

Can Transfer and Articulation Policies Propel Community College Students to a Bachelor's Degree—and Is This the Only Goal?

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Transfer and articulation policies have been a prominent policy issue in community college administration and research for almost three decades. These policies, established by states through legislated authority or by institutions through agreements, can create greater coherence in post-secondary curriculum and facilitate the transfer of students across institutions. Although they apply to students transferring both among and across all types of post-secondary institutions (two-year community colleges and four-year colleges and universities), these policies are especially relevant and have maintained a high profile in community college policy discussions for their potential to help students make the leap from community colleges to four-year colleges, something 28 percent of students enrolling in community colleges hope to do.¹ Research, however, indicates that this expectation may be somewhat misplaced. Even though transfer and articulation policies were expected to help community colleges steer students toward a four-year degree, research to date offers no evidence that these policies are helping to achieve this goal. However, as described in this brief, these post-secondary policies may still be important due to their potential to reduce the administrative costs associated with processing transfer students into new institutions, especially now when community college enrollment is booming.

Transfer and Articulation Policies and the Transfer Mission of Community Colleges

Community colleges serve multiple objectives, including job training, re-skilling, and remediation, but the transfer mission has long been a central goal.² Whether students are simply looking for a local post-secondary option, building up foundational skills, or easing back into education after an extended time away from school, community colleges provide some attractive options. Typically they boast small classes, local classrooms, and schedules friendly to students wishing to attend school part time. Further, they allow students to build a base of general education requirements needed to pursue a traditional four-year bachelor's degree. Finally, as the cost of a four-year degree rises, this pathway of transferring from a community college to a four-year college is also touted as a "low-cost" option for earning a bachelor's degree.

Unfortunately, community colleges have yet to find overwhelming success in achieving their transfer mission. A report from the Department of Education indicates that as many as 29 percent of all incoming community college students expect to ultimately earn a bachelor's degree but only about half of those students meet this goal.³ Corroborating prior research from Rouse,⁴

William Doyle⁵ recently found that, among students seeking a bachelor's degree, those who initially enrolled in a community college had 32 percent lower odds of earning a bachelor's degree than did comparable students who initially enrolled in a four-year institution.

On the surface, transfer and articulation policies seem to hold promise for improving the success of students transferring from community colleges to four-year colleges; however, research has not borne this out. Early research by Roksa⁶ failed to find higher transfer rates among community college⁷ students in states with articulation agreements. Roksa and Keith⁸ also did not find that transfer students in states with agreements earned bachelor's degrees at higher rates, earned their degrees in less time, or lost fewer credits after transferring than comparable transfer students in states without agreements. In short, simply having a transfer and articulation agreement does not seem to correspond with better outcomes for students.

Our research sought to dig deeper to see if any specific components of these policies (for example, common course numbering, common general education requirements or core requirements, common program/major requirements, or the automatic transfer of associate's degrees) were associated with better college outcomes (transferring to a four-year college or earning a bachelor's degree) for community college students.⁹ We found that in states where policies reached more private school institutions, community college students were more likely to transfer than were similar students in states with less policy reach. We also found hints that community college students transferring into four-year programs in states with common course numbering, automatic transfer of associates degrees, and common general education requirements were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than students in states without similar policies, but none of these effects turned out to be statistically significant. All in all, the evidence was not conclusive enough to draw strong connections between these or other policies and better college outcomes for students.

Instead, our analysis suggests that institutional factors may be more important. For example, we find that the percentage of tenured faculty at the community college and the student-teacher ratios at both the community and four-year colleges are more tightly associated with a community college student's chances of transferring and earning a bachelor's degree than are state transfer and articulation policies. These findings are not terribly surprising given that these factors can meaningfully impact the relationship between students and their instructors. All of this suggests that efforts to improve outcomes for students might be better spent focusing on the institution, and specifically on student and faculty relationships.

Why Transfer and Articulation Policies May Still Be Relevant

Failing to find a relationship between transfer and articulation policies and student outcomes does not mean that we should ignore these policies. There is good reason to believe that they may still hold the potential to minimize the cost and subjectivity that could dominate the process of transferring credits across institutions. At a recent meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), several administrators from community college and four-year institutions gathered to hear the latest research on transfer and articulation policies. A quick survey of those attending revealed that these administrators were interested in these policies not just because they may improve student outcomes, but also because both community and four-year colleges are working very hard to cope with the ever-increasing number of students transferring across institutions.

For the last two decades the number of students enrolling in community colleges has consistently grown, and the economic downturn has led to nothing short of an explosion in community college enrollments. Even though many community college students are still (unfortunately) diverted from their goal of transferring to a four-year college, the expanding

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enrollments mean that the volume of transfers has expanded as well. Processing all of these transfer students requires that the receiving institution review each student's transcript and correctly determine which of the courses taken at the student's prior institution have a corresponding class in the receiving institution. Completing this process efficiently and fairly is critical for both the institutions and students. Efforts such as common course numbering and common general and programmatic requirements can help students obtain the foundational credits needed for placement in four-year institutions and can help receiving institutions accurately place students in courses.

More Institutions, Better Curriculum Coherence, and Consistent Use of Policies Maximize Benefits

To ensure that these policies serve this valuable administrative function, however, they must promote consistency and reliability across all institutions, paying particular attention to the number of institutions participating in the agreements, the quality of commonly identified curriculum components, and the use of articulation agreements in guiding student course taking.

Winning broad support and participation of a state's post-secondary institutions is perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of a successful agreement, but many states have yet to win this support. For example, a 1999 survey from Ignash and Townsend found that only 34 states (of 43 responding) had statewide agreements, and of those only 7 had agreements that included the state's public and private post-secondary institutions.¹⁰ Even in states with wide institutional support, some exempt flagship state colleges create even more challenges for transfer students hoping to access the state's premier institutions.

Common course numbering across institutions can be a powerful strategy to facilitate the transfer of credits

across institutions. In Florida, where common course numbering has been in place since the 1970s, all public community college and four-year institutions number their courses in the state numbering scheme and accept credits as numbered when receiving students. A well-functioning course numbering system, however, must address a couple of key issues. First, the numbering strategy must classify courses in widely understood categories without over-specifying curriculum content. In Florida, this is accomplished by allowing institutions to determine course content, credits, and titles, and, based on the course content, propose a statewide course number. A faculty committee reviews the materials and verifies that the course number is appropriate.¹¹ Subject committees are brought together when course themes and categories need to be reconsidered.

A second concern with statewide course numbering is ensuring common rigor in courses across institutions. This is especially important for core courses, since they are typically taken in the first two years of post-secondary school and are the classes students are most likely to transfer and build upon as they pursue advanced courses. If receiving institutions are not confident that the courses in the sending institutions are of comparable quality to their own, the receiving institution will be reluctant to accept credits from these sending institutions and the students will lose valuable credits, time, and money. A recent examination of transfer and articulation policies in Illinois illustrates how such a situation seemed to undermine the state's policy efforts. In this case, the state's largest state university questioned the quality of courses taken at other colleges and, as a result, continued to use its own transfer guidelines instead of those specified in the state transfer and articulation agreements.¹²

A comprehensive approach to course numbering has its detractors. Critics argue that building a system like Florida's would be too time consuming, fraught with conflict, and too difficult to ensure quality. Instead of full course numbering schemes, some states opt to provide course content guides or make no effort

to specify courses across institutions. A possible compromise may be to focus common numbering on the core courses.

Finally, the goal and spirit of transfer and articulation has to reach the student level. Common general and programmatic requirements need to truly inform student course taking as they prepare to transfer, especially as they build up their core courses. To ensure this happens, student advisors need to be well versed in these requirements and inform students early in their preparations.

Despite finding little association between transfer and articulation policies and student outcomes, these policies can still be of tremendous help to institutions as they send and receive transfer students. With a more fluid transfer system, both students and institutions can minimize the costs associated with transferring. However, turning attention to the administrative goals associated with these policies may mean focusing on curriculum articulation and maximizing the reach of the policies, and assessing the policy's success based on administrative outcomes, such as costs and time to process a transfer student and percent of credits transferred.

Recommendations

Looking across our findings, other research, and feedback from post-secondary administrators, we offer three recommendations:

Look to the institutions for student outcomes

We began our investigation of transfer and articulation policies hoping to see a relationship between state efforts and student outcomes, but instead we found that institutional factors associated with the connection between students and instructors correspond more closely with student transfer and attainment outcomes than do state policies. It is possible that the federal data available to researchers are so limited that

they obscure any effects of these policies. However, it does seem that state-level policy providing an overarching structure to academic curriculum and programs may simply be overshadowed by students' life circumstances, experiences on campus, and experiences in the classroom when students make educational decisions.

Efforts to bolster the rate at which students transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and the chance that they ultimately earn a bachelor's degree should focus on the post-secondary institutions themselves, particularly on the connections between students and faculty. An example of on-going policy and research initiatives that focus on the institutional level is MDRC's "Achieving the Dream" and "Opening Doors." Through a partnership between a research center and community college institutions, these initiatives include efforts to analyze institutional factors, specific programs, and practices aimed at improving outcomes for community college students.

Consider the administrative benefits of transfer and articulation policies

Transfer and articulation policies may be most valuable in their ability to improve administrative efficiency in receiving and sending transfer students. Though these benefits may be difficult to connect to student outcomes, they are certainly important to institutions that often face tight budget constraints. Future examinations of transfer and articulation policies should assess the policies based on their impact on administrative outcomes, including (but not limited to) the resources devoted to reviewing and completing credit transfers, and courses repeated by students during a transfer.

Focus on the academic core

Looking at the administrative benefits of transfer and articulation policies draws our attention to the quality of articulation systems—creating common understandings and expectations for course

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content and rigor across institutions. Articulation across institutions needs to be balanced against an institution's freedom to develop and teach courses in keeping with their traditions. Given the critical nature of core courses in building a students' educational foundation, and how important it is that all students have the basic skills that advanced faculty expect, states aiming to strengthen the curriculum articulation across institutions may focus first on the academic core, which most students obtain in the first two years of post-secondary education. In so doing the state will address the lion's share of courses students attempt to transfer while reserving judgment on advanced classes, which no doubt are the most difficult to classify.

Meeting Demands in Difficult Times

Since the full weight of the economic downturn hit U.S. students and workers, the number of community colleges reporting booming enrollments has been startling. Though it is too early to know the extent of the enrollment growth, the early reports are significant. For example, enrollment in California's community colleges is projected to grow by 10.2 percent this year.¹³ Of course, this expansion is happening at exactly the same time states are cutting budgets. Although direct benefits to students have not been realized, to the extent that these policies can save resources for the classroom, they will be welcomed and valued.



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Endnotes

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