

Executive Summary

January 2017

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Prepared by
Thomas Bailey,
Davis Jenkins, and John Fink
Community College Research Center
and

Jenna Cullinane and Lauren Schudde
University of Texas at Austin

Many community college students who intend to earn a bachelor's degree make substantial progress in community college but fail to transfer.



Research
Supported by:



GREATER TEXAS
FOUNDATION

The opinions expressed in
this report are those of the
author(s) and do not necessarily
reflect the views of
Greater Texas Foundation.

Policy Levers to Strengthen Community College Transfer Student Success in Texas

Texas relies heavily on its community colleges to provide low-cost access to undergraduate coursework for students pursuing a bachelor's degree. Yet, while the majority of Texas students who enter higher education through a community college enroll in transfer programs, only 35 percent transfer and only 15 percent earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting at a community college. Moreover, there is a large gap in bachelor's attainment between lower-income students who start at a community college and transfer and their higher-income peers. Many community college students who intend to earn a bachelor's degree make substantial progress in community college but fail to transfer. Among students who transfer, most do so without earning a community college credential. Many of those who do graduate end up earning excess credits, wasting their time and money and making inefficient use of taxpayer resources. While two- to four-year transfer does not work well in many other states, in Texas it seems to be especially inefficient.

This report to the Greater Texas Foundation recommends ways that state policy could help to improve outcomes for community college transfer students in Texas. It is based on three sets of analyses: (1) analysis of National Student Clearinghouse data on transfer and degree outcomes for Texas students compared to those in other states; (2) analysis of state transfer policies to better understand the policy environment and identify policies that may facilitate or inhibit transfer success in the state; and (3) interviews with over 50 persons at 36 Texas colleges (18 two-year and 18 four-year institutions) on how state policy plays out on the ground with students and institutions.

We find that existing transfer policy in Texas fails to help students transfer successfully and efficiently. There are two central problems. First, students do not have what we refer to as clear "transfer pathways" that lead in coherent, transparent, widely accepted ways from community college enrollment (or even before enrollment) through transfer, to bachelor's completion. Second, even if there were clearer pathways, students are not given much help in choosing, entering, and staying on transfer pathways. These problems with transfer reflect a broader lack of alignment in Texas among high schools, community colleges, and universities.

We argue that Texas state policy provides few incentives to two- and four-year colleges in Texas to work to address these problems. At the same time, we contend that there are growing market incentives for community colleges and regional public universities (the destinations for most community college transfer students in Texas) to work together to improve transfer outcomes.

Based on our analysis, we recommend ways Texas state policy might be enhanced to achieve three objectives that we believe are key to improving transfer student success: (1) create stronger transfer pathways, (2) help students choose and stay on a transfer pathway, and (3) build momentum for regional community college-university collaboration to improve transfer outcomes.

Create Stronger Transfer Pathways

1 Provide clear guidance for students on which Texas general education courses to take for particular fields.

Students should be given clear guidance on which core courses to take in math and other foundation subject areas if they are interested in pursuing a program of study in a particular broad field or "meta-major." Texas may want to consider organizing meta-majors to correspond to the fields specified by the HB5 legislation. The THECB should engage faculty from two- and four-year institutions across the state to identify requirements from the current core to recommend to students interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree in a particular broad field. Both the THECB and the colleges should be required to post information about field-specific core requirements on their websites.

2 Expand and strengthen statewide field of study (FOS) curricula to the most popular transfer majors.

These agreements would specify particular community college general education and pre-major courses that are critical to the given major and that all Texas public universities would accept toward a bachelor's degree in that major. Ideally, the THECB would ensure that at least some FOS plans are developed for the most popular majors in the broad fields or meta-majors that encompass all of the majors offered by Texas colleges and universities. Community colleges and universities should be

Executive Summary

January 2017

required to include up-to-date information on both the field-oriented general education core and FOS curriculum requirements on their websites.

Helping Students Choose and Enter a Transfer Pathway

3 *Require community college students to choose a broad field or meta-major early on.*

Students should be required to choose a broad field or meta-major by the time they reach 30 credits. This would encourage students to begin exploring their career and academic interests from the start and provide incentives for colleges to help them do so. This too will help ensure that they take general education courses that will be accepted toward a major in their field of interest. The requirement of the new multidisciplinary studies associate degree policy enacted by the legislature, which mandates that students meet with an advisor before the beginning of the semester after they have reached 30 semester credits to develop a specific degree plan and choose a transfer institution, should be expanded to students in all transfer-oriented associate degree programs.

4 *Strengthen high school dual credit regulations to ensure that college courses students take in high school will be applicable to a degree.*

Dual credit offerings, which have grown substantially in Texas over the past decade, have the potential to improve transfer outcomes by encouraging students to explore options for college and careers while they are still in high school and to increase the chances that college courses students take will count toward a degree in the major field they end up choosing. Yet, there is some evidence that substantial numbers of Texas students are taking college courses in high school that are not accepted for credit toward a major in a degree field. Dual credit students should be advised to take courses that will help expose them to college programs of study and enable them to earn credits that are not only transferable but applicable toward a degree in a major. Colleges should be required to provide advising to dual credit students on college and career paths, help them develop a plan that includes at least a tentative choice of a field of interest or “meta-major.”

5 *Strengthen alignment between the HB5 endorsements and postsecondary pathways.*

In general, ongoing efforts in Texas to help high school students prepare for college and careers have not been well-connected to the growing movement among community colleges and universities in the state to create clearer pathways to careers and further education. One way to help smooth the pathway from high school to college would be to require colleges to work with high schools to create a crosswalk of the HB5 high school endorsements offered by the school districts to fields of study offered by colleges. (In 2013, the Texas legislature passed HB5, which among other things requires high school students to choose one of five “endorsement” fields—STEM, business and industry, public services, arts and humanities, and interdisciplinary.) Colleges should be required to create websites and other advising tools to help clarify for high school students and their parents and counselors (1) the requirements for college programs of study by field and (2) what students should be taking in high school to prepare to enter a field of interest when they enroll in college.

Building Momentum for Community College–University Collaboration

6 *Support regional career pathways partnerships led by regional public universities.*

The state and private philanthropy should build on growing market forces and consider supporting burgeoning efforts led by regional Texas universities to work with community colleges and K-12 schools to create regional career pathways partnerships of the sort we are seeing develop in other parts of the country. The focus of this support should be on coordination, convening, and capacity building rather than program operations. In lieu of general appropriations funding, for which there is significant competition from other state demands, or categorical funding, which is subject to cuts in economic downturns, Texas should explore alternative funding strategies. Given the well-documented high returns of college degrees to students and society, one strategy worth considering is social impact bonds.

7 *Explore statewide financial incentives for efficient transfer.*

Currently there is no statewide financial aid for transfer students. In general, Texas transfer students do not have the same level of access to financial aid as students who enter

universities as freshmen. Texas universities indicate that lack of financial support is one of the biggest barriers to success facing the community college transfer students they enroll. We recommend that the state consider freezing tuition or providing other financial incentives for students who complete an associate degree in less than three years and then transfer to a state university and complete a bachelor’s degree in less than six years total. This would help to signal to colleges and universities that if they want their students to receive such incentives, they need to change their practices in ways that support positive transfer outcomes.

8 *Support a public education campaign.*

As a result of the lack of clear pathways to success for students between community colleges and universities (and throughout the Texas higher education system more broadly), too many students are taking courses that do not count toward a degree in their desired major, taking more courses than are required for a degree, and making other poor decisions. These decisions are costly to students, their families, and taxpayers. In the case of disadvantaged students, taking courses that do not count for a degree may derail their chance of getting a college education forever. Therefore, we suggest that the state and private philanthropy explore ways to (1) help students and parents be more informed consumers of higher education, so they are more likely to take efficient pathways to transferring and earning bachelor’s degrees, and (2) put pressure on educators to offer clearer degree pathways and better support for transfer students. We believe that the Texas Student Success Council is well-positioned to help assess the value of this and our other recommendations, and to help plan and champion implementation of those deemed useful to Texas.

Two factors lead us to believe that this may be a propitious time to promote this agenda. First, economic and demographic trends are strengthening incentives for two- and four-year colleges for transfer students. Second, improved transfer is an integral element of the guided pathways movement, which is gaining strength in Texas and throughout the country. Building on the momentum for reform these developments have created, the state policy enhancements we recommend would, we believe, lead both to improved transfer and degree outcomes for students who start at a Texas community college and a higher return on investment for the state.