

To Improve Community College Transfer in Texas, Students Need Better Information

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community college students in Texas lack essential information about state transfer policies. With better resources, students could take courses more efficiently at community college and position themselves to complete their bachelor's degree after transfer. To improve the state's investment in higher education, policymakers and other stakeholders should clarify existing transfer policies and increase the quality of student-facing information about transfer. Improving transfer in Texas will advance equity and reduce students' costs and the time it takes them to complete a four-year degree.

Many college students who enter higher education through community colleges are students of color or students from low-income households who see community college as an affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree. Despite their high aspirations, only 32% of students who enter community college ultimately transfer, and only 13% earn a bachelor's degree.¹ One barrier to degree attainment is "credit loss"—when earned credits from community college are not applicable at the four-year college. In Texas, multiple transfer policies and course transfer agreements between colleges known as institutional articulation agreements attempt to prevent this problem.

Three state policies that affect community college students' ability to successfully transfer to a four-year college and ultimately earn a bachelor's degree include: (1) the *Texas Core Curriculum*—a set of courses that provide students with breadth of knowledge and are universally accepted at public colleges statewide; (2) *Field of Study Curricula*—additional lower-division coursework, available in specific majors, that must transfer between colleges and count toward a bachelor's degree; and (3) *Reverse Transfer*—a policy that allows for four-year credits to be transferred back to the community college to earn an associate degree.^{2,3}

However, there is very little information about how students experience and make sense of state-mandated policies. Once a year over the course of three years (2015-18), we interviewed 100 Central Texas community college students who planned to transfer to a four-year college. We studied how students perceive state transfer policies and how their understanding of the policies influenced their educational decisions.

This policy brief seeks to inform policymakers about the lack of information students receive on Texas transfer policies and suggest areas of improvement to help more students achieve their educational goals.

KEY FINDINGS

- > **There were serious gaps in students' knowledge about transfer policies.**
 - > Students were generally familiar with the Core curriculum. Students often assumed that Core curriculum courses would transfer and apply to their major at a four-year institution. This was often not the case, yet the college websites and advisors presented information in a way that led students to think Core credit would apply to degrees.
 - > There was virtually no knowledge about the Field of Study curriculum, even among students in a major with a Field of Study agreement available. In earlier work, we showed that community college advisors were often unaware of the Field of Study policy.⁴
 - > Students had no knowledge prior to transfer of Reverse Transfer policies.
- > **Most students want a clear set of steps to follow but cannot find all the information they need from a single source.**
 - > Any given source lacked complete information. For example, a college website was out-of-date and an advisor provided a transfer plan not specific to the student's major.
 - > Because most students followed a given transfer resource like a roadmap, students' success is dependent on the quality of the materials they receive.
 - > Incomplete transfer information can have serious consequences, leading students to waste time and money, and, for some, to mistrust the entire institution.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

- > **The current system puts undue burden on students to collect information from many sources.**
 - > Students who pieced together information and resources across sources (advisors, websites, representatives from four-year institutions) were the most informed and were able to leverage transfer policies strategically.
 - > Even students who strategize by comparing institutional degree plans and Core requirements faced confusion – they often must go against recommendations of advisors to find the most efficient pathway to a bachelor’s degree. Several decided not to complete the community college Core because many credits would not count toward their desired major at the four-year and would result in unnecessary elective credits.
- > **Some students recognized that earning an associate degree was irrelevant to their transfer aspirations.**
 - > For many students, earning an associate degree prior to transfer could result in excess credits.
 - > Some students opted instead to transfer as soon as possible, without earning an associate degree, to ensure a more efficient transfer process.
 - > There are conflicting messages from different institutions. Community colleges often encouraged students to complete an associate degree while some universities discouraged it.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In a context where there is a great deal of decentralization and coordination required from institutions, we find that there is no coherent policy message about transfer provided to students. Our recommendations focus on clarifying existing transfer policies and increasing the quality of student-facing information about transfer to improve the state’s investment in higher education.

1. The content and intent of state policies must be clarified so that students can use the policies and advocate for themselves. For example, students should specifically know how the Core curriculum relates to general education requirements and credit transfer.
2. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), or another entity, should create a transfer guide template for institutions to use that describes transfer policies, ways students can use the policies efficiently and effectively, and which courses will transfer and count toward a degree in a given major.
3. Transfer should be discussed at the initial community college student orientation to ensure that all students are aware of resources available on their campus and online.
4. College websites should be updated regularly to ensure all the necessary materials are available. Colleges must post and regularly update transfer guides for all existing transfer agreements.
5. The state should determine and encourage the most efficient relationship between transfer and associate degrees. Community colleges should work with common destination universities to make degrees more “stackable,” meaning all associate degree credits count toward a bachelor’s degree in the same major.

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