



# METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY CASE STUDY

A TACKLING TRANSFER REPORT | 2021





## AUTHOR

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## TACKLING TRANSFER

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, HCM Strategists, and Sova have joined together through the Tackling Transfer initiative to partner with institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners in Minnesota, Texas, and Virginia to dramatically improve transfer outcomes for baccalaureate-seeking students who begin at community colleges.

This comprehensive effort incorporates policy, practice, research, and strategic communications to foster the conditions for scaled and measurable improvements for baccalaureate-seeking transfer students, including the large number of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color who begin their education at community colleges.

**The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program** aims to advance higher education practices and leadership that significantly improve student learning, completion, and employment after college—especially for the many students from low-income backgrounds and students of color on American campuses.

**HCM Strategists** is a public policy and advocacy consulting firm committed to removing barriers and transforming how education is delivered. Our work focuses on developing sound public policy, aligning teaching and learning practices and advancing meaningful accountability and equitable strategic financing. HCM works to support leaders and organizations that prioritize the voices and outcomes of Black, Hispanic, Native American, recent immigrant, low-income and adult students.

**Sova** focuses on improving the quality and accelerating the pace of complex problem-solving in the areas of higher education and workforce development. Animated by a core commitment to advancing socioeconomic mobility for more Americans, Sova pursues its mission through distinctive approaches to will-building, strategic planning, change leadership and process improvement.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are also grateful for the national, state, and institutional transfer leaders who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences for the development of this report.

# BACKGROUND



Metropolitan State University was founded in 1971 as a college for students from the Twin Cities region of Minnesota who were not being adequately served by other universities in the area. Originally called Minnesota Metropolitan State College, the school was created to be exclusively an upper-division institution devoted to helping working adults complete their last two years of baccalaureate studies. Like other “universities without walls” launched in the 1960s and early 1970s, Metro State had no physical campus. Classes met in rented spaces around the region to widen access, and advisors worked with students to design an Individualized Studies Bachelor of Arts degree program that maximized credit for prior learning and work experience.

Despite starting small, with 50 students in its first class, and operating on the margins of Minnesota’s public higher education system for most of its first two decades in operation, Metropolitan State University has grown in recent decades to become a promising engine of post-secondary attainment in the Twin Cities where a majority of undergraduates and transfer students — as well as an overwhelming majority of students of color and first generation college students — reside. With a permanent campus opened in 1992, and the introduction of lower-division courses in 1994, Metro State now serves over 10,000 students as a comprehensive university offering more than 60 baccalaureate programs and upwards of 40 graduate programs. The university’s Bachelor of Science in Accounting program, with nearly 900 declared majors, is the largest in the state. Metro State boasts both the largest share of transfer students in the system and the lowest tuition of any public four-year institution in Minnesota.

While the university has in recent years seen an uptick in enrollment of native freshmen, it retains its fundamental mission to serve transfer students. With between 85-95 percent of its students transferring from other institutions — a majority of whom arrive with several transcripts — it remains overwhelmingly focused on helping students apply as much credit for past coursework and experience as possible. As President, Virginia (Ginny) Arthur has said, “Serving transfer students is in our DNA. Transfer isn’t something we *do* at Metro State, it’s who we *are*. We are first and foremost a transfer institution, and our commitment to our students’ success is intrinsically a commitment to improving equitable outcomes for transfer students.”

Once an outlier created to serve ‘non-traditional’ students, as Metro State approaches its 50th year, it is now a harbinger for other access-oriented universities because those once ‘non-traditional’ students are increasingly the norm. The wealth of knowledge accumulated about what it takes to serve first-generation, lower-income, returning adult, and transfer students well as *part of a university’s core business* are enormously instructive to the wider field. With much accomplished, and much still to do to, Metro State’s experience is worth attention and consideration. In this case study, created as part of the national [Tackling Transfer](#) project, we shine a light on noteworthy practices and elevate key lessons so that other institutions may learn from Metro State University as the pressure mounts for colleges and universities to work in unprecedentedly nimble ways to meet the needs of today’s learners — a growing majority of whom attend multiple institutions on the way to a credential.

# WHY DRAMATICALLY IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS MATTERS

80% of community college students intend to earn a bachelor's degree and only 14% achieve this goal after six years. This unacceptably low rate is even lower for Black and Latinx students.

**80%**

OF NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AIM TO EARN A BACHELOR'S DEGREE



**33%**

OF THESE STUDENTS TRANSFER TO A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE WITHIN 6 YEARS



**14%**

EARN A BACHELOR'S DEGREE WITHIN 6 YEARS OF STARTING COLLEGE



“New traditional” students – i.e. first-generation college-goers, students from lower-income families, returning adults, new Americans, and students from historically marginalized and minoritized communities including Black, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, and some Asian communities – are overwhelmingly served by community colleges and access-oriented universities where outcomes for transfer students are among the worst. Nearly half of all undergraduates attend multiple institutions and, according to a 2017 [GAO report](#), students lose an average of 37% of their credits in transfer. In short, far too many students are harmed by the loss of time, money, opportunity and hope that flows from the failure of institutions to meet their needs.

Even before COVID-19 changed the world, the declining enrollment of “traditional” students created pressure on institutions to change how they operate to better meet the needs of transfer students. In a post-COVID world, finding ways to honor the learning that students acquire in the form of accelerated progress toward a degree will be imperative both for the survival of institutions and the health of the American middle class.

For more information, see *Tackling Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees* (New York, NY: Community College Research Center).



## OVERVIEW & KEY THEMES

This case study is based on the following sources:

- Review of Metropolitan State reports and surveys;
- Ten in-depth interviews with key leaders;
- Five focus groups with advisors, admissions staff, transcript evaluators, deans, and a cross functional advising leadership team;
- Student focus groups and interviews with ~40 students

Three aspects of Metropolitan State’s work with transfer students that are particularly instructive for the wider field will be the focus of this case study.

- 1. Understand transfer students’ experiences and outcomes.**
- 2. Define a vision and goals for equitable transfer student success.**
- 3. Create clear paths to a four-year degree.**

Drawing on the framework provided in *The Transfer Playbook*, an evidence-based resource created by the Aspen Institute and Community College Research Center, the three themes below reflect the playbook’s emphases on prioritizing transfer student success, creating clear program pathways, and providing tailored advising for transfer students. Within each of the following themes, we highlight salient features and then point toward the “next level” work ahead for Metro State as described by advisors, faculty, deans, staff, administrators, and students who participated in focus groups and interviews.

## THEMES IN DETAIL

### 1. Resourced Commitment to Maximizing Applicability of Transfer Credits

Metro State is distinguished among its four-year peers in the Minnesota State system when it comes to prioritizing transfer students’ needs. This is, of course, in large part because the institution was founded as a transfer institution and serves by far the largest number of transfer students in the system. But the ways in which Metro State operationalizes its commitment to transfer students holds important lessons for its four-year peers both inside and outside of the state.

Because Metro State is situated in the most densely populated area of the state, a region that is home to ten community and technical colleges, many students take courses at multiple colleges simultaneously and often transfer between colleges. As a result, students arrive at Metro State with an average of three transcripts, though upwards of seven is not uncommon. In 2009, Metro State decided to grow the size of its transcript and credit evaluation team to 10, making it by far the largest transfer and degree audit support team in the system. Through particularly robust and creative use of a variety of tools and systems, including DARS (Degree Audit Report System), the [Transferology](#) tool, and a new Transfer Appeal Tool which allows students to advocate for applicability of transfer credit, Metro State shows what it looks like when an institution commits itself to maximizing applicability of credits.



## Transferology

Through the use of the Transferology tool, which assists advisors and students in making educated decisions when transferring credit, students can enter coursework and instantly see how credits transfer to member institutions. Once a student's coursework has been entered into the system, they can also see how their coursework applies to academic programs. Features include: clear transfer course equivalency information, the ability to import Minnesota State coursework from ISRS, request transfer advising assistance and get information from colleges and universities.

## Transfer Review & Appeal Tool

The Minnesota State System's Transfer Review and Appeal tool provides an electronic method for students to request a review of course/credit transfer questions and course transfer denials. Students are able to provide transfer data, identify missing transfer course work, upload syllabi and/or transcripts. This tool is designed to improve communication with students about

how their courses transfer. This project aligns with the system commitment to improving the student transfer experience by providing an efficient, consistent approach for responding to transfer reviews and appeals across the system.

The Metro State transcript evaluation team was one of the first to pilot this tool. They worked closely with system office staff to build enhancements that would make the tool more user friendly. As a result of their efforts and creativity, they remain exemplars among the 37 two-year and four-year institutions in the system because of the way they have built and documented processes that better serve transfer students. This team uses the system's transfer evaluation tools not only to capture student transfer review and appeal requests, but to answer a wide variety of other student questions. All user actions and the results of the process are stored for later review and to provide account administrators with a snapshot of the institution's responsiveness to transfer credit appeals.

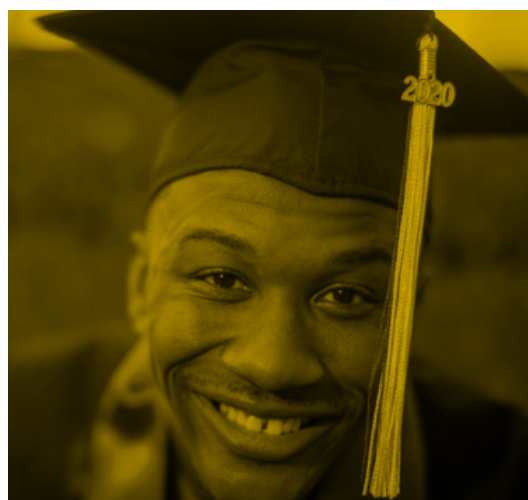
## The Degree Audit Report System

Operating essentially as the ‘back-end’ of advising, and therefore liaising primarily with advisors, the DARS team at Metro State prioritizes maximizing credit applicability through a complete and rigorous review of incoming transcripts. As one DARS team member explained, “Many schools will handpick what credits they evaluate, based on what the student says they’re doing, but here we review every single credit a student brings in to see how it can apply at the University.” This approach ensures that students are provided with complete information about the most efficient path to a degree as they choose a program and major. A former student described her experience of the process this way, “When I arrived at Metro State, the advisor I met with was like, ‘Ok, let’s figure out how to help you get it done!’ She seemed eager to make it as efficient for me as possible, knowing that I didn’t have a bunch of time and money to spend on this. It felt like she was really on my side.’

For many students, the most efficient path to a bachelor’s degree and beyond is through Metro State’s Individualized Studies Bachelor of Arts program. Reflecting the original mission of the university to give students primary authority over their education, the Individualized Studies program is designed not only to maximize applicability of transfer credit, it is also a vehicle

for strengthening students’ sense of agency and purpose. At Metro State, the Individualized Studies program allows students to tailor a major that prioritizes maximum applicability of their transfer credits. For example, while most programs allow only 16 technical credits to be applied toward a bachelor’s degree, the Individualized Studies program allows for the applicability of up to 70 technical credits for students who are able to craft their own degree plan.

While individualized studies bachelor’s degrees are common offerings of highly selective universities that serve predominantly native freshmen, this same offering at Metro State is one expression of this access-oriented university’s commitment to helping transfer students achieve their credential as efficiently as possible. As the Dean of the Individualized Studies program said, “This program allows us to circumvent so many of the problems facing transfer students elsewhere, and it helps us do so in a way that builds students’ sense of ownership over their education.”



## Next Level

With the introduction of a system-wide student Transfer Review and Appeal process to improve applicability of transfer credits in recent years, the process is becoming more efficient for students, credit evaluators, advisors, and faculty. As one credit evaluator on the DARS team said, "...once that appeal process came forward from the system, and we added a component, it became like a monster, this huge system, but it's a good monster because it not only helps students get answers but it also helps us document all the direct targeted equivalencies, this class is equal to this class, in a really efficient way... It's a slick system that makes transfer course review for departments a lot easier." The 'good monster' notwithstanding, improving communication between the DARS team, program faculty, and advisors remains a strong need — and making the credit evaluation more efficient and faster for students is a priority.

There is also essential work to be undertaken, for both Metro State and the system as a whole, in building a strong culture of evidence in which data are accessed, translated, and used effectively to support student-focused improvements. In 2014, the Minnesota Legislature directed Minnesota State colleges and universities to develop a plan to address concerns about credit transfer from system colleges to system universities through the implementation of multi-campus transfer agreements that would permit students who transfer with an associate in arts, associate in fine arts, or associate in science degree to complete baccalaureate degrees at system universities without accumulating excess credits. Transfer Pathway degree programs were developed for 26 disciplines by representative faculty and staff work groups.

The stated goals at the outset of the implementation of the Transfer Pathways were:

- 1. Create opportunities to streamline transfer for all students who are completing an associate degree program at a two-year college in preparation for completing a baccalaureate degree.**
- 2. Facilitate communication and collaboration among faculty in the same discipline at all of the system's institutions.**
- 3. Generate savings on many levels, including the cost to students and time to degree completion.**

The Transfer Pathways work represent a tremendous opportunity for the system, but effective implementation of these 26 pathways is still a work in progress. It is clear that it will be the work undertaken at the level of individual institutions through partnerships that will ultimately determine how well the system-wide transfer pathways serve transfer students.





## 2. Multi-Level, Equity-Minded Approach to Partnership Building with Community Colleges

In recent years, as its demographic profile has shifted toward younger students transferring directly from lower division programs at community colleges, Metro State has intentionally deepened its relationships with local community colleges in a range of ways. With 50% of its students from historically marginalized and minoritized communities, Metro State has expanded the role and number of admissions counselors to ensure that they reflect and are dedicated to serving its diverse student population. Metro State's commitment to equity is operationalized in part by its resourcing of four admissions counselor positions, each one focused on and representative of a different population. These admissions counselors connect respectively with African American, Asian American, American Indian, and Latinx students. These, as well as additional "generalist" admissions counselors, are a visible presence on the campuses of several community colleges in the Twin Cities region where they make at least one visit each month to build relationships with key staff and meet with students.

Metro state shows how important it is for effective transfer partnerships to be built on trust, common understanding, and a shared vision that prioritizes collaboration (rather than all-too-common competition for students and resources). At the forefront, it is admissions counselors who build and reinforce those

partnership attributes; they spend a lot of time strengthening individual relationships with liaisons at the community colleges. As one admissions counselor described, "There may be concern from some colleges about what they get from partnering with us, concerns about us stealing their students. So it's really important to be continuously building those relationships so that we can better partner to show students degree paths from high school through a BA or BS, or even graduate school...We're pulling back from high school fairs to signal that we're not competing with the community colleges for freshmen and there are questions about students who want to transfer before completing an Associate's...and those are hard conversations... It's easier when we [the community college liaison and I] are on a first name basis and know each other. Getting on the same page is important."

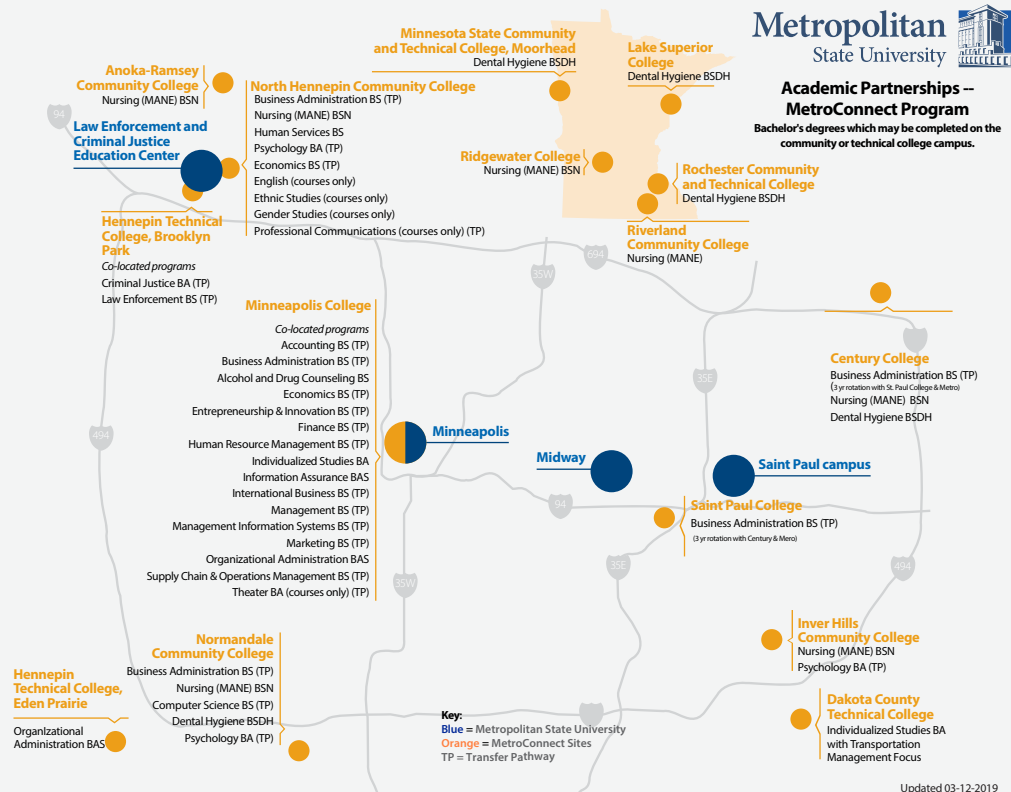
In addition to the strong efforts of admissions counselors, the strong transfer partnership is undergirded by the work of multiple actors at Metro State and community colleges to build seamless transfer pathways for baccalaureate-seeking community college students. Meetings take place at least once a semester, and often monthly, between Metro State and its key partner colleges, involving senior student affairs and academic affairs staff, deans of students, chief diversity officers, and partnership coordinators

of the two institutions' officers. While this multi-level partnership is particularly strong at Minneapolis College — a community college with which Metro State shares a campus — the university has several program-specific partnerships with other community colleges in which students are concurrently enrolled at both institutions. Most ambitiously, through the Metro Connect initiative Metro State is working to offer baccalaureate degree completion opportunities on several community college campuses.

Despite the strong, visible commitment to high-quality partnership work with community colleges, Metro State has a great deal of work ahead in forging partnerships that make seamless transfer the norm for baccalaureate-seeking community college students. Specifically, Metro State and its partners need to create greater clarity for students and advisors about the many transfer options available, and they need to work to more effectively implement the Metro Connect baccalaureate completion programs housed at community colleges.

As one undergraduate admissions counselor said, “We do a lot, but we need a clear partnership vision...We've got Metro Connect, which is really hard to implement well, and we've got the system Transfer Pathways, and we've got joint enrollment partnerships. There's just so many access points that it's confusing to students, let alone staff. Trying to explain how all this works in a streamlined way, in a consistent way, that's the work that needs doing.”

In addition... Getting strategic about the vision for community college partnerships and improving data sharing at multiple levels to ensure that the relationship-building with community colleges is well grounded is the next-level work for Metro State. System-level leadership to evaluate the transfer pathways and simplify logistical aspects of co-located programs would be very helpful for supporting transfer student success in the Twin Cities region, the state's population center.





### 3. Advising Structures & Practices to Support the Full Student Journey

Metro State has adopted a decentralized advising model that allows faculty and professional advisors to build strong advising partnerships and areas of knowledge within colleges that support the student experience within each of Metro State's colleges/schools. Professional advisors provide pre-major students with information and ensure their questions are being answered, and then hand students off to specific colleges once a major is chosen. Students are then assigned program advisors, either professional or faculty depending on the program, who are deeply knowledgeable about the college and can provide ongoing academic advising to students throughout their learning journey.

Metro State makes significant efforts to provide pre-advising to community colleges students while they are still on the two-year campuses. Where transfer volume is highest, Metro State maintains a presence on the two-year campus. Great effort is made not only to provide pre-advising on the two-year campus, but also to bring transfer students to the University to meet with an advisor prior to enrollment and become familiar with the campus. In student focus groups conducted for this case study, a large majority of participants reported meeting with an advisor from Metro State *both* while at their previous institution *and* at Metro State prior to enrolling. Efforts like this can mitigate against "transfer shock" by making the institution more

familiar/less daunting, and can help strengthen students' sense of academic purpose and belonging.

Recognizing that its decentralized advising models may promote inconsistency across different colleges/schools, Metro State has created — and is refining — structures and processes that support consistency and oversight. The Academic Advising Leadership Committee has been created to knit conversations, raise and resolve issues related to consistency, and build relationships between advisors and deans within and across different Colleges/Schools. It is composed of deans, advising representatives from each of the Colleges/Schools, directors of advising from the largest programs, and a project manager focusing on advising. The group is also open to interested faculty members. As one member described it, "We come together monthly to discuss consistency and standardization of advising practice across the colleges and are often one of the first committees to review proposals by administration."



## Next Level

In late 2019, the Metro State Provost invited a team of consultants from the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the leading professional organization of academic advisers, to conduct a comprehensive assessment and provide recommendations. The top recommendation was for Metro State to commit more fully to a building an institution-wide “culture of advising”—starting with a common definition of advising and including plans for advising assessment and professional development. Echoing this recommendation, a member of the current Advisor Leadership Group noted that advising is sometimes too narrowly conceived and practiced: “The culture [has to be] broader than the activity..We need to make sure everyone who has student contact is part of the culture of advising.”

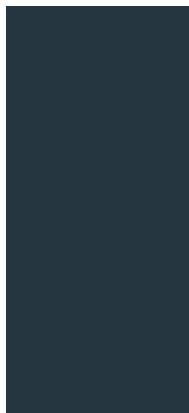
Based on the NACADA observations and recommendations, Metro State is exploring a set of structural changes aimed at ensuring greater

consistency in advising practices, caseloads, technology use, and communication. The chief recommendation of the NACADA consultants is for Metro State to implement a hybrid structure in which advisors continue to be embedded within colleges while reporting through Advising Directors to an Executive Director of Academic Advising. This proposed structural change would help ensure greater consistency for students and provide a path to continuous improvement of transfer student outcomes by providing centralized oversight. At the time of this case study, Metro State was waiting for official feedback from the bargaining units. While it remains to be seen how the advising structures will evolve, Metro State’s decision to engage with NACADA is itself an expression of commitment to professional development for advisors and the building of a “culture of advising.”

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

One of 37 institutions in the Minnesota State System, including seven four-year institutions, Metro State relies on system leadership to ensure its ability to effectively serve transfer students. A number of themes surfaced in our interviews and focus groups at Metro State that speak to opportunities for system leadership to pursue its [statewide equity goals](#) through redoubled attention to transfer. Specifically, themes from focus groups and interviews suggest that it would be helpful for the system to focus specifically on:

1. Improving the quality and understanding of transfer pathways through specific attention to evaluation and continuous improvement of implementation to achieve true seamlessness and to better market the pathways to students.
2. Providing leadership for a system wide approach to classroom lease agreements to make it easier for four-year and two-year institutions to establish baccalaureate completion programs on community colleges campuses.
3. Continuing to refine the promising use of the Transfer Evaluation System for Transfer Review and Appeal and to ensure transfer technology tools are integrated and professional development is provided to advisors, department chairs, and faculty on the importance of changing processes to lower maximize applicability of transfer credits.
4. Working to ensure that state financial aid resources – including state scholarships and institutional funding systems – are allocated to effectively support transfer students, far too many of whom drop out while in good standing due to lack of resources.



## CONCLUSION

Once an outlier, Metropolitan State University is now a harbinger for other access-oriented four-year institutions. As fiscal pressures mount and resources shrink, colleges and universities will need to adapt to evolving realities if they are to deliver the value students need and attract new enrollments in an uncertain future. That means bold and courageous efforts to move beyond “business as usual” to a model grounded in a commitment to meeting students where they are and honoring their past learning through applying a maximum of transfer credits toward degree. Though much work lies ahead for Metro State to continue to advance student outcomes, Metro State’s work and commitment to supporting transfer students provides a valuable and hopeful set of lessons for institutions everywhere.



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