Leveraging the Transfer Process to Improve Student Success: Postsecondary Transfer in Texas

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Ongoing research on transfer

• Using Texas state administrative data to examine how transfer-related policies impact transfer outcomes for community college entrants

• Following transfer-intending students at CCs in central Texas over 5 years to understand transfer hurdles/process

• Evaluator of Dana Center Math Pathways and MapMyPath
Postsecondary transfer in Texas: The numbers

• Numerically, transfer in Texas closely mirrors national statistics

• Transfer among Texas public college entrants (Andrews et al., 2014):
  – Over half of students transfer within 8 years
  – 1/3 of students moved between UT, A&M, other universities, and CC, the remaining transfer occur within those categories
    • Community college students who transfer are most likely to transfer to a regional comprehensive university
  – Latino students are more likely to transfer than White students
The Community College Pathway to a Bachelor’s Degree

- In Texas, 40% of students start at a community college (THECB, 2014)
  - 81% of students enroll in transfer programs, but only 20 percent of transfer aspirants transfer (Jenkins, 2013)
- 75% of all Texas public university students take some community college credits
  - Increasing emphasis on “dual credit” among high school students
- If interested in vertical transfer patterns for certain colleges, John Fink (CCRC) created tool using THECB data to see transfer networks
Transfer Networks are complex.
Colleges can prioritize partnerships using data on the number and success of transfer students in each partnership.
Transfer doesn’t always = success

• Credit transfer matters for efficiency and completion:
  – Losing credits in transfer decreases odds of completing a degree (Monaghan and Attewell, 2015)

• In Texas:
  – Transfer students who earn a baccalaureate accumulate 7 more college credits than “native” students (Cullinane, 2014)
    • Likely much higher among students who transferred and didn’t earn a degree
    • Inside Higher Ed article this August noted that UH looked at credits for degree recipients; average was 151 credits—high number may be driven by inefficient transfer
  – 83% of credits transfer; 70% count toward degree (THECB, 2001)

• Barriers to smooth credit transfer include:
  – Inadequate support services and institutional resources
  – Unclear transfer pathways (particularly problematic here in TX)
    • Lack of resources and institutional incentives to improve these
  – Lack of coherent messages to students about transfer policies/requirements
Texas Mandated Policies

- **Core Curriculum**
  - General education courses must automatically transfer, but the credits do not have to count toward majors
  - 42 credit hours, comprised of nine foundational component areas
  - Each institution decides on own core courses, within component areas

- **Field of Study Curriculum (FOS)**
  - Specify 12-32 credits from “pre-major” courses, initially available in 8 fields, but THECB expanded these options (will have most popular 25 majors)
  - Can be added to the core curriculum to build lower-division course plan to transfer with junior standing in specific majors

- **Reverse Transfer**
  - University must send a transcript back to the community college to check for associate degree completion
  - Occurs when a student reaches 66 credit hours at a university, if they transferred with at least 30 credits from a community college
“Encouraged, But Not Required” Policies

- **Texas Common Course Numbering System**
  - Required for CCs because they must offer classes from Academic Course Guide Manual (or WECM), but optional for universities
  - Can look up course equivalencies for non-participating colleges

- **Bilateral transfer agreements**
  - Agreements to smooth transfer pathway between individual institutions
  - In 2015, THECB found that there were 1,206 agreements
  - (likely this number has grown)

- **Statewide transfer compacts: Tuning Texas**
  - THECB promoted voluntary statewide articulation agreements (including two-year transfer course plans)
  - Voluntary Transfer Compacts developed through “tuning”
  - Only 12 Voluntary Transfer Compacts created
  - About a third of public universities signed any agreement; obligations were unclear
How do these transfer policies work and what barriers Texas students face?
Institutional challenges for transfer success

- Institutional autonomy
  - Each institution picks their own core
  - Departments create own program curriculum
  - Little incentive to get programs to align across institutions
  - Little knowledge of or accountability for mandated policies like FOS

- Dual credit adds new complexity
  - Students are arriving at college with college credits, but not necessarily aligned with a particular degree/goal
  - Those credits are subject to same policies/degree audits upon transfer
    - Institutions then have to determine how those credits transfer
    - Students unaware of college credit transfer and degree plans while in HS
Student challenges for transfer success

• Transfer info provided by colleges, but varies in quality
  – Ranges from nothing (no website info / no info in orientation or advising) to detailed online information and resources about different transfer pathways/policies
  – Little (nothing?) on credit transfer provided by high schools as planning college

• Students are unaware of state policies; info filtered through institutional practice:
  – No knowledge of Field of Study policy; encouraged to finish their “basics”
  – CCs tell students to complete the core and associate degree prior to transfer, but not efficient

• The Core and FOS can help, but not necessarily as intended:
  – Pre-transfer Core/FOS credits improve BA attainment among CC transfer students
  – But *completing* the core slows students progress toward BA
    • Most likely due to misalignment between degree requirements across sectors
What has been done and where do we go from here?
Recent changes in credit/transfer process

• Increased institutional partnerships
  – Regional coalitions
  – More and more transfer agreements
    • But variation in quality; some institutions aren’t building agreements that articulate how courses will transfer (some are)
  – More multi-institution teaching centers/satellite campuses
    • We don’t know the effects, but they seem promising
• Attempts to make transfer pathways more transparent
  – E.g., MapMyPath tool (led by Texas OnCourse); program-to-program transfer guides
• Guided Pathways reforms at CCs
  – A focus on credit transfer is crucial – is this part of the conversation/effort? (seems to be at some, like Houston GPS)
• THECB expansion of Fields of Study
How can we improve transfer success?

Institution-level:

• Discuss transfer at college orientation, make clear whether/how classes count for transfer vs. associate degree
• Regularly update college websites with transfer policies/requirements
• Work to ensure associate degrees and transfer plans are very similar (minimal different courses) for top transfer pathways
• Improve info in high school to college pipeline
  – High school counselors need to be trained about credit portability (dual credit courses should be purposeful, with degree plans in mind)
• Take advantage of momentum of Guided Pathways and FOS
  – Must think about whether associate degree requirements, core, FOS align with bachelor’s reqs across top partners
How can we improve transfer success?

State-level:

• Require student transfer guide for transfer agreements
  – If an agreement exists, colleges should have student-centered transfer guides that show how credits transfer

• Accountability for complying with FOS
  – Need actionable plan to inform practitioners about new FOS plans and encourage compliance

• Mandate stackable degrees
  – Credits toward associate degrees should count toward the bachelor’s if in same major (until legislation, institutional partnerships need to do this work)
Additional Resources

• To Improve Community College Transfer in Texas, Students Need Better Information (Schudde, Jabbar, & Chevalier)

• Navigating Vertical Transfer Online: Access to and Usefulness of Transfer Information on Community College Websites (Schudde, Bradley, & Absher)

• Policy Levers to Strengthen Community College Transfer Student Success in Texas (Bailey et al.)

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