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IMPROVING TRANSFERABILITY: CASE STUDIES

"BUILDING A BETTER BRIDGE TO THE BACHELOR'S"

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INTRODUCTION

Many Virginians aspiring to earn a four-year degree intentionally begin their journey at one of the 23 community colleges within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). In concert with those aspirations, the VCCS is committed to providing its residents an affordable and accessible program of study that prepares them to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree at any one of Virginia's colleges and universities. The establishment of an affordable and accessible pathway was one of the emanating purposes of the community college (Mellow & Heelan, 2015). The dream of affordable transfer education is one of three key legislative efforts of the VCCS, and statute 23.1-907 of the Commonwealth of Virginia mandates transfer agreements between the institutions. With at least 38 transfer agreements and more than 300 articulation agreements developed between the VCCS and the four-year colleges and universities, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) states that up to 32% of transfer students do so under the auspices of guaranteed admission agreements (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2017).

As students progress to the baccalaureate, the completion of the associate's degree is crucial, in that it affects the rate of degree attainment. In 2014-15 alone, Virginia's four-year colleges accepted over 14,000 transferring students, with more than half of them having previously

earned an associate's degree. According to data from SCHEV, students who transfer with the associate's degree attain their baccalaureate at a rate of 79.7%. However, students transferring with less than 15 community college credits earn their bachelor's degree at a significantly lower rate of 48.8%. Similarly, Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chiang, Chen, Harrell & Torres (2013) found that 73% of students who transferred with a degree earned their baccalaureate within 6 years, compared to 59.6% of those who transferred without a degree.

All agree that the transfer pathway must be accessible and easily achieved in the least amount of time, with the least amount of required credits, and the least amount of cost and debt. To build a better bridge to the bachelor's degree, Virginia must examine the current situation, consider best practices within the Commonwealth and across the nation, and seek to enact policies and procedures that achieve that goal. In that vein, the 2017 Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) conducted a thorough investigation of the VCCS, provided a review of the current logistics, and suggested areas of improvement.

THE CURRENT TRANSFER SITUATION

The JLARC report clearly validates the commitment of the VCCS to provide viable transfer options for its citizens. Sixty-six percent of the community college transfer students earn a bachelor's degree within 7 years, with a median of 5 years (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2017). Of the 11,600 students who transferred from VCCS community colleges in 2014-2015, two-thirds transferred to George Mason University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Old Dominion University, while the rest of them transferred to various colleges and universities, both public and private.

Nested within these tremendous success stories, however, are myriad challenges and struggles relating to the transfer and completion of the bachelor's degree. The journey to degree attainment can be arduous for any college student; nationwide, less than 60% of native four-year students earn their degree within 6 years (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Kristapovich, Rathbun, Wang, & Zhang, 2013). Virginia proudly boasts a higher rate; more than three-fourths of native students attain the baccalaureate. Although only two-thirds of community college transfer students earn their bachelor's degree, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) indicates a comparable rate of degree attainment of transfer students from other institutions (Wyner, Jenkins, & Fink, 2017).

Community college transfer students traverse an uncertain path with obstacles and barriers far greater than those of the native college student. With no clearly articulated pathway or program map, transfer students navigate a black hole of numerous articulation agreements that are often vague, convoluted and restrictive. Large numbers of them experience accumulation of excessive credits, loss of credits due to non-transferability into the intended program of study, increased costs and debt, and extended time to degree attainment. Transfer students, in comparison to non-transferring students, accumulate, on average, up to 17 additional credits, while one-fourth of those transfer students graduate with 31 additional credits beyond the requisite program (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2017). The loss of savings and time consumed by extraneous credits will ultimately place the affordability of the community college in jeopardy.

Clearly, the myriad articulation agreements lack standardization, accessibility, currency, and organization. With no single repository for the agreements, one is unable to truly quantify the total number of agreements. The shortcomings are numerous and appear to benefit only a

minority of students, with less than 25% of transferring students utilizing them; however, this low rate also aligns with the low percentage (23-35%) of students who are transferring post-associate (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2017).

Vague agreements and course equivalency guides are helpful, but lack clarity. The agreements fail to specify if the associate's degree is required for transfer, and whether courses transfer as program credits or electives. More often than not, the course transfers as an elective, as opposed to program credit, and the course must be repeated at the four-year school. Many transfer students, who are first-generation students, make the journey without an academic GPS or a well-defined program map. To compound the problem, some agreements require transfers to complete additional prerequisite work upon transferring. These situations are barriers to the transfer student and increase the number of credits and time-to-degree. While SCHEV currently tracks the completion rates and time-to-degree for the transfer student, it fails to collect or analyze the number of credits earned by transfers, or the completion rates of particular academic pathways for transfers versus non-transfers (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2017).

In light of the need for a more transparent and accessible transfer pathway, the Commonwealth is committed to improving the transfer process, and the following JLARC recommendations focus on system and state-level responses that will reduce barriers for the VCCS transfer student.

- All four-year institutions should develop, in conjunction with the VCCS, program maps for transfer pathways, based on a SCHEV-developed standardized template.

- Program maps may be unique to the community college and the four-year institution but should clearly specify the required community college courses to transfer into a particular program as well as the required academic standards.
- Receiving institutions should accept the transfer student into both the general undergraduate and intended program major and accept the community college coursework as program credits.
- All four-year institutions annually update transfer agreements and the VCCS maintain a single repository of agreements and course equivalency tools; and,
- SCHEV should annually identify transfer pathways, which have marginal outcomes—lower completion rates, longer time-to-degree, more accumulation of credits, and lower success rates.

Even as the JLARC study was ongoing, the General Assembly passed an important bill of promise for the VCCS transfer student. SB 1234 requires that SCHEV develop a “Passport” transfer program with uniform standards and competencies for general education courses guaranteed to transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions as fulfillment of a lower division general education requirement.

Building on that legislation, the 2018 Virginia General Assembly promises to enact additional statutes to enhance transferability. Upcoming bills include a General Education Certificate to include a 15-hour guaranteed Passport Program, the development of program maps for transfer pathways, and the creation of an online transfer portal to guide and support students in the transfer process. With coordination between SCHEV and the VCCS the goal is to standardize the curriculum of the general education courses such that the community college

courses transfer as a guaranteed parallel track to Virginia's public four-year universities and simultaneously fulfill the general education requirements at the university.

CASE STUDIES—WHAT IS WORKING IN OTHER STATES?

Virginia is not alone in its effort to provide a clear and transparent pathway for its community college transfer students to the four-year university, but there are opportunities for improvement. Lawmakers from several states—North Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Illinois, and Washington, among other states—have received recognition for their policies and best practices which enable its residents to more successfully journey across the bridge from associate's to baccalaureate. These states have adopted one of three different architectural approaches, a 2+2 system, a credit-equivalency system, or an institution-driven system (Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2016).

States such as Florida, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Illinois, and New Jersey have adopted a 2+2 system in which policies guarantee the transfer and application of general education and pre-major course credits across institutions. Transfer students seamlessly enter the university ready for upper-division major coursework due to the 2+2 system wide plan of study that incorporates common core and pre-major course agreements. Consistent and clearly articulated major programs of study allow most students upon completion of the associate's degree to meet all lower-division general education and pre-major requirements and enter the university major-ready, and earn their bachelor's degree within two years, regardless of the program of study or the receiving institution.

Florida's pathway is a progressive example of the 2+2 system. Florida's Board of Governors manages Florida's State University System and ensures the coordination between all institutions of higher education in Florida. In partnership with the State Board of Education, the Board of Governors adopted standard rules regarding the transfer pathway, including a common course numbering system, a common calendar, a common 36-credit general education core curriculum, and a 60-credit Associate in Arts (A.A.) degree (Florida Department of Education, 2014).

The 36-hour general education core curriculum—communication, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences—applies to all students interested in pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Students who complete the general education core curriculum at any Florida school may transfer to another Florida school with no further general education requirements. However, those who transfer prior to completing the 36-hour general education requirements may be required to complete additional course work by the receiving school (Florida Department of Education, 2014).

Florida statutes mandate that students who complete the 60-credit associate's degree with a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) have guaranteed admission to an upper division school, but not necessarily to a specific program. However, community college students experience equal opportunity with native university students to enter limited access programs of study. Uncommon to most higher education institutions, a D grade transfers and counts toward degree completion as it does for native students. The Board of Governors also provides incentives for students to complete their A.A. degree prior to transferring. If a student transfers before completing their A.A. degree, all classes taken count toward their GPA; however, if the A.A. has been completed, only the most recent grade in repeated courses will apply toward the cumulative GPA. Transfer students without the associate's degree compete along side other incoming

freshman for degree programs. These incentives and the ease of transfer serve to increase graduation rates and the student diversity at 4-year institutions (Drew et al., 2015).

Additionally, Florida has recently passed legislation regarding performance funding and in particular, has placed a “tax” on excessive credits. As a result, Florida has strongly encouraged native and community college transfer students to select a major during their first or second semester to minimize excessive credits and ensure that students complete prerequisite courses. Florida universities have further strengthened their program maps and have improved their website to provide clarity about their majors and pre-requisite coursework (State University System of Florida, Board of Governors, 2015).

The College System of Tennessee has implemented multiple measures to improve transfer and completion outcomes among transfer students. The Tennessee Transfer Pathway certifies the transcript of students who have completed the A.A. or A.S. degree and allows the student to transfer to a Tennessee public or private four-year school with an acceptance guarantee of all completed courses by the receiving institution (Tennessee Board of Regents, 2018). The student is guaranteed that all courses taken will be accepted by the transfer institution and will count toward completion of the particular major.

Concurrent with the transfer pathway, Tennessee facilitates increased momentum among transfer students by encouraging them to enroll in 15, rather than 12, credits per semester. Evidence supports a strong positive effect of the increased load, particularly for those who start at the community college (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016). Belfied, Jenkins, & Lahr (2016) found that those who attempted 15 credits were nine percentage points more likely to obtain a degree.

Similar to the proposed Passport Program of Virginia’s HB 919 and SB 631, community colleges in Massachusetts are a part of the MassTransfer (MT) agreement. Students in the

Massachusetts public higher education system who complete the General Education Foundation or MT Block satisfy the general education core requirements at any other public higher education institution. The receiving institution can add no more than six additional credits to a transfer students' general educational core (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2018).

Additionally, the MT associate to bachelors (A2B) program clearly incentivizes its residents to achieve the two-year degree and progress to the bachelor's degree. Massachusetts' community college offers two transfer degrees--Associates in Arts and Associates in Science with 60-61 credits. The MT A2B agreement rewards students who complete either of the degrees with a 2.0 GPA by guaranteeing full transfer of a minimum of 60 credits, either as program or elective credits. Additionally, these students receive a tuition discount, which amounts to a 28% savings on the typical 4-year degree costs (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2018).

For Massachusetts' high-achieving students desiring to attain the bachelor's degree, the rewards can be even greater through a Commonwealth Commitment known as the MT A2B + CC program. Through faculty collaboration across the campuses, Massachusetts developed fully aligned, course-to-course transfer A2B mapped programs in 10–15 major disciplines, all of which were high transfer programs. Students who opt to commit to the MT A2B + CC program must enroll in one of the state's community colleges, complete their associates within 2.5 years, transfer and enroll full-time in one of the state's university and maintain a continuous enrollment with a cumulative 3.0 GPA. For these students, a freeze is placed on tuition increases and mandatory fees upon program entry, and at the completion of each successful semester, students receive a 10% tuition rebate (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2018).

Through collaboration of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois State Board of Education and the Transfer Coordinators of Illinois

Colleges and Universities, Illinois developed the Illinois Articulation Initiative (2018) (IAI) which serves as a statewide transfer agreement, among 100 participating colleges and universities in Illinois. All participating schools have agreed to accept the General Education Core Curriculum (GECC) as a complete package in lieu of their own comparable lower-division general education requirements; however, unless the entire GECC is completed, no guarantee of particular course-to-course transfer credits is offered.

Illinois also has two transferable two-year degrees—Associates of Arts and Associates of Science—both incorporating the GECC package. For those students earning the A.A. degree and transferring to a participating IAI institution, the general education core is waived. The A.S. degree, designed for transfer students pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics related fields, incorporates a slightly modified GECC package. To allow transfer students in these demanding fields to remain on track with the four-year cohort, the IAI allows students to take two additional math and science classes at the sending institutions and complete the remaining two GECC courses at the receiving school after transfer (Illinois Articulation Initiative, 2018).

Additionally, Illinois has collaboratively developed major course recommendations for approximately 20 popular majors and that information is provided through the IAI portal. Although these agreements identify recommended coursework for the specific majors, admission into the major program is not guaranteed. As with other systems, transfer students remain uncertain as to whether courses beyond the GECC transfer as program or elective credit (Illinois Articulation Initiative, 2018).

Along with Florida and Illinois, New Jersey also ranks extremely high in terms of transfer student outcomes (CCRC). New Jersey, in their comprehensive statewide transfer agreement,

touts a seamless transition from the associate to baccalaureate degree. An A.A. or A.S. from any one of the 19 New Jersey community colleges is fully transferable as the first two years of any public New Jersey public four-year institutions and such students will be considered as having met the general education requirements. Further, students transferring into a B.A. program from an A.A. or students transferring into a B.S. from an A.S. program will be granted credit for exactly half of the bachelor's degree. In particular, if a typical basic four-year program of study requires 128 credits, the student's A.A. or A.S. degree and credits transfer into the receiving institution as the first half of the program, and the student will only have 64 remaining credits to complete for the baccalaureate (New Jersey Statewide Transfer Initiative, 2017).

Corollary principles mandate that the receiving institution provide specific guidance to the transfer student as to the remaining half of the program as early as possible. Additionally, the New Jersey governing board encourages and promotes collegiality between the two- and four-year faculty to ensure that the curriculum of the 100 and 200 level courses across the colleges are equivalent in both content and rigor. Some limited instances exist where students must complete additional credits beyond the remaining half; however, these credits are in cases where the transfer student had not completed the prerequisite coursework at the community college level and was unable to fit the prerequisite within the remaining half of the program (New Jersey Statewide Transfer Initiative, 2017).

Credit equivalency systems, as those in Ohio and Washington have enacted policies that guarantee the transfer and application of general education and some pre-major course credits across institutions in the most popular programs, or programs with very specific lower-division coursework (Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2016). Credit equivalency systems contain policies for ensuring that lower-division general education and some pre-major courses

transfer and are uniformly applied to program requirements at all campuses across the system. These systems have developed transfer pathways for the pursuit of particular majors, but do not guarantee that transfer students with an associate's degree will have met all lower-division requirements of the receiving campus; nor do they guarantee entry with major-readiness. Most of these four-year institutions prefer to maintain flexibility in determining lower-division major course requirements for all or some majors.

The state of Washington offers a Direct Transfer Agreement (DTA) for its students. Although their transfer is on a course-by-course basis, the state touts the highest transfer rate at 49% and the highest bachelor completion rate (Tracking Transfer, 2016). With the DTA a structured transfer pathway allows students to complete all lower division general education requirements and transfer with junior status at all four-year colleges and universities in the state.

Kentucky, North Carolina, and Texas have systems that are institutionally driven (Hodara, et.al, 2016). State policies guarantee the transfer and application of general education course credits, but the four-year institutions via individual articulation agreements retain the right to determine the application of credits and dictate how transfer credits apply to major requirements and major-readiness for programs of study. North Carolina updated and approved its statewide Comprehensive Articulation Agreement in 2014, which includes a 30-credit common core guaranteed to transfer and junior status guarantee for transfer students who complete an associate's degree program. However, individual university programs determine any major-specific coursework (North Carolina Community College, Transfer Advisory Committee, 2016).

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Aspen Institute of the CCRC of Columbia University in its Transfer Playbook proposes three crucial tenets for a successful transfer pathway (Wyner, Jenkins, & Fink, 2017). First, both the two- and four-year institutions must prioritize transfer. Successful transfer partnerships are marked by a commitment of senior administrators and faculty to the importance of providing and promoting transfer pathways and a willingness to appropriate funding to ensure and maintain a successful pathway.

Secondly, successful partnering institutions have developed major-specific pathways, or transfer program maps, that clearly delineate the course sequences, prerequisites, and expectations to transfer the institution. Best practices require that partner institutions work collaboratively to create major-specific program maps, while at the same time cooperate to ensure high quality academic experiences and rigorous instruction at all levels. In order to maintain a smooth on-going process, these systems have implemented reliable procedures for updating and improving program maps as requirements and programs change.

Communication between the two- and four-year colleges is paramount for a successful transfer pathway. CCRC indicates that systems with successful transfer pathways communicate regularly about curriculum changes. As also recommended by JLARC, best practices suggest that in order to affect change and improvement, transfer student success outcomes be shared with the community colleges and that the outcomes be broken down by major and in comparison with native students.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, CRCC shares that systems with highly successful transfer pathways have incorporated personal guidance—tailored academic transfer student advising—both at the community college and the four-year college. Effective academic advising will articulate transfer options to students and assist them to determine, as early as possible, their

major program of study and their potential transfer institution. When students do so early, academic advisors can provide more relevant direction, give specific guidance to program maps, and connect the student with an academic advisor at the receiving school. The sooner the program major and transfer college is decided, the greater likelihood of success.

FALA RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Develop a Passport Program of General Education—The team is in full support of the Virginia SB 1234, which requires SCHEV to develop a Passport of general education core curriculum. The team recommends the core entail 30-36 credits of coursework that would be a standardized component of all A.A. and A.S. transfer degrees throughout the VCCS. The curriculum should be collaboratively developed by a cross-section of two-and four-year college faculty and deans. Each course in the curriculum should have 8-10 clearly identified common student learning outcomes. Further, the Passport core curriculum should fulfill the general education requirements for all Virginia public universities and students having completed the Passport should not be required to complete further general education coursework.

Recommendation 2: Coordinate the development of Program Maps—The team recommends the creation of 7-9 meta-majors, with sub-majors, based on high demand majors and careers. During the initial phase, the state should develop 5 or 6 common major programs such as business, biology, communications, history, mathematics, etc., and then progress to others. A faculty panel comprised of VCCS and university colleagues specific to the major should collaboratively develop the program map. The panel should reach a consensus on the required coursework (an A.A. or A.S. with General Education Core and Program Core) for the first two

years of the program, allowing the receiving institutions to independently determine the second half of the program. The VCCS should categorically offer the first two years of the identified programs as proposed. In turn, the four-year universities should accept A.A. or A.S. degree-holding students with a prescribed GPA at junior status and require no further general education course work.

Recommendation 3: Prioritize and Incentivize Transfer—The team recommends a high priority be given to promoting and incentivizing transfer. Virginia should educate its population regarding the benefits and savings of a community college associate’s degree and transfer options for the bachelor’s. Incentivize students to transfer, but only at key milestones. A graduated tuition discount system should be considered for students who transfer after achieving credentials. For example, a student who transfers after achieving the proposed Passport may be awarded a 5% tuition discount at the four-year school and a student who transfers after completing the A.A. or A.S. may be awarded a 10% tuition discount.

Recommendation 4: Prioritize Academic Advising—The team recommends that Virginia Department of Education promote career exploration in K-12 public schools, as early as the middle school grades. Exploration should include career technical fields and transfer options. As students begin to express interest, academic planning should begin. The VCCS should also promote academic advising and provide opportunities for students to explore, receive academic advising, and plan early for transfer success. Academic advising should happen as soon and as often as possible. All students should be required to meet with an academic advisor to discuss their career or future transfer plans within the first 15-30 credits of coursework.

Recommendation 5: Create an Articulation/Transfer Advisory Committee (ATAC)—This committee, a joint group of representatives from the VCCS and SCHEV, should provide direction, oversight, and the development and maintenance of a comprehensive transfer agreement. The ATAC should review data collected from SCHEV regarding student success outcomes in such areas as the major fields of study and the success rates and time-to-degree of transfer versus native students in the least and most effective major programs of study.

Recommendation 6: Create a Virtual Transfer Portal—The team recommends the development of a website that provides tools for career and meta-major exploration, academic planning, major program maps, transfer agreements, and other pertinent transfer information. See Appendix for a list of hyperlinks to states with example virtual transfer portals.

Recommendation 7: Provide Inter-collegial Professional Development Opportunities—The team recommends the promotion of venues where discipline-specific faculty from two- and four-year colleges can interact, discuss pedagogical methodologies, student learning outcomes, program and curriculum changes, and student success. The VCCS should consider the biennial peer group conference sponsored by the VCCS Office of Professional Development as a possible venue.

APPENDIX

Examples of Virtual Transfer Portals

Florida: <https://www.floridacollegesystem.com/students/transfer.aspx>

- Georgia: <http://www.completegeorgia.org/content/credit-when-its-due>
- Illinois: <http://itransfer.org/>
- Kentucky: <http://www.knowhow2transfer.org/>
- Massachusetts: <http://www.mass.edu/masstransfer/>
- New Jersey: <http://www.njtransfer.org/>
- North Carolina: <http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/academic-programs/college-transferarticulation-agreements/comprehensive-articulation-agreement-caa>
- Ohio: https://transfercredit.ohio.gov/pg_1?:::
- Tennessee: <http://www.tntransferpathway.org/>

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