MATH 302 (Analytical Geometry & Calc II)	4	M CSC 215 (Fundamentals of Computer S	3				
		G PHY 215 (University Statistics I)	4	M CSC 331 (Data Structures)	3				
		M CSC 211 (Adv. Programming & Techniques)	3	M CSC 350 (Software Development)	3				
		M CSC 231 (Discrete Structures & Applications to Computer Science)	4	G Flexible Common Core**	3				
				G General Elective***	3				
		Total Hours	15	Total Hours	15	Total Hours		Total Hours	

Include relevant, college-level English and math courses in the first year

At least one major-specific (e.g., computer science) course each term in community college.

G GenEd
M Major

Comments:
* MATH 101 may be waived depending on mathematical placement.
** Students are advised to consult with an advisor on course selection.
*** Students are advised to take STEM variant in the Common Core.



CS/CSIS FOUR-YEAR ACADEMIC PLAN

Student Name: _____ Student ID: _____ Major: Computer Science AS/Computer Science & Information Security BS

YEAR 3 AT JOHN JAY COLLEGE											
Summer		Semester 1				Semester 2				Winter	
		M MATH 301 (Prob. & Math. Statistics I)	3	M CSCI 360 (Cryptography & Cryptanalysis)	3						
		M CSCI 375 (Operating Systems)	3	M CSCI 374 (Programming Languages)	3						
		M CSCI 377 (Computer Algorithms)	3	M CSCI 379 (Computer Networking)	3						
		G 300-Level Justice Gen. Education	3	M PHI 216 (Ethics & Information Technology)	3						
		G Elective or Learning from Past/Comms*	3	E Elective	3						
		Total Hours	15	Total Hours	15	Total Hours		Total Hours			
YEAR 4 AT JOHN JAY COLLEGE											
Summer		Semester 1				Semester 2				Winter	
		M CSCI 400 (Capstone I)	3	M CSCI Elective	3						
		M CSCI 411 (Computer Security & Forensics)	3	M CSCI 401 (Capstone II)	3						
		E Elective	3	M CSCI 411 (Network Security & Forensics)	3						
		E Elective	3	E Elective	3						
		E Elective	3	E Elective	3						
		Total Hours	15	Total Hours	15	Total Hours		Total Hours			

G GenEd
M Major
E Elective

Comments:
* If not taken at BMCC
This plan assumes that students are transferring to John Jay College with 60 credits.
Students are required to earn 120 credits in order to graduate with the BS degree.



Because four-year maps set an explicit benchmark for pathway design, they make it easier for faculty and staff to identify when there are excess credits and course misalignments. Their development and existence provide a clear starting point for faculty-to-faculty collaboration.

These course sequences have three features:

First, the exemplars include major-specific courses (e.g., a biology course for prospective biology majors) in the first term. This enables students to either commit to their program with greater confidence and enthusiasm or change direction while there is still time to make early progress on a different pathway. Switching majors early avoids adding time to a degree or excess credits, as one or two major-specific courses can usually be converted into electives or satisfy general education requirements for a different major. Prior research demonstrated that STEM transfer students who take a STEM course in their first term are more likely to persist on a STEM transfer path.³²

Second, exemplars ensured that most students in a 2+2 pathway were taking classes that prepared them to transfer with junior-level status within a major at a pace comparable to students who began at the four-year institution. This means community college students take the same major-specific courses (or preapproved equivalents) as students who start at the four-year institution (i.e., approximately one major-specific course each term for a full-time student). This approach is distinct

from defining junior status simply by the number of credits earned. Students benefit from this approach in two ways: They gain broader exposure to their chosen discipline before transferring, and they are better prepared to complete their upper-division major requirements and electives in a timely manner after transferring.

Delaying major-specific courses poses several risks. Students can become overburdened with too many high-degree-of-difficulty major requirements after transferring, which could lead to burnout and lower completion rates. Alternatively, both scheduling constraints (i.e., a course is available only once each academic year) and the need to space out highly challenging major requirements can result in transfer students paying more tuition and increasing the time needed to complete their degrees. Students can also experience delayed or denied admission to their major if they can't take enough prerequisites, especially to competitive (and often remunerative) majors. Each of these consequences would disproportionately harm lower-income students, who may not be able to afford to delay graduation and may run out of financial aid eligibility.

For programs in which students can't maximize major-specific courses at the community college, transfer partners should consider transitioning pathways to 1+3 or other alternative formats to ensure students can transfer and progress to a bachelor's with few, if any, excess credits. Another option is to establish co-enrollment—where prospective transfer students continue to take most courses at community college while taking one or more individual major-specific courses at the university that are otherwise unavailable.

Finally, exemplary transfer maps often include specific college-level math and English courses in the first year, differentiated by a student's program of study (e.g., calculus for engineering majors, statistics for psychology

³² Xueli Wang. (2016). Course-taking patterns of community college students beginning in STEM: Using data mining techniques to reveal viable STEM transfer pathways. *Research in Higher Education*, 57, 544-569.

An Opportunity for State or System Policy

We compared the strong maps and pathways at the Playbook exemplar institutions with those from other institutions, systems, and states. We found that, unlike at the colleges featured in this section, the issue of students taking insufficient major-specific courses in community colleges is widespread. Even institutions in states and systems with mandated transfer pathways have maps that recommend transfer students take only two major-specific courses for many majors, especially in STEM disciplines (i.e., an introductory course and perhaps the second in a first-year sequence). This reveals a flaw—and opportunity—in

state and system-level policies on transfer pathways. Our finding is consistent with other research on statewide transfer pathways, which have been shown to strengthen transfer rates but have limited impact on bachelor's completion, credit accumulation, and time to degree.^{35,36}

³⁵ Baker, Rachel, Elizabeth Friedmann, and Michal Kurlaender. *Improving the Community College Transfer Pathway to the Baccalaureate: The Effect of California's Associate Degree for Transfer*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2023. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.22462>

³⁶ Angela Boatman and Adela Soliz. 2017. "Statewide transfer policies and community college student success." *Education Finance and Policy* 13 (4): 449-83. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00233.

majors). This is consistent with studies that demonstrate students—especially historically underserved students—are much more likely to be transfer-ready, transfer, and earn bachelor's degrees after completing these specific courses in their first year.^{33,34} Unfortunately, many students do not take these courses early. One common barrier is long, non-credit developmental education sequences. *Essential Practice 3* in this section addresses how community college exemplars studied for this Playbook moved away from prerequisite developmental education sequences to support early college-level math and English completion.

Taken together, these features—all designed to support timely bachelor's degree completion within a major—substantially improve pathways for community college students seeking a bachelor's degree. Later in this section, we describe how community colleges and universities collaborated to develop these high-caliber programmatic pathways.

³³ Yuxin Lin, Maggie P. Fay, and John Fink. 2020., *Stratified Trajectories: Charting Equity Gaps in Program Pathways Among Community College Students*

³⁴ [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf)

Essential Practice 2

Systematized translation of maps into tailored education plans

Four-year maps can be important tools for transfer students and advisors. However, the full benefit of maps is realized only when a student works with an advisor to translate a map into an editable, digitized education plan tailored to their circumstances. Such plans can be powerful tools, especially for the two-thirds of community college students who do not enroll full-time. Creating tailored educational plans with advisors helps those students understand how to maximize progress toward their associate and bachelor's degrees in ways that take into consideration their time constraints.

KEY IDEAS:

- Set systems to ensure plan development within the first term
- Create customized plans that support timely completion while balancing students' work and family responsibilities
- Embed maps and plans into student information and degree audit systems

The exemplars in our research were especially attentive to developing systems that enable program maps to be translated into tailored plans for students at scale. Their systems included three standout features:

First, processes were established with the goal of ensuring that students and advisors work together to create a plan by the end of the first term in community college, and no later than the end of the first year. Second, processes and policies supported the timely completion of plans while accounting for students' work and family responsibilities. Research shows that credit momentum boosts transfer and bachelor's attainment rates, especially among historically underserved groups.³⁷ Third, systems were moved from paper-based methods—which are

prone to human error and rely heavily on individual knowledge—to easily accessible online maps that are coded into student information and degree audit systems.

Together, these features help students create accurate plans that meet their needs and build momentum toward their degrees.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How Tallahassee State College streamlines and improves the transfer process by integrating maps, advising, individualized plans, and registration

Tallahassee State College (TSC) doesn't leave the use of its transfer maps with top transfer partners to chance. TSC uses technology to integrate its transfer maps into registration, advising, and degree planning. Accomplishing this required that TSC embed its defined transfer pathways with Florida State University and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University into its student information system, which feeds directly into TSC's advising and registration processes.

As a result, students' first-semester schedules are auto-populated, based on the community college credential, program of study, and university destination they select when they apply and engage in advisor-guided onboarding. For example, most associate of arts students register for gateway English, math, and the introductory course for their program of study.³⁸ Then, during their first year, students work with advisors to use defined maps to tailor a two-year education plan based on their major choice and transfer destination. Once a plan is generated in the TSC advising platform, students can register directly from it.

³⁸ Gateway courses are introductory-level, credit-bearing courses students must pass to progress in their majors

³⁷ Lin, Fay, and Fink, *Stratified Trajectories*.

Education plans can be changed based on student needs (with guidance from advisors). Advisors use the digitized plans to help students stay on track to degree milestones outlined in the maps and to discuss the impact and tradeoffs of different scenarios when students are considering a change. For example, an advisor could point out the consequences of delaying a major requirement course that is offered only once a year and is part of a highly sequenced program of study.

With 90 percent of students having tailored education plans, TSC expects their already strong transfer student outcomes to improve even further.³⁹

How Imperial Valley College uses advising and data reporting to support strong plan completion in the first year


At **Imperial Valley College** (IVC), advisors work closely with local high school students to create degree plans (called abbreviated plans) for their first term in college. This allows IVC’s prospective students to know exactly which courses they’ll take when they start at IVC (read more on *page 47*). Once the IVC classes begin, advisors help students create a tailored educational plan (called a comprehensive plan) that outlines two years of coursework within a major that is aligned with a specific transfer destination. Advisors use statewide course equivalency tools to increase the likelihood that credits will transfer to the student’s intended destination.

To allow as many students as possible to meet with an advisor, the IVC advising office stays open until 7 pm. Prominent signs around campus encourage students: “Complete your comprehensive plan to save money by graduating and transferring on time!” IVC also uses small

incentives, such as a branded tumbler, to encourage students to complete their plans.

An institutional dashboard tracks whether students have created abbreviated plans or a comprehensive plan, and it is widely used at the college. Faculty and staff can see the aggregate number who have completed plans by term and major. Advisors can see whether individual students have completed a plan (and which type of plan), which helps them prioritize outreach. The dean who oversees advising monitors plan completion rates by advisor weekly and meets with advisors who have low plan completion rates. Their conversations focus on problem-solving: understanding how other duties may influence the numbers and identifying ways to free up the advisor to help more students complete plans, such as release time from counseling duties.

The dashboard also allows IVC to stay on track to its strategic goals. IVC aims for all students to have a tailored education plan by the end of their first year and works to maximize the number who have one by the end of their first semester. At the time of our research visit in 2024, 90 percent of IVC students had an abbreviated education plan, and 70 percent had a comprehensive education plan by the end of their first year. This is particularly noteworthy given that 85 percent of IVC students are the first in their families to go to college.

 **KEY IDEA:** Adjust course schedules and modalities to enable students to complete plans

The exemplars in this Playbook ensure students can access courses recommended in their transfer maps by aligning how and when courses are offered to students’ availability and needs. Colleges made key courses available evenings and weekends and in online, in-person, and hybrid modalities—changes that help students who attend part-time, work, and/or care for their family. They also offered

³⁹ Sotherland, N., Stange, K., and Matsudaira, J. (2023, November 9). New measures of postsecondary education transfer performance: Transfer-out rates for community colleges, transfer student graduation rates at four-year colleges, and the institutional dyads contributing to student success. U.S. Department of Education Blog.

key courses during summer and winter terms, which helps students accumulate sufficient program-relevant credits throughout the entire academic year, rather than overwhelm them in any single term or make them wait to take a required course. In each case, these approaches were designed to facilitate timely degree completion while accounting for students' lives beyond the classroom.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How Northwest Vista College uses shorter terms and courses throughout the year to spur momentum for part-time students

Accelerating and maintaining student momentum and minimizing time to degree are central goals at **Northwest Vista College** (NVC), part of the Alamo Colleges District. College leaders knew that encouraging students to take more courses would help them earn an associate degree faster and increase their likelihood of graduating. But they also understood that not all students can attend full-time due to work and other obligations. To help part-time students build momentum, the community college offers multiple ways to accumulate credits beyond the traditional 15-week courses, including eight-week courses, flexible summer terms (five, eight, and 10 weeks), and three-week May and December courses. By offering flexible options, NVC hopes part-time students can add a few extra credits here and there and finish their associate degrees within three years.

The college launched a “Time to Degree” campaign with the tagline “Every course counts!” to help students understand how long it will take to finish an associate degree based on the number of courses they take each semester—two years if they take five three-hour courses each semester, five years if they take two courses a semester, and 10 years if they take one course a semester.

NVC also leverages district-wide tools and policies to advance its time-to-degree goals. For example, the district's university- and major-specific “Transfer Advising Guides” (their term for program maps) embed summer terms, which help prospective transfer students see how summer courses can help them graduate and transfer in a timely manner. In addition, NVC promotes the district's “Summer Momentum Plan” scholarship, which offers up to nine free credit hours for summer classes.⁴⁰

How San Diego State University-Imperial Valley's course schedules allow working students to complete their degrees efficiently.


At **San Diego State University-Imperial Valley** (SDSU-IV), course schedules have been tailored to working adults since the campus' inception. The university offers courses in the evenings as well as during the day. Many are in a compressed format, with students taking all their classes two days a week in back-to-back blocks (e.g., two three-hour classes separated by a 30-minute break). This allows students to dedicate full days to their coursework while having other days free for work or family obligations.

Furthermore, department chairs at SDSU-IV collaborate with the transfer coordinator at **Imperial Valley College** (IVC) to develop transfer pathways and strengthen course scheduling. The pathways' clear course sequences help the SDSU-IV department chairs understand which courses students need and in what order. The result: stronger and more predictable course enrollment for the university. More students are following the same pathway, creating a de facto cohort model, given SDSU-IV's small size. This helps prevent the university from unexpectedly closing class sections due to low enrollment, including in smaller programs.

⁴⁰ <https://www.alamo.edu/admission-aid/paying-for-college/tuition-and-fees/summer-momentum-plan/>

Essential Practice 3**Strengthened instruction, academic support, and curricular alignment**

Institutions and their faculty must ensure transfer students have strong academic experiences, so they learn the information and concepts and develop the skills needed to succeed in their upper-division coursework and after graduation. At the exemplars we studied, this meant transfer pathways reflected not only aligned course sequences but also aligned curriculum and instruction as well as academic supports. Achieving all these goals necessitated robust faculty involvement at both the community college and university levels.

 **KEY IDEA:** Create space and routines for faculty to build cross-sector relationships, develop and maintain pathways, and align and strengthen curriculum and instruction

Playbook exemplars engaged faculty in four distinct ways:

1. College leaders communicated the importance of maintaining academic rigor while designing strong pathways that meet the practical needs of transfer students.
2. Leaders frequently shared data with faculty, helping them understand transfer students' goals, experiences, and challenges—and the consequences of lost time and credits.
3. In addition to asking faculty to assess whether courses are equivalent, leaders created space for faculty members to discuss how to align teaching and learning.
4. Leaders at exemplary institutions created structures to ensure that faculty engagement would continue beyond the initial program pathway alignment so improvements would be sustained over time.

Strong faculty engagement at exemplar colleges helped everyone understand where community college students needed more preparation to meet university-level

expectations—and where university faculty members' impressions of community college courses and students were inaccurate. Typically, when partners started the work of aligning curriculum and teaching practices at scale, most programs determined they needed to make modest-to-moderate changes in curriculum, course recommendations, and/or instructional approaches. Only a few programs required significant overhauls.

At the Playbook exemplars, faculty-to-faculty collaboration had been happening in pockets for years before exemplary systems were developed across programs at both colleges. When all faculty engage in this type of cross-sector collaboration, the benefits spread from a limited number of students enrolled in certain pathways to most transfer students at both colleges. Presidents and provosts of partner institutions can ensure this happens by setting the expectation of widespread faculty engagement in curricular and instructional alignment and then creating the time and space for it to occur. When exemplary institutions make these efforts routinely and collegewide, the outcome is a faculty culture that widely and visibly supports transfer student success.

 **FIELD EXAMPLES:**

ADVANCE's yearly Academic Summits help faculty build relationships and align curriculum and instruction

The annual Academic Summit is a hallmark of the ADVANCE partnership between **Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)** and **George Mason University** and a main reason the program has been able to move so many students to bachelor's degrees in four years or less. The annual full-day meeting is structured to enable faculty to deeply evaluate and discuss curricular and instructional alignment and identify changes that will benefit students.

To start the summit, senior leaders from NOVA and George Mason (e.g., the provosts or presidents) give welcome remarks, signaling that ADVANCE is a priority. Program leaders then restate ADVANCE's goals—to increase the number of bachelor's degree graduates who started at NOVA, to reduce time and cost, and to improve transfer student advising and support—and present data about ADVANCE student outcomes and summaries of student feedback. The morning concludes with faculty, students, and/or outside experts making the case for faculty members' continued support and engagement in ADVANCE.

Next, breakout sessions focus on building pathways and aligning curriculum. Faculty members sit by discipline, with each table typically including two or three from George Mason and three or four from NOVA (the exact number depends on the discipline). For two or three hours, they discuss the details of their courses and major requirements with the goal of ensuring that programmatic pathways don't require students to repeat or take excess courses because their community college credits aren't accepted or don't apply to their majors. Information and tools are provided, including current program maps and a program review checklist. Each table also has a facilitator to keep conversations focused on curricular and instructional alignment.

After the summit, dedicated personnel from both institutions amend maps based on the faculty's conclusions. If additional collaboration is needed to finalize a pathway, ADVANCE staff will coordinate more touchpoints for faculty over the next several months. In the rare occurrence that faculty cannot agree on a pathway that meets ADVANCE's standards for timely transfer and bachelor's completion, the pathway is not published on ADVANCE's site. This does not often happen, because all involved recognize the benefits of the pathways to both departments and students. Faculty also understand

that a pathway's omission from the ADVANCE site is a disadvantage for their programs and courses, because a lack of student awareness could impact enrollments.

When programs were first developing program maps, the summits encouraged faculty members from NOVA and George Mason to get to know each other, build trust, and remove any misconceptions about the rigor or quality of education at the community college level.

Now that the pathways and relationships are more established, faculty focus on pathway maintenance as well as more complex issues like improving student engagement in faculty research. Some disciplines have even arranged additional convenings, such as the annual STEM Transfer Symposium.

One of the principal benefits of the summits is they help align instruction as well as curriculum to give transfer students the knowledge they need to succeed in upper-division courses at the university. Some examples: NOVA chemistry faculty adjusted lab assignments to match expectations at George Mason, and George Mason computer science faculty added a lesson so transfer students could avoid retaking a course to learn details of a programming language taught there but not at NOVA.

Program review at College of Southern Maryland institutionalizes transfer as a faculty priority

Cross-sector faculty collaboration is important, but so are internal practices that focus a college's faculty on transfer student success. One key practice is program review. At the **College of Southern Maryland** (CSM), the systematic review of transfer-oriented programs promotes widespread curricular and instructional alignment with transfer partners.

CSM's formal program reviews occur on a five-year cycle, with an annual progress check-in. The formal process takes about 10 months and has three components:

- **Self-study:** Departmental faculty and leaders analyze five years of program data, including transfer student outcomes disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income (Pell Grant status) and qualitative student survey data. The self-study must be approved by the Academic Learning and Assessment Committee before proceeding to the next step.
- **External review:** An external reviewer—in the case of transfer programs, often a representative from a four-year university—evaluates the self-study, conducts a comprehensive site visit, and provides feedback.
- **Five-year action plan:** Faculty members use the self-study and external reviewer's report to draft a five-year improvement plan. After review by the department chair and dean, the action plan is submitted to the assessment office. The plan is then reviewed annually as part of the assessment cycle and reporting process for all programs and courses.

For transfer-oriented programs like the Associate of Arts, faculty reviewers must meet with the CSM transfer coordinator to answer the following questions:

- What is the transfer rate of the program for each transfer institution?
- Does the program meet the needs of the transfer institution(s)? Explain.
- Have the articulation agreements been analyzed for accuracy? Explain.
- Have new articulation agreement opportunities been identified? Explain.

The process has resulted in new or stronger program pathways that benefit students. For example, a review of a

communications program revealed transfer students were missing a needed theory course but taking a capstone course that didn't count toward their major. The capstone course was popular among CSM faculty members, but faculty agreed to replace it with the theory course to avoid delaying students' completion of a bachelor's degree. One key reason why: The faculty members understood that delays would disproportionately and negatively impact students from lower-income backgrounds.

Virginia Commonwealth University deploys data to engage faculty in improving transfer student outcomes

The president and provost of **Virginia Commonwealth University** (VCU) tout its "culture of evidence" and how it has helped improve transfer students' success. VCU uses dashboards to analyze student outcomes at individual colleges/schools/departments for both first-time and transfer students by race/ethnicity and Pell Grant eligibility. Institutional and departmental leaders can access the dashboards and monitor the reports.

These dashboards are used to strengthen curricular alignment. For example, the university tracks the percentage of students who receive a D or F in, or withdraw from, foundational courses for transfer students, disaggregated by community college. When faculty members observe dips in transfer student outcomes, they can discuss curricular alignment with community college partners.

To encourage regular use of the dashboards, the provost makes them part of evaluation discussions with deans. In addition, academic leaders receive a weekly report with data and recommended action from the vice president of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success. For instance, the VP recommended a calling campaign to increase retention of transfer students when numbers declined.

 **KEY IDEA:** Include content on transfer students' needs in faculty professional development

Community college and four-year exemplars in our research intentionally cultivated faculty support for transfer students. Some embedded discussion of transfer students' needs in new faculty onboarding or ongoing professional development, while others created venues where faculty could learn about transfer students and how best to foster their success, especially in the classroom.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Robust faculty professional development at Northwest Vista College results in teaching that supports university-level success

Northwest Vista College's longstanding mandatory professional development for faculty focuses on improving teaching practices that help prepare students for rigorous courses at the four-year level. Professional development opportunities include both full-time and adjunct faculty.

Every Friday, NVC holds “Student Success Fridays,” a half-day of professional development for faculty and staff focused on improving teaching, learning, and student success. For faculty, these sessions can include working together across disciplines to share teaching challenges and find solutions and better ways to teach. Discussions include the most effective ways to engage students in group work or problem-based learning to strengthen their critical thinking and ability to collaborate—skills that will help them after they transfer and when they start a career.

The regular professional development has helped create a faculty culture that supports students in and outside the classroom. For example, NVC faculty frequently engage with the college's tutoring services, referring students

and collaborating with tutors to ensure alignment with classroom instruction.

How Prince George Community College promotes instructional practices aligned to transfer student success through a one-year, new faculty onboarding process

At the time of this research, **Prince George's Community College** (PGCC) had recently implemented a mandatory one-year onboarding and professional development process for new faculty. One of its early results: greater awareness and adoption of classroom practices that support students' transfer goals.

The training includes online workshops, where new faculty collaborate, learn about the institution, its students, and service-area demographics, and discuss pedagogy that can support students in reaching their goals. For many PGCC students, bachelor's attainment is the goal: Over 50 percent of its graduates complete transfer-oriented associate degrees.⁴¹

Several faculty members we interviewed cited this training—especially the ability to learn from and collaborate with one another and faculty mentors—as one of the main reasons they aligned classroom practices to students' transfer goals. For example, several faculty members brought in former transfer students to discuss career options and pathways. Others mandated one-on-one meetings with each student early in the semester to discuss the transfer process, what transfer students in their academic discipline need for career preparation (e.g., internships, concentrations within majors, or graduate/professional studies), and what options they have for four-year destinations.

⁴¹ Analysis of Liberal Arts and Sciences General Studies and Humanities associate degree graduates in 2021, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

Virginia Commonwealth University's Transfer Champions training reaches faculty and staff members at scale

The Transfer Center staff at **Virginia Commonwealth University** (VCU) help prospective transfer students make a smooth transition to the university, while also leading efforts to build a broader campus culture that welcomes and supports them. Annual Transfer Champions training helps the center's staff accomplish this.


The training aims to increase faculty (and sometimes staff) awareness of VCU's transfer student population and improve transfer students' engagement with university resources and activities, such as faculty-led research, office hours, and tutoring. Transfer Center staff share data on transfer student demographics, enrollment, and outcomes. They also share information on transfer student experiences, challenges they are likely to face, and resources available to help.

Participants then develop a "Transfer Champion Action Plan." They fill out a worksheet to consider and reflect on the support their department or unit provides to transfer students as well as their personal experiences with and support for transfer students in the classrooms. The worksheet then prompts participants to develop a goal to better support transfer students and concrete steps to meet it.

One faculty member from the Kinesiology and Health Sciences department who attended the training developed an idea to add flexibility to a major-requirement course to accommodate transfer students' life demands while upholding high academic standards. After learning that nearly a fifth of VCU's transfer students are adults and, compared to first-year students, much more likely to be working and/or commuting, the professor introduced an optional—but

more challenging—cumulative final that would cover all the course's concepts. Students who opted to take the final could replace their lowest test grade of the term, which could help those who may have missed classes or scored lower on a test due to outside-the-classroom responsibilities. While the change was intended to help transfer students, many students from all backgrounds benefited. Over 40 percent of his students opted to take the final, and 63 percent of them raised their final grade.⁴²

At the time of this research, VCU had been hosting Transfer Champion training for several years, reaching over 150 faculty and staff. Training is often embedded in regularly scheduled departmental meetings or existing faculty professional development opportunities but is sometimes delivered at standalone events. Faculty members who have gone through the program help educate other faculty, such as the Kinesiology and Health Sciences professor who partnered with the Transfer Center to bring Transfer Champions training to the entire department. By continuing the training, Transfer Center staff hope to grow and sustain a campus and classroom culture that supports transfer student success.

 **KEY IDEA:** Support success in gateway courses, writing, and STEM through enhanced instruction and robust academic support services at the community college and university levels.

Prospective and current transfer students may need extra help to progress and succeed in some courses and majors. Faculty members we interviewed at exemplary colleges identified those areas and redesigned instruction and academic supports accordingly, including in tutoring and office hours.

⁴² <https://news.vcu.edu/article/2022/07/the-goal-success-for-every-student>

One key area for such reforms in the community colleges we studied was gateway courses—introductory-level, credit-bearing courses students must pass to progress in their majors (e.g., college-level English, math, economics, and many STEM courses). Supporting students in these courses—especially students from historically underserved backgrounds—is especially important because research shows that completing them within the first year substantially improves the chances students will transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree.^{43,44}

In our research, successful community colleges paid special attention to gateway college-level English and math because most of their transfer-intending students need to complete them. These colleges were transitioning away from the costly, noncredit, prerequisite developmental education classes required of many community college students (including a disproportionate number from historically underserved backgrounds) before they can enroll in college-level courses. Instead, they moved to corequisite models, which place the vast majority of students into credit-bearing courses while providing embedded academic support and/or supplemental instruction. The most advanced approaches we observed also ensured that corequisite gateway courses align with the student’s chosen pathway, especially in math. For example, while engineering majors may need calculus, a better corequisite gateway math course for students in other majors might be statistics. Research has shown this comprehensive approach to corequisite education is associated with stronger pass rates and higher levels of enrollment in college-level courses.⁴⁵

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Tallahassee State College helps students succeed in gateway courses with embedded supports and targeted corequisite education

Tallahassee State College (TSC) has adopted multiple strategies to help students pass gateway courses for math, English, and students’ intended majors. First, TSC identified the courses that were preventing students from transferring to specific majors at their top transfer partner institutions. For example, College Algebra (a gateway course for business and STEM) was a major stumbling block for students intending to transfer to TSC’s top university partner, Florida State University (which admits students directly into a major). Similarly, TSC found that gateway courses in English composition and micro- and macroeconomics posed challenges for students interested in transfer programs in communications, humanities, and business.

In response, TSC embedded academic supports, such as tutoring and success coaches, in about 85 percent of its gateway courses. For gateway English and math classes, TSC encourages students who previously may have been placed in developmental education to enroll in courses with corequisite supports. TSC has achieved scale: For example, about half of their gateway algebra courses are corequisite.

An effective but sometimes costly corequisite support is embedded tutoring. TSC provides a cost-effective program called Math and Writing Champions, which employs high-achieving TSC students who tutor other students during class and at weekly mentoring sessions in TSC’s learning commons. Tutors help students review material, understand concepts, and improve their study skills. The results are impressive. For example, the success rate for students enrolled in gateway English

⁴³ Lin, Fay, and Fink, *Stratified Trajectories*.

⁴⁴ [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf)

⁴⁵ Trey Miller, Paco Martorell. (2022) Using Corequisite Remediation to Help Students Progress to College-Level Courses. <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/using-corequisite-remediation-help-students-progress-college-level-courses>

courses supported by Writing Champions is 85 percent, compared to 76 percent for students in non-Writing Champions sections. The tutors receive up to \$1,000 in tuition or book stipends, plus priority registration, hands-on experience, and a chance to work closely with a faculty member.

Northwest Vista College prioritizes developing strong writing skills across the curriculum to set students up for university success

Faculty at **Northwest Vista College** (NVC) recognize that writing is one of the key skills students need to thrive at the university level (and in the workforce). The NVC English department has adopted a thoughtful, scaffolded approach to teaching writing. Over a semester, students write parts of a larger piece and continue to review and revise it, learning that writing is an iterative and collaborative process and can get better over time.

While all transfer students must complete college-level English, NVC faculty understand that strengthening writing takes more than a single English course, so they include writing components in different classes. NVC was an early adopter of “Writing Across the Curriculum” (WAC), a national effort to improve learning, critical thinking, and communication skills by providing students with frequent opportunities to write, revise, and discuss their writing throughout their educational journey, in whatever major they pursue. To enable college-wide adoption, all NVC faculty have access to a WAC coordinator in the college’s multi-disciplinary writing center who can help develop effective writing instruction through customized workshops, presentations, and handouts.

Virginia Commonwealth University Science Hub provides STEM support for all based on transfer students’ needs

At **Virginia Commonwealth University** (VCU), transfer students taking STEM courses can get extra help from faculty at the Science Hub at the Campus Learning Center, a centralized space in a STEM-focused building. The Hub received start-up funds as part of a package from a private foundation grant intended to help the university find ways to engage more students in science, especially those from underrepresented groups. To accomplish that goal, VCU focused primarily on creating supports for transfer students and what they need to succeed in STEM subjects, while allowing all students to benefit from the Science Hub’s services.

For example, because over a third of VCU’s transfer students identify as the first in their family to go to college, science and math faculty members hold weekly “Student Hours” in the Hub instead of traditional “office hours” to make clear that the support is meant for them. The Hub also allows students to connect with multiple STEM faculty members in one place without an appointment, get help with coursework, find study partners or groups, and learn about undergraduate research and professional opportunities. The ability to multitask is especially convenient for VCU’s transfer students who have work or family responsibilities.

Survey data suggest that the Hub’s Student Hours are having the intended effect. More than a third of respondents who attended Student Hours had never accessed office hours before. In addition, survey data shows that students in all demographic categories reported a higher sense of belonging in their course, major, and at VCU after using Hub services. ■

Strategy 3: Tailor Transfer Advising and Nonacademic Supports to Foster Trust and Engagement



Summary: This strategy is characterized by three essential practices, each featuring several key ideas:

Early, sustained, and inevitable advising systems

KEY IDEAS:

- > Make advising inevitable throughout community college
- > Engage transfer students before, during, and after they transition to a university
- > Start transfer outreach and advising in high school

A trained, knowledgeable, and caring advising corps

KEY IDEAS:

- > Use hiring and training to increase advisor empathy for transfer students
- > Invest in mandatory, routine, transfer-specific professional development
- > Develop advising protocols that start with students' career goals

A transfer-specific approach to holistic success

KEY IDEAS:

- > Provide quick on-ramps to career advising and high-impact experiences in community college and university
- > Foster community-building, belonging, and inclusion informed by transfer student demographics and needs
- > Attend to transfer students' basic and nonacademic needs

Our interviews with transfer students revealed a recurring theme: Advising is pivotal in helping them achieve their academic and career goals. At a minimum, effective transfer advising helps students enter and complete academic pathways and navigate institutional transitions that often bring uncertainty. At its best, transfer advising substantially strengthens students' educational journeys by linking their career goals to their majors and connecting students to high-impact experiences like internships, mentoring, and faculty research. Conversely, ineffective (or inadequate) advising can erode student trust in advising (and the college overall), a breach that can be challenging to mend

At colleges nationwide, many advisors go above and beyond to help students decipher complex transfer requirements and navigate disconnected campus services. Too often, the success of transfer students depends on such heroic efforts. Institutional leaders bear responsibility for ensuring their campus advising corps is well equipped to support students who must contend with the complexities of multiple institutions and overcome challenges associated with being, for example, first-generation, lower socioeconomic status, and/or working students.


At the Playbook exemplars, improvements to transfer advising were often the result of broader advising reforms aimed at improving student success. While no two advising systems or reform efforts we researched were the same, each included investments in advising guides and other tools, professional development for advisors, and technology systems to help advisors serve students efficiently and effectively.

Furthermore, the exemplars demonstrate that achieving holistic success for transfer students benefits from coordinating multiple services that support their academic and nonacademic needs. These leaders fostered collaborative environments where individuals across the entire campus community contribute to the success of transfer students.

Essential Practice 1

Early, sustained, and inevitable advising systems

Research indicates that about half of the community college students nationally who intend to transfer do not access transfer services.⁴⁶ In contrast, community college exemplars studied for this Playbook work independently and with their four-year partners to ensure that students engage with advisors and other supports early and often. The exemplars develop systems to deliver strong advising in high schools, community college, universities, and the transition periods in between.

 **KEY IDEA:** Make advising inevitable throughout community college

Because most students entering community college want to attain a bachelor's degree, most (if not all) of them should receive some form of transfer advising that helps them understand whether a bachelor's will help them reach their life and career goals and, if so, how to achieve them.⁴⁷ The exemplar community colleges we researched reformed transfer advising, often as part of broader advising reforms. These changes aimed to engage all students with advisors soon after entering college and

⁴⁶ CCCSE. (2023). Helping community college students climb the transfer ladder. <https://cccse.org/NR2023>.

⁴⁷ *ibid*

at key milestones (often marked by specific numbers of credits accumulated) to navigate transfer options.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How Durham Tech makes sure all new community college students know about transfer

North Carolina's state articulation agreement strongly recommends that all community college students in transfer-oriented degrees be offered a version of a student success course known as ACA 122 that includes transfer-specific content.⁴⁸ **Durham Tech** does more than offer that course. It requires that all students take it during their first semester. Durham Tech's president explains why: "In this area [Research Triangle], the bachelor's degree is the mobility credential."

Durham Tech's version of ACA 122 includes exploration and planning materials that help students understand articulation, maximize credit transfer, and explore career and university options. During the course, students learn how their majors connect to their career goals and evaluate their learning skills, such as note-taking, reading, and time management. A defining element of the course: Students are walked through the process of building out a course of study and developing an individualized education plan for transferring within a specific major to a specific transfer destination. Durham Tech has major-specific transfer guides that show recommended courses for at least four different universities to make this process easier for students.

Leaders at Durham Tech who led the establishment of the ACA 122 requirement see little downside to students on non-transfer pathways taking the course. Some

students—especially from historically underserved backgrounds—might otherwise not consider pursuing a bachelor's degree. If the course leads more students to seek a bachelor's degree, they will be better prepared to navigate transfer pathways. Those who decide to enroll in workforce programs without transferring still receive help navigating their program of study, developing strong learning strategies, and entering the workforce in a timely manner.

How Prince George's Community College incorporates transfer advising across the student experience

At **Prince George's Community College** (PGCC), advising is organized across 10 career and transfer pathways, including allied health and nursing, behavioral and social sciences, and business and entrepreneurship. Students choose a major when applying to the college and are assigned a pathway advisor based on that major.

Advising at PGCC is strongly encouraged at four distinct milestones: 0-14, 15, 30, and 45 credits, with specific guidance for students who identify transfer and bachelor's attainment as a goal.⁴⁹

- **Milestone 1** (0-14 credits): Students and advisors build rapport, discuss academic and career goals, and craft an educational plan through completion of an associate degree. PGCC advisors help arrange course sequences so students enroll in program-specific courses within the first 15 credit hours. The academic plan is uploaded into PGCC's CRM so advisors and students can track progress.
- **Milestone 2** (15 credits): Advisors continue to build relationships with students, discuss academic and/or personal concerns and transfer destinations, review and adjust academic plans, and ensure the student's


⁴⁸ The only students who don't take ACA 122 are in the Human Services and Public Safety pathway, which is designed to deliver certifications and training to students who are already in careers that (for the most part) require bachelor's degrees.

⁴⁹ Though advising is mandatory, there are no consequences for students if they do not meet with an advisor.

academic plan still aligns with their academic and career goals.

- **Milestone 3** (30 credits): Advisors revisit transfer destinations to ensure students remain on track and confirm academic plans through completion. Advisors provide career resources, and students are given the option of being assigned a faculty mentor, who can help them navigate academic and career paths within a major.
- **Milestone 4** (45 credits): Advisors help students prepare for graduation and life beyond community college (discussing transfer and career fairs and asking about internship options, for example).

To ensure all advisors are prepared to help students navigate these milestones, the advising office closes for training from 8 am to 2 pm on the first and third Fridays of each month. Training is mandatory for advisors and open to all faculty and staff as well.

 **KEY IDEA:** Engage transfer students before, during, and after they transition to a university

Exemplar universities studied for this playbook eased the transition from community college by helping students settle into a new environment, connect to community, and maintain momentum toward their degree. They worked with community college partners to engage prospective and admitted students before they transferred. They leveraged onboarding and orientation—when students are most attentive to university outreach and emails—to ensure that new transfer students build a strong foundation and direction for their university experience. And they remained engaged with transfer students from their first semester through graduation to help them stay on track and maximize their learning in and outside the classroom.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How Virginia Commonwealth University uses early advising to support prospective and new transfer students

Virginia Commonwealth University's approach to advising includes working closely with transfer students while they are in community college, during their transition to VCU, and during their first term. The university's Transfer Center focuses on supporting prospective students, while VCU's centralized, professional advising staff focus on newly admitted transfer students. Departmental advisors support continuing transfer students through graduation. All advisors use a centralized advising technology platform to support all students, including transfers.

VCU's early transfer advising happens in three phases:

Pre-transfer: VCU's dedicated transfer admissions counselors are regularly available at community colleges throughout Virginia. When a student expresses interest in VCU, counselors refer them to VCU's Transfer Center on the Richmond campus, which provides virtual or in-person pre-transfer advising. Pre-transfer advisors use VCU's four-year transfer maps and course equivalency database to help students craft a plan. These advisors prioritize supporting prospective transfer students' best interests rather than simply enrolling students. As a result, VCU will, at times, counsel students to defer enrollment until they have completed their associate degree, which can reduce costs and, as research shows, increase bachelor's attainment.⁵⁰

Transition: After being admitted, new transfer students are assigned an advisor, who meets with them once

⁵⁰ Velasco et al. (2024)

before classes begin and again during the first semester. Transfer students have their first one-on-one advising appointment before orientation to review their first-semester schedule. Advisors have access to students' intake survey responses and transcript data, which they use to plan for these discussions and connect students to services. Students also have the option to meet with their advisor again during orientation to ask follow-up questions.


First Term: Once classes start, new students and advisors meet again to craft a full graduation plan. Students are expected to meet with an advisor once a semester in their first year, and professional advisors have specific targets: Meet with 30 percent of their caseload of 200 to 300 students by the end of the first month of the semester, 60 percent by the second, and 90 percent by the third month. Advisors book an appointment for the remaining 10 percent of students by the end of the semester. Most of those students—over 88 percent—show up to the appointment. As a result, 80 percent of new transfer students access advising in their first term—with an even higher share for historically underserved groups.

University of North Texas uses mandatory orientation to ensure new transfers attend their first advising appointment

The **University of North Texas** (UNT) requires one-day orientation sessions for all new undergraduates, including separate orientations tailored for transfer students.⁵¹ Each session concludes with students registering for their classes with support from advisors within their academic departments and student orientation leaders. UNT's orientation for transfer students is based on years of experimentation and student feedback and showcases transfer student experiences through video and student voices. It also highlights resources tailored to transfer

students, many provided through the Transfer Center. These transfer-focused details are paired with essential information all students need about UNT, such as degree requirements, how to access advising resources, and where to find different offices on campus. This approach helps transfers feel included and supported without telling them things they may already know from past college experiences. Accomplishing this requires close collaboration between academic departments, student affairs, and academic affairs.

The outcomes are clear: Those who attend orientation and the initial advising touchpoint have higher retention and graduation rates than those who do not.

 **KEY IDEA:** Start transfer outreach and advising in high school

Engaging high school students in college exploration and coursework helps them consider a variety of options, including transfer pathways from community college entry through bachelor's degree attainment. By introducing students to such possibilities early on, college leaders can increase college-going, especially among those who otherwise might not consider it. This is especially important for students from lower-income backgrounds, many of whom would be the first in their families to go to college and who, research shows, are also the least likely to attain a bachelor's degree.⁵² Exemplars we studied went a step beyond, helping high school students develop degree plans that often extended through transfer.

⁵¹ With few exceptions, students are unable to register without attending orientation.

⁵² Margaret W. Calahan, Nicole Brunt, Terry Vaughan III, Erick Montenegro, Stephanie Breen, Esosa Ruffin, and Laura W. Perna. (2024). Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States 2024: 50-Year Historical Trend Report, Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn AHEAD).

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Imperial Valley College works with admitted students to start degree-planning in high school

Robust high school outreach at **Imperial Valley College** (IVC) is noteworthy because it focuses on degree-planning, not just enrolling in college. This focus is rooted in an understanding of their students—more than 80 percent are the first in their families to go to college—and their community, where the portion of the population with a college credential is lower than any other community in California.⁵³ By helping students start post-secondary pursuits with a clear plan, IVC aims to increase the odds they will get a degree. IVC has a goal: Every high school student who applies will have an abbreviated education plan, listing courses they will take in their first semester.

To accomplish this, IVC places at least one representative on high school campuses every day for six months of the year, with the goal of meeting with students at least twice during their senior year. In the fall, IVC advisors—each assigned to a specific high school—meet with seniors for an hour to fill out an application to IVC and the federal financial aid (FAFSA) form. In the application, IVC helps students choose a major and develop a general education plan that maps to the major. Advisors help students navigate these choices based on each student's career goals, whether they intend to transfer, and, if so, whether they hope to stay in the region, which means transferring to **San Diego State University-Imperial Valley** (SDSU-IV). Starting with career goals is crucial. For example, an IVC psychology major who aspires to become a doctor would need a different general education plan than a psychology major who wants to become a teacher. Both students could complete their bachelor's degree at SDSU-IV, but the aspiring doctor would have to leave the area

eventually to attend medical school; the aspiring teacher would be able to remain in the area to complete their teaching credential at SDSU-IV.

In the spring, high school seniors admitted to IVC meet with advisors a second time for 30 minutes to create an abbreviated educational plan based on the major they intend to pursue and any college credits they've earned through dual enrollment courses. These plans are uploaded into IVC's student information system so students and advisors can access them in the future. The results so far are impressive: Eighty percent of area high school students who matriculate at IVC enter with an abbreviated education plan. As discussed in *Strategy 2*, IVC advisors continue to work with students to develop a full, tailored education plan by the end of their first year in college. For transfer students, the full plan maps out courses through associate degree completion based on the student's intended major and prospective transfer destination.

By partnering this way, the region's K-12 and higher education leaders have achieved remarkable success: More than 70 percent of local high school students go to college—one of the highest rates in the state. Between 60 percent and 70 percent of them matriculate at IVC, and the rate is even higher for those who have dual enrollment credits. This system has also provided an important foundation for IVC's successful transfer partnership with SDSU-IV, elements of which are described elsewhere in this Playbook.

Arizona Western College links addressing financial concerns to promoting behaviors associated with transfer student success, starting in high school

The Yuma Educational Success (YES) Program is a partnership between Yuma Union High School District (which serves over 11,000 students), **Arizona Western College** (AWC), and **Northern Arizona University** (NAU),

⁵³ California Community College Chancellor's Office. *Data Mart*. Accessed September 20, 2024. <https://datamart.cccco.edu>.

which aims to increase college-going, transfer, and bachelor's completion among participating students. Engaging high school students with YES' signature component—a scholarship that incentivizes behaviors associated with success—is especially helpful for first-generation, lower-income students.

As one student put it, “Getting to college, the price was the biggest thing I was stressed about.” The YES Program addresses this concern by offering \$1,000 a semester for up to four semesters (in addition to any federal and state aid) and ties the scholarship to timely progression, grades, and community activities shown to help students succeed. Efforts to promote the financial benefits of YES start early: A dedicated program coordinator visits each of the district's seven high schools to discuss affordability and help students set career goals, decide on majors, and create degree plans. This is especially important for first-generation students, who may not otherwise have access to guidance on setting career and educational goals and creating plans to accomplish them. (Eighty percent of YES participants are first-generation, and 87 percent are Hispanic.)

When students commit to YES, they sign a contract that outlines the expectations for maintaining scholarship eligibility when they arrive at AWC, including:

- Attain 30 credits over the course of a year. This ensures students make timely progress to their degrees. Students who want to attend full-time but need to balance family life and work responsibilities can utilize winter and summer terms and eight-week classes to meet this requirement.
- Meet with the YES Academic Success Coordinator once a semester. The coordinator aims to understand a student's career goals, then helps them develop a plan for what they will study and what additional support they will need. The coordinator guides students toward

resources at AWC's student success center, including tutors and writing coaches.

- Maintain a 3.0 GPA. Program organizers know the GPA threshold is high, but a 3.0 minimum is required for students to access many post-transfer scholarships. Students whose GPAs drop below 3.0 are required to meet with the success coordinator to discuss the challenges they face, identify resources for support, and make a plan to succeed the next semester.
- Participate in two social and two academic activities. Program organizers work to engage students outside the classroom, offering activities ranging from financial management workshops to fun events such as making slime to help students decompress during mid-terms. Organizers entice students to attend with incentives such as drawings for prizes. Even more valuable: Students who participate in a transfer conference series in March are eligible for an additional \$250 scholarship.

The program reaches hundreds of students each year, and growing demand demonstrates it provides what students want. And program outcomes show it works: From 2019 to 2024, 49 percent of YES participants earned an associate degree within six years. Of those, 77 percent transferred to a four-year university. Among the 2018 and 2019 cohorts of students, 85 percent who transferred to a four-year university graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years.

Though YES started as a grant-funded project, AWC and NAU leaders plan to expand aspects of the program (especially the robust advising) to reach more students and to fund the YES program out of their operating budgets. Their goal: Ensure all students in AWC-to-NAU pathways have access to a personalized support model that fosters a sense of belonging, sets clear goals for completion, and links to specific career opportunities.

An Idealized Transfer Student Advising Experience

Start Advising in High School

- University, community college, and K-12 partners showcase community college transfer pathways to a bachelor's degree—including generating interest in high school dual enrollment opportunities—as part of their outreach efforts.
- Advisors have conversations with students about their career goals, the salaries and demand for those jobs, and whether the transfer pathway to a bachelor's degree is right for them.
- Advisors support prospective community college transfer students who are interested in participating in high school dual enrollment to develop an educational plan that links their DE coursework to a transfer pathway.
- Advisors help all prospective community college transfer students pick a program of study, submit an application, and complete a FAFSA.
- Advisors support admitted community college students to identify courses they will take in their first term (taking into consideration any prior dual enrollment credit).
- Advisors upload any educational plans into the community college's degree planning/advising platform for future access.

Inevitable Support in Community College

Before Day 1: Advisors build a relationship with students, understanding their goals and motivations. They help students create first-term plans or modify ones developed in high school, upload them to degree-planning/advising platforms, and support students with registration.

0-14 credits: Advisors support students in creating a complete, tailored educational plan based on their career goals and specific transfer destinations. Digitized plan formats ease future access and monitoring.

15-60 credits: Advisors monitor students' progress through plans, meeting them after reaching the **15, 30, and 45** credit marks to ensure timely milestone completion or course corrections.

Throughout:

- Community college advisors collaborate with university advisors to help prospective transfer students navigate four-year options, admissions requirements, and pathways.
- Advisors or coaches proactively engage students with other nonacademic and academic supports.
- If academic advisors are not faculty members, students have opportunities to meet with faculty advisors/mentors to enable discipline-specific guidance.

Transition and Progression through University

Before Day 1: Admitted transfer students meet with a university advisor to continue building their educational plan based on their major and goals. Orientation supports institutional knowledge development, community building, and advisor-assisted registration for first-term classes.

First Term: Transfer students and advisors continue to build a complete, tailored educational plan through graduation, including participation in internships and other high-impact practices. Digitized plan formats ease future access and monitoring.

Throughout:

- Advisors monitor students' progress through plans, meeting at least once per term to ensure timely milestone completion or course corrections.
- If academic advisors are not faculty members, students have opportunities to meet with faculty advisors/mentors to enable discipline-specific guidance
- Advisors or coaches proactively engage students with other nonacademic and academic supports.

Essential Practice 2

A trained, knowledgeable, and caring advising corps

KEY IDEAS:

- Use hiring and training to encourage advisor empathy for transfer students
- Invest in mandatory, routine, transfer-specific professional development
- Develop advising protocols that start with students' career goals

Research shows that advisors can ensure students have positive transfer advising experiences by doing two things: empathizing with students and providing accurate information.^{54,55}

One way many Playbook exemplars ensured a positive student experience was to recruit and retain advisors and other student-facing staff who were like students in some way: demographically and/or former community college transfer students themselves. This helped ensure that advisors and frontline staff had empathy for and could readily build trust with students and families, many of whom had no prior exposure to higher education. For all advisors and frontline staff, regardless of their background, advising protocols and training emphasized the need to make transfer students feel understood and supported.

Of course, strong rapport with advisors is valuable only if the guidance students receive is sound. Research has shown that the most important function of transfer advising is providing accurate information on matters such as degree requirements, timelines, and policies.⁵⁶

Additionally, pre-transfer students need help connecting the dots between their academic, career, and life goals, as well as their major.

Too often, what students want out of transfer advising is very different from what they experience. Research shows that many transfer students receive inaccurate information, which creates problems: enrolling in the wrong program, losing credits when transferring, and increasing the time it takes to earn a degree.⁵⁷ Students reported taking advisor guidance at face value, demonstrating how important it is for advisors to avoid providing poor guidance.

To avoid those pitfalls, Playbook exemplars ensure transfer students are getting the information they need by establishing routines and systems that build on an understanding of students' educational and career goals. Through professional development, technology, and processes, these systems aim to ensure consistency in both empathy and information accuracy to achieve strong outcomes for each student.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

Prince George's Community College advising establishes a caring approach to set the stage for strong transfer advising

Trust in advisors is especially important for students from communities historically underserved by higher education. For example, a major study in California found that Black community college students who receive academic advising in the first year are 60 percent more likely to be transfer-ready, demonstrating advising as a powerful tool to support transfer student success.

⁵⁴ J.M. Allen, C.L. Smith, and J.K. Muehleck. (2013). What kinds of advising are important to community college pre- and post-transfer students? *Community College Review*, 41(4), 330-345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552113505320>

⁵⁵ [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_ExploringTransferJourneys_October2023.pdf?ver=2023-10-28-111932-313](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_ExploringTransferJourneys_October2023.pdf?ver=2023-10-28-111932-313)

⁵⁶ J.M. Allen, C.L. Smith, and J.K. Muehleck. (2013). What kinds of advising are important to community college pre- and post-transfer students? *Community College Review*, 41(4), 330-345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552113505320>

⁵⁷ Becky Wai-Ling Packard, Janelle L. Gagnon, and Arleen J. Senas. 2012. "Navigating Community College Transfer in Science, Technical, Engineering, and Mathematics Fields." *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 36 (9): 670-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2010.495570>.

However, advising had an even bigger positive impact on other student populations (a 110 percent increase in transfer readiness).⁵⁸ One explanation for the difference: The same researchers found that some Black students avoided engaging with advisors after poor experiences made them feel unwelcome or misguided.⁵⁹

To encourage engagement with advisors and support students in meeting their goals, **Prince George's Community College** (PGCC) has adopted an advising model designed to foster trust, a sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy for all students. The college's student body is 62 percent Black and 96 percent students of color. Half of entering students receive Pell Grants, and 51 percent identify as first-generation college students.

The “appreciative advising” model focuses on student strengths and involves asking students open-ended questions about their goals and experiences before offering academic guidance. The idea is that by creating a welcoming, judgment-free space and maintaining strong relationships with students over time, advisors will be better able to connect with students and successfully implement the transfer advising guidance during the 0-, 15-, 30-, and 45-credit checkpoints discussed earlier in this section. (Note: Many of the community colleges we studied also adopted this model.)

Advisors establish trust by listening to students' hopes and dreams and by intentionally sharing personal stories as a way to help students feel understood and empowered to persist. In one case, an advisor shared with a struggling

“My advisor is the one reason I'm here today.”

— **Transfer Student**

student how she was once on academic probation but worked hard and turned the situation around. The student was surprised that their advisor—someone they viewed as successful—had struggled academically, too. Sharing that story helped the student feel motivated to develop a plan for success.

Since implementing the appreciative advising model, advising leaders say they've received fewer complaints about advisors being distant or unhelpful.

Northwest Vista College invests in mandatory, regular training for advisors focused on transfer

At **Northwest Vista College** (NVC), advisors receive weekly, mandatory professional development and training focused on how to best serve their students. Offered on Fridays, sessions teach advisors the most effective ways to approach each of the credit touchpoints (15, 30, and 45), including how to make sure community college students take the classes they need for their degrees as well as their desired career, major, and transfer destination. Advisors receive training on financial matters, too, such as how to talk to students about financial aid or the different costs of private and public colleges. And they discuss how to connect students to resources in NVC's Advocacy Center, including a food pantry, a free clothing store, a calming room for neurodiverse students, and support navigating housing challenges and other social services.

⁵⁸ Darla M. Cooper, Katie Brohawn, Alyssa Nguyen, Rogéair D. Purnell, Ashley Redix, and Daisy Segovia. The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Identifying the Factors That Impact Transfer among African American/Black Community College Students. October 2022. Accessed September 11, 2024. [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf).

⁵⁹ Darla M. Cooper, Katie Brohawn, Alyssa Nguyen, Rogéair D. Purnell, Ashley Redix, and Daisy Segovia. The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Unpacking the Factors That Impact the Success of Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students. October 2022. Accessed September 11, 2024. [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_Brief2_Fall2022.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief2_Fall2022.pdf).

The weekly professional development sessions give advisors a chance to learn from each other. For example, advisors noted it was helpful to discuss how to guide students who want to be on STEM pathways to select math courses that align with their program and to use the math tutoring center. Advisors discussed how to talk to students who don't know where they want to transfer about their options, including the differences between in- and out-of-state tuition and public and private institutions.

“Step by step, we're with the student,” a training facilitator said. “We're not allowing them to go solo.” Enabling this kind of effective transfer advising at scale has been a key contributor to NVC's strong transfer rates—37 percent—well above Texas' statewide average of 25 percent.⁶⁰

How NOVA and George Mason ensure strong advising and coaching for ADVANCE students

Many of the ADVANCE academic coaches at **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) and success coaches at **George Mason University** are alumni of one of those schools, and some have been on the transfer pathway between the two. Their experience is an asset, and so is the training NOVA and George Mason provide to ensure that coaches have the skills and information they need to offer strong support to ADVANCE students.

Both ADVANCE academic coaches at NOVA and success coaches at George Mason go through a structured coaching training process run by a third-party organization and must be coaching-certified within a year of joining the ADVANCE team. They receive foundational training in the first few weeks and then are observed by senior coaches over their first year, given feedback on their performance, and provided opportunities to shadow veteran coaches.

Additionally, academic coaches at NOVA go through a 10-week training supported by both institutions focused on policies, curricular pathways, and foundational academic advising practices. They also attend ongoing biweekly training that includes updates from representatives from academic units, student support, and administrative offices. The ongoing training ensures academic coaches are aware of emerging trends, concerns, or changes that could impact ADVANCE students' experiences.

⁶⁰ Texas Public Higher Education Almanac Data (three-year average, 2022-2024 reports): <https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/agency-publication/almanac/>

Essential Practice 3

A transfer-specific approach to holistic success

Community college students are more likely to be caregivers, experience basic needs insecurity, or come from low-income backgrounds than students who start at four-year institutions.^{61,62} Institutions achieving high levels of transfer student success take those factors into account as they help students complete their degrees.

Many colleges have resources to address students' nonacademic needs, such as food pantries and other basic needs services, career coaching, and financial aid counseling. Exemplary institutions have designed systems to consistently connect transfer (and other) students with those resources, enhancing their well-being while increasing retention, completion, and career readiness.

 **KEY IDEA:** Provide quick on-ramps to career advising and high-impact experiences in community college and university

Research has shown that high-impact experiences such as internships and engagement in faculty-led research are important in preparing students to succeed beyond college.⁶³ Access to such experiences often flows from student-faculty relationships. Arriving partway through their bachelor's program, transfer students are often less likely than others to build faculty relationships at the university and to participate in such practices. Several exemplar transfer destinations provided hands-on guidance and changed the structure of high-impact experiences so transfer students would be more likely to participate.

⁶¹ Aspen analysis of NPSAS:20 data.

⁶² Bryce McKibben, Jin Wu, and Sara Abelson, "New Federal Data Confirm That College Students Face Significant—and Unacceptable—Basic Needs Insecurity," *The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice*, August 3, 2023, <https://hope.temple.edu/npsas/>.

⁶³ Gallup, Inc. (2015, April 8). The big six college experiences linked to life preparedness. Gallup News. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/182306/big-six-college-experiences-linked-life-preparedness.aspx>

FIELD EXAMPLES:

San Diego State University supplements orientation with a Transfer Student Success Summit that elevates high-impact experiences


San Diego State University's main Mesa campus has worked to ensure that transfer students can participate in high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, internships, and study abroad. To inform students about these opportunities, the university offers a virtual Transfer Student Success Summit for new transfer students that features faculty members and student affairs leaders explaining undergraduate research, study abroad, graduate school opportunities, internships, and on-campus employment. The summit is held in June, helping students connect with important services at their new college even before they attend an orientation in August. The timing is intentional: The transition to college during the pre-orientation period can be nerve-racking for students, and the summit provides a helpful, additional touchpoint. Students are then supported through New Transfer Student Orientation, which boasts 95 percent participation. The orientation program differs from the summit in complementary ways, with a focus on supporting students in using SDSU's advising technology platforms, meeting with advisors within their majors, and registering for first-term classes.

George Mason University increased awareness of and created transfer student-friendly, high-impact experiences

George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) analyze participation rates in high-impact experiences among transfer students. For example, analyses shared at the STEM Transfer Symposium (*see page 36*) revealed that community college transfer students were engaging

with undergraduate research at lower rates than other students. So, George Mason and NOVA worked with advising personnel at NOVA to embed conversations in advising appointments about the importance of undergraduate research and the opportunities available to students before and after transfer.

Knowing that most transfer students don't have time in their schedule for traditional high-impact experiences like study abroad and internships, George Mason creates shortened versions wherever possible. This allows working students to participate without sacrificing their employment or wages for extended periods. Student affairs leaders work closely with the school's academic colleges to ensure transfer students know about these shorter-term opportunities and make it clear they can participate, too.

 **KEY IDEA:** Foster community-building, belonging, and inclusion informed by transfer student demographics and needs

Leaders of four-year institutions should pay attention to inclusion and belonging for transfer students, who on some campuses are more likely to be in the minority regarding transfer status, age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity. When institutions do not effectively onboard and integrate transfer students into the campus community, those students can feel overlooked, leading to dissatisfaction and an increased risk of attrition. Successful examples from our research demonstrate that implementing dedicated programming tailored to transfer students' needs can lessen those risks.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

University of North Texas Transfer Orientation invites families to enable greater support from home


The **University of North Texas** (UNT) enrolls an undergraduate student body that is over 40 percent first-generation and nearly a third Hispanic. For over a decade, UNT has offered Transfer Parent Orientation and Spanish Family Orientation (for the families of both new first-year and transfer students) alongside their mandatory new transfer and first-year student orientations. Each year, about 1,000 people attend Transfer Parent Orientation, and several hundred more come to the Spanish Family Orientation. UNT leaders say these sessions provide valuable, detailed information about the university experience—such as how to navigate the tuition payment process or access student support programs at the learning center and health and wellness center—that students might otherwise miss because they are focused on registering for classes.

San Diego State University's commuter center gives many transfer students space and resources to succeed

At **San Diego State University** (SDSU), 97 percent of transfer students are commuters or live off campus. In 2010, SDSU established the Commuter and Transfer Student Resource Center to provide students a “home away from home” between classes. Students can use the space to relax, connect with peers, and hold study groups, with access to microwaves, refrigerators, and modular furniture that can be rearranged to suit their needs (e.g., for study groups or presentations). The center hosts programs for students on topics such as career readiness, how to participate in various co-curricular and high-impact experiences, and time management. SDSU also

has several commuter lounges near heavily used public transit stations to provide convenient study and social spaces for students who live off campus.

The Commuter and Transfer Student Resource Center and lounges are symbols that SDSU's campus welcomes and is built to serve commuter and transfer students.

 **KEY IDEA:** Attend to transfer students' basic and nonacademic needs

The exemplars in our research demonstrated a deep understanding of students' needs outside the classroom, especially financial and other basic needs, such as food. For transfer students specifically, exemplars connected access to goods and services to aspects of the transfer process, such as choosing a transfer destination, completing degree planning, and navigating the transition to a new four-year institution.

FIELD EXAMPLES:

How Imperial Valley College connects basic needs services to individualized education plan development

At **Imperial Valley College** (IVC), faculty and staff use several avenues to connect their service delivery to tailored education plans (*see page 33*). For example, when students receive basic needs support from the food pantry, staff are trained to check if students have a tailored education plan on file. If they don't, the basic needs specialist alerts the student to the importance of the plans and lets them know they will receive follow-up from an advisor to develop one. Staff will never withhold services, but they aim to connect the basic needs services directly to students' education. IVC's food pantry is centrally located, easily accessed, and heavily used by

students. In a county where 21.1 percent of the population is below the poverty line, this matters.⁶⁴

How ADVANCE success coaches serve students holistically once they transfer to George Mason

The ADVANCE student population at **Northern Virginia Community College** (NOVA) and **George Mason University** is 60 percent first-generation, almost 40 percent Pell-eligible, and more likely to be Black (13 percent) or Hispanic (31 percent) than the population of the Northern Virginia region.⁶⁵ These populations are also among the least likely in Virginia to have a bachelor's degree.

ADVANCE was designed with its students in mind to provide an academic advisor within their major and an ADVANCE success coach once they transfer from NOVA to George Mason. The academic advisor helps students navigate academic issues, while the ADVANCE success coach supports their nonacademic needs. To support the latter, ADVANCE success coaches focus on nine areas of student experiences: finances, effectiveness (organizational skills), academics (study skills), well-being (mental and physical health), school community, managing commitments, career, civic engagement (e.g., service learning or volunteering), and commitment to graduation. Before transfer, the NOVA academic coaches focus on these same nine areas. ■

⁶⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months," *American Community Survey*, 2022, Table S1701, Imperial County, CA, <https://data.census.gov>.

⁶⁵ Northern Virginia Regional Commission. Race and ethnicity. Northern Virginia Regional Commission. <https://www.novaregiondashboard.com/race-and-ethnicity>

Appendix 1: Methodology

Step 1: Quantitative Analysis

Aspen and CCRC used National Student Clearinghouse data to identify colleges and universities that produce strong outcomes overall and for Black, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, and low-income students.

Using data from the National Student Clearinghouse for the entering fall 2015 community college cohort (tracked six years, through 2021), we identified community colleges with relatively high enrollment shares (i.e., in the top three quartiles of the distribution) and six-year transfer rates greater than the median for students in each of the demographic groups mentioned above. Because of missing data, we included income only as a consideration in the final rankings step of the quantitative analysis.

For community colleges that met these initial criteria, we then identified partnerships that met the following characteristics:

- A minimum of 10 transferred students in a given student group
- Bachelor completion rates (six years after community college entry) among all transfer students that were above the national average
- Bachelor's completion rate for the given student group that, when compared to completion rates for all students at the partnership, were above,

equal, or at least in the top three quartiles when ranking disparities in the partnerships (i.e., smaller outcomes gaps)

This data methodology identified 252 eligible community college-university partnerships. We ranked partnerships based on the number and share of students within each student group, low disparities in bachelor's completion rates for the given student group, and a calculated contribution of the partnership to the observed outcomes after accounting for institutional and demographic characteristics. The ranking analysis also included the share and bachelor's completion outcomes of transfer students from lower-income backgrounds.

We selected the top 10 performing partnerships at each selectivity level of the four-year partner institution (nonselective, moderately selective, very selective) for Black and Hispanic transfer students and the top 10 partnerships overall for Native American and Pacific Islander students (due to a smaller number of eligible partnerships). Quantitative selection produced 70 partnerships we subjected to qualitative review.

The Aspen and CCRC research teams used insights from our fieldwork to select 22 partnerships for additional screening. We also considered the diversity of the partnerships by geography, urbanicity, institution size, and selectivity. An additional consideration included whether the partnership produced strong outcomes for students who previously participated in community college dual enrollment.

Step 2: Screening Calls

From *Step 1*, we conducted 75-minute semi-structured virtual interviews and focus groups with 37 colleges. In these interviews, we asked interviewees to characterize their practices, partnerships, and institutions, and why they believed they achieved strong results in our quantitative analysis. We also asked institutions to complete a self-assessment of practices related to transfer.

After each call, interviewers completed an evaluation form that assessed practice strengths and weaknesses. Results from these forms were used alongside interview notes and transcripts to create institution-specific memos for the Aspen and CCRC research team to review. The team selected the final sites for fieldwork based on these results, paying attention to institutional diversity by geography, urbanicity, size, and selectivity.

Step 3: Site Visits

Team members from Aspen and CCRC conducted follow-up research on selected institutions between January and March 2024, either through in-person or virtual interviews, and then follow-up conversations through July 2024. For each college, we conducted at least one full day of interviews. An extra interview day was added in select instances where the institutional context merited further review (e.g., the presence of branch campuses, shared campuses). In person, we

visited 12 campuses—five community colleges, six universities, and one university branch campus.

We also conducted five virtual site visits (three community colleges and two universities), which included semi-structured interviews with groups of institutional leaders, faculty, advisors, institutional research staff, transfer staff, and students.

Step 4: Synthesis & Writing

After each virtual and in-person site visit, the research team synthesized observations from the interviews. Findings were summarized in site visit reports. The Aspen and CCRC teams used the site visit report and source interview notes and artifacts collected from site visits to identify common themes. Synthesis memos were prepared internally, and the teams reviewed and discussed thematic findings immediately following the completion of fieldwork.

Once a draft report was completed, we shared relevant sections and sought feedback from the featured institutions to ensure our portrayal was accurate. Any remaining mistakes are solely our own.

INSTITUTIONS STUDIED IN MORE DETAIL	In-Person Site Visit	Hispanic-Serving Institution	Predominantly Black Institution
2-YEAR INSTITUTIONS:			
Arizona Western College, Yuma, AZ	X	X	
College of Southern Maryland, La Plata, MD			
Durham Tech Community College, Durham, NC			
Imperial Valley College, Imperial, CA	X	X	
Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA	X	X	
Northwest Vista College, San Antonio, TX	X	X	
Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD	X		X
Tallahassee State College, Tallahassee, FL		X	
4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS:			
CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, NY	X	X	
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC			
George Mason University, Fairfax, VA	X		
Northern Arizona University-Yuma, Yuma, AZ	X	X	
San Diego State University, San Diego, CA	X	X	
San Diego State University-Imperial Valley, Calexico, CA	X	X	
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR			
University of North Texas, Denton, TX	X	X	
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA	X		

The examples featured in this Playbook come from colleges in cities, suburbs, and rural America. **Our conclusion: Transfer excellence is within reach of every school; no institutional characteristic prevents leaders, staff, and faculty from achieving it.**

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