

# Takes Two to Tango: Essential Practices of Highly Effective Transfer Partnerships

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to describe practices of 2- and 4-year institutional partnerships effective in supporting transfer student success. **Method:** Using student records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) for the entire 2007 fall cohort of first-time-in-college community college students nationwide, researchers identified partnerships of 2- and 4-year institutions that were more effective than expected (controlling for student and institutional characteristics) in enabling community college entrants to transfer to a 4-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree. Based on this methodology, and in partnership with the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, researchers visited six pairs of 2- and 4-year college transfer partnerships identified as high performers, interviewing more than 350 faculty, student-facing and senior-level staff, and transfer students. **Results:** From these in-depth interviews, researchers identified a set of essential transfer practices common among these highly effective institutional partnerships. The practices were grouped under three broad strategies: (a) make transfer a priority, (b) create clear programmatic pathways with aligned high-quality instruction, and (c) provide tailored transfer advising. **Contributions:** This study offers a set of essential transfer practices culled from national fieldwork to 2- and 4-year institutional transfer partnerships identified using NSC data as highly effective in supporting transfer student success.

## Keywords

transfer, articulation, student services, institutional partnerships, leadership

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Community colleges are the entry point for many students who aspire to attain a 4-year degree, but few transfer and even fewer earn bachelor's degrees. While an estimated 80% of entering community college students intend to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, within 6 years only one third transfer to a 4-year institution and less than 15% earn a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Community college students who intend to transfer and earn bachelor's degrees encounter numerous barriers, including accumulating college credits at a lower rate than their peers who start at 4-year colleges (Xu, Jaggars, & Fletcher, 2016); losing community college credits upon transfer to the 4-year college (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Simone, 2014); encountering barriers to social and academic integration at the 4-year institution (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Masse, 2013); and accumulating more credits than required among those who manage to complete a bachelor's degree (Cullinane, 2014; Xu et al., 2016). Moreover, a surprising number of students who intend to earn a bachelor's degree and make substantial progress at a community college—in some cases earning 60 or more credits or even earning an associate degree—do not end up transferring at all (Xu et al., 2016).

The barriers to transfer are created by the practices of both community colleges and 4-year institutions; in order to remove them, both institutions need to change how they serve students, both individually and in partnership with one another. As Bahr et al. (2013) pointed out in their extensive review of the literature on the experience and outcomes of community college students who transfer to 4-year institutions: "To quote an old adage, 'it takes two to tango.' Both the community college and the four-year institution share responsibility for the outcomes of community college transfer students" (p. 461). While there is a substantial body of research on the experiences and outcomes of community college transfer students (e.g., Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Laanan, 1996; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011; for a review, see Bahr et al., 2013), we focus more specifically on the performance of partnerships of community colleges and 4-year colleges in helping students who start at community colleges to transfer and complete bachelor's degrees. We utilize the national variation in the performance of transfer partnerships by identifying and conducting field research at highly effective partnerships to identify common practices and policies they use to serve transfer students.

## **Background on Effective Transfer Partnerships**

While there is much literature on the student experience of transfer, transfer barriers, and transfer success rates (see Bahr et al., 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012), studies that seek to measure the effects of institutions on transfer student outcomes are somewhat limited. Researchers examining institutional performance within states (Carrell & Kurlaender, 2016; Ehrenberg & Smith, 2002) and nationally (Jenkins & Fink, 2016) have found that certain colleges are more effective than others in helping students transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Carrell and Kurlaender (2016) tracked multiple cohorts of former high school students who subsequently enrolled at California's community colleges and transferred to one of the California State Universities (CSU). The authors measured community college performance with transfer in two ways: how

productive the college was at transferring its students to one of the CSUs, and how successful the college's transfer students were in completing bachelor's degrees at the CSUs. Adjusting for student demographics, high school achievement and quality, and some institutional inputs (i.e., size, faculty-to-student ratio, proximity to CSUs, and academic/occupational program mix), the authors found that some of the community colleges were more effective than others at both transferring students to CSUs and preparing their transfer students for success at the CSUs. The authors also found small positive associations between these measures of success and the community college having larger student populations and being located closer to a CSU. Similarly, Ehrenberg and Smith (2002) measured the performance of colleges in helping transfer students earn bachelor's degrees, but the authors were not limited in their analysis to the performance of community colleges. Using data on a sample of students who transferred from the State University of New York's (SUNY) 2-year schools to SUNY's 4-year institutions, Ehrenberg and Smith (2002) found large variation in the performance of 2- and 4-year institutions within the state based on the number of students transferring-out of 2-year colleges or transferring-in to 4-year institutions who earned a bachelor's degree. The researchers also ranked the state's 2- and 4-year colleges, taking into account student characteristics, and grouped high- and low-performing institutions within the state.

Recent descriptive work from Jenkins and Fink (2016) further showed that community college and 4-year college transfer performance varies nationally, both within and across states. Using student-level data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) on a cohort of students who started higher education in a community college and were tracked over 6 years, Jenkins and Fink found that 33% of entering community college students transferred to a 4-year college (ranging from 19% to 52% by state) and 42% of students transferring-into public 4-year colleges completed bachelor's degrees (ranging from 6% to 55% by state). In addition to state variation in average transfer performance, Jenkins and Fink showed large variation among individual community colleges and 4-year colleges on the transfer performance metrics. While useful in demonstrating the variation in colleges' transfer performance, Carrell and Kurlaender (2016), Ehrenberg and Smith (2002), and Jenkins and Fink (2016) each examined the performance of 2- and 4-year institutions separately, leaving unstudied the effectiveness of partnerships between pairs of 2- and 4-year institutions.

There are very few studies of the effectiveness of 2- and 4-year institutions working in partnership to support transfer student success. However, Kisker's (2007) case study of the transfer partnerships between a public university in southern California and its major community college partners provided rich descriptions of how 2- and 4-year colleges can build and maintain effective transfer partnerships. Using network embeddedness theory as a conceptual framework (Gulati, 1998), Kisker (2007) interviewed faculty and staff at each college to understand how the accomplishments and challenges of the transfer partnerships could be explained through the relationships within and across the partnering organizations. Kisker found that previously established and sustained relationships between partners were important for effective collaboration, along with support from campus leaders, adequate funding, and a university

presence at the community college. Some of the challenges the study described in sustaining transfer partnerships include limitations on faculty time to be involved in partnership efforts, as well as confusion about which partner is responsible for sustaining the relationship. In addition, newer partnerships with fewer embedded social networks would have more difficulty establishing trusting and collaborative working relationships.

Since Kisker's (2007) study, a number of reports have described the *best practices* of transfer partnerships between community colleges and 4-year colleges. In 2012, the College Board convened the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, a group of educational leaders, scholars, and policymakers, to examine strategies for strengthening transfer pathways for community college transfer students. The Commission's report (Handel & Williams, 2012) concludes with a set of recommendations calling for both 2- and 4-year institutions to collectively create "transfer-affirming cultures" (p. 58). For community colleges, the report recommended helping students identify transfer destinations early and providing well-articulated transfer curricula. Some of the recommendations for 4-year institutions included outreaching to prospective transfer students, conducting transfer credit evaluations transparently and prior to admission, and setting aside financial aid for transfer students. These recommendations are consistent with other reports, such as the evaluation of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Community College Transfer Initiative (Burack, Lanspery, Shields, & Singleton, 2014) and Jenkins, Kadlec, and Votruba's (2014) set of "model university transfer practices" (p. 8). Partnerships between community colleges and universities have also been in focus as a part of guided pathways reforms, as introduced in the book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). A core principle of guided pathway reforms at community colleges is to "start with the end in mind" and backward design educational programs, which requires intentional planning and partnership with 4-year institutions to create clearer pathways for community college students who intend to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. They recommend that community colleges work with university partners to map out default curricular pathways to decrease transfer credit loss and increase the likelihood that students transfer and graduate.

The existing literature on how transfer partnerships can best support student success draws on institutions selected by reputation or convenience rather than on evidence of their relative effectiveness. We build upon the current understanding of how transfer partnerships can most effectively support student success by investigating the practices of transfer partnerships across the country identified using data on student outcomes and regression analysis to determine strong performers.

## Method

### *Identifying High-Performing Partnerships*

To understand the essential practices of strong transfer partnerships, we sought to identify those community college and 4-year college partnerships that, after controlling for

student demographics and institutional characteristics, were most effective in enabling community college entrants to transfer to a 4-year college and earn a bachelor's degree. Building from Kisker's (2007) focus to the performance of partnerships of 2- and 4-year institutions in supporting transfer student success, our analysis identified highly effective pairs of institutions as the final unit of analysis. To identify these effective partnerships, we analyzed student enrollment and degree attainment records from the NSC for the approximately 1.2 million students nationwide who entered higher education for the first time at a community college in Fall 2007, excluding those who were below 18 years of age presumed to have been enrolled through high school dual enrollment arrangements. In the Fall 2007 semester, the NSC reported a 92% national coverage rate of community college enrollments, including 800 community colleges with at least one student who subsequently enrolled at a 4-year college (our definition of a transfer student). We tracked students for 7 years from Fall 2007 through Fall 2014, calculating transfer student graduation rates for community colleges and 4-year colleges using definition of "transfer-out" and "transfer-in" completion rates, respectively (see Jenkins & Fink, 2016). To identify partnerships where both the 2- and 4-year institution were contributing to exceptionally positive outcomes, selecting sites based on the performance of the overall partnership would not ensure that both institutions were contributing to the outcomes. Therefore, we took a two-step analytic approach, where first we identified highly effective community colleges and then identified those community colleges' highly effective 4-year partners. To more fairly compare institutions, we used a *value-added* approach, comparing *residuals* for each institution in a transfer partnership from regression equations that controlled for student and college characteristics. Technical results from these analyses can be found in Xu, Ran, Fink, Jenkins, and Dundar (2017).

*Identifying strong community colleges.* In the first step of the partnership selection procedure, we identified high-performing community colleges. To do so, multiple regression analysis was utilized to predict community colleges' transfer student bachelor's completion rates, controlling for state fixed effects and a number of college characteristics (i.e., student population composition by race and socioeconomic status, institutional resources, urbanicity, and program mix, see Xu et al., 2016, Table 6). The inclusion of state fixed effects and college characteristic variables in the multiple regression analysis was based on related prior research modeling factors influential in predicting community college performance (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Jenkins, 2007). Each college's expected bachelor's completion rate was then subtracted from the college's actual bachelor's completion rate, yielding a bachelor's completion rate *residual* for each community college. A positive residual indicates that the institution's actual performance is higher than its expected performance based on student and institutional characteristics. In selecting a group of high-performing community colleges, colleges were only included if they had more than 30 transfer-outs from the Fall 2007 cohort which was the median number for community colleges in the data set; a high actual transfer-out bachelor's completion rate above the national median; and a positive residual when subtracting the model-predicted completion rate from the college's actual completion rate. Applying these thresholds

identified 143 community colleges from the original sample of 800 colleges for the second-stage analysis.

*Identifying strong 4-year transfer partners.* The goal of the second stage of our analysis was to identify receiving 4-year colleges with better-than-expected baccalaureate completion rates for students who transferred from one of the 143 community colleges identified in step one. To focus the analysis on transfer partnerships where there is a substantial flow of students, we selected 4-year partners that received 15% or more of their community college transfers from one of the top community colleges and were one of the community colleges' top five transfer destinations. After this restriction, 177 transfer partnerships remained in the sample with some colleges having multiple partnerships. We used a multiple regression analysis to predict the bachelor's completion rate of students transferring between each community college and 4-year college pair, controlling for a number of 4-year institution characteristics (i.e., student population composition by race and socioeconomic status, institutional resources, urbanicity, and selectivity, see Xu et al., 2016, Table 7). Similar to the first stage of this procedure, a *dyad residual* value was derived for each transfer partnership by subtracting each partnership's expected bachelor's completion rate from the actual bachelor's completion rate.

*Screening finalists for fieldwork.* The authors and staff members at the Aspen Institute's College Excellent Program conducted phone interviews with college leaders at 12 transfer partnerships, 24 institutions total, with the highest *dyad residual* values. Calls were used both to gauge the college's interest in participating in the study and to assess whether the college's strong outcomes were the result of intentional, replicable practices as opposed to idiosyncratic situations or characteristics. This process was used to ensure that findings from the fieldwork would be useful to other institutions seeking to improve their transfer outcomes. The calls were guided by a semistructured interview protocol asking college leaders to describe why they believed their transfer outcomes are strong; what they have done to achieve such strong outcomes including dedicated resources, policies, and practices to support transfer success; which transfer partners they consider to be their strongest partners and why; and the college's biggest unaddressed transfer-related challenges. After each call, the interviewers rated the extent to which the college leadership demonstrated an understanding of the challenges to transfer success, understanding of the strategies to improve transfer success, and an understanding of the results of existing transfer success strategies. After the calls were completed, we selected six transfer partnerships for site visits based on the results from our ratings of the screening calls and colleges' interest in participation. We also prioritized visiting partnerships in different states to provide variation in state policy context (see Table 1). At two of the sites, we visited two 4-year transfer university partners for additional context.

## Fieldwork

*Site visit procedure.* A team of four researchers, including the authors and staff members at the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, conducted each of the six

**Table 1.** High-Performing Transfer Partnerships Visited by State.

State	Community colleges	Four-year institutions
Colorado	Front Range Community College	Colorado State University
Connecticut	Manchester Community College	Eastern Connecticut State University
Florida	Broward College	Florida International University Florida Atlantic University
Louisiana	Louisiana State University–Eunice	University of Louisiana Lafayette
Massachusetts	Holyoke Community College	University of Massachusetts Amherst
Washington	Everett Community College	University of Washington Western Washington University

site visits, which took place in the spring and fall of 2015. We spent 1 day at each institution interviewing administrators (i.e., president, vice presidents/provost, deans, chairs, admissions, institutional research), faculty, student services staff (i.e., advisors, orientation and financial aid staff), and transfer students using semistructured interview and focus group protocols. In total, we visited 14 institutions and conducted 120 interviews or focus groups with more than 350 faculty, staff, administrators, and transfer students. One to three administrators and staff members participated in each interview, and focus groups with faculty, advisors, and students typically included six to 10 participants each. The interviews and focus groups were arranged by a site contact who scheduled interviews with requested administrators and staff members and utilized convenience sampling to fill the focus groups.

*Protocols and analysis.* Protocols for the interviews were constructed using previous reports detailing the “best practices” of community colleges and 4-year colleges for supporting transfer student success (Burack et al., 2014; Handel & Williams, 2012; Jenkins, Kadlec, & Votruba, 2014) and customized by our research team based on the most relevant topics for each of the groups we interviewed. The interview protocols included a series of questions related to five broad areas common across previous reports: (a) institutional commitment and strategy; (b) data and information sharing; (c) programmatic collaboration; (d) curricular alignment; and (e) recruitment, advising, and student support. After each site visit, the research team synthesized notes and findings through debriefing meetings and produced individual site reports. The transfer partnership site reports detailed the relevant context, key themes, prominent practices and policies, and challenges observed during each visit. Each member of the research team independently reviewed the site reports, pulling out major themes, and gathering a set of practices observed across the institutions visited. We then met to discuss our findings and identified broader themes based on the individual review of the site reports. As a result, we detailed a number of *essential transfer practices* which were most commonly observed from our individual coding grouped into three broad themes described in the following section. As a check on our coding and identification of themes, we reviewed the original protocols used for the site visits and considered how the five broad areas from previous best practices reports aligned with our themes.

## Results

Analysis resulted in three broad strategies common among the six high-performing transfer partnerships: (a) make transfer a priority, (b) create clear programmatic pathways with aligned high-quality instruction, and (c) provide tailored transfer student advising.

### *Strong Transfer Partnerships Make Transfer a Priority*

*Connect transfer to the mission.* Leaders at both 2- and 4-year institutions among the high-performing transfer partnerships shared the importance of communicating how student transfer is a key component of the institution's mission. For example, President William Messner of Holyoke Community College (HCC) has intentionally worked to build and sustain a transfer culture by infusing the topic of transfer whenever possible into conversations he has with faculty and staff, as well as recognizing those who have forged partnerships with programs at local 4-year colleges. HCC's culture of commitment to transfer is also reflected in the college's hiring practices. "We prioritize folks who buy into and reflect the ethos of the place," Messner explained, resulting in the hiring of "people who are steeped in transfer; it's the norm around here."

Personal involvement by presidents is critically important to prioritizing transfer—particularly in the context of interinstitutional relationships. When Bruce Shepard was appointed president of Western Washington University (WWU) in 2008, he found that transfer was not a core focus at the university and resolved to make it so. President Shepard began to convene community college leaders in the region and asked them how WWU could better serve transfer students. His personal involvement in these meetings sends a signal to WWU faculty and staff, as well as the leaders of regional community colleges, that, "in the crush of everything else going on, [transfer] is a priority."

*Use data to make the case to improve transfer.* Leaders at colleges who engaged in strong transfer partnerships collected, analyzed, and strategically used data on transfer students, disaggregated by student race, age, income, and sending/receiving institution, to build awareness about the importance of transfer at their institutions. For example, leaders at WWU used data to dispel the myth that transfer students could not excel academically, showing the faculty that transfer students' grade point averages (GPAs) dip immediately after they enroll but then recover over time termed transfer shock in the literature (see Hill, 1965). At Colorado State University (CSU), an administrator recalled conducting an informal survey which indicated that colleagues thought transfer students accounted for no more than 10% of the undergraduate student body when, in fact, transfer students were 40% of all undergraduates. In response, CSU issued a report on transfer student enrollment and outcomes to dispel this and other misconceptions. At Everett Community College (EvCC), administrators said that before the college began its major transfer improvement campaign about a decade ago,



many faculty and staff believed that the majority of EvCC's students achieved their transfer goals. This belief led to faculty and staff resistance to early reform efforts. When EvCC's leaders shared that, of 4,000 students who indicated a goal of transferring to a 4-year college, fewer than 400 successfully transferred, the resistance abated and many faculty and staff readily joined the campaign. Since then, EvCC's transfer and subsequent graduation rates have substantially improved; between 2007 and 2012, the student transfer rate increased 47%, and between 2007 and 2010, the 4-year bachelor's degree graduation rate among students who transferred increased by 57% (J. Olson, personal communication, April 5, 2016).

*Resource investment.* Improving the transfer process often requires resources. The leaders of the high-performing transfer institutions all expressed a conviction that the benefits of improved transfer outcomes outweigh their costs. For example, faculty and staff often need release time to align and clarify program pathways between transfer partners, but these strengthened pathways can improve retention rates and increase the likelihood that students' credits will transfer and count toward their degree program. Establishing a visible presence on partners' campuses is another investment with a high return. Florida International University (FIU) and Broward College jointly established an off-campus building where faculty and staff from each institution collaborate on programs. EvCC created a university center where university partners offer bachelor's degree programs on the EvCC campus which, according to an EvCC leader, creates "the excitement of university presence on their campus." By dedicating the necessary institutional resources to improve transfer student outcomes, leaders at these community colleges and universities signaled to their internal and external stakeholders that transfer students deserve the same opportunity to succeed at their institutions as do native students.

### ***Strong Transfer Partnerships Create Clear Programmatic Pathways With Aligned High-Quality Instruction***

*Collaborate to clarify the pathway.* At each of the high-performing transfer partnerships, there was evidence of the two partners working together to create clarity about the steps students should take to attain a bachelor's degree. Often, these partners had developed major-specific pathways, or transfer program maps, that presented the courses students should take at the community college, offered a suggested course sequence, clarified major-specific prerequisites, and suggested extracurricular activities such that transfer students could successfully transfer to the 4-year partner with junior standing in their desired major. For example, in Washington the community colleges and public 4-year colleges have collaborated to create statewide, field-specific transfer agreements called Direct Transfer Agreements. EvCC has further customized these agreements based on the college's major transfer destinations. Using the major-specific transfer guides, students at EvCC can see recommended courses to take prior to transfer including major prerequisites, be alerted to exceptions for each of EvCC's major transfer destinations, and identify program advisors who can help students develop their academic plans.

At some of the transfer partnerships, interviewees said that some students' course requirements for their intended major could not always be easily completed at a community college. For instance, rural community colleges may not offer extensive laboratory science courses or courses that require studio equipment. In these cases, a typical two-plus-two program map—2 years at the community college followed by 2 years at the 4-year college—may not be the best path to student success. Indeed, a few effective transfer partners identified alternative pathways to better serve students. For example, at Front Range Community College (FRCC), a review of student outcomes data revealed that FRCC had struggled to offer 2 years of the specialized coursework necessary to prepare students in engineering. In partnership with the Colorado School of Mines (Mines), FRCC established a one-plus-three transfer program in engineering where FRCC students, in their first year, take 15 credits aligned to a Mines' 4-year engineering degree. After this first year, FRCC students transfer to Mines to complete their bachelor's degree.

*Prepare students for success in upper-level coursework.* Beyond outlining the sequence of courses that students need to successfully transfer to 4-year colleges in their intended majors, faculty at the high-performing community colleges focused on how to teach courses at a level of rigor sufficient to prepare students to meet the expectations of 4-year college-level instruction. For example, an engineering faculty member at EvCC described how he changes his instruction over time to prepare students for success in engineering courses at the University of Washington and other 4-year colleges. In his first-year courses, he takes a very hands-on and supportive approach, allowing students to rewrite papers and retake exams. As student's progress into their second year, his policies become stricter so that, eventually, students complete their coursework independently, because that is what faculty in their upper-division coursework will require. Faculty and staff at community colleges recognized that transfer students need access to opportunities for in- and out-of-class experiences, like internships, to be prepared for upper-level coursework and future careers. HCC's learning communities enroll hundreds of students each semester and are organized around areas of academic interest, including several courses co-taught by English and science faculty. These interdisciplinary courses are designed to deliver the kind of enriched learning experience HCC believes students will need prior to be prepared for upper-division coursework at a 4-year college.

*Regularly update and improve program maps.* Program maps are only effective if they reflect the most current course requirements and degree pathways. Interviewees at each of the transfer partnerships indicated that program maps need to be regularly updated as curricular changes are inevitable. To keep program maps updated, faculty and administrators at the high-performing transfer partnerships had established channels through which they proactively communicated programmatic changes. Leaders at Broward College and FIU established a process whereby faculty and staff meet annually to review student outcomes data and discuss curricula, teaching methods, and course learning outcomes. These meetings are designed to collectively identify

strengths and gaps in existing program maps. At HCC, administrative leaders invited university faculty to serve on program review committees for programs aimed at transfer. This provides a structure for periodic feedback about gaps in 2-year program offerings from the 4-year perspective. As a result of input from 4-year partners, HCC has updated program maps for several of its programs.

### ***Strong Transfer Partnerships Provide Tailored Transfer Student Advising***

In addition to streamlining the curricular transfer pathway, the high-performing transfer partnerships provided tailored transfer student advising and support to help students decide which pathway to follow, navigate the transfer process, and offer encouragement and support along the way. The community colleges and 4-year colleges had overlapping but distinct advising priorities related to transfer students.

*Community college advising practices.* The high-performing community colleges prioritized helping students explore and select a field of study and potential transfer destinations as early as possible to ensure that the courses students take at the community college will be applicable to a bachelor's degree in their desired major field of study at their intended transfer destination. For example, advisors at EvCC and their partner WWU jointly communicate to students the importance of early major selection. A student at EvCC indicated that when noted that transfer was a goal, his advisor immediately asked, "What do you plan to major in and where do you want to go?" WWU admissions counselors reinforce this message by insisting students be major-ready when they transfer.

Many students enter community college undecided or uncertain about their field of study. Louisiana State University at Eunice (LSU Eunice) matches new students with advisors during their required orientation through a sort of major speed dating process. Students first meet with an advisor in a field that interests them, and then are encouraged to move around to different advising groups as they narrow or change their focus. The heads of the college's three academic divisions are responsible for helping students who select a focus area—but are not firmly committed—to explore and identify areas of interest as soon as possible, but ideally by the student's second term. The division heads either do this advising directly or by assigning these students to faculty members in their division who specialize in the advising of undecided students.

The high-performing community colleges monitor students' progress along their transfer plan, intervening quickly when students are off-track. Staff and faculty interviewed at LSU Eunice and EvCC shared that every student is required to have a degree plan and meet with their program-specific faculty advisor to register for classes. These faculty advisors closely monitor students' progress toward degree plan completion. Similarly, at HCC, academic advisors and financial aid staff use DegreeWorks advising software to ensure students are sticking with their academic plans and not falling off-track. Administrators and financial aid advisors at HCC emphasized the importance of helping students make a financial plan through to bachelor's degree completion (not just to the associate degree) to ensure that students do not exhaust their

financial aid and other resources before they earn a bachelor's. To do this, HCC counselors developed a budget template that outlines the predicted costs for each year of study until bachelor's completion and the longer-term repayment implications of loans students may take out. In addition, HCC counselors update students each year on their lifetime aid eligibility so students are aware of the amount of aid they can still receive.

*Four-year college advising practices.* The 4-year college partners exhibited a commitment to supporting transfer students before, during, and after they matriculated from their community college partner. Advisors and other support staff at these 4-year colleges provided prospective students and their community college advisors with detailed information about the admissions process, financial aid, cost of attendance, and course requirements for students' intended majors. These high-performing 4-year college partners also provided a robust onboarding process that involved regular meetings with their advisors. In addition to assigning advisors to work with transfer students once they arrive at FIU, FIU employs several bridge advisors who are located on Broward College and Miami Dade College's (MDC) campuses. These bridge advisors help students explore options for a major at FIU which they are required to declare upon applying to FIU and gauge a prospective student's progress or transfer-readiness by reviewing the student's intended major, GPA, and completion of prerequisites. At other 4-year colleges, admissions staff do not require but strongly encourage students to select a major prior to transfer. At WWU, advisors repeatedly emphasize to prospective students that WWU considers whether students are prepared for their intended major in the admission process and gives preference to students who are major-ready.

Student services staff at the 4-year colleges sought to replicate elements of the first-year experience for transfer students. At CSU, the transfer student orientation is designed to demonstrate that the university is a welcoming destination for transfer students, and to recognize the value of transfer students' prior experiences. For example, CSU hires former transfer students to lead the transfer orientations to establish more credibility and encourage a sense of belonging among incoming transfer students. CSU leaders also changed their transfer orientation program to be offered earlier in the summer instead of immediately before the semester to ensure that new transfer students could register for classes before returning students so that they would not be shut out of classes they need. Another disparity that transfer students can encounter is less availability of institutional aid, as 4-year colleges often prioritize incoming freshman when they distribute aid packages. Usually, transfer students—who are generally admitted *after* incoming freshman—are last in line for these resources. One of the students commented,

I applied to [a specific 4-year university] as a freshman and got scholarships but chose to attend a community college first. Then I applied [to the same university] as a transfer student and didn't get [scholarships]. Where did they go?

Some administrators at the 4-year colleges recognized how the inequity in financial aid distribution can create another barrier to degree completion for transfer students.

These leaders were able to increase aid to transfer students either directly or by ensuring that transfer students were included in broader aid initiatives. For example, in 2011, President Tony Frank of CSU ensured that the new Commitment to Colorado program, which covers tuition and fees for any admitted Colorado resident who is Pell-eligible, included eligible transfer students. Similarly, FIU has an upper-division grant aid for full-time students to promote completion which, in 2014, it made available to incoming transfer students.

## Discussion

The strong transfer partnerships in six different states, identified nationally for their better-than-expected performance helping students who start at a community college to transfer and earn bachelor's degrees, engaged in numerous practices to support transfer student success. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with faculty, staff, and students, our research team identified three broad strategies encompassing essential transfer practices across these high-performing partnerships: These transfer partnerships exhibited a strong commitment to transfer students; forged clear transfer pathways to best prepare students for success at the 4-year college; and provided tailored transfer student advising and support from students' entry at a community college to bachelor's completion. Readers are directed to Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, and Fink (2016) for additional examples of the essential transfer practices described in this article.

Findings from this study are consistent with previous work describing best practices of transfer partnerships. Similar to findings from Kisker's (2007) case study of one university and its main community college partners, highly effective transfer partnerships developed collaborative working relationships, particularly among deans, department chairs, and faculty. Kisker suggested that one of the challenges in building and sustaining transfer partnerships was lack of clarity about who was responsible for the partnerships and the availability of resources, such as faculty and staff time to develop the partnerships. From our fieldwork, we find that campus leadership can effectively address these challenges by making transfer a clear institutional priority, thereby creating an environment where strong communication and collaboration between partners is encouraged.

Leadership and support for transfer student success at the 4-year college is particularly important as 4-year college academic departments determine program requirements and prerequisites, which transfer students must know in order to efficiently select and transfer their community college coursework. A recent study of the transfer policies in 10 states impressed how critical well-articulated transfer pathways may be for greater credit transfer efficiency. Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, and Mazzeo (2016) argued that structured articulation agreements, which specify both general education and premajor coursework, would better enable students to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree with fewer wasted credits. We found that when academic departments collaborate to create and maintain clear curricular pathways for transfer students with support from campus leadership, the resulting transfer program maps

enable transfer students to count all of their credits toward their bachelor's degree program. Among the strong partnerships, the 4-year colleges were active partners, concerned not only about smooth transition and integration of transfer students into the 4-year college community, and successful completion of the bachelor's degree, but about the preparation of students prior to transfer. Active participation from the 4-year college in clarifying student transfer pathways was crucial to the success of the strong transfer partnerships.

There is also substantial overlap between findings from this study and principles and recommendations from guided pathway reforms, which have developed significant momentum in the field since the release of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (RACC; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). In RACC, the authors recommend to increase community college student success, colleges need to comprehensively reform to create more structured pathways aligned with student supports services. Guided pathways reforms require not only clearer curricular alignment but also redesigned student intake, advising, and support to help students enter pathways, and successfully achieve their goals. Similarly, we found that while the strong transfer partnerships created well-articulated transfer program maps, they also ensured that students used those maps by providing support and advising as students explored, selected, and entered a transfer pathway at the community college and then transitioned to the new 4-year college environment. Some of the community colleges were thinking about the future of their transfer work from a guided pathways perspective, considering how to better engage dual enrollment students in conversations about their transfer programs. Based on our observations and preliminary work happening at some of the sites, a future direction for these partnerships would be to engage school districts, community colleges, 4-year colleges, and local industries to develop regionally focused educational pipelines to in-demand careers.

Our analysis to identify transfer partnerships nationally yielded more than 44,000 unique partnerships with at least one student transferring from a community college to a 4-year college. Given the myriad combinations of institutional partners, it may be that institutions, which have finite resources to invest in transfer, should focus on their major transfer partners to maximize their impact with students. Also, we found that collaboration at the department level was critical to the success of the transfer partnerships. Further research could investigate special considerations for transfer partnerships within specific disciplines, as recent work suggested that transfer pathways within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and computer science are particularly challenging for students (Jaggars, Fink, Fletcher, & Dundar, 2016; Lyon & Denner, 2016). Transfer outcomes overall require substantial improvement, and the variation in partnership performance suggests there is much to learn from highly effective partnerships on how to better support community college students' aspirations to transfer and earn bachelor's degrees.

Research on institutional transfer practices and the student experience of transfer (e.g., Bahr et al., 2013; Kadlec & Gupta, 2014; Lewis, Reeves Bracco, Moore, Nodine, & Venezia, 2016), combined with less-than-desirable transfer outcomes (Jenkins &

Fink, 2016), indicates that the kinds of practices in these high-performing partnerships are rare. Although transfer is a central element of most community colleges' missions, in most colleges advising and other support for transfer students is generally limited and passive (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014). Community colleges report to the U.S. Department of Education the rate at which students transfer to 4-year institutions, but many do not look at whether those students earn a bachelor's degrees, from which institutions, and in what programs. For their part, 4-year institutions provide intensive supports to students who enter as freshmen, but often do relatively little to support transfer students. Many 4-year institutions do not monitor progress and outcomes for transfer students, even when those students represent a large proportion—in some cases the majority—of their entering students. Given the potential for the community college transfer route to the baccalaureate and beyond to advance the completion agenda, upward social mobility, and regional workforce and economic development, improving the effectiveness of partnerships between community colleges and universities in supporting transfer student success is critically important.

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