

THE TRANSFER RESET

Rethinking Equitable Policy for Today's Learners | 2021

COUNTLESS STUDENTS would agree: transfer does not work. Despite sustained efforts to “fix” transfer over the past several decades, the current system continues to produce dismal, inequitable outcomes and unnecessary roadblocks that thwart students’ educational goals. As members of the Tackling Transfer Policy Advisory Board, we feel great urgency in our purpose to challenge the status quo and make strong and clear recommendations for systems change, with an emphasis on state, system and federal policies, that dismantle inequitable transfer policies and build a new approach designed to center students and the recognition of their learning as they transfer across institutions and move through their varied lived, work and learning experiences beyond high school.

Most transfer students face long odds of achieving their goals. While the great majority of students entering community college desire a bachelor’s degree, only 14 percent have earned one within six years. And historically marginalized students who face systemic barriers to degree completion are most harmed by transfer inefficiencies. The six-year bachelor’s degree completion rate for Black and Latinx students who begin at community colleges is about half the rate of White students, and higher-income students are more than twice as likely as

their lower-income peers to complete a bachelor’s degree in that timeframe.

Such dismal outcomes and rife inefficiency should be a wake-up call to us all. Students should be awarded a diverse array of credentials with labor market value in accordance with their high-quality learning, work experiences and personal goals. Moreover, achieving equity in bachelor’s degrees for students who begin at the community college continues to be critical if we are to achieve national goals of shared prosperity, equitable opportunity for wealth accumulation and a robust democracy. Valuable benefits continue to accrue to those who hold bachelor’s degrees, such as health care, retirement savings, higher incomes and opportunities for professional development and career advancement.

Today’s students are highly mobile, but postsecondary and workforce practices, policies, technologies and data systems haven’t kept up with changing patterns in where and how they learn. We need to “reset” transfer to meet the needs/demands of today’s learners—and tomorrow’s—who are seeking to receive credit for learning, work and lived experiences along the entirety of their educational path.

HIGH BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Every year, millions of students enroll in community colleges with the hope of completing a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year school. Few of them ever make it—largely because there’s no clear, consistent path to turn credits into degrees.

80%

of community college students want a bachelor’s degree



31%

of community college students transfer to a 4-year institution



14%

of community college students earn a bachelor’s degree within 6 years of entry to postsecondary



43%

of students’ credits are not accepted upon transfer

A good first step would be to broaden our collective thinking to recognize that we are doing nearly all students a disservice by not recognizing the knowledge and skills they transfer in from a host of settings, even if they don't change institutions. In addition, we offer concrete recommendations for state, system and federal policies. Most transfer

policies in place now focus on mapping out pathways, policies that are useful building blocks but nonetheless wholly insufficient on their own. Please see the full report for the comprehensive policy framework, which addresses critical dimensions of transfer reform, including:

Dimensions of Transfer Reform

- 1. Transparency and political will to change:** There is currently a dearth of state policies focused on promoting institutional accountability for transfer student success. States should set, measure and publicly report progress in achieving data-driven goals for transfer student success—disaggregated by at least race/ethnicity, Pell recipient status and program of study—through a public dashboard that includes specific targets for closing equity gaps in the two- and four-year sectors, and develop new metrics that focus on the institutions' role and responsibility for transfer student success and support. Given that many transfer students move across state lines and/or learn online, we similarly need far better data at the national level.
- 2. Financial incentives for institutions:** At the same time that we call for plugging holes in accountability and transparency, we call on states and systems to create financial incentives that can support institutions that are trying to innovate and do the hard work of supporting transfer students well. Effective student success efforts require time and money, and at this time we see little evidence of states and systems investing in incentives designed to support transfer and recognition of learning.
- 3. Financial aid:** When students transfer, their federal, state and institutional financial aid does not automatically transfer with them, and many eligible transfer students with demonstrated need find that institutional aid has already been allocated to incoming freshmen or current students, leaving none to support them. We recommend that state and institutional leaders designate a subset of state and institutional aid specifically designed for transfer students and that federal actors double the Pell Grant to provide more purchasing power for students experiencing wealth and income disparities.
- 4. Accreditation review:** Little is known about whether and how accreditors treat transfer in evaluating an institution or program's quality. We call for a study examining how well the accreditation process supports transfer student success and encourages greater credit applicability and recognition of learning. Furthermore, we believe accreditors should encourage institutions to strike a balance between the need for curricular cohesion and quality and the need to accept a degree of heterogeneity in evaluating course content for credit.
- 5. Technology:** Scaled improvements in recognition of learning cannot be achieved if we continue to rely upon manual, local efforts to evaluate course credit and support students as they navigate learning. States, systems and national actors must accelerate efforts to develop technology systems that facilitate statewide digital transcript exchange, course evaluation and degree auditing processes across the higher education ecosystem, and empower learners with electronic access to their lifelong learning records.

Transfer is a notoriously complex challenge. These policy recommendations are critical, but the level of change this Board seeks will simultaneously require equal attention to broader dimensions of systems change as well—structural, relational and transformative—that shaped our thinking. We therefore undergirded the policy recommendations with a set of **stakeholder engagement strategies** designed to drive reform and solid implementation by building a supportive ecosystem and political will. Together we must expand our collective sense of urgency and ownership for transfer student success. We aim to create and cultivate a sense of responsibility for transfer student success that transcends the confines of organizational boundaries and job titles. **We aim to reset transfer. Let's get started.**