

# The Promise of the Transfer Pathway

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Opportunity and Challenge for  
Community College Students  
Seeking the Baccalaureate Degree

Stephen J. Handel  
Ronald A. Williams

**The Initiative on Transfer Policy  
and Practice**

October 2012







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*"I think that one of the powerful statements you can make  
about transfer is that it is a way to keep higher education  
whole."*

Member of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice (2011)

## About the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice

In partnership with the College Board's National Office of Community College Initiatives and the Advocacy & Policy Center, the Initiative on Transfer Policy and Practice highlights the pivotal role of the transfer pathway for students — especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds — seeking the baccalaureate degree; convenes two- and four-year institution leaders to identify policies and practices that enhance this century-old pathway; and promotes a national dialogue about the viability and potential of transfer to address the nation's need for an educated citizenry that encompasses all sectors of American society.

## Acknowledgments

Our thanks go to the members of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice (see next page) who helped shape and guide this initiative. We are also thankful for the assistance we received from our colleagues at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (Michelle Cooper, Gregory S. Kienzl, Alexis J. Wesaw, and Amal Kumar) whose empirical analyses form the basis of Chapter 3. We would also like to thank the following colleagues who reviewed earlier versions of this manuscript and provided important insights that improved the quality of the final report: Marilyn Cushman, Alan Heaps, Gregory S. Kienzl, James Montoya, Christen Pollock, Tom Rudin, Myra Smith, Anne Sturtevant, and Alicia Zelek. This report benefits greatly from the help of these individuals, but any errors are the responsibility of the authors.

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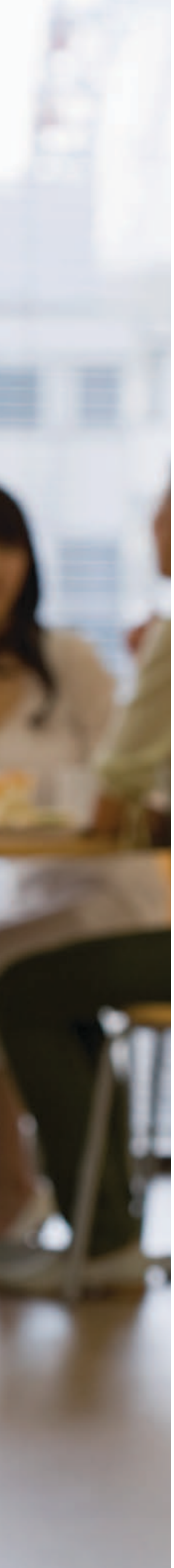
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## Supplemental Reports

(available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>)

1. *Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer*  
by Stephen J. Handel (The College Board)
2. *Understanding the Transfer Process: A Report by the Institute for Higher Education  
Policy* by Gregory S. Kienzl, Alexis J. Wesaw, and Amal Kumar (IHEP)
3. *Transfer as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective*  
by Stephen J. Handel (The College Board)





## Foreword

Over seven million students attend credit-bearing programs in community colleges, the largest postsecondary system of education in the U.S. Many of these students attend a community college so that they may prepare themselves to transfer to a four-year college or university and earn a baccalaureate degree. Among new, first-time community college students, the desire to transfer is especially strong. Surveys indicate that as many as eight in 10 want to transfer. Although some dispute the seriousness of these educational intentions, what is not disputed is that among students who say they want to transfer, most do not.

The transfer pathway, an academic avenue of advancement that was the original *raison d'être* for the establishment of junior, now community, colleges, is over 100 years old. Since 1901, the year marking the establishment of the first community college, the mission of these amazingly flexible and adaptive institutions has grown to include vocational and workforce training, adult education, and a myriad of other unique programs serving their surrounding communities. Similarly, during this same period, four-year colleges and universities expanded enormously to become an educational enterprise that remains the envy of the world.

Unfortunately, the transfer process has not benefitted from the emergence of community colleges and the expansion of four-year institutions. There are exceptions, of course. Numerous two- and four-year institutions around the country have built and nurtured transfer partnerships for decades, serving thousands of students in the process. If we are honest in our assessment, however, transfer is rarely the first thing on the minds of two- and four-year institutional leaders. Over the past century, the topic has captured their interest only intermittently, and largely during periods of economic downturn, political upheaval, or demographic shifts in the population. Moreover, some political pundits and education prognosticators 100 years ago, and even today, say we need fewer students with baccalaureate degrees and more students *with jobs*. This desire is as understandable as it is beside the point (and one that would be far more persuasive if such leaders also assured us that they were giving *their* kids the same advice). Despite this, the majority of today's community college students, much like those of previous generations, say they want to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree.

More often than not, however, they do not.

This report is an attempt to understand why. The findings within — culled from the minds of some of the best educators and researchers in the business — will not be the last word on the issue. Our hope, however, is that this report will provide the impetus toward a debate about the importance of the transfer pathway in U.S. higher education and the ways in which this avenue to the baccalaureate degree can be improved. This debate must focus on the ways in which two- and four-year institutional *colleagues* can work effectively to help students onto an academic pathway we offer to them in the name of access and equity; a pathway whose potential has yet to be fully valued and embraced.

Sincerely,

**Ronald A. Williams**  
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Community College Initiatives  
The College Board Advocacy &  
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**Stephen J. Handel**  
Executive Director  
National Office of Community College  
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The College Board



## Executive Summary

In 2010, the College Board's Advocacy & Policy Center, with financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, initiated a project to identify ways of improving the efficiency of the transfer pathway, a century-old mechanism that provides community college students with an opportunity to earn the baccalaureate degree at four-year institutions. Both organizations understand that the national focus on increasing the number of individuals with credentials and degrees will require that transfer play a significant role, especially given the fact that 47 percent of all undergraduates attend community colleges. Now and into the future, the way in which two- and four-year institutions embrace transfer — or not — will influence the educational fate of thousands of students in the U.S.

To address this issue, College Board staff reviewed research pertaining to transfer, convened the Commission on Transfer Policy, a committee composed of education leaders having special expertise in serving community college transfer students (a committee roster can be found on page 5) to identify significant and emerging trends that influence transfer, and engaged the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) to address a series of empirical questions raised by the Commission and College Board staff.

This report, as well as several supplemental reports,\* describes the transfer process as it is currently applied; identifies major challenges facing policymakers wishing to expand this pipeline; and provides a set of recommendations for states, two- and four-year institutions, and other entities, including the philanthropic and research communities, that are designed to advance transfer as a more effective pathway to the baccalaureate degree.

## Findings

The empirical and policy findings gathered for this initiative suggest the following:

- *Transfer continues to be a popular route to the baccalaureate degree, but the transfer rate has not improved despite more students wishing to transfer.*
- *The transfer process is too complex.*
- *The effectiveness of statewide articulation policies in boosting transfer has not yet been established empirically, but transparent transfer credit policies remain essential for student success.*

- *Community colleges and four-year institutions are rarely acknowledged for the work they do on behalf of transfer, and where transfer-related metrics exist, they are often imprecise, inadequate, or misapplied.*
- *Community colleges and four-year institutions are different academic cultures that create barriers for students already struggling to maneuver through a too-complex system.*
- *Financial aid policy is an essential element for an effective transfer plan, but it is not often aligned with other initiatives to boost transfer.*
- *We do not know the capacity of the current transfer system, and this impairs our ability to meet the nation's college completion agenda.*

## Recommendations

The empirical and policy findings gleaned from this initiative invite the following set of recommendations targeted to state governments, two- and four-year institutions, and the research, policymaking, and philanthropic communities.

### 1. For community college and four-year institution leaders:

*Create a transfer-affirming culture that spans your respective campuses, providing a pathway for community college students to advance toward the associate and baccalaureate degrees. Develop partnerships, such as dual admission arrangements or transfer contracts, which provide students with an academic road map. Develop similar partnerships to help students understand their financial aid options. Share information with one another on student goals and intentions, student academic performance, course equivalencies, and changes in programs and requirements with the overarching intention of providing students with a simpler and more coherent transfer process.*

\* Available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.

### **2. For community college leaders:**

*Honor and support the intentions of your new, first-time community college students, most of whom overwhelmingly want to earn a four-year degree, by making transfer and the associate degree the default curriculum, unless they opt for a different educational goal. Help students get a good start in higher education by providing them with a mandatory orientation program before their first term in college and/or a student success course in their first term, the product of each being a program of study leading to the associate degree and transfer. Require these students to make at least minimum progress toward their educational goal each term.*

### **3. For four-year institution leaders:**

*Establish an authentic and equal partnership with community colleges focused on transfer. Elevate transfer as a strategic, rather than tactical, objective of your institution's enrollment plans. Evidence this by insisting that enrollment targets be separate from those developed for freshmen. Share the responsibility of preparing students for transfer by reaching out to community college students in their first year of college with information about academic preparation, financial aid, and credit transfer. Cultivate these students with the same intensity and commitment that you cultivate your high school prospects and demonstrate this commitment by providing them with first-priority in the admission process over other transfer applicants.*

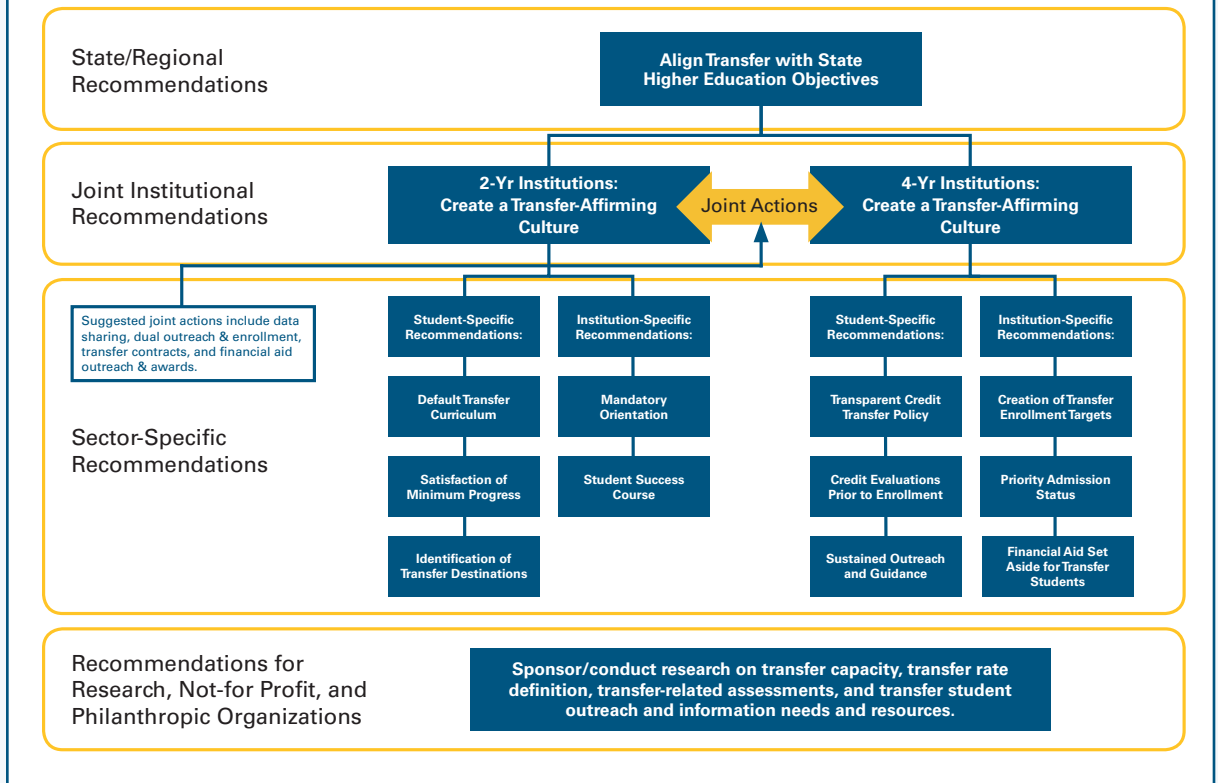
### **4. For state government leaders:**

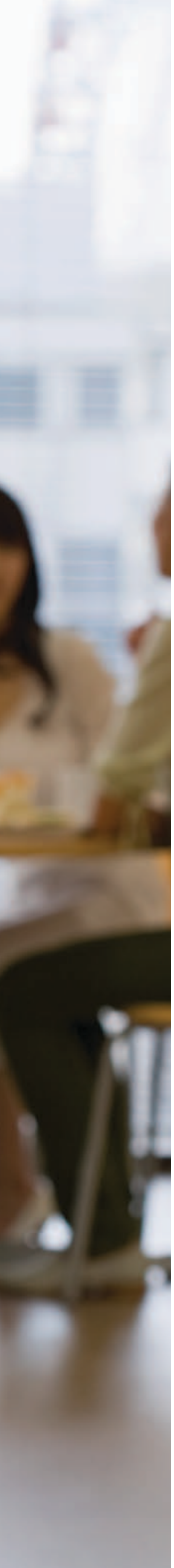
*Create a coherent transfer strategic plan that aligns with the state's overall higher education objectives. Incentivize the joint activity of community colleges and four-year institutions to serve community college transfer students, but also hold them accountable with reasonable and meaningful metrics that best assess what each type of institution does best.*

### **5. For research, not-for-profit and philanthropic organization leaders:**

*Develop research methodologies that allow policymakers to assess the capacity of the transfer pathway nationally. Create a definition of transfer that two- and four-year institutions can use to meaningfully assess their progress. Build Web-based college-search and other informational databases for community college students preparing for transfer that are at least as sophisticated as those for high school students applying to college. Develop new evaluation methods that can measure students' learning outcomes and thereby allow them to demonstrate competency in lieu of completing specific course work that may not have been articulated between any given two- and four-year institutions.*

**Figure 1**  
**Summary of Recommendations for State Governments, Two- and Four-Year Institutions, and Research, Not-for-Profit, and Philanthropic Organizations**





# Chapter 1: A Look Forward and a Look Back

*“With the current emphasis on the [community] college as the institution which will presumably care for an increasing share of this nation’s college freshmen and sophomores, representatives from all types of four-year colleges and from all types of [community] colleges must use all means of enabling the greatest number of transfer students to have a satisfying and successful experience in the next institution ... To date, too much has been left to chance.”*

Leland Medsker

This description of the transfer pathway — brief, precise, and instructive — summarizes well the work ahead for educators and policymakers as this nation strives to educate an increasing number of students needing postsecondary credentials and degrees in an intensely competitive and global marketplace.

It was written in 1960.\*

The transfer pathway, a century-old mechanism that allows community college students the opportunity to earn a baccalaureate degree, is a shared responsibility of community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. It has not always been viewed that way, however. Even at the beginning of the community college movement in 1901 — a movement initiated by leaders at several of America’s most elite four-year colleges and universities — helping students make the transition from a two-year to a four-year institution was, if not an incidental activity on the part of senior institutions, then certainly a secondary one. Community colleges have also come under similar criticism as these institutions have expanded their mission to include vocational and workforce training, developmental education, and adult education, forcing educators there to balance transfer against a growing list of other priorities. Today, despite the fact that 47 percent of all undergraduate students are enrolled in a community college — and the

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\* When he wrote *The Junior College: Progress and Prospect*, Leland Medsker was the vice chair of the Center for Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley. It is startling to read Medsker’s book today and discover how well his findings anticipate the issues that current policymakers and educators face in helping advance students through the transfer pipeline toward the baccalaureate degree. Medsker’s prescience cuts both ways, however. While acknowledging the depth of his scholarship, Medsker reminds us of how little these issues have advanced in half of a century.

fact that most new, first-time community college students want to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree — the relationship between two- and four-year institutions is often strained over disagreements about academic preparation, credit transfer, and control of the baccalaureate degree. As a result, despite this 100-year history, transfer has never been a reliably productive route to the baccalaureate degree. Current estimates indicate that the proportion of community college students who transfer successfully to a four-year institution hovers around 25 to 35 percent, a rate reflecting an enormous opportunity for improvement.

This report highlights the reasons for the sustained neglect of transfer, examines the often ineffectual interactions among two- and four-year institutions that undergird this neglect, and recommends strategies to reverse this outcome. This project was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and carried out by the College Board, with the assistance of educators, researchers, and policymakers throughout the United States, all understanding that the way in which two- and four-year institutions embrace transfer — or not — influences the educational fate of tens of thousands of students in the United States.

The release of this report, whatever its shortcomings, could not be more timely. Our nation’s need for a strengthened transfer pathway turns on a number of social and political intersections that are roiling higher education. First, as President Obama made clear in his often quoted 2009 State of the Union address, there is a significant need for more individuals with postsecondary degrees and credentials in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Our increasingly technological economy will require individuals with higher skills so that our workforce can vie effectively with international competitors. Second, gaining ground in an interdependent world economy can only be achieved if we raise the college completion rates substantially among students who have been traditionally underserved in higher education. The gap between rich and poor in this country is at an historic high, and the persistent two-decades-old achievement gap among students from different racial and ethnic groups has been difficult to ameliorate. Third, as the cost of higher education increases, families are looking for ways to cut college costs and minimize debt — especially since the advent of the most recent recession. In the meantime, the public perception of higher education has suffered, threatening the foundation upon which the future of both community colleges and four-year institutions depend. In a recent Pew Center survey, 57 percent of those polled said higher education was doing only a “fair or poor” job of

providing “value for money.” The poll went on to note that over two-thirds agreed that access to college, even for those who are qualified, has been compromised (up over 20 percentage points from a similar poll conducted in 2000) (Pew Research Center, 2011, p. 16).

These higher education trends — a need for more degrees, the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the rising cost of a college degree — are depressingly unassailable, but why do they argue for a strengthened transfer pathway? The most compelling reasons include the following. First, the low cost of community colleges makes these institutions increasingly attractive to all families, even those from upper-income brackets who heretofore never gave these institutions a serious look. They have also attracted the attention of policymakers desperate for ways to educate more students with fewer dollars. Second, two-year institutions are the colleges of choice for students from underserved groups who will constitute the majority of new-student college enrollments in the coming decades. Third, the transfer process has the potential to supply four-year institutions with the student diversity they covet but cannot command via increasingly fragile public support for affirmative action policies. Finally, strengthening transfer simply is the right thing to do. It was a bargain this nation made with community college students a century ago but one that is not yet fulfilled.

### As We Look Forward ... A Brief Look Back

Throughout this report we emphasize that the transfer process is a *shared* responsibility between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities, understanding that both types of institutions are essential in advancing students to the bachelor’s degree (Gandara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012, p. 6; Cohen, 2003).<sup>2</sup> More often than not, however, transfer — its successes and failures — is associated almost entirely with community colleges. Yet, four-year college and university leaders were instrumental in the establishment of the junior — later community — college and the transfer pathway.<sup>3</sup> Their motivations were both pragmatic and self-serving. First, they believed that the creation of two-year institutions would be an effective way of addressing anticipated increases in college enrollment without having these new students overrun their campuses. A second reason was a desire to recast their universities as institutions focused solely on the upper-division curriculum and graduate education, ceding lower-division or general liberal arts education to the two-year institution. In creating this separate institution, four-year institution leaders hoped to “unburden” themselves of the expense and responsibility of offering lower-division courses, while also increasing the selectivity of the

students they admitted to the upper division. During the first two decades of community colleges’ history, these four-year college and university leaders, along with local and regional civic leaders, were instrumental in establishing community colleges throughout the country. It has been estimated that state universities were pivotal in the inauguration of 42 percent of all two-year colleges in the U.S. (Dougherty, 1994, p. 142). Moreover, four-year institutions were deeply involved in the development of mechanisms to evaluate and award community college credit so that students could begin their baccalaureate degrees at two-year colleges.<sup>4</sup>

Although four-year institutions originally believed that their own lower-division curriculum could be addressed by community colleges, the ebb and flow of college enrollments — the lifeblood of any institution, public or private — made it imperative for them to maintain a lower-division curriculum and to continue to admit

### Preview: Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes

The transfer pathway was created as an outgrowth of the community college movement. However, its origin and subsequent development is also linked with that of four-year colleges and universities and powerful cultural and economic trends in American higher education at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. In *Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer*, the creation and expansion of the transfer pathway is described in detail from its initial incarnation in the mid-1800s to its current function as a major avenue of access to a baccalaureate degree for thousands of students. This historical analysis reveals three long-term trends that continue to influence the transfer pathway:

- *Transfer has been and continues to be a central and preeminent mission of the community college.*
- *Transfer has been and continues to be a shared responsibility of two- and four-year institutions.*
- *Transfer has been and continues to be the most popular educational goal of new, first-time community college students.*

Access this report at:

<http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>



freshmen. Despite the early and sustained support of four-year institutions, community colleges and four-year institutions — almost from the beginning — were in competition for students, changing the nature of the relationship from one of partner to something approaching a competitor.

It is important to emphasize that transfer was the predominant mission of community colleges from the very beginning. While occupationally oriented programs were available to community college students if they did not move up (or were denied admission to) the senior institution, the proportion of the curriculum devoted to such programs was less than 20 percent (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 31; Witt et al., 1995, p. 45). However, as community colleges grew in number throughout the 20th century, the mission of these institutions expanded to include not only a comprehensive lower-division, liberal arts curriculum suitable for preparing students for transfer but also training for a variety of vocational occupations (Levin, 2008).

Community colleges' expanding vocational mission complicated its relationship with students and intensified an already thorny relationship with four-year institutions. Despite the publicly professed wish of two- and four-year institution leaders that most students entering a community college be counseled to earn a sub-baccalaureate credential, surveys in virtually every decade since the creation of community colleges show that most new, first-time students desire to transfer and earn a four-year degree. Moreover, with an increased focus on occupational training came a perception — accurate or not — that community colleges were less interested in the “higher” portion of higher education; that community colleges had subverted or, at least, weakened their connection with four-year colleges and universities and in doing so undermined the transfer process. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period in which the nation opened a new community college *every week*, the long-simmering debate between two- and four-year institutions intensified about the viability of the transfer process. Researchers noted a decline in the transfer rate, which, despite students' professed interest, had never been very high (25 to 35 percent of students with transfer intentions — see Chapter 5). Education leaders and policymakers speculated publicly about the causes of this decline, highlighting weakened relationships between two- and four-year institutions and a lack of state policy guidance in making transfer an educational priority.

Quick to defend the role of their institutions in advancing students' educational progress, community college leaders pointed out that transfer remained an indelible part of their mission, and if there had been any diminution in transfer effectiveness, it was the result

of four-year institutions' lack of interest in community colleges and the students who wished to transfer to their institutions. These leaders pointed to the refusal of four-year institutions to admit more than a handful of their students and four-year institutions' failure to grant transfer course credit to the ones they did admit.

This interinstitutional debate over transfer, which continues to this day and is one of the reasons this project was commissioned, also highlights a broader uneasiness among most Americans about the essential purpose of a college education. Four-year institutions are seen as providing an education in the liberal arts, a set of skills that their graduates may apply throughout life, regardless of and unsullied by specific career occupational demands. Community colleges, on the other hand, are seen as providing training for the current marketplace. Yet, it would be impossible to argue that four-year institutions are not interested in the employability of their graduates. The establishment of professional schools on their campuses, for example, indicates a willingness to provide occupational training, so long if it is for the “right” kinds of jobs.<sup>5</sup> For their part, community colleges, from the very beginning, have offered a lower-division liberal arts curriculum largely mirroring what is offered at four-year institutions. The idea that these institutions are unable to educate students for lifelong learning seems misplaced. Still, it is this tension between what we define as “education” and “training” that plays out uneasily when two- and four-year institutions interact on issues of policy and practice surrounding transfer.

## Preview

In the pages that follow, we bring to this century-long debate our own empirical and analytical contributions, with an emphasis on historical and contemporary trends that continue to exert an influence on this academic pathway. For this report, we commissioned a new set of empirical analyses, carried out by researchers at the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP). This report also reflects the guidance of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, a committee convened by the College Board composed of education leaders from around the country possessing both expertise and experience in the area of transfer. In undertaking this work, our overriding goal was to understand better the capacity of the current transfer process to help more students earn the baccalaureate degree; scrutinize transfer from the perspective of students who are asked to navigate this pathway, often on their own and with minimal assistance; and integrate both the policy and empirical research literature in a way that provides higher education leaders with a set of strategies instrumental for improving the transfer process.

The report is organized as follows:

- Chapter 2 addresses current conditions that we believe draw attention to the need for a stronger transfer process. We describe shifts in the American workforce that will require individuals to possess greater levels of knowledge and skill, the pressure of international competition on U.S. economic growth that has highlighted the need for this nation to raise college completion rates, and the necessity of closing the achievement gap for students from underserved groups not only to meet future workforce needs but to fulfill the nation's democratic ideals.
- Chapter 3 presents the empirical findings from IHEP, which addressed a number of transfer-related questions, including: What are the characteristics of first-time community college students and how do they compare to students who begin college at four-year institutions? What are some of the student-, institutional-, and state-level factors that accelerate or hinder transfer? How do the bachelor's degree attainment rates of transfer students compare to four-year students who are roughly at the same place in their studies?
- Chapters 4–8 highlight five broad topics on which the improvement of the transfer pathway rests: the capacity of the transfer pathway to accommodate more students; the need to develop appropriate institutional incentives to support transfer, while implementing appropriate accountability metrics to measure progress; identifying and addressing those places in the process where we lose most of our potential transfers; restructuring financial aid to support transfer students; and bridging the academic cultures of two- and four-year institutions.
- Chapters 9 and 10 highlight the major findings from this initiative and delineate a series of recommendations for state governments, two- and four-year institutions, and research and philanthropic organizations.

Finally, we offer three supplemental reports that address, in greater depth, issues touched on in this report. The first focuses on the history of transfer, especially the evolving, sometimes uneasy, relationship between two- and four-year institutions. The second is the technical report showcasing the empirical results described in Chapter 3. The third report is a student-view narrative of the transfer process and its on-the-ground challenges. (Supplemental reports are available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admissioncompletion/community-colleges>.)

### A Note About Transfer and Student “Swirl”

Our examination of transfer in this report is focused on the traditional two-year to four-year institution pathway, sometimes called “vertical transfer.” We appreciate that many students, indeed the majority of students, do not attend a community college for two years, transfer to a four-year institution, and complete their degree in four years. Even students who first attend a four-year institution rarely finish in the traditional four-year timeframe. Moreover, research indicates that most students who wish to earn a baccalaureate degree may attend several community colleges before they transfer. Most community college students attend on a part-time basis; other students “stop-in” and “stop-out” of these institutions, sometimes completing only one or two courses in a given academic year. Why focus on the “traditional” vertical pathway, especially since it does not mirror the behavior of current community college students? First, vertical transfer, however idealized, represents the historical relationship between community colleges and four-year institutions and remains the most efficient route to the baccalaureate for community college students. Second, despite the variability in students’ academic pathways, we believe that the analyses presented here, along with our policy recommendations, are neither inconsistent with nor antithetical to an understanding of the other transfer pathways that students may follow. Indeed, as our goal is to advance the effectiveness of transfer for all students wishing to earn a four-year degree, efficiencies achieved in the vertical pathway — as it is the most rigorous of transfer scenarios — necessarily aids students following other routes to the baccalaureate degree.

## Chapter 2: The Transfer Moment

*“A great challenge and an opportunity are at hand ... At the very time that global competitiveness depends on a well-educated citizenry, we find ourselves losing ground in relative educational attainment ... Between now and 2025, the United States will need to find 15 to 20 million employees, as an aging and highly skilled workforce retires. How is the nation to replace these skills?”*

21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 2012 (pp. 5–6)

The last 50 years have seen remarkable growth in American higher education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Fueled in part by the GI Bill and federal research dollars to maintain this nation’s Cold War readiness, our colleges and universities became (and remain) the envy of the world (Zakaria, 2008). The American community college played a phenomenal part in this growth. Now enshrined in the U.S. higher education landscape, these colleges were imagined by visionary educators at four-year colleges and universities and brought to fruition by junior college — later community college — leaders who correctly saw that this model of higher education access represented a blueprint for the greatest educational experiment of the 20th century. During this period, the United States became the best-educated country in the world.

The new century promises a less optimistic future — unless the nation acts expeditiously. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States ranked sixth among developed nations in the percentage of adults ages 25 to 64 years with an associate degree or higher. Although the United States ranked fourth among developed countries in the postsecondary degree achievements of 55- to 64-year-old adults, our position rank slips to 12th when we look at the academic productivity of 25- to 34-year-olds (OECD, 2008). Moreover, the OECD analyses revealed that the United States ranked near the bottom of industrialized nations in the percentage of students entering college who completed a degree program. The implications, as noted by the Commission on Access, Admissions, and Success in Higher Education, are historic: “We face the prospect that the educational level of one generation of Americans will not exceed, will not equal, perhaps will not even approach, the level of its parents” (College Board, 2008, p. 5).

The uneven productivity of college degrees and credentials comes at a time when the need for highly skilled workers is growing. According to *Jobs for the Future*, by 2025, the United States must produce 25.1 percent more A.A. degree holders and 19.6 percent B.A. degree holders, over and above current production levels, to meet our nation’s workforce needs (Reindl, 2007). Moreover, to effectively address this degree gap, our nation must increase the number of degrees earned by individuals coming from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including American Indian, African American, Latino, low-income, and first-generation students (NCHEMS, 2007). This disparity in higher education degree productivity for individuals from some underserved groups has been difficult to ameliorate, yet doing so is essential to meet this nation’s need for a better-educated population. This is due to the fact that these groups, especially the Latino population, will increase significantly in the coming decades.

The extent to which other nations have eclipsed the educational productivity of the United States has galvanized the business, policymaking, and philanthropic communities here at home. Still, the most ambitious challenge has come from the federal government. Not since the passage of the GI Bill has a presidential administration placed such emphasis on higher education and pledged the support to provide opportunity to a greater number of students, although this has not translated into funding for direct support of transfer (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, & Kienzl, 2009, p. 6). During his 2009 State of the Union address, President Obama challenged every American “to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training” and challenged this nation to attain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

The need to increase educational productivity in this country raises questions not only about our will to fulfill President Obama’s ambitious goal but whether we have the capacity to do so. It is clear that community colleges will need to be a significant part in meeting any college completion goal, given the number of undergraduates these institutions educate each year.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, although the discussion around college completion focuses on increasing the number of people with certificates and degrees of all types, more recent analyses portend an especially urgent need to increase the number of bachelor’s degree holders. Georgetown researchers Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose in their report, *The Undereducated*

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*American*, conclude that the United States will need an additional 20 million postsecondary-educated workers in the next 15 years. Of these 20 million individuals, at least 15 million will need to earn bachelor's degrees. Carnevale and Rose argue that such growth, 2 percent per year for the next decade and a half, is needed not only to fill job requirements in the U.S. but also to stem the widening earnings gap between those individuals who possess a high school diploma compared to those who hold a four-year degree. At the current rate of degree production, the income gap is expected to grow, say Carnevale and Rose, to an astonishing 96 percent by 2025 (Carnevale & Rose, 2011).

Carnevale and Rose never mention community colleges or transfer students in their report. Nonetheless, they do stress that increasing “the number of college graduates must be based ... on removing barriers to degree completion for qualified students” (p. 32). Surely, creating a smoother transfer pathway falls within this criterion. They also recommend that we

improve the quality of our graduating high school seniors. Better-prepared students entering college, whether a two- or four-year institution, are more likely to complete a certificate or degree. But generating 15 million more B.A. degree holders in eight years is so ambitious that, barring an historic and unrealistic turnaround of the K–12 system, it is unlikely that Carnevale and Rose’s goal can be met without relying on the accessibility and capacity of community colleges and the transfer pathway.

There are other reasons why we need a strengthened transfer pathway:

- **Community college students want to transfer.** Transfer has been and continues to be a popular goal for a large proportion of incoming community college students. Surveys indicate that at least 50 percent and perhaps as many as 80 percent of all incoming (first-time) community college students seek to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree

<b>Table 1</b>			
<b>Percentage Distribution of First-Time Beginning Community College Students Who Wish to Earn a Bachelor’s Degree or Above by Selected Student Characteristics</b>			
<b>Selected Student Characteristics</b>	<b>1989-90</b>	<b>1995-96</b>	<b>2003-4</b>
<b>Total</b>	70.7	79.2	81.4
<b>Sex</b>			
<b>Male</b>	71.3	83.0	83.6
<b>Female</b>	70.3	75.6	79.7
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
<b>White</b>	68.6	78.8	79.1
<b>Black</b>	81.7	72.5	83.0
<b>Latino</b>	75.1	86.2	85.4
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander<sup>1</sup></b>	–	–	88.8
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native<sup>1</sup></b>	–	–	55.0 <sup>2</sup>
<b>Age When First Enrolled</b>			
<b>18 or younger</b>	80.9	91.1	90.4
<b>19–23</b>	70.3	84.4	83.7
<b>24–29</b>	55	59.8	78.1
<b>30 or older</b>	48.9	46.8	61.3
<b>Income</b>			
<b>Lowest 25 percent</b>	73.9	81.8	84.2
<b>Middle 50 percent</b>	70.3	78.0	82.3
<b>Highest 25 percent</b>	67.6	79.0	76.8

Adapted from Table 1-A, NCES 2012-253, U.S. Department of Education (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011, November).

<sup>1</sup> Some data for Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native not available or unreliable due to small sample sizes.

<sup>2</sup> Figure represents only those students indicating a goal “above a bachelor’s degree.”

**Table 2**

<b>Percentage of Undergraduates Enrolled in Two- and Four-Year Colleges and Universities</b>	
<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Percentage of All Undergraduate</b>
<b>Public Two-Year Community Colleges</b>	45.7
<b>Public Four-Year Research and Other Colleges and Universities</b>	28.9
<b>Private Four-Year Research, Liberal Arts, and Other Colleges and Universities</b>	12.7
<b>For Profit</b>	9.8
<b>Others</b>	2.9

Adapted from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2012 (<http://chronicle.com/article/Who-Are-the-Undergraduates-/123916/>)

(Horn, 2009, pp. 8–9; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011, Table 1-A; Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 21). Students' desire to earn a baccalaureate degree has steadily increased since 1989-90 regardless of their racial/ethnic background, age, and income level (see Table 1). Moreover, although students' educational intentions are often seen as unreliable, the high proportion of entering community college students wishing to transfer has been constant through the history of community colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Medsker, 1960).<sup>7</sup> Finally, research has established that many students who intend to earn sub-baccalaureate credentials at a community college often increase their educational aspirations after starting at a two-year college (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

- **Community colleges are the largest postsecondary education segment, and their share of the undergraduate population is likely to increase.** Community colleges enroll more than seven million for-credit students, constituting 47 percent of all undergraduates in the United States (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012; American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012, p. 8). Moreover, student enrollment in public two-year community colleges dwarfs enrollments in all other sectors of undergraduate higher education (see Table 2). Community college enrollments, especially during the most recent recession, were far more volatile than four-year institution enrollments; nevertheless, community college enrollment increased 9 percent since 2006 (Dadashova, Hossler, Shapiro, Chen, Martin, Torres, Zerquera, & Ziskin, 2011, p. 17). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education predicts that postsecondary enrollments will grow 13 percent between now and 2020, despite the fact that the national high school graduation rate is predicted to decline 3 percent during the same period. Part of the projected growth in the college-going population will be made up of Latino students, students ages

25–34 years old, and part-time students. These groups are far more likely to attend a community college than a four-year institution (Hussar & Bailey, 2011, pp. 19–24).

- **The college-going population is changing.** As described in Chapter 1, four-year colleges and universities have historically preferred to enroll students directly from high school rather than community colleges, believing that the supply of first-time students was inexhaustible. But the supply, if not drying up, is certainly slowing down. As noted above, the U.S. Department of Education predicts that the high school graduation rate will be in decline between now and 2020. In 27 states, the Department predicts high school graduation rates will level off or decline (Hussar & Bailey, 2011, p. 10). Thus, certainly in the near term, transfer students will allow four-year institutions to fill seats that would have otherwise been occupied by 18-year-olds.
- **Community colleges attract students from underserved groups in significant numbers.** White students constitute the majority of community college enrollments as they do four-year institutions. Community colleges, however, enroll significant numbers of African American, Latino, and first-generation students, as well as students from the lowest income level and single-parent families (AACC, 2012; Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education [WICHE], 2008).<sup>8</sup> These numbers are likely to increase because, for example, the population of students from underrepresented ethnic groups is expected to increase substantially in the coming decades. Moreover, students from underserved groups, especially Latino and American Indian students, have traditionally enrolled in community colleges in greater numbers than in public four-year institutions, regardless of their income level.<sup>9</sup>

- **Increasing stratification of higher education makes transfer the most important — and perhaps the only — viable avenue for students from underserved groups.** The fact that students from underserved groups enroll in community colleges in significant numbers may have more to do with economics than institutional preference. Between 1994 and 2006, the share of African American students enrolling in community colleges increased from 10 percent to 14 percent, and the share of Latino students enrolling in community colleges increased from 11 percent to 19 percent. During the same period, both populations did not increase their share of participation in competitive four-year colleges and universities, despite increases in their respective high school graduation rates (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010, pp. 131–135). As noted earlier, this same pattern is seen in the enrollment of students from the lowest socioeconomic groups, who now make up the majority of enrollments in community colleges. These institutions are the gateway for students from a variety of groups that have been — and continue to be — underrepresented in higher education. That community colleges welcome these nontraditional groups of students is well known. Yet the growing numbers of these students who begin at a community college, coupled with the nation’s need to produce more degree holders, makes the transfer process critically important.
- **Community colleges will prepare more students for transfer from traditional backgrounds.** There is evidence that traditional student populations are enrolling in community colleges in greater numbers than ever before. The College Board (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2012, p. 1) reports that students attending community colleges on a full-time basis increased almost 50 percent in the last decade. Moreover, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Dadashova et al., 2011) found as a result of the most recent recession, that “community colleges saw increases in full-time enrollments — suggesting the possibility that students who might otherwise have attended four-year institutions full-time were instead enrolling in greater numbers at community colleges” (Dadashova et al., 2011, p. 46). Other researchers have suggested a similar trend within community colleges (Mullin & Phillippe, 2009; Rhoades, 2012; Bailey & Morest, 2006, p. 5). Such students attending full time are far more likely than other students to have transfer and a bachelor’s degree as a goal. In addition, in a recent survey focusing on how families pay for college, there was a significant shift in the number of high-income families (over \$100,000 per year)

sending their children to community colleges, increasing from 12 percent in 2009-10 to 22 percent in 2010-11. A similar, though smaller, increase was noted among middle-income families (from 24 percent to 29 percent) (Sallie Mae, 2012, p. 12).

- **Community colleges cost less to attend than four-year institutions.** As the national debate about college costs intensifies, the relative affordability of community colleges makes these institutions an increasingly attractive option for many American households. Although community college costs are also rising, these institutions remain the most affordable higher education option in the U.S. According to data compiled by AACC, tuition and fees at community colleges average only 36.2 percent of the average four-year public college tuition and fee bill (AACC, 2009).<sup>10</sup> The relative affordability of community colleges is reflected in the number of students from lower socioeconomic levels who attend these institutions. In 2006, over 58 percent of all students attending community colleges came from the lowest two income quartiles and over one-quarter (28 percent) came from the lowest income quartile (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010, p. 137).
- **Community colleges are more accessible than four-year institutions.** Closely linked to the issue of cost, there is a community college located within driving distance of most Americans. Moreover, community colleges are geographically more widely distributed than four-year institutions (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 4, Figure 3). Students rank geographic convenience among the most important reasons for attending a particular college or university.

Highlighting this confluence of variables, a Brookings Institution study recently concluded:

*“Confronted with high tuition costs [at four-year institutions], a weak economy, and increased competition for admission to four-year colleges, students today are more likely than at any other point in history to choose to attend a community college” [emphasis added] (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, & Kienzl, 2009, p. 10).*

The need for a better-educated workforce, the centrality of community colleges as an avenue of higher education access for millions of students from underserved groups, and the untested potential of the transfer process as an expressway to the baccalaureate degree, make this an especially opportune time to assess the strength and efficiency of the community college — four-year institution partnership.

## Chapter 3: Empirical Snapshot for the New Century: Transfer Student Gains and Losses

In 2010, the College Board engaged the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) to tackle the transfer and degree completion research issues identified by the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice and to supplement these analyses with site visits to two- and four-year institutions. As part of its efforts, IHEP analyzed the latest longitudinal data from the U.S. Department of Education databases focusing on transfer and B.A. attainment rates. In addition, promising practices in transfer policy were investigated based on site visits in several states. The empirical analyses focused on three questions:

- What are the characteristics of first-time community college students and how do they compare to starting students at four-year institutions?
- What are some of the student-, institutional-, and state-level factors that accelerate or hinder transfer?
- How do the bachelor's degree attainment rates of transfer students compare to four-year students who are roughly at the same place in their studies?

### The Complete Picture

The findings presented in this chapter are taken from *Understanding the Transfer Process: A Report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy*, which was written by Gregory Kienzl, Alexis Wesaw, and Amal Kumar and commissioned specifically for this initiative. A complete description of the data sources, methodology, and findings can be found at: <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>

Embedded in these questions are issues such as students' intentions to transfer, the influence of statewide articulation agreements in encouraging the movement between two- and four-year institutions with minimal burden or loss of momentum, and whether having an associate degree prior to transferring provides the necessary push toward a bachelor's degree.

### Data Sources and Methodology

The study draws from a number of data sources, including the two most recent national longitudinal datasets of first-time college students, characteristics of state transfer and articulation environments, and several campus interviews. The analysis includes both descriptive comparisons as well as multivariate models that attempt to tease out the relationships among key indicators identified in the literature. The findings discussed in this report were based on data drawn from several primary and secondary sources, including the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS 96-01 and BPS 4/09), the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the Education Commission of the States' policy brief on transfer and articulation, and interviews with transfer counselors at five postsecondary institutions in three states.

### Results

- **Community college students are a diverse population.** First-time students attending community colleges are different from first-time students attending four-year colleges and universities. Community college students are more likely to be older. Forty-four percent of community college students are 20 years of age or older, compared to 14 percent of students attending four-year colleges and universities. Nevertheless, community colleges enroll a sizeable number of students from the traditional 18- to 23-year-old college-going cohort. In this analysis, over 72 percent of first-time community college students are in this age-group, compared to 91 percent for four-year colleges and universities.

Compared to students who begin at a four-year college or university, first-time community college students are also more likely to come from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Although white students comprise about 60 percent of community college enrollments (as compared to 68 percent in four-year institutions), community colleges enroll more first-time African American students (14 percent versus 11 percent at four-year institutions) and Latino students (16 percent versus 10 percent at four-year institutions).

First-time community college students are more likely to come from the lowest income quartile. In this analysis, 26 percent of community college students come from the lowest income quartile, compared to 20 percent for students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities. In addition, first-time community college students who are African American and Latino are more likely to come from the lowest income quartile, compared to white students. Forty-four percent of first-time African American community college students and 35 percent of Latino students are from the lowest income quartile, compared to 18 percent for white students.

Finally, first-time community college students are more likely to have completed at least one remedial course compared to their peers at four-year colleges and universities (30 percent versus 18 percent) and are much less likely to attend college on a full-time basis (49 percent versus 88 percent).

The results of this analysis demonstrate that students attending a community college represent a broad range of backgrounds and personal characteristics. In comparison with four-year colleges and universities, community colleges attract a far more diverse student body in such areas as age, race/ethnicity, income level, and academic preparation.

- **The transfer rate remains steady, but more students transfer.** In calculating a national transfer rate, a commonly used definition of a transfer student, developed by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, was used: “A student who started her postsecondary education at a public two-year institution and stayed there at least one full-time semester is considered to have transferred if at any point she was observed at a four-year institution of any type, anywhere for at least one full-time semester.”

From this definition the national transfer rate of community college students who first enrolled in the 2003-04 academic year was calculated as 26 percent. This transfer estimate is statistically indistinguishable from eight years earlier, which was calculated as 27 percent.

Although the transfer rate has remained the same, due to 100,000 more first-time community college students enrolled in postsecondary education now than eight years ago, there has been a net gain of approximately 24,000 transfer students between 1996–2001 and 2004–2009.

- **The transfer rate for African American students increased, but the transfer rate for Latino students did not improve.** The transfer rate for African American students is 25 percent. Although this transfer rate is similar to the transfer rate for all students, it represents an increase of 9 percentage points over the previous cohort (1996–2001). This increase was especially pronounced for African American students in the lowest- and middle-income quartiles, in which the rate surged 10 and 13 percentage points, respectively, compared to the previous cohort. The transfer rate among African Americans in the highest income quartile, however, dropped 4.5 percentage points — from 24 to 20 percent — over the eight-year period.

The transfer rate for Latino students is 20 percent. Although this rate did not decline substantially from the rate calculated for the previous cohort (less than 1 percent), Latinos have the lowest rate among all students in the current cohort. The transfer rate for Latino students is 8 percent lower than the rate calculated for white transfer students and 6 percent lower than the rate calculated for African American transfer students.

- **Student transfer intentions increased but not the number of students that successfully transferred.** In spite of a transfer rate that is virtually unchanged from the earlier cohort, a larger proportion of community college students in the current cohort indicated a desire to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree. In the 1995-96 academic year, 44 percent of the first-time community colleges student population indicated a desire to transfer and earn the baccalaureate degree. In the 2003-04 academic year, this figure was 60 percent.

Unfortunately, although more students intended to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree in the current cohort, they were less successful in doing so compared to the earlier cohort. Although 60 percent of first-time community college students intended to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree in the 2004-09 cohort, only 36 percent of these students were successful in doing so. In the 1996–2001 cohort, 44 percent of first-time community college students intended to transfer and earn a four-year degree and an equal percentage (44 percent) were successful.

- **No support for statewide articulation policies on transfer rates was found.** Statewide articulation agreements, which require the transfer of lower-division course credit from public community colleges to public four-year colleges and universities, show no statistically significant impact on transfer rates. Although such



agreements are designed to assist students by streamlining the transfer process, data indicate a negative correlation between states that have implemented such agreements and the overall transfer rate.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews with transfer coordinators suggests that institution-to-institution articulation agreements have more impact on student transfer rates than statewide policies. Institutional agreements between and among public colleges and universities, while far less comprehensive than statewide agreements (which generally cover entire lower-division programs, such as general education curricula and/or major programs), may be seen by students as perhaps more relevant for their needs, especially because these agreements cover specific courses between only two institutions.

Despite transfer coordinators' preference for institution-specific agreements over statewide agreements, such agreements are not a perfect solution. Interviews with transfer counselors in two- and four-year institutions in Illinois and Indiana revealed that institution-specific agreements, created by individual college partnerships, usually only cover a single program area or major. They typically allow for block transfer of credit, but only if students transfer to the specific partnership institution. Such agreements are widely seen — at least by these interviewees — as problematic, because they are very specific, limit students' choices, and can be confusing. To meet the requirements of an agreement, students need to select both a major and a transfer institution, which means that they must engage in detailed planning early in their college careers.

- **Institution-based strategies to increase transfer may boost transfer.** Interviews conducted with transfer counselors at Portland Community College and Portland State University in Oregon revealed a successful institution-based strategy to ease transfer. In this program, qualified students are co-admitted at both institutions. Participating students have access to many facilities and support services at each institution. Students pay community college tuition for community college courses, and four-year tuition for courses offered through the university.

This program and others like it help transfer students gain access to the receiving institution early in their collegiate career and make transfer a key component of the culture on both campuses. But it also requires significant resources. Co-admitted students are given multiple forms of

## Do Community College Students Succeed at Four-Year Institutions?

Our results found a difference in graduation rates for students who attend a community college compared to students who begin at a four-year institution. A student who starts at a community college is less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree in six years. Unfortunately, this finding has been replicated numerous times (although, as we note, community college students are sometimes not tracked for a sufficient number of terms to measure success). Of course, that's part of the reason why this project was initiated: To discover ways of improving the transfer pathway so that many more students transfer and graduate with a four-year degree. What we also found, however, was that students who successfully transferred to a four-year institution were less likely to graduate compared to a matched set of four-year institution peers (that is, students who started at a four-year institution and who also achieved junior status). This finding, however, is far from definitive. Other researchers have discovered just the opposite; that community college students who transfer are as academically successful — if not more so — than students who began at a four-year institution. More research is needed to clear this up. (See Note 11 for additional information and research references.)

support before, during, and after the transfer process, but this support is dependent upon having dedicated transfer staff available to them.

A particular challenge is reaching out to all of the potential transfer students who are not aware of the program and, because they self-advise, do not necessarily see themselves as benefiting from participation. In Oregon, the co-enrollment program is struggling to meet demand. Portland State University is having difficulty serving the large numbers of freshmen and sophomores enrolled or co-enrolled in that institution. This is particularly challenging given the budget cuts facing the institution and higher education generally.

- **Bachelor's degree attainment lags for transfer students compared to their four-year institution peers.** Although student success in making the transition from a community college to a four-year institution is an achievement all its own, the

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ultimate goal is a bachelor's degree. To what extent do these students succeed in earning this degree compared to their peers who began college at a four-year institution and who have achieved the same level of academic advancement?

To make this comparison, students who successfully transferred from a community college to a four-year institution were compared with students who initiated their college careers at a four-year institution and who achieved junior standing (called "rising juniors"). Comparing successful transfers to rising juniors (rather than the entire cohort of students who began college at the four-year institution) accounts, to some degree, for student attrition that inevitably occurs in both sets of cohorts.

With this analytical framework in mind, community college students do not earn bachelor's degrees at comparable rates as students who begin at a four-year college or university in the current cohort. Nearly 70 percent of rising juniors earned a bachelor's degree at four-year colleges and universities, but only 45 percent of transfer

students who were seeking a bachelor's degree had a similar outcome after six years. This gap is sometimes referred to as the "transfer penalty."<sup>11</sup> It is important to stress, however, that about 20 percent of transfer students were still enrolled six years after their initial enrollment in postsecondary education. If the timeline of the study were extended, the difference in attainment rates would shrink considerably.

## Limitations of the Analysis

There are two key limitations of the current study. The most critical limitation is a measure of student financial aid. Because data on the type and amount of financial aid offered to a potential transfer student were not gathered in this analysis, modeling the impact of financial aid — separate from students' personal or family income — in any meaningful way was rendered impossible. Another limitation has been the sole focus on the "supply side" of transfer. Does every eligible community college student have a place for them at a four-year college or university? Additional information would be necessary to address this key aspect of the transfer puzzle.

## Interlude: Challenges to the Expansion of the Transfer Pathway

*“Believe it or not, even with the spotlight on community colleges [and the college completion agenda], there are still states ... where students are not able to transfer at the junior level even after completing two years at a community college ... This is a ridiculous conversation at this point ... We’ve got to take that barrier down.”*

Walter Bumphus, President,  
American Association of Community Colleges, 2010

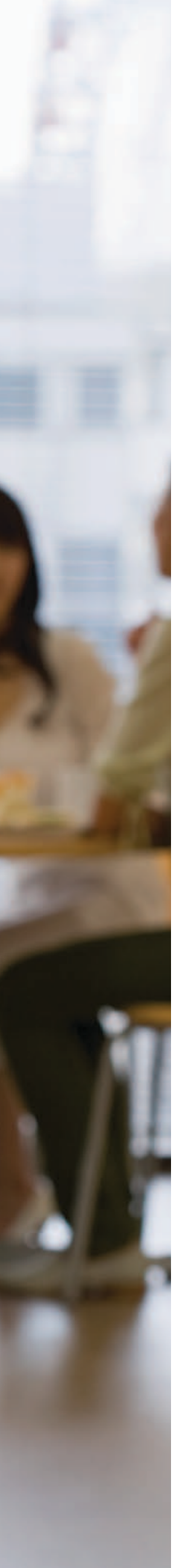
The findings highlighted in the last chapter show a transfer pathway in distress. Positive findings, such as an increase in the transfer rate for African American students compared to a similar cohort of students assessed eight years earlier, were more than offset by other findings that revealed a stagnate transfer rate for Latino students, no support for statewide articulation agreements in boosting transfer, fewer students who intended to transfer who were successfully in doing so, and the presence of a transfer penalty in the baccalaureate completion rates of students who begin at a community college compared to those who began at a four-year institution.

In the chapters that follow, we draw a crosswalk between those findings and the work of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, which

was charged with identifying the most significant barriers in expanding the transfer pathway and to develop recommendations to improve its efficiency. The Commission used two strategies. The first strategy focused on a description of the transfer process as viewed by community college students. The results of this analysis are presented in Supplemental Report 3 *Transfer as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective*.<sup>\*</sup> The Commission’s second strategy was to identify the most important challenges facing policymakers who wish to enhance the transfer process, guided not only by the empirical data compiled for this project but relying also on the research literature more generally. The Commission identified the following five challenges, which are described in Chapters 4–8:

- Unknown capacity of the transfer pathway to accommodate more students;
- Lack of institutional incentives to support transfer;
- Ruptures in the transfer pipeline where most potential transfers are lost;
- Discontinuities in financial aid that do not support transfer students; and
- Distinct and sometimes contrary academic cultures of two- and four-year institutions that compromise transfer student progress.

<sup>\*</sup> Supplemental Report 3 is available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.



## Chapter 4: Transfer Capacity: Black Box or Black Hole?

*“While community colleges have a critical role to play in preparing some students with important vocational skills, federal education survey data show that 81.4 percent of students entering community college for the first time say they eventually want to transfer and earn at least a bachelor’s degree. That only 11.6 percent of entering community-college students do so within six years is a national tragedy. Some look at these numbers and suggest community colleges should downplay the idea of transfer, but it makes more sense to improve and strengthen transfer paths.”*

Richard Kahlenberg (2012)

How many community college students are preparing for transfer nationally? How many of these students make a successful transition to a four-year institution? How many more can the nation’s community colleges and four-year institutions absorb in the coming years to meet our need for students with baccalaureate degrees? Answers to these questions are essential if we wish to boost transfer in substantive ways. Three findings from the empirical analyses described in Chapter 3 are especially relevant to this discussion:

- The transfer rate for first-time community college students is 26 percent, which is consistent with the rate calculated for a similar cohort of students eight years earlier. Although the current findings (and earlier ones) are disheartening, they are not surprising. Similar transfer rate results have been documented for decades by different researchers, using different methodologies, with different populations, and in different regions of the country.
- Although a greater proportion of students in the current cohort intended to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree, a smaller proportion was actually successful in doing so compared to the earlier cohort of students. While the variability of student intentions is well known, when goals are unrealized — regardless of whether we judge them as realistic or not — it undercuts the equity and access dimension of community colleges that is so universally praised.

- There is a gap in bachelor’s degree attainment for students who transfer from a community college compared to those who begin at a four-year institution. Although our analysis tracked students for only six years, almost certainly not long enough to capture all transfers in the pipeline, the presence of a transfer penalty has been noted by other researchers.

A transfer rate that has not budged in a decade; an increased number of students who want to transfer but, for whatever reason, are unable to do so; and the persistence of a transfer penalty all speak to systemic misalignment within the transfer process. These findings also raise a number of questions about the capacity of the nation to educate more students for the baccalaureate degree using the transfer pathway.

- *Does the static transfer rate over the past decade indicate that the nation has reached a ceiling in accommodating students who wish to enter a four-year institution and earn the baccalaureate degree? If such a ceiling exists, what are the causes?*

Evidence for an explicit transfer ceiling are indirect and speculative, but intriguing. First, the steadily increasing number of community colleges granting the baccalaureate degree (48 public colleges in 17 states) indicates that four-year institutions alone, at least in some states, are unable to meet transfer student demand (AACC, 2012; Lewin, 2009). Although there are multiple motivations for the push to confer baccalaureate degrees at community colleges, this trend signals that four-year institutions are struggling in addressing the demand for baccalaureate degree holders in high-need fields like nursing and teaching. Second, greater pressure on four-year colleges and universities to retain and graduate their native students, as a result of the national focus on college completion, may mean fewer seats for community college transfer students at these institutions.

- *To what extent are four-year colleges and universities anticipating more transfer students coming to their doors, especially given the increase in community college enrollments nationally?*

In an informal review of the strategic plans of 15 four-year colleges and universities in states having

a strong community college system, we found explicit intentions on the part of these institutions to make transfer students a more important part of their enrollment planning. Two-thirds of the plans highlight the importance of developing stronger relationships with local community colleges, which, if successful, would presumably lead to the enrollment of more transfer students. Only one plan, however, explicitly indicated that the institution planned to expand its enrollment of community college students by decreasing its enrollment target for first-year students.

- *What is the relationship between enrollment demand and public resources that are available to accommodate increased demand?*

It is no secret that severe budget cuts in response to the last recession have weakened the ability of community colleges and four-year institutions to meet student enrollment demand. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) reports that 11 states in 2010-11 capped enrollment at their public four-year institutions. In addition, seven states limited enrollment at public regional institutions. These enrollment caps occurred in some of the nation's most populous states (AASCU, 2011, p. 4). Community college enrollments are also being cut or capped. In California for instance, community college officials estimate that 400,000 students were closed out of classes last year, while the California State University reduced transfer student enrollment by 12,000 students across the system in 2010-11 (Associated Press, 2011, p. 3). In response to these dramatic decreases in state support, public four-year institutions in particular have begun to alter their recruitment strategies by focusing on the admission of "full-pay" students to cover losses in appropriations from state governments. While such actions do not preclude the admission of community college transfers, domestic community college students are more likely to come from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and so may suffer in this competition for seats.

Research also suggests that college completion rates are likely to be negatively impacted unless state and federal support for higher education is increased (Bound & Turner, 2007). Predictions that current levels of austerity will continue for the foreseeable future do not bode well for boosting college completion. Moreover, some data suggest that students who are crowded out of four-year colleges and universities and, as a result, attend a community college, are more likely to earn an associate degree rather than a baccalaureate (Maghakian, n.d.). This suggests that the transfer

connection between two- and four-year institutions remains problematic not only for students who begin at a community college but also for those students who initially planned to attend a four-year institution and for whatever reason, chose a community college.

- *Are community college students preparing for transfer majors that are already at capacity?*

Has the national push to increase the number of students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, for example, overwhelmed the ability of four-year institutions to accommodate demand for these relatively more expensive majors? Are there fewer transfer students majoring in STEM disciplines because of the sequential, often lockstep, nature of such majors? What incentives are in place (or should be) for four-year institutions to help make prospective transfer students "major ready"?

- *Does the fact that fewer students with transfer intentions were successful in enrolling at a four-year institution, as compared to a similar group of students surveyed a decade earlier, imply that there is a problem with transfer advising at the two- and/or four-year institutions?*

The data so far examined — along with the historical record — reveal a mismatch between student intentions to transfer and the number that successfully do so. Laying such sustained failure, however, at the feet of guidance counselors is misplaced, although the lack of guidance overall — since academic advising is so often the first to be cut in state budget reductions — may well be one of the culprits. The complexity of the current transfer system (discussed in Chapter 6), we believe, demands guidance mechanisms that both two- and four-year institutions seem to be unwilling or unable to support.<sup>12</sup>

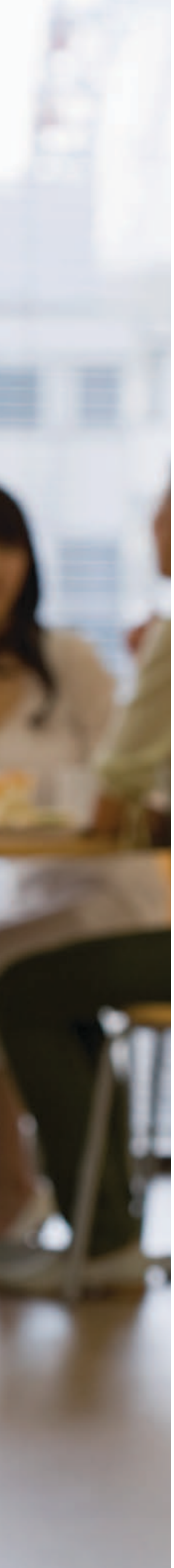
Without a national longitudinal database, we can only guess at students' trajectories through higher education, though we know from recent research that it is variable and, with regard to transfer students, often nonlinear (Hossler, Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chen, Zenquera, & Torres, 2012). Moreover, capacity is dependent on a series of countervailing, at times contradictory, variables, such as:

- The availability of public resources in the form of subsidies to two- and four-year institutions. Without these subsidies, two- and four-year institutions make up the loss by increasing tuition, an act that may depress the enrollment of all students but especially those attending community colleges.

- The availability of federal resources in the form of direct financial aid or greater access to subsidized federal loans. Given that community college students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the availability of financial support — Pell Grants, subsidized loans, work-study — is a vital element in their ability to complete a four-year degree.
- The degree to which four-year institutions want or need transfer students from community colleges. Four-year institutions, by and large, choose the number of transfer students they wish to enroll; it is rarely a mandated number. So, when leaders

of these institutions say they are “at capacity,” it is important to remember they could potentially enroll more transfers by taking fewer freshmen.

What we lack is compelling information about the ability of two-year institutions to prepare additional students for transfer and the baccalaureate degree and the capacity and willingness of four-year institutions to admit more community college students to the upper division. National education trends offer some insight but on balance portray great uncertainty about the future viability of the transfer pathway.





## Chapter 5: Incentives and Accountability

*“Transfer should be a performance indicator for community colleges and for four-year schools. ... Having transfer students be a part of the way the universities are judged is a wonderful way of improving retention.”*

Member of the Commission on  
Transfer Policy and Practice

The general lack of institutional incentives for both community colleges and four-year institutions impedes expansion of the transfer pathway, as does the multiplicity of transfer definitions, which makes accounting for progress difficult to measure. Despite the passage of 100 years in which transfer has been a part of the higher education landscape, few explicit and compelling incentives have been developed for either two- or four-year institutions to invest in a serious expansion of the transfer pathway (Carey & Aldeman, 2008).<sup>13</sup> Worse, where metrics do exist, they are misapplied. While community colleges are often criticized for low transfer rates, it is a metric they do not control because four-year institutions are solely responsible for transfer admission practices. Finally, simply accounting for the number of transfer students in the pipeline is problematic. The most commonly referenced metric — the transfer rate — has no common definition across the U.S.

### Federal Reporting Guidelines

Federal law requires colleges and universities to report enrollment rates, degree completions, and graduation rates, among other things, as part of its response to the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) via the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).<sup>14</sup> Specifically, two- and four-year institutions are required to report on cohorts of full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students who enter college in the fall of a given academic year and who graduate within 150 percent of the expected time to earn an award (three years for students entering community colleges and six years for students entering four-year colleges and universities). The current system does not account for part-time students or students who enter higher education in a term other than the fall. Moreover, students who transfer to another institution are considered nongraduates and are grouped as dropouts. The current reporting system was designed in 1990 for purposes other than how it is currently used, but as we discuss below, it is increasingly inadequate for the task of accounting for the wide variety of students who now

attend two- and four-year institutions (Cook & Pullaro, 2010; Committee on Measures of Student Success, 2011, December).

- **Community colleges.** Community colleges enroll a significant number of students in academic terms other than the fall, perhaps as many as one-quarter of all enrollments. In addition, a significant portion of students, over 50 percent, enrolls in two-year institutions on a part-time basis (AACC, 2012). Moreover, community college students often take longer to complete their educational goals than the time allowed by the federal reporting time frame. Thus, from a national perspective, information collected by the U.S. Department of Education does not include a significant portion of students attending community colleges, let alone those who transfer (Cook & Pullaro, 2010, p. 28).

Despite the centrality of transfer for community colleges, these institutions almost never receive due credit for the commitment they make to the transfer process. While often criticized for not transferring enough students — despite the fact that four-year institutions control the admission process — they are rarely asked to report on the number of students they prepare for transfer, though that represents the major contribution of these institutions to this academic pathway. For example, if a four-year institution presents data on the completion rates of its transfer students (and not many do — more about that later), the community colleges that prepared those students rarely share in either the credit, if the completion rates are good or, to be fair, the blame, if students struggle academically.

While current data-gathering guidelines, especially at the federal level but also within states, attempt to measure transfer activity, they are often inconsistent, inappropriate, or unclear. For example, community colleges cannot identify transfer as a measure of institutional productivity (graduation), nor are they generally required to identify how well they prepare their students for transfer to a four-year institution. That’s because current reporting guidelines separate those students who graduate from a community college — students who completed a program during the tracking period — from those students who transfer — defined as students who moved to another institution without completing a program. Moreover, students who complete a certificate or

degree at a community college and then transfer are not counted in the transfer-out rate.

Current federal regulations do include a definition for transfer preparation: “The successful completion of at least a two-year program that is acceptable for full credit toward a bachelor’s degree and qualifies a student for admission into the third year of a bachelor’s degree program” (Cook & Pullaro, 2010, p. 8, footnote 18). But this definition does not recognize those students who transfer in less than two years. It also does not address circumstances in which a four-year institution refuses to grant full credit for courses completed at a community college.<sup>15</sup>

- **Four-year institutions.** If community colleges are not recognized sufficiently for the work they do to prepare students for transfer, it is nonetheless a founding element of their institutional mission. Whether or not properly acknowledged by federal or state governments, transfer is understood by community college leaders and faculty to be one of their overriding objectives in serving students. Such a historical grounding, however, is not a part of the four-year institution’s experience. Many public four-year institutions were established prior to the founding of the first community college. As a result, transfer processes have been grafted, sometimes uneasily, to an already existing freshman admission structure at four-year colleges and universities. Without a campus-wide appreciation that transfer students should be an integral part of an institution’s mission and strategic enrollment plan, efforts to mark the admission and progress of these students are challenging to initiate and difficult to sustain. And current reporting guidelines do not help. Similar to community colleges, the current data collection guidelines under IPEDS do not accurately represent the efforts of the four-year institution in providing a pathway to the baccalaureate (Cook & Pullaro, 2010, pp. 9 and 28). Under IPEDS regulations, a four-year institution that confers a bachelor’s degree on a student who has transferred from a community college receives no credit for this effort, because the transfer student was not part of the four-year institution’s original first-time, full-time cohort.<sup>16</sup> Even if a four-year institution wished to tout its transfer efforts, it would need to keep its own books. IPEDS data are largely irrelevant.

## Institutional Disincentives

Although current federal reporting requirements provide little incentive for four-year institutions to address the needs of transfer students, the mission of these institutions may also work at cross purposes regarding transfer. Research-oriented four-year institutions rarely see transfer students as an important part of the undergraduate enrollment strategy because such students do not directly support the research enterprise. Four-year research institutions partly support their graduate programs by enrolling large numbers of first-year students to sustain undergraduate survey classes, which, in turn, support graduate student teaching assistants. In a static enrollment environment, admitting more transfer students who enter the institution at the upper division means fewer freshman students available to enroll in the lower division.

Enrolling transfer students also requires four-year institutions to absorb substantial costs, surely a disincentive in times of austerity. Enrolling even a handful of transfer students requires a separate admission process, involving the articulation of courses with local or regional community colleges. Evaluating transfer applicants is also labor-intensive, requiring an analysis of whether a student is prepared for the upper division, as well as a determination of how a student’s community college course credit will be applied to the baccalaureate degree. Finally, four-year institutions are likely to incur greater financial aid costs because community college students, by virtue of the fact that they are more likely to come from low-income groups, often require substantial support. This is a special concern of private institutions. In order to admit greater numbers of transfer students, they face the prospect of increasing their discount rates, perhaps significantly, to provide aid to these students.

None of these issues alone prevents a four-year institution from recruiting and admitting students from community colleges. Indeed, many four-year colleges around the nation have invested significant time and resources toward the recruitment, admission, and enrollment of these students. The point here is that in the absence of explicit incentives — even ones that allow four-year institutions to receive simple recognition from federal, state, or local governments for the transfers they admit and graduate — the prospect that these institutions will increase significantly the number of community college students that they accommodate seems unlikely.

## Performance Accountability Measures

The lack of incentives for expanding the transfer pathway has not stopped policymakers from devising accountability mechanisms to encourage — or mandate — increases in the number of students who transition from a community college to a four-year institution. Many state performance accountability systems include a measure of community college transfer rates (though, as we discuss in the next section, there is no common definition of such a rate). In addition, some states, such as California, Florida, Maryland, Oregon, and North Carolina, also measure post-transfer persistence and grade performance, requiring four-year colleges and universities to keep records of transfer student outcomes along with their native students (Dougherty, Hare, & Natow, 2009, p. 42).<sup>17</sup> These efforts are often embedded within large-scale higher education restructuring efforts. For example, in 2006, Virginia implemented a law that allowed its public colleges and universities greater freedom in a variety of areas, such as purchasing, construction, and personnel, in return for achieving specific performance benchmarks (Leslie & Berdahl, 2008, pp. 309–328). One of these benchmarks required colleges and universities to “develop articulation agreements that have uniform application in all Virginia community colleges” (Leslie & Berdahl, 2008, p. 315) with the potential of reshaping the relationship between the state’s two- and four-year institutions. Less comprehensive, but equally high profile, accountability initiatives have been developed in Minnesota, Maryland, and other states that provide the public with a series of “dashboard indicators” measuring the extent to which higher education institutions have met their strategic goals (see, for example, Kirwan, 2007).

It is an open question whether the collection of accountability data has succeeded in providing two- and four-year institutions with sufficient incentive to improve performance, especially given the reluctance of states to link data collection to performance outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Even so, it is not even clear that performance accountability mechanisms have any influence on institutional behavior. Researchers reviewing the entire empirical literature on this issue conclude that there is no clear evidence that performance funding increases the rates of traditional measures of institutional effectiveness, such as retention, completion, and graduation (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011, pp. 43–44). In a broad-based review of the efficacy of accountability systems on community colleges, researchers Dougherty and Hong (2006) concluded that, “there is no evident relationship between the strength of a state’s accountability system

with respect to transfer and increases in the number of transfers” (p. 81).

Researchers identify at least three major problems with current accountability systems:

- The measures used to assess transfer progress are often inappropriate or poorly designed.
- Funding does not keep up with rising enrollments and is especially susceptible to changes in overall state funding.
- Variations in institutional capacity or context may create inequitable impacts. For example, a rural community college may be a considerable distance from a four-year college, thereby suppressing its transfer rate, though it is no fault of the institution (Dougherty & Hong, 2006, pp. 59, 81–82).

Despite the fact that traditional accountability measures have shown little impact on institutional outcomes, some researchers believe that such mechanisms have not been fully exploited and recommend that incentives be linked to base-budget allocations (Jenkins, 2011, p. 26). Such policies could be made operational by providing resources to colleges that graduate or transfer students rather than simply enrolling them or by providing incentives for the number of students that reach certain intermediate goals that have been shown to lead to greater transfer, such as credit accumulation and the completion of transfer-preparing curriculum (Jenkins, 2011, p. 27). Other proposals have called for rewarding institutions that prepare, transfer, and graduate students from educationally disadvantaged groups, such as low-income students.

Still, stricter or contingent accountability measures have downsides, perhaps leading to unintended, even pernicious, consequences. UCLA Researchers Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer (2008) note the potential for “gaming the system” and cite instances in which “colleges have weakened their academic standards by reducing course requirements [in order to raise graduation and retention rates]” (p. 396). Worse, linking greater funding to institutional performance could be an incentive to create explicit policy-level changes, such as creating admission requirements at community colleges. Forcing these institutions to produce more transfer students could be an invitation to admit only students with certain academic credentials, essentially abrogating the distinctive open-door mission of these institutions. Indeed, the literature cited earlier concluded that performance funding may encourage unintended consequences, such as grade inflation, lowering of academic standards, reduced faculty voice in governance, and more restrictive student admission policies (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011).

## Transfer Rates

Calculating a transfer rate may be one of the thorniest accountability issues facing two- and four-year institutions. Cohen and Brawer (2008) sum up the problem well:

*“... since community college matriculants arguably are potential transfers until they either show up at a university or die ... transfer rate calculations can never be fully reflective of student performance” (p. 65).*

Measuring the effectiveness of the transfer pathway requires — at least — a common understanding of what we mean by transfer. But convergence on this issue is a long way off. Although the transfer rate is often identified as an appropriate accountability metric, there is virtually no common agreement about how a transfer rate should be calculated.

The obvious calculation is simple enough: Divide the number of students who transfer to a four-year college or university by the total number of students attending a community college. Such a calculation, however, is anathema to community college presidents everywhere. Counting all students in the equation, they argue, unfairly marks their institutions as failures because a good many students enter their colleges without an intention to transfer (Dougherty, 1994). They submit that a more reasonable calculation would include only those students who have enrolled at a community college with transfer as their goal. But this is where things start to unravel.

The presidents' lament — not an unreasonable one — has led researchers and policymakers down a quixotic path to find the perfect transfer rate definition, a definition that compares the number of successful transfers to a predefined pool consisting only of those students who demonstrate an intention to transfer. Yet the effort to find a “true” transfer rate methodology has resulted in a maddening array of transfer definitions and transfer rates. In a 2001 analysis of transfer, for example, the U.S. Department of Education identified no fewer than eight different definitions, calculating transfer rates that ranged from 25 to 52 percent (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001). In 2007, a study analyzing transfer in California presented six different calculations, resulting in transfer rates as low as 24 percent to a high of 67 percent (Horn & Lew, 2007). Table 3 presents a variety of transfer definitions and corresponding outcomes.

Ideally, a transfer rate calculation should include only students who intend to transfer to a four-year institution. On this, most agree. But how can we accurately assess transfer intentions for students?

Moreover, how are we to account for students who begin at a community college with intentions other than transfer but then change their minds? Community college advocates often speak of the transformative nature of their institutions, and there is research indicating that community colleges provide a net boost to student expectations (Adelman, 2005; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2006, p. 18). How should we measure the transfer expectations of late bloomers?

To circumvent the fluidity of students' college plans and create a better-defined transfer pool, many researchers believe that students' course-taking behaviors are more accurate barometers of transfer intentions. Students enrolled in transferable, academic courses, such as collegiate math and English composition, are seen as more likely candidates for transfer (see Table 3). But this definition has problems, too. There are few universal, transfer-specific courses. Granted, gatekeeper courses such as mathematics and English composition, are a central element in any transfer-going curriculum, but they are also essential for nontransfer majors, such as nursing, criminal justice, and computer technology, among others. Transfer requirements vary widely, as does the transferability of courses. What might be acceptable to one four-year institution may not be acceptable to another. Moreover, there is no single transfer core curriculum that all districts or states use to prepare students to transition from a community college to a four-year institution, given that different majors require different kinds of lower-division preparation.

Some have suggested that the transfer pool be restricted to those students who indicated both a desire to transfer (i.e., responded to a questionnaire or declared an academic major) and are enrolled in or completed transferable, academic courses (Bahr, Hom, & Perry, 2005). This has its own problems. Such a criterion restricts the transfer pool to a small puddle. While this definition identifies a pool of students almost certain to transfer, it also leaves out of the equation a significant number of students who end up transferring anyway. The Department of Education found that as the definition of transfer becomes more restrictive, the pool of students (1) looks more and more like the traditional college-going student; that is, young, white, and affluent; and (2) does not accurately account for a great number of students who successfully transfer (but who did not fall into the predefined transfer pool) (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001). In other words, as the transfer denominator is refined, it accounts for fewer and fewer transfers with greater and greater accuracy. Although the transfer rate goes up, it neither accounts for the wide diversity of students attending community colleges nor accurately measures the true number of transfers. (Table 3 indicates the pool of students each transfer rate includes in its definition.)

**Table 3**

<b>Student Transfer Rates Associated with Different Definitions of Transfer</b>			
<b>Transfer Rates Based on All Students in a Predefined Sample/Population</b>			
<b>Researchers</b>	<b>Transfer Rate Definition</b>	<b>Transfer Rate</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Dougherty, 1994</b>	All entrants to community colleges who transferred within 4 years (irrespective of program and aspiration).	15%–20%	Meta-analysis of national and state-level transfer studies conducted by the author.
<b>McCormick &amp; Carroll, 1997</b>	First-time, beginning community college students in 1989-90 who transferred to a 4-year institution by 1993-94.	22%	Findings based on BPS: 90/94
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years (p. 7–8).	25%	Findings based on BPS: 90/94
<b>Transfer Rates Based on Student Self-Reports of Transfer/BA Intentions</b>			
<b>McCormick &amp; Carroll, 1997</b>	First-time, beginning community college students in 1989-90 who transferred to a 4-year institution by 1993-94 <i>and who expected to complete a BA degree or higher.</i>	39%	New transfer rate based on 25% of students in population.
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years <i>and who expected to complete a bachelor's degree or higher.</i>	36%	New transfer rate based on 71% of students in original population.
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years <i>and who reported that they were enrolled in an academic program.</i>	36%	New transfer rate based on 68% of students in original population.
<b>U.S. Dept. of Education, 2003</b>	Students who began postsecondary education at a public 2-year community college in 1995-96 and then transferred to a 4-year institution within 6 years <i>and who had a BA degree goal.</i>	51%	New transfer rate based on 25% of students in original population.
<b>Transfer Rates Based on Student Transfer-Related Behaviors</b>			
<b>Cohen and Brawer, 1996 (Transfer Assembly Project)</b>	"All students entering the community college in a given year who had no prior college experience and who completed at least 12 college-credit units, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at an in-state, public university within 4 years" (p. 2).	21.5%	Rate is a 1996 calculation based on data submitted by 416 community colleges in more than 14 states, encompassing a total of 511, 996 students.
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years <i>and who were enrolled continuously for one year.</i>	37%	New transfer rate based on 63% of students from original population.
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years <i>and who were enrolled anytime in one academic year.</i>	38%	New transfer rate based on 62% of students from original population.
<b>Adelman, 2005</b>	"The student (a) begins postsecondary study at a community college, (b) earns more than 10 additive credits [credits that count toward a degree] from community college before attending a 4-year college, and (c) subsequently earns more than 10 additive credits from 4-year college" (p. 14).	37%	Data included NCES 1988 Longitudinal Study; BPS 1995/2001; and other NCES data sets.

**Table 3 Continued**

Researchers	Transfer Rate Definition	Transfer Rate	Comments
<b>Adelman, 2005</b>	Transfer rate based on definition above, but with the added restriction that the students earned “at least 30 community college credits, but less than 60 percent of all their undergraduate credits were earned at a community college” (p. 55).	96%	Transfer rate based on 18% of students in original population, referred to as community college “Tenants” in the Adelman essay.
<b>Transfer Rates Based on Student Self-Report and Transfer-Related Behavior</b>			
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years and who were pursuing an academic major or taking courses toward BA degree or both.	43%	New transfer rate based on 43% of students in original population.
<b>Bradburn, Hurst, &amp; Peng, 2001</b>	First-time, beginning community college students enrolled in credit courses who transferred to any 4-year institution within 5 years and who were pursuing an academic major and taking courses toward BA degree or both.	52%	New transfer rate based on 11% of students in original population.

Adapted from Handel (2007, Table 1).

## Options for Educators and Policymakers

The muddled picture surrounding the use of incentives and performance accountability mechanisms do not provide unequivocal guidance on the ways in which two- and four-year institutions can be incentivized to boost transfer. Still, the importance of the transfer pathway should be emphasized through the identification of one or more metrics, along with others that are used to judge the effectiveness of higher education institutions.

As discussed earlier, holding community colleges accountable for the number of students that transfer is misplaced because these institutions have no control over the number of students that four-year colleges and universities admit. Preparing students for transfer would seem more appropriate, though that could be as slippery as current transfer rate definitions. In a review of performance accountability systems in 10 states, researchers found that while nine of the 10 states examined had a measure for transfer (however defined), only one state (California) had a measure for transfer readiness. These researchers make the point that this measure is underdeveloped but may be especially appropriate to community colleges (Dougherty, Hare, & Natow, 2009, p. 26). In California, students considered to be in the transfer cohort must have completed at least 12 credits and enrolled in at least one transfer-level math course and one transfer-level English course within six years of initial enrollment. This seems to be a minimal transfer-preparing definition, but the focus is nonetheless on the things that community colleges can control. Other states have linked transfer preparation to the completion of a specially designed transfer associate

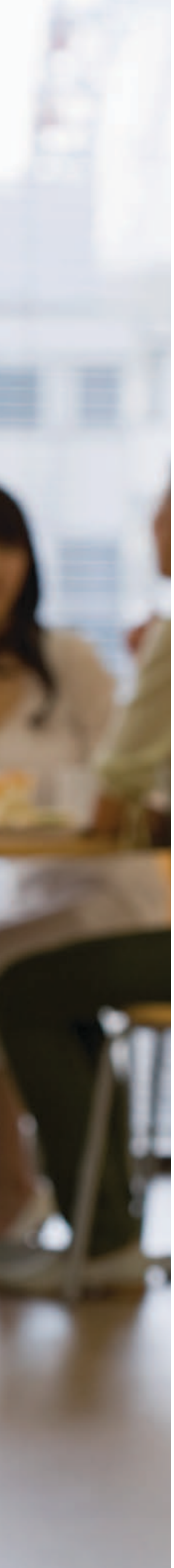
degree followed by enrollment at a four-year college and university (Moore, Shulock, & Jensen, 2009, p. 12). In Florida, community college students who have completed the transfer associate degree have higher rates of admission to state universities than freshman students (Moore et al., 2009, p. 15). Other proposals tie funding not to enrollment but to the completion of courses or specific milestones or momentum points (e.g., completing a specific number of credits in a specified time frame). This could be extended to help students become transfer ready though the completion of specific transferable courses, such as math or writing.

The accountability measures for four-year institutions are relatively straightforward. Simply reporting on the number and academic performance of transfer students — using the same metrics used for first-year students — would be a good beginning. But research indicates that only a few states (noted earlier) have measures of after-transfer performance such as retention or degree completion (Dougherty, Hare, & Natow, 2009). Doing so, however, would provide education leaders at four-year institutions with valuable information about the performance of these students in a variety of majors. This information would shine a light not only on the adequacy of preparation that students received at the sending institution but also about possible misalignments among two- and four-year academic programs.

Although statewide transfer metrics are relatively rare, some elements may prove useful for policymakers. California’s Master Plan for Higher Education (California State Department of Education, 1960), for example, mandates that the state’s two public four-year

institutions, California State University and University of California, admit transfer students primarily from California's community colleges. Moreover, the Master Plan requires that each system have a 60:40 ratio of upper- to lower-division students, although individual campuses in each system are allowed to determine the absolute number of transfer students to admit. Finally,

California law requires California State University and University of California to give first priority in admission to applicants from California community colleges over applicants from other institutions. Each of these elements signals the importance that state leaders and educators place on the transfer pathway.





## Chapter 6: Complexity and Casualties

*“What does the transfer pipeline look like — as a comprehensive structure? There is leakage at several points, which is really problematic. I don’t think we have a very good sense at all of how many credits get lost. I think there’s a tremendous leakage that undermines transfer ambitions.”*

Member of the Commission on  
Transfer Policy and Practice

As noted in Chapter 3, far more students entering community colleges wish to transfer than actually do. Where do we lose those students who wish to transfer but are not successful? Is the failure primarily within community colleges or at the point of transfer to the four-year institution? Are the reasons primarily institution-centered or student-centered? What distinguishes successful students from unsuccessful ones? How can we encourage transfer ambition in students who might not otherwise be focused on this goal? Of course, there are a variety of reasons why students never transfer despite their intentions to do so, many completely out of the hands of two- and four-year institutions. Still, some institutional processes — combined with the complexity of transfer itself — leave students vulnerable to dropping out despite their best efforts to progress through the system.

### Transfer Complexity

A major factor that contributes to student mortality in the transfer pipeline is the inherent complexity of the current process. Supplemental Report 3, *Transfer as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective*, documents the journey that students are faced with in assessing the applicability of articulation agreements in planning for transfer.<sup>19</sup> And that is just one part of the academic planning milieu for transfer students, who are also faced with having to develop different course programs in preparation for multiple transfer destinations.

Transfer complexity also results from a system that offers students extraordinary choice but insufficient guidance. Most community colleges offer a wide range of certificate, associate degree, and transfer opportunities. Similarly, four-year institutions have a wide variety of degree choices. Such opportunity is a hallmark of U.S. higher education, but it also comes at a cost.

For the transfer student, an array of abundant options opens up a world of possibilities but can also lead to

confusion and indecision (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). College officials believe that students come to college with solid plans, but many do not, especially those students from underserved groups who lack essential college knowledge because parents or peers have no experience with the college-going process (Goldrick-Rab, 2007, p. 7; Rosenbaum et al., 2006).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, given dwindling guidance resources, students find it more difficult than ever to obtain the information they need to assess reasonable pathways based on their interests and academic preparation.<sup>21</sup> Finally, at most colleges, students are encouraged to explore their interests by enrolling in a variety of courses or programs. But the precision with which students must plan their transfer curriculum makes the exploration model especially problematic. “[T]his nondirective approach may work well for middle-class students who can afford four-years of college, it presents difficulties for many nontraditional students with a shorter time frame” (Rosenbaum et al., 2006, p. 118).<sup>22</sup> Add to this the recent revision to the Pell Grant Program, in which student eligibility for these grants was limited to 12 academic terms, and the need for careful planning, especially among students from low-income backgrounds, becomes acute.

It is worth adding that the nondirective model does not work especially well for any student because it encourages the accumulation of credits without an organized structure and goal orientation central to effective transfer. Researchers have found that students who enter community college with an academic plan are more likely to complete their educational goals. In an analysis of student completion rates in California, Moore and Shulock (2011) discovered that about half of students who entered a specific and definable program of study at a community college within one year of college enrollment completed a certificate, degree, or transfer. Less than one-third of students who entered a program in their second year completed anything after six years (p. 8). In a national study of community college student intentions, Horn (2009) found that “strongly directed” students were more likely to complete their educational goals, including transfer to a four-year institution.

### Insufficient Academic Guidance

The complexity of the transfer process, coupled with the multitude of programs and majors offered by two- and four-year institutions, only exacerbates what is already endemic in K–12 schools and colleges and universities: the lack of adequate guidance, especially for students who are most in need. These professionals

### The Student Perspective

Pick up any college guide book and it will almost certainly advise students *not* to transfer from one institution to another unless they have a very good reason. Why? Students will need to adjust to a new campus and culture, leave old friends behind and make new ones, and face a series of awkward academic challenges (such as whether the new school will accept credits earned at the previous institution). All of these are excellent reasons not to transfer, but all are irrelevant and largely a fact of life for community college students who *must* transfer to earn a bachelor's degree.

*Transfer as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective* identifies three central challenges that community college students face as they prepare themselves for transfer to a four-year college or university:

- **Getting Ready:** Students who are preparing for transfer are often faced with insufficient information in print or on the Web about the transfer process; nonexistent or indecipherable policies specifying how their community college credit will transfer; and enormous complexity in satisfying requirements for possible admission to multiple four-year institutions.
- **Getting In:** Students who are ready to apply for admission at one or more four-year institutions encounter another cluster of challenges, including late notification of admission and insufficient financial aid. In addition, transfer students are often asked to make a decision to attend without knowing officially how (or if) their community college credit will be accepted by the four-year institution and how this credit will apply toward various elements of the baccalaureate degree.
- **Getting Through:** Students who successfully transfer struggle to become familiar with a new campus. It is a transition that deserves, but rarely receives, much attention from campus administrators who assume that transfer students are already acclimated to college and do not need assistance.

Read the report at:

<http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>

are often the first to be cut in public institutions, an especially distressing fact at community colleges where the need for expert and sustained guidance is so great. Today, student caseloads per advisor range from 800 to 1,200 students, especially in public institutions (Scott-Clayton, 2011, p. 7). A recent analysis of transfer rates among students of color in California concluded that “strong transfer counseling is the sine qua non of community college transfer, yet it is wholly inadequate and this is not always because of resource limitations” (Gandara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012, p. 102). The study notes that some counseling centers close at 5 p.m., making it extremely difficult for part-time and evening students to avail themselves of what limited academic guidance was available on campus.

Insufficient guidance leads to at least two problems for transfer students:

- **The perils of student-initiated guidance.** Although most postsecondary institutions make academic advising available, students must almost always initiate the process. This is a problem, especially for students not versed in the academic culture of two- and four-year institutions (Rosenbaum et al., 2006, pp. 119–120). If a new student is unfamiliar with the culture of the institution — not an unreasonable assumption for many community college students — even knowing what questions to ask may be a challenge. Rosenbaum and his colleagues describe the dilemma for students especially well: “First, students must be aware of what kind of help they need and when they need it. Second, they must be informed about how and where to get it. Third, they must actually go get it. Fourth, students must seek this information well in advance” (Rosenbaum et al., 2006, pp. 119–120).
- **Slow detection of costly choices.** Given the myriad and sometimes confusing set of choices at two- and four-year institutions, students are likely to make mistakes in selecting courses that prepare them for transfer. Unfortunately, these mistakes are rarely detected until the student gets ready to transfer, and then students may have to spend additional time at the community college before being eligible for transfer. This was noted as far back as 1960 by Medsker in his national review of community college practices: “The two-year college that carelessly counsels students about course requirements in other institutions and about the most desirable pattern to follow in the junior college makes an error that is difficult to correct” (1960, p. 138).

## Institutional Practices that Discourage Transfer

Both two- and four-year institutions employ policies and practices that inadvertently discourage students' academic advancement. These include academic policies that reward students for academic behavior that may undermine progress, as well as institutional procedures and services — or the lack of them — that place unnecessary barriers between students and their educational goals.

- Putting the brakes on academic momentum.** Clifford Adelman, while at the U.S. Department of Education, identified a number of activities that significantly influenced a student's likelihood of completing a college degree (Adelman, 2005, 2006). These included accumulating college-level math credits, completing at least 20 credits in the first year of college, making strategic use of summer sessions to advance progress, staying continuously enrolled, and completing 80 percent of courses attempted.<sup>23</sup> (See also Moore, Shulock, & Offenstein, 2009.) Adelman suggests that this cluster of activities provides students with the academic momentum they need to transfer and complete a four-year degree. These activities are not excessively ambitious, even for students attending college on a part-time basis. For example, completing 20 credits in a calendar year would require a student to complete two courses per term and make strategic use of summer sessions. In addition, Adelman discovered that students who stayed continuously enrolled — even part-time — were more likely to transfer than students who did not stay in school from term to term. This is an important finding for community college students because the majority of them are enrolled part-time. Institutions that support continuous enrollment, for students enrolled full-time or part-time, are more likely to advance their students toward transfer and a four-year degree.

Adelman's data also revealed that institutions were likely to have policies in place that undercut students' academic momentum. For example, students who drop 20 percent or more of courses attempted are 50 percent less likely to complete their degree (Adelman, 2005). Yet many community colleges allow students to drop courses late in the academic term without penalty or, worse, withdraw completely from a term with no consequences on either their academic standing or subsequent enrollment. While these practices may be seen as accommodating the needs of a diverse student constituency, they bring students little benefit. Moreover, as described

above, while community colleges allow part-time enrollment, they rarely enforce minimum progress requirements. However, if it is true that continuously enrolled students are more likely to complete degrees, it is possible that adherence to even a minimal standard of progress per academic year might encourage more students to make steadier progress toward transfer and a four-year degree.

- Erecting bureaucratic hurdles.** It is a fact of institutional life in America that we all daily deal with bureaucratic complexity. Students entering higher education also must grapple with institutional complexity, but there are few places in our culture where there is so much of it: admission requirements, registration procedures, financial aid applications, and academic requirements, just to name a few. Of course, for students who want to transfer, the bureaucratic intrigue is magnified. Students need to learn the system quickly or face difficulties getting enrolled in classes, receiving financial aid, or finding a place to park. Just getting information is difficult, and they are often required to appear at several different offices to obtain advising, financial aid information, or to register for classes. That many students who attend community colleges do not fit the traditional mold of a college student only heightens this problem. Lacking complete college knowledge and the resources that make going to college possible, these students are often at the mercy of bureaucracies that may not be especially accommodating to the outside demands faced by these students, some as seemingly benign as automobile breakdowns but others more significant, such as work commitments, child care issues, parent illness, and financial need.<sup>24</sup>
- Program scheduling complexity.** As transfer students attempt to prepare themselves for the varying requirements of four-year institutions, they are at the mercy of the people who schedule classes at the community college.

*“Class schedules are driven by student demand rather than planned sequencing, and course schedules change every term, thus students cannot anticipate their class schedule from semester to semester. Given the vast array of course options that community colleges offer, administrators cannot create coordinated schedules for students. Students report that the courses they need to take are often scheduled at vastly different times of day and some are not offered for several semesters”* (Rosenbaum et al., 2006, p. 127).

The need for systematized and predictable course schedules was recently highlighted by Complete College America as one way of assisting community college students. Through the use of block schedules, with fixed class meeting periods, students are better able to arrange work or family commitments around school (Complete College America, 2011, p. 9).

- **Lack of interinstitutional communication.**

The lifeline for a successful transfer experience is accurate and timely information concerning academic preparation, but such information can be hard to find. If four-year institutional leaders are not focused on the transfer student experience, they will be unaware of the consequences of their curriculum decisions on transfer students. While adjustments to the curriculum are a necessary part of the academy, failure to communicate these changes creates dire situations for transfer students (Pussar & Levin, 2009, pp. 32–33).

### Options for Educators and Policymakers

Are effective strategies available that address the complexity and lack of guidance that plagues the current transfer process? Research by the Community College Survey for Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2012) and others (Moore & Shulock, 2009) suggests effective strategies that, if made mandatory, might make a difference. Four-year institutions have long understood the importance of orientation programs, student success courses, and learning communities, although they are almost always designed for freshman students. Two-year institutions have also implemented

these programs on their campuses. The problem is that most do not make participation mandatory for first-time college students (in the case of community colleges) and new transfer students (at four-year institutions). The CCSSE reports that while 96 percent of community colleges offer some kind of orientation program, only 38 percent make it mandatory for first-time students. Eighty-three percent of community colleges also offer student success courses, but only 15 percent make it mandatory for first-time students (Gonzalez, 2012, p. A-20; CCSSE, 2012). No corresponding statistics are available for four-year institutions, but we suspect the same trends hold true. Institutions that do not make such interventions mandatory are attempting to accommodate the diverse needs of the community college students, and this is to be commended (especially for reentry students). But for first-time students, such interventions will pay important dividends in students' college knowledge at both two- and four-year institutions. At community colleges, students assigned to an orientation or student success course will learn not only about the culture of the institution but the importance of planning for transfer — an essential behavior that marks students who successfully transfer versus those who do not. At four-year institutions, an orientation or student success course will introduce transfer students to a new academic culture, one that has its own expectations and oddities often divergent from that of the community college model (we discuss academic culture in Chapter 8). If transfer is to remain a complex pathway — and we suspect it will — there are nonetheless strategies to provide students with the knowledge they will need to navigate the process but only if institutions insist that students be armed with them.

## Chapter 7: Problematic Financial Aid Policies and Practices

*“There’s this perception of [community colleges] as low cost. This is because some families ... focus only on the tuition and fees. They do not recognize all of the other education-related costs that are necessary, such as the cost of books and supplies, transportation, and the other expenses. So, when they come to the point of transferring and look at the cost of the four-year institution, there’s sticker shock ...”*

Member of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice

Higher education costs have been increasing astronomically. This is not a secret. And these costs hit almost all American families hard. In the last 25 years, costs have increased 400 percent, compared to only 150 percent for median family income (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009). According to the latest report from the College Board’s *Trends in College Pricing*, average tuition and fees increased again in 2010 for all segments of higher education. For community colleges, average tuition and fees increased 8.6 percent to \$2,962. For public four-year colleges and universities, average tuition and fees increased 8.3 percent to \$8,244, while average tuition and fees at private four-year institutions increased 4.5 percent to \$28,500 (see Table 4) (College Board, 2011).

Although higher education costs at four-year institutions almost always receive greater media attention, tuition and fees at community colleges have been rising steadily over the past decade, greatly

outpacing median family income. This is especially true in those states that rely most significantly on community colleges as a doorway of access to higher education (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011).<sup>25</sup> In California, which enrolls one-quarter of all community college students, fees have increased nearly 80 percent in 10 years (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011, p. 5, Figure 1). Moreover, when costs of attendance are added to tuition and fees, students attending community colleges in 2011-12 can expect to pay, on average, \$15,286 for one year (College Board, 2011).<sup>26</sup>

The decreasing affordability of the community colleges is alarming, especially so for those students who have the greatest difficulty in meeting college costs. Recent reports indicate that students from the lowest income groups are left with a significant amount of unmet financial need; one estimate places the figure at over \$7,000 (Orozco & Mayo, 2010, p. 5). Dependent students from lower-middle income quartiles do not fare much better, facing nearly \$5,500 in unmet need. When combined with rising costs at both community colleges and four-year institutions, transfer students are especially hard-hit. According to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance:

*“Tuition and fees at public flagship universities, on average, are more than 2.5 times the tuition and fees at community colleges. ... If [transfer] students already have unmet need at the community college level, they may become overwhelmed by these higher costs. Moreover, students who seek to transfer from a two-year to a*

**Table 4**

**Average Estimated Undergraduate Budgets 2011-12**

	Tuition & Fees	Room & Board	Books & Supplies	Transport	Other Expenses	Total Expenses
<b>Community College (Commuter)</b>	\$2,963	\$7,408	\$1,182	\$1,606	\$2,127	\$15,286
<b>Public 4-Yr (In-State/On-Campus)</b>	\$8,244	\$8,887	\$1,168	\$1,082	\$2,066	\$21,447
<b>Public 4-Yr (Out-of-State/On-Campus)</b>	\$20,770	\$8,887	\$1,168	\$1,802	\$2,066	\$33,973
<b>Private 4-Yr (On-Campus)</b>	\$28,500	\$10,089	\$1,213	\$926	\$1,496	\$42,224

Adapted from *Trends in College Pricing*, 2011, the College Board.

*four-year institution often find that less institutional aid is available to them because such funds are often targeted at recruiting first-time, full-time students” (p. 32).*

Students respond to unmet need by working more hours per week than is optimal for college completion. Ironically, the relatively low-cost community colleges, along with these institutions’ liberal rules around part-time enrollment, make working a viable option. Yet, students who work more than 20 hours per week and attend college part-time are at greater risk of not completing their educational goals (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008, September, pp. 7 and 9).

Students attending community colleges, with or without a transfer goal, face special financial aid challenges:

- **Students attending a community college are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds.** In 2007-08, nearly one-third of dependent students at public two-year colleges were from the lowest income quartile compared to 21 percent at public four-year institutions. In contrast, only 15 percent of students from the highest income quartile attended community colleges, compared to 29 percent in four-year institutions (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009, p. 4). In the most recent student cohorts analyzed for this project, which included only new, first-time, community college students, the proportion of students in the lowest income quartile was 26.1 percent in two-year colleges compared to 20.2 percent in four-year institutions.
- **Community college students are less likely to apply for financial aid.** It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of all students who do not apply for federal aid are from community colleges (Kantrowitz, 2009, p. 3). Students cite a number of reasons for not applying, including a belief that they were not eligible or did not need aid, an unwillingness to share personal information with the government, fears of accumulating debt, and a reluctance to complete what they viewed as forms that were too complex (Kantrowitz, 2011). Other researchers have noted that the complexity of the FAFSA rivals that of an income tax return and, as a result, discourages participation (Scott-Clayton, 2011; College Board, 2010).
- **Even if students apply for financial aid, current federal policies are less likely to help students from low-income backgrounds.** Financial aid policies have shifted nationally from an emphasis on grants toward loans. Two decades ago, nearly 60 percent of financial aid was in the form of grants, while only about 40 percent was in the form of loans. Today, these percentages are reversed (Kahlenberg, 2004, p. 4). Moreover, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has declined significantly. Thirty years ago, the Pell Grant covered about three-quarters of the costs associated with attending a four-year institution. Now it covers about one-third of the cost of attendance (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009, p. 5). Moreover, recent changes to the Pell Grant eligibility formula reduce the number of terms a student may be eligible for a grant from 18 full-time semesters to 12 full-time semesters (Association of Community College Trustees, 2012).
- **State financial aid dollars have shifted from a primary focus on need to one focused on merit.** According to the Education Trust, state grant funds awarded on factors other than need have grown three times faster than the rate for need-based aid (Education Trust, 2011, p. 2). Although merit aid rewards students for their academic accomplishments, these grants favor students in middle- and upper-income brackets who have college-going advantages often unknown to students from lower-income groups. Moreover, more money for merit scholarships siphons off already dwindling state dollars for need-based assistance (Education Trust, 2011; Orozco & Cauthen, 2009). Even where grant aid is available, states tend to award these resources to four-year institution students over community college students, despite the fact that two-year institutions enroll more low-income students. A recent report notes that, on average, 46 percent of community college students receive a state grant compared to 57 percent of students attending a four-year institution (Orozco & Mayo, 2011, p. 6).<sup>27</sup>
- **Community college students have less access to federally subsidized loans to fund college costs.** About one million community college students in 31 states attend colleges that have blocked access to federally subsidized loans. This lack of access disproportionately affects African American and American Indian students (Project on Student Debt, 2011, p. 1). The rationale is laudable. Many community college leaders want to discourage students from taking on too much debt. The problem, however, is that for students who need the money, their only alternatives are far more expensive private loans or to work more hours at an outside job.

- **Community college students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, prefer to work rather than take out loans.** In 2007-08, 67 percent of all community college students under the age of 24 worked more than 21 hours per week, compared to 46 percent of students at public four-year institutions, and nearly 30 percent worked more than 36 hours per week compared to 15 percent of students at public four-year institutions (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009, p. 6, Table 4). While working one's way through college is an honorable strategy, too many hours away from school wreaks havoc with student progress and completion rates. Research consistently reveals that working more than 20 hours per week has a negative impact on students' persistence and academic achievement (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008, September, pp. 7 and 9).

## Unique Challenges Facing Transfer Students

*"When students arrive at the four-year campus, they find there are other expenses, such as books and supplies that they may not have anticipated. The need for financial aid then becomes very critical to them. One of two things may happen as a result: If they're really industrious, they'll find a way to the financial aid office, which isn't always easy, or they will simply drop out."*

Member of the Commission on  
Transfer Policy and Practice

The trends described above apply to all students attending community colleges, not just students who identify themselves as seeking a baccalaureate degree. While research is less plentiful about the specific effects of financial aid policies on students who identify themselves as seeking a four-year degree, several trends have been identified that undercut the ability of these students to fund their education and earn the baccalaureate degree:

- **Rising tuition and fees at two- and four-year institutions also affect transfer students.** As noted earlier, while rising costs at four-year institutions catch most of the media attention, costs are rising at community colleges, too. Admittedly, students who begin at a community college and then transfer will pay less in tuition and fees on average than students who begin at a four-year institution. Still, these students face significant

sticker shock once they transition to a four-year institution and research indicates that these students are especially sensitive to fluctuations in college prices (Medsker, 1960, p. 137; Rhoades, 2012). Average tuition and fees account for only 19 percent of expenses related to attendance at a community college compared to 38 percent at public four-year institutions (in-state students), 61 percent at public four-year institutions (out-of-state students), and 67 percent at private/independent institutions (College Board, 2011, p. 6, Figure 1; Orozco & Mayo, 2010, p. 5). Students must have the resources not only to pay for tuition and fees but also for a variety of additional expenses, such as housing, textbooks, supplies, and transportation.<sup>28</sup> If a community college is located in an expensive urban area, total costs can be substantial.

- **Transfer students do not have an accurate estimate of the costs they will incur in pursuit of a bachelor's degree.** Estimating one's financial commitment will be largely dependent on whether the student transfers to a public or private institution and the extent to which that institution provides aid. Few community colleges and four-year institutions package students together or even supply information in which a student could estimate his or her total financial commitment to college and the likely aid to be received.
- **Transfer students, like all students attending a community college, work more hours while attending school than students attending a four-year institution.** Unlike other community college students, however, they may be penalized for this strategy when it comes to applying for financial aid at the four-year institution. A government analysis of this issue revealed that 28 percent of full-time community college students on the transfer track who were from the lowest income bracket (\$0–\$9,999) work 30 hours or more per week. Despite the fact that these students are clearly eligible for financial aid, they may be subject to a "work penalty," which could make them ineligible for some federal financial aid due to the fact that their job-related assets, such as savings, give an inaccurate snapshot of their income level. While savings will and should be factored into the financial aid that is awarded, some four-year institutions assume the student will continue to be employed while attending the senior institution, an unlikely outcome because such schools generally require full-time enrollment. Most financial aid offices will make this adjustment, but only if a student makes them aware of it, requiring a level of financial sophistication students are unlikely to possess (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008, September, pp. 8–9).

- **Transfer students, like all students attending a community college, are less likely to apply for financial aid.** Unlike other community college students, however, their reasons for doing so are somewhat different. Data show that among full-time community college students seeking transfer in the lowest income bracket, 28 percent of dependent students, 17 percent of independent students (with dependents), and 24 percent of independent students (without dependents) did not submit a FAFSA, despite the fact that they were most likely eligible for aid (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008, September, p. 11). When asked why they did not apply, students said they did not think they would qualify for aid (39 percent) or that they did not need it (35 percent). Neither reason indicates a reluctance to participate in the financial aid process (only 6 percent of respondents indicated that they felt the form was too complex and only 2 percent indicated a reluctance to provide personal information). These answers imply that some transfer students have little understanding of the role and necessity of financial aid. At relatively low-cost community colleges, students can maneuver around the financial aid office by working or attending college part-time. However, at more costly four-year institutions (most of which frown upon part-time enrollment), this lack of understanding could prove perilous to their academic success (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008 September, p. 14).
- **Transfer students are often last to be packaged by four-year institutions.** Community college applicants to four-year institutions are usually evaluated after the freshman class has been assembled. Unless an institution has reserved financial aid specifically for transfer applicants, the kinds of aid that they will receive may be limited, perhaps including less grant aid and more loans (see Stainburn, 2011). A 2010 report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling indicated that nearly a quarter of the four-year colleges and universities it surveyed did not offer merit aid to transfer students (NACAC, 2010). These data, however, were based on a 2006 survey and more recent data are unavailable about whether the proportion of four-year institutions providing aid has changed. Students who transfer in the middle of the academic year (about one-quarter of all transfer students) are almost assuredly less likely to have access to state- and institutional-level support since four-year institutions package the great majority of their students in the fall term.

*“What I would like to see is a comprehensive financial aid system. For years, I have wanted to do a four-year financial aid package in my system. Students’ financial positions do not change that significantly over time. When students start at a community college — and they are on the transfer track — there is no reason why they should not know what their financial aid package will look like for four years.”*

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## Options for Educators and Policymakers

Current national and state budget shortfalls do not bode well for generous student financial aid packages in the near future. Still, while more support would be welcome, two- and four-year institutions might well improve transfer by recalibrating some current practices that undercut transfer student progress. One strategy is to help students understand their financial aid options across both institutions. The goal would be to help students see how certain kinds of financial aid can be leveraged in support of their education more effectively than relying on part-time enrollment or working more than 20 hours per week. In addition, four-year institutions can revise their outreach messages to high school and first-year community college students by helping them develop a financial aid estimate across four years of college. In addition, these institutions should reserve financial aid specifically for community college transfer students.

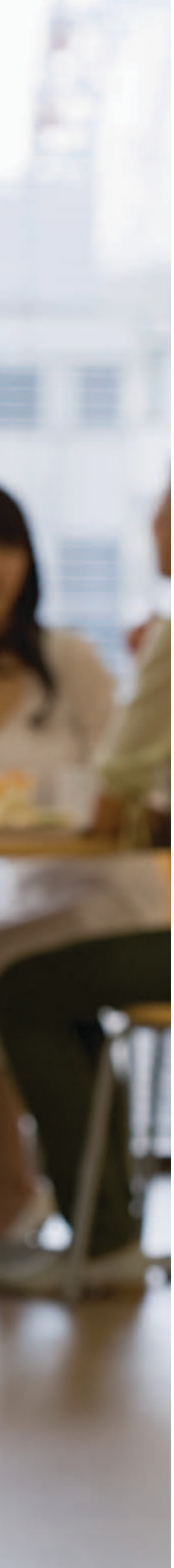
The recent implementation of “net price calculators” (NPC) at two- and four-year institutions may help community college transfer students understand their financial aid options across two institutions. In 2011, the federal government required all colleges and universities that receive Title IV federal student aid to post a NPC on their website, allowing current and prospective students an opportunity to calculate an estimated net price of attendance at a given institution based on individual financial information provided by students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Although, current NPCs offer students estimates of net price based on enrollment at a single institution, the NPC framework offers community colleges and four-year institutions an opportunity to partner in the development of calculators that provide estimates of net cost across two institutions. In other words, with more advanced calculators, community college students could calculate not only their cost of



attendance at the two-year institution but also at the four-year institution following transfer.

All of this suggests that financial aid policy for transfer students should be properly aligned with other elements essential to the process, such as articulation policies and enrollment management strategies. It is unreasonable, for instance, to require transfer students to enroll in college full-time if aid is not sufficient to maintain that level of commitment. For many community college students who are comfortable putting themselves through school by working at an outside job, the prospect of going into significant debt at a four-year institution is neither attractive financially nor compelling academically. However, federal work-study awards might be appealing to these students.

Despite the added administrative aspects of the program (connecting students to appropriate jobs), it addresses the need of this constituency well by providing them with work, often in conjunction with a student's academic interests; wedding them more closely to the campus community (because many jobs are on campus); and limiting the number of hours that can be worked. These and similar efforts may be especially powerful for community college students whose ability to earn a baccalaureate degree rests less in their classroom performances and more on their hourly wages, often working far more hours per week than is recommended for sustained academic achievement.



## Chapter 8: Conflicting Academic Cultures

*“There is a lack of information sharing [between community colleges and four-year institutions] because we’re different cultures; we’re different kinds of institutions.”*

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Transfer Policy and Practice

The final challenge is the most difficult to define and, therefore, the most difficult to analyze. In broad terms, this issue relates to the institutional differences between community colleges and four-year institutions, disparities inherent in their essential makeup that pose problems for transfer students. While both types of institutions deliver postsecondary education, they have different histories, attract different kinds of students, place different responsibilities on faculty, receive funding in different ways (often from different sources), offer different types of curricula, maintain different kinds of physical plants, and are governed by different political processes.

Of course, community colleges and four-year institutions share common attributes, too. For example, many four-year institutions are nonselective, meaning they accept 80 percent or more of students who apply. There are also programs within community colleges, such as nursing, to which it is extremely difficult for students to gain admission, sometimes akin to highly selective four-year institutions. Furthermore, attempts to describe two- and four-year institutions as separate and distinct invites an assumption that there is little variation *within* each type of institution. Clearly, this is not the case.

With these caveats, however, it is our contention that there are essential differences — real or perceived — between community colleges and four-year institutions that trip up transfer students and undermine the effectiveness of this academic pathway. Nearly three decades ago, researchers Richard Richardson and Louis Bender documented this essential interinstitutional tension in their analysis of the transfer process in urban community colleges, noting:

*“... improving opportunities for ... transfer students involves helping them to adjust to two different kinds of institutions, each with its own set of values and assumptions ... there is a lack of understanding among community colleges and universities of the differences between their cultures. ... Accompanying this lack of understanding is an absence of respect for the differences in attitudes and behavior that these*

*cultures produce. As a result, neither does as much as it could to help students understand or adjust to the other’s culture” (Richardson & Bender, 1987, p. 21).*

A variety of researchers have shown that students who adjust quickly to their new environment are more likely to succeed. (See Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1994.) By extension, Richardson and Bender and other education practitioners believe that students’ success is significantly impacted if they traverse two or more academic cultures. (See Dougherty, 1994; Handel, 2011a; Handel & Herrera, 2003, 2006; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2011; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). Not only must transfer students learn the culture of the four-year institution, having just become accustomed to the culture of the community college, they must also deal with the fact that in many instances there is little communication among community colleges and four-year institutions. As a result, they are left to manage the transition on their own. As one student affairs leader at a four-year university remarked, “Transfer students are like Alice in Wonderland [at a four-year campus]. They go from one place to another and have no clue about the culture of the institution” (Handel, 2011a, p. 23).

Some will find it easy to dismiss differences between academic cultures as a problem characteristic of the relationship between community colleges and highly selective four-year institutions. Although the gap may be widest for those sets of institutions — it is an arguable point — the observations to follow are not unique to them. In fact, the obstacles noted in this report are common to all institutions and are certainly not unique to the most elite four-year colleges and universities. The point to be gleaned here is that regardless of the receiving institution, transfer students must make a transition in the middle of their undergraduate careers; a transition we almost never advise an undergraduate who begins college at a four-year institution to make.

The major differences between the egalitarian focus of community colleges and the generally more selective academic cultures of four-year institutions fall along four dimensions: mission and public perception, admission and enrollment requirements, curriculum and pedagogy, and academic and campus culture.

- **Mission and public perception.** The two- and four-year institutional models were established in different centuries with different missions to address the needs of different types of students.

(See Cohen & Kisker, 2010.) Public and private four-year institutional models were established before the first community college opened its doors to students. And while the four-year model (or models — this segment of higher education is very diverse) continues to evolve, it is characterized by a view of the undergraduate narrative as an unbroken four-year experience, involving recent high school graduates living on or near-campus in housing designed for their needs. While this narrative is far less prevalent than it was even two decades ago (it is estimated that only 25 percent of current undergraduates fit the mold. See Complete College America, 2011, p. 6), it still exerts a powerful hold on how Americans perceive higher education. The community college narrative is also a powerful one, but it is different, more egalitarian and surely less elitist than that of four-year colleges and universities. But this cuts both ways. Community colleges are viewed as less prestigious, less a citadel of ivory tower enlightenment, and more a center for the practical arts — a place to gain job skills. A good thing, but perhaps not college.

These divergent impressions of two- and four-year institutions would play out separately were it not for the common connection of transfer. Only then do the comparisons begin, the adding up of strengths and weaknesses and the unspoken concerns about the academic gulf that exists between both types of institutions. As we alluded to in the first chapter, these perceptions, which unfairly stereotype both community colleges and four-year institutions, create uneasiness among Americans about the purpose of a college education.

Despite these impressions, community colleges and four-year universities carry on with their respective institutional missions, although the extent to which it includes transfer varies greatly among institutions. Inherent in the community college mission is preparing students for transfer to a four-year institution; it is part and parcel of their institutional heritage, despite a mission that expanded throughout the 20th century in which the vocational training became increasingly prominent. One could argue that with the establishment of the community colleges, there was an implicit assumption that four-year institutions — public ones certainly, private less so — would take an active part in, and make a contribution to, the effectiveness of the transfer pathway. Some institutions have done so, but the importance, even the legitimacy, of transfer as a four-year institutional responsibility is not an

explicit part of the academic mission of these institutions. Even among four-year institutions that enroll large numbers of community college students, the process is often a secondary one, an auxiliary part of a much more elaborate freshman admission structure. Whatever efforts are made on behalf of transfer students are largely unspoken or unacknowledged.<sup>29</sup> As discussed earlier, part of the reason may be the absence of compelling incentives to admit and serve these students.

- **Admission and enrollment.** More striking than their respective historical antecedents, two- and four-year institutions differ radically with respect to whom they admit. Community college faculty are especially proud that they are open admission institutions, taking all applicants who might benefit from their curricula and instruction. Faculty in four-year institutions, even nonselective ones, focus their work on recruiting students with specific academic preparation and talent and, as a result, develop admission criteria to craft a class that best meets the mission of their institutions. In effect — and in almost complete contrast to one another — community colleges gain a measure of moral authority (though little prestige) by opening their doors to virtually all applicants, while four-year institutions, especially highly and moderately selective institutions, gain prestige by maintaining admission requirements that restrict entry to their colleges and universities.

In addition to differences in selection criteria, community colleges' and four-year institutions' admission and enrollment practices diverge in other ways. For example, the admission application process for community colleges is generally simple. Application forms are almost never longer than one or two pages. Moreover, many colleges allow students to apply and enroll in classes after a term has already started. Almost all community colleges offer students the opportunity to enroll in classes on a part-time basis. These institutions also do not generally require students to make minimum academic progress, nor do they monitor the number of courses students drop late in the term or, if they do, apply few penalties for doing so (this does not apply to students on federal financial aid). In contrast, the admission process at four-year colleges and universities is more comprehensive, requiring applicants to prepare what amounts to an academic and extracurricular portfolio of their high school years. In addition, these institutions do not generally allow students to enroll part-time on a sustained basis, and they are more vigilant about monitoring student progress (sometimes imposing credit ceilings to encourage completion of the

degree).

These distinctions impact community college transfer students. Preparing an application for a four-year institution, for example, requires more time and greater commitment compared to the application process at a community college. In addition, if a student has attended a community college on a part-time basis, full-time engagement at the four-year institution will require greater attention to time management. Not only will the amount of classroom work increase significantly, it may well be introduced more quickly, with increased demands for mastery (especially if the student has transferred from a community college on a semester system calendar to a four-year institution on a quarter system calendar). Moreover, paying for college on a full-time basis will demand new strategies, especially if the student has little experience applying for financial aid at the community college and plans to continue working at an off-campus job.

- **Curriculum.** The primary difference between the curricula of two- and four-year institutions is that community colleges are limited in offering only lower-division courses (this does not apply, of course, to community colleges that have been authorized to grant baccalaureate degrees). This division of faculty labor is clear, especially when discussing primarily traditional academic majors (things get more complicated when addressing degrees with greater vocational, technical, or occupational content). The problem is how the lower and upper divisions are linked between community colleges and four-year institutions. On four-year institution campuses, the lower-division preparatory courses for, say, the chemistry major align with the upper-division major curriculum because chemistry faculty are in close contact with one another, and there are layers of oversight (presumably) that provide checks and balances. But can the same lower-division–upper-division linkage be assumed between community colleges and four-year institutions? In what ways are community college faculty in touch with their peers at four-year institutions to ensure that they are teaching all that is necessary for academic success at the upper-division level? In what ways do four-year faculties

consult with their community college colleagues about course offerings and changes in curriculum at their institutions? Both constituencies can learn a great deal from one another, but the reality is that there is very little time to consult with one's colleagues on campus, let alone colleagues at other institutions.

- **Campus environment.** Community colleges are almost entirely transient, nonresidential communities that pride themselves on providing extraordinary access to classes, virtually night and day. They are “drive-in and drive-out” colleges (and this applies increasingly to faculty, many of whom are part-timers who patch together a living by teaching at several colleges in a single term). (See Rhoades, 2012.) While all of this works against a strong and cohesive campus community (although there are plenty of two-year colleges that are the exception), it, nonetheless, accommodates the needs of a broad range of students who are more concerned about child care than the plight of the basketball team.

More traditional, four-year institutions with on-campus, or near-campus, housing create a far more centralized campus community. Academic engagement is supported and encouraged not only in the classroom but also in the activities outside of class that supplement and extend the learning that occurs more formally. For these efforts, four-year institutions reap considerable benefits in greater student retention and graduation rates, but are probably less in tune with the needs of the surrounding campus community (although, again, there are notable institutional exceptions).

Despite these differences in campus environment, both types of institutions are inextricably linked because students attending a community college must transfer to a four-year institution to earn a baccalaureate degree. Thus, the ways in which community colleges and four-year institutions work with one another have profound consequences for student success and for education policymakers trying to accommodate an increasingly large number of students who want to attend college.

## Manifestations of Mistrust

*“The trust issue among two- and four-year institutions is very important. People need to be in more contact with each other, because we know that people build up all sorts of expectations that can be quite wrong. Providing opportunities for regular contact is crucial.”*

Member of the Commission on  
Transfer Policy and Practice

What are the manifestations of the apparent disconnect between two- and four-year institutions? We identify several:

- **A belief that four-year institutions are reluctant — even recalcitrant — in accepting community college credits to apply toward a baccalaureate degree.** A common complaint about the transfer process is that student progress is impeded by four-year institutions’ refusal to accept community college course credit.<sup>30</sup> Anecdotes abound about transfer students who, upon entry to the four-year institution, were told that “their credits would not transfer” (or, if credit was granted, none of it would apply toward degree requirements). These stories have a way of turning up at legislative hearings, fueling the wrath of politicians who in response propose a variety of policy interventions to streamline the transfer process.

While anecdotes abound, there is little research that supports the claim of a persistent and pernicious provincialism on the part of four-year institutions to deny community college credit toward their degrees. This is not to say it does not exist, but a systematic and sustained desire to do so has yet to be documented. One widely cited study found a large difference in the six-year bachelor’s degree completion rates for students whose receiving institution accepted all of their community college credits compared to students whose receiving institutions only accept some subset of their total community college credit (Doyle, 2006). The study did not specify the amount of credit that was denied by some four-year institutions, the type of four-year institution most likely to deny credit, or the reasons why the credit was denied. Still, it is not a stretch to conclude that students are more likely to complete their four-year degree more quickly and efficiently if the receiving institution is generous in its credit-acceptance policies. Nevertheless, the study does not tell us how widespread the problem is, nor does it suggest possible solutions.

Others have argued that the significant number of credits that community college transfer students amass while earning a baccalaureate — at some institutions well beyond the minimum required for the four-year degree — is an indication that students are having to repeat or enroll in different courses after they transfer. Yet data reveal that there has been a steady increase in the number of credits earned by *all* students. While the research literature in this area is not extensive, a recent study indicated that the difference in the number of credits completed at graduation by students who started at two-year institutions was only seven credits more than students who started at four-year institutions. In other words, community college students appear to be completing about two more courses, on average, than their four-year institution peers (Roksa, 2011; Roksa & Keith, 2008).

The reason transfer students struggle to have credits applied toward the four-year degree probably has more to do with the complexity — and capriciousness — of the transfer process than anything approaching a scheme by four-year institutions to shortchange students. Most four-year institutions accept community college credit, but how they apply this credit toward the baccalaureate degree, especially in the absence of an explicit articulation agreement, may be haphazard. Indeed, the denial of credit asserted by community college students may be due primarily to a lack of information about a course. A title on a transcript is not very informative, and a catalog course description is likely to be too general as well. The four-year institution official who reviews a transfer student’s transcript (usually the registrar) is obligated to request additional information about the course from either the student or the community college. The information is then reviewed by a dean or a faculty committee. All of this takes time, which delays the academic progress of the student.

Community college faculty might well argue why their courses are not simply accepted by four-year institutions on faith. After all, two- and four-year institution faculty members are part of the same “academy.” The response from faculty at four-year institutions, however, is that they have the obligation to review all outside courses given that they are responsible for conferring the baccalaureate degree.

In response to this standoff, lawmakers in some states have implemented policies (see next bullet) that require all public postsecondary institutions to accept one another’s course credits (an outcome that, ironically, appears to invite universal scorn by

two- and four-year faculty members). Five decades ago, Leland Medsker wrote:

*“A common obstacle created by [four-year institutions] is their frequent inflexibility in lower-division requirements. For them relentlessly to insist that the junior colleges offer identical or equivalent courses covering the same content and taught in the same manner as in the four-year college simply means that smaller junior colleges cannot satisfy requirements to several four-year institutions. Furthermore, insistence on equivalent courses per se overlooks a basic question of whether a specific subject matter and a given approach to it is more valuable than other related content in the same general discipline and training in intellectually processes in general”* (Medsker, 1960, pp. 138–139).

More recently, a higher education leader at a highly selective institution said, “I am not one who wants to get hung up on the philosophical issue that our definition of a liberal education is better than somebody else’s. That’s a big problem we just need to get over and accept more courses, frankly” (in Handel, 2011a, p. 17).

If we accept the notion that the primary function of articulation agreements among postsecondary education institutions is to prepare students for whatever it is they will face academically at the next institution, trust and flexibility among faculty at all institutions is essential. Faculty members are in the best position to evaluate content and pedagogy. They are also the only ones capable of elevating the level of debate over credit transfer in ways that do not make transfer students unwitting victims of interinstitutional parochialism.

- **A belief by lawmakers that two- and four-year institutions are unable to work well together to improve the transfer process for students.**

As described above, state policymakers have stepped in aggressively with a number of policy interventions to “encourage” recalcitrant (or simply uninterested) community college and four-year institution faculty to cooperate with one another to improve the transfer pathway (Roksa & Keith, 2008, p. 237). These interventions are designed largely to standardize course credit transfer practices through the assignment of common course numbers across all public institutions, as well as to systematize interinstitutional curricula by approving blanket or block articulation agreements that establish a single general education (GE) curriculum for an entire state or guarantee admission to the receiving institution for all students who complete an associate degree.

While such policies effectively regulate credit transfer between and among institutions, the benefits to transfer students appear to be mixed. For example, creating a course number system for all institutions helps to simplify the curriculum, but it rarely indicates how a given course may be applied to the four-year degree. Blanket policies that homogenize the lower-division undergraduate curriculum across institutions provide students with a less complex recipe for fulfilling, say, GE requirements, but may fail to prepare students well for the upper division if there is little or no faculty oversight ensuring course applicability and rigor.

These and other types of statewide policies emerged in the late 1980s and have gained increasing popularity among state leaders as a way of linking two- and four-year institutions in service to transfer (Roksa, 2009, p. 2448). One-third to one-half of the states have implemented some type of large-scale articulation reform. (See Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006, p. 262; Roksa, 2009, p. 2449; Moore, Shulock, & Jensen, 2009.) Yet the weight of the evidence thus far is that articulation agreements and other similar policies have not been especially effective in boosting transfer rates (Anderson et al., 2006; Cohen, 2003, p. 10; Roksa & Keith, 2008).<sup>31</sup> For example, empirical research commissioned for this project found no differences in the rate of transfer for states with strong statewide articulation agreements compared to states that had fewer articulation agreements or none at all. Other researchers have come to the same conclusion. (See Jaschik, 2009.) The fact that statewide articulation agreements evidence little impact on transfer rates, however, may simply reflect deficiencies in methodology and the difficulty of measuring large-scale policy changes using relatively insensitive metrics. In addition, some statewide articulation policies are relatively new. Thus, any impact on transfer may not yet be measurable.

Still, despite the absence of definitive data, it is our belief that statewide transfer policies are necessary but not sufficient to enhance transfer. A broad-based study that addressed the effectiveness of statewide articulation initiatives, relative to other transfer efforts, concluded that:

*“... state policy is not a panacea for what ails postsecondary education, unless other factors contributing to student success (such as financial aid, effective compensatory and counseling programs, and improvement in K–12 public schools*

*leading to higher rates of retention and high school graduation) are also built into a multidimensional approach to enhance the probability of transfer” (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006, p. 284).*

This conclusion, an argument for a comprehensive approach to the issue of transfer, mirrors the findings of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, which recommends an integrated set of interventions and includes state governments, two- and four-year institutions, and the research, policymaking, and philanthropic communities as responsible parties (see Chapter 10).

- **A belief that community college students are not prepared well for study at four-year colleges and universities.** Given that community colleges are open-access institutions, there is a perception that the curricula of these institutions are less rigorous than those of four-year colleges and universities. As a result, it is argued that community college students are insufficiently prepared for the upper division. In support of this contention, critics point to high rates of remediation at community colleges, low transfer rates, and transfer shock (a decline in transfer students’ GPA after the first term at the receiving institution). Yet community college faculty argue that their emphasis on teaching and pedagogy make up for deficiencies in student preparation, that smaller classes and greater personalization are adequate to the task. Furthermore, some empirical research indicates that transfer students are at least as successful academically as similar students who began college at the four-year institution (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Still, community colleges are the least well-funded higher education entity, which translates into fewer dollars for student services, such as tutoring and other supports, compared to four-year institutions. It seems reasonable to ask about the preparation of students for transfer given these sets of conditions. Also, we should hardly take comfort in the fact that only the strong survive the transfer process, which, not incidentally, tend to be students we would most likely predict to have success: middle- and upper-income students of college-educated parents. (See Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006.) If the authentic mission of the community college is to serve students from all backgrounds — and well — it is hard to be sanguine when few of our most vulnerable students earn a baccalaureate, even if we sleep well at night knowing the reasons why.

- **The belief that four-year institutions create artificial capacity restraints at their institutions to prevent more community college students from enrolling.** In Chapter 1 (as well as in Supplemental Report 1, *Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer*), we noted that historically, first-time community college students regard the chance to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree as a primary goal. Nevertheless, transfer rates (current and historical) indicate that most do not. Analyses carried out for this project indicate that only about one-third of students who intend to transfer are successful in making the transition to the four-year institution. The discrepancy between student goals and success has led some to believe that there is a ceiling established on the number of students that four-year colleges and universities are able to admit.

This concern runs deeper than simply an argument about filling seats at the upper-division level. Every institution has a finite number of seats to fill and, in the broad sense, there is always going to be a ceiling on the number of students who can be accommodated. Moreover, ever since the beginning of the transfer pathway, when the modern notion of a community college was first conceived and implemented at the University of Chicago and Joliet College in 1901, it was built on the formulation that not all students would desire to enter a senior institution. Indeed, the establishment of the associate degree came from the recognition that some students, either as a result of their performance in the classroom or their personal desire, would not transfer. They would, nonetheless, leave with an official credential indicating their performance in lower-division courses. Finally, students with transfer intentions change their minds. Common sense and empirical research indicate that students alter their goals and work toward other kinds of educational outcomes, while some students who start at a community college with sub-baccalaureate goals will often elevate their aspirations.

Nevertheless, one need not speak too long to community college leaders and educators to hear a lingering concern that the low transfer rate is a result of four-year colleges and universities “not wanting to take our students,” preferring to admit mostly freshman students. Embedded in this complaint is an unspoken belief that four-year institutions do not understand or appreciate the values that transfer students bring to the four-year institution, such as greater ethnic and racial diversity, broader life experience, exceptional



motivation (as a result of, alas, having to travel a road more gauntlet than pathway to academic enlightenment), and solid academic preparation for the upper division (as demonstrated by research showing the success of community college students at the four-year institution).<sup>32</sup>

As evidence of a persistent and widespread bias against transfer students, community college advocates point to individual four-year colleges and universities that have made a variety of decisions that thwart transfer, such as raising admission requirements, adding more course work requirements to their GE and major programs, increasing tuition and fees, limiting the amount of community college credit a transfer student may apply to his or her degree, or finally, simply limiting or not accepting transfer students at all. Such a bias, it is argued, reduces the ability of students from underserved groups to earn a baccalaureate degree, with subsequent constriction on the ability of such students to earn postgraduate degrees as well.

This is a tricky issue to confront, made all the worse by the lack of compelling data on this topic. All of the concerns cited — restricting admission, adding course requirements, limiting transfer credit — are ones that any given four-year institution is likely to have implemented multiple times, perhaps even annually. Yet, such actions could have been enacted for a whole host of other reasons. Where community college leaders see a conspiracy against transfer students when enrollment targets are adjusted, four-year institution leaders may simply be responding to reductions in state support for enrollment. Where community college leaders see a lack of commitment to the transfer process because of limits on transfer course credit, four-year institution faculty may be addressing concerns regarding the preparation of students in certain disciplines.

Moreover, these actions take a decidedly different tack depending on what kind of institution is doing them. For example, the criticism that a particular college does not admit transfer students may be true but largely irrelevant, especially for private liberal arts college whose curricula is often tightly woven around the needs of first-year students. While one might argue that such a college would benefit from admitting transfer students (and some very prominent private liberal arts colleges, such as Amherst College in Massachusetts, do), the parameters of institutional mission remain with the institution. On the other hand, a public flagship university, whose support comes from taxpayers and is located within a state that has a vibrant and publicly supported community college

system, would be wise to have a better reason for not admitting transfers than “such students do not fit our mission.” Or if the institution does admit transfers, it had better be able to defend its policies about course transfer, credit limitations, or other mission-driven considerations.

Rather than an explicit strategy of excluding transfer students, four-year institutions’ devotion to first-year students reflects a widespread view, reinforced by historical practice that predates the establishment of community colleges, that an undergraduate experience should span four years at the same college or university. This view is supported by a series of incentives both official and implicit, such as the way the federal government calculates retention and graduation rates based on first-time freshman cohorts (see Chapter 5). It is almost universally accepted by four-year colleges and universities, which are not otherwise compelled by government or institutional necessity to admit students from community colleges. Nevertheless, the indifference of many four-year institutions as a result of their traditional reliance on freshmen as the sole engine of enrollment leads to the same outcome: an exclusion of community college students that continues to frustrate two-year college leaders, educators, and, most important, students who only wish to use community colleges in the way in which it was originally envisioned, in part by four-year institution leaders, over 100 years ago.

## Options for Educators and Policymakers

There is an emerging appreciation that although two- and four-year institutions possess different, sometimes even incompatible, academic cultures, both kinds of institutions must still seek ways of serving students who must make the transition from one institution to the other. Researchers are investigating the elements that characterize “transfer-affirming” cultures; that is, campus environments in which community college students are supported in their efforts to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a baccalaureate degree (Handel, 2011b). Applying constructs such as social capital theory (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010) and critical race theory (Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2011) researchers in this area believe that an effective transfer process is the product of a collaborative dynamic between two- and four-year institutions. For example, given that students attending community colleges are often those least likely to possess the information necessary to make the transition to a four-year institution, two- and four-

## The Promise of the Transfer Pathway

year institutions must fill the gap; in effect, to provide the essential cultural capital that they lack. But basic “college knowledge” will not be sufficient for transfer students since, as we have discussed, transfer success requires the acquisition and application of very specific (and often arcane) kinds of information and knowledge. They need access to *transfer* cultural capital (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010, p. 177). Imparting this information, however, cannot be the sole responsibility of community colleges. Four-year institutions — as we stress throughout this report — must play a pivotal role.

Researchers analyzing transfer through the lens of critical race theory highlight the need to challenge dominant ideologies, which, in this instance, refers to the tendency to see student enrollment at a four-year institutional model as the only legitimate route to a baccalaureate degree. In response, these researchers argue that an equivalent model must be embraced, one that sees transfer as the *shared* responsibility of two- and four-year institutions (Jain et al., 2011).

What does this mean in practice? A recent report issued by the College Board (Handel, 2011a), which included interviews with higher education leaders committed to transfer student success, revealed that, at its core, a transfer affirming culture:

- Envisions transfer as a shared responsibility between community colleges and four-year institutions;
- Views transfer and attainment of the bachelor’s degree as expected and attainable;
- Offers curricula and academic support services that make transfer and degree completion possible;
- Provides students with the transfer social capital they need, while leveraging the social capital that students bring to college — linguistic, familial, aspirational — in service to their educational goals; and
- Includes transfer as an essential element of an institution’s mission and strategic vision.

None of this will surprise educators at two- or four-year institutions who have committed their professional lives to transfer student success. The challenge today is to apply this framework more broadly as a bridge that links community colleges and four-year institutions whose current academic cultures inadvertently allow transfer students to flounder in the gap.

## Chapter 9: Concluding Thoughts

Our findings from this initiative, a result of Institute for Higher Education Policy's empirical work and the conclusions of the Commission on Transfer Policy and Practice, reveal the following:

- **Transfer is as popular a route to the baccalaureate degree among community college students as it has ever been, but the transfer rate has not improved despite more students wishing to transfer.** New, first-time community college students want to transfer. Most of them do not. In addition, data suggest the continued presence of a transfer penalty, that is, students who begin at a community college appear to have less chance of earning a baccalaureate degree compared to students who begin at a four-year institution (although we qualify our findings by noting that the period of our analysis may not be long enough to account for students still in the pipeline). We also identify the difficulty of assessing an accurate transfer rate, given the devilishly difficult definitional issues involved. Yet, for the two cohorts compared in this study (1996–2001 versus 2004–2009) the same definition of transfer was applied, and we found no improvement in the transfer rate. The research literature is replete with studies using a variety of methods, assumptions, and data sets whose results indicate considerable room for improvement in the transfer rate.
- **The transfer process is too complex.** We think part of the reason more students don't transfer is the system is unnecessarily complicated. If there is a shortcoming in our description of the choices facing the transfer student in Supplemental Report 3, *Transfer as Academic Gauntlet: The Student Perspective*, it is in limiting the discussion to the interpretation of articulation agreements; the same student faces a host of other challenges when he or she arrives on the four-year campus.\* The complexity of the current transfer process did not happen overnight. The best interpretation is that it has built up over the years, layer upon bureaucratic layer of rules and regulations intended to ensure academic rigor, compliance with four-year degree requirements, and changes in content knowledge of disciplines. Tiny adjustments are piled upon one another creating a system that in some states looks more like the tax code than a set of guidelines designed to help students prepare
- themselves for the upper division. To argue that this complexity does not serve students is hardly the point anymore. We would be surprised if anyone could marshal an argument in favor of who or what the current system serves.
- **The effectiveness of statewide articulation policies in boosting transfer has not yet been established empirically, but transparent credit policies remain essential for student success.** That this study found no support for statewide articulation efforts is consistent with the findings of other researchers, but we also note that that literature is relatively recent and not deep. Moreover, the lack of support may simply be the result of methodology that is insufficiently sensitive to the impact of relatively broad policy interventions. Still, even if the literature were more definitive, some sort of mechanism is necessary to communicate to students how community college course credits transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Research may never be able to tease out the relative impact of one type of articulation effort over another, but that does not minimize the responsibility of two- and four-year institutions to provide prospective transfer students with an accounting — in a language they can understand — of how their courses and majors align with one another.
- **Community colleges and four-year institutions are rarely acknowledged for the work they do on behalf of transfer, and where transfer-related metrics exist, they are often imprecise, inadequate, or misapplied.** We have been hard on community colleges and four-year institutions in this report for their apparent failure to create a system of transfer that is transparent, relatively free of bureaucratic entanglements, and academically justifiable. But to be fair, the ways in which we currently acknowledge and reward institutions for the work they do on behalf of transfers is almost nonexistent. Community colleges are rarely judged on the number of students they prepare for transfer and four-year institutions are almost never given credit for the community college students they enroll and graduate. If the transfer pathway is to succeed fully, education and policy leaders must delineate specific goals for transfer and develop methods of effectively tracking progress.

\* The report is available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.

- **Community colleges and four-year institutions are different academic cultures that create barriers for students already struggling to maneuver through a too-complex system.**

Two- and four-year institutions are more different than they are alike, and failing to address this openly does not make these differences go away. Despite differences in mission, history, curriculum, admission criteria, and the like, both types of institutions cross paths when it comes to transfer and, as such, must work together more effectively to serve students preparing to make the transition from one institution to the other.

- **Financial aid policy is an essential element for an effective transfer plan, but it is often not aligned with other initiatives to boost transfer.**

Financial aid is important for all students with need, but especially so for students attending community colleges, because these students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. At community colleges, lower tuition and fees compared to four-year institutions, coupled with liberal part-time enrollment policies, encourage students to work outside jobs, often imperiling academic progress. At four-year institutions, where part-time enrollment and excessive off-campus work is less manageable (or not permitted), new transfer students have little experience with financial aid. What two- and four-year institutions lack is a comprehensive financial aid strategy across institutions. This strategy would delineate the tuition, fees, and other costs students face for the entire baccalaureate degree and the ways in which they can manage these costs at the community college and the four-year institution.

- **We do not know the capacity of the current transfer system and this impairs the ability of the nation to meet its college completion agenda.** We lack compelling information about the ability of two-year institutions to prepare additional students for transfer and a baccalaureate degree. We also lack information about the capacity and willingness of four-year institutions to admit more community college students to the upper division. National education trends offer some insight but, on balance, portray great uncertainty about the future viability of the transfer pathway. Our unscientific review of four-year institution strategic plans indicates a greater willingness of these institutions to consider the role of transfer in their planning. On the other hand, an increasing number of community colleges are being given permission by state lawmakers to offer the baccalaureate degree. Although there are multiple motivations for the push to confer baccalaureate degrees at community colleges, at minimum, this trend signals that four-year institutions are struggling to address the demand for baccalaureate degree holders in high-need fields like nursing and teaching.

## Chapter 10: Recommendations

The empirical and policy findings gleaned from this initiative invite the following set of recommendations. These recommendations are targeted to three sets of constituencies: state governments; two- and four-year institutions; and the research, policymaking and philanthropic communities. There are other players in the effort to improve transfer (such as the federal government's role in collecting national college-going data) but these represent the primary influencers in strengthening this academic pathway. Each set of recommendations is centered on the main themes of this report: the shared responsibility of two- and four-year institutions to improve transfer, the importance of accountability mechanisms that incentivize institutions to enhance the transfer pathway, and the need to simplify the transfer process for students.

### Recommendations in Brief

(see Figure 1)

#### **1. For community college and four-year institution leaders:**

*Create a transfer-affirming culture that spans your respective campuses, providing a pathway for community college students to advance toward the associate and baccalaureate degrees. Develop partnerships, such as dual admission arrangements or transfer contracts, which provide students with an academic road map. Develop similar partnerships to help students understand their financial aid options. Share information with one another on student goals and intentions, student academic performance, course equivalencies, and changes in programs and requirements with the overarching intention of providing students with a simpler and more coherent transfer process.*

#### **2. For community college leaders:**

*Honor and support the intentions of your new, first-time community college students, most of whom overwhelmingly want to earn a four-year degree, by making transfer and the associate degree the default curriculum, unless they opt for a different educational goal. Help students get a good start in higher education by providing them with a mandatory orientation program before their first term in college and/or a student success course in their first term, the product of each being a program of study leading to the associate degree and transfer. Require these students to make at least minimum progress toward their educational goal each term.*

#### **3. For four-year institution leaders:**

*Establish an authentic and equal partnership with community colleges focused on transfer. Elevate transfer as a strategic, rather than tactical, objective of your institution's enrollment plans. Evidence this by insisting that enrollment targets be separate from those developed for freshmen. Share the responsibility of preparing students for transfer by reaching out to community college students in their first year of college with information about academic preparation, financial aid, and credit transfer. Cultivate these students with the same intensity and commitment that you cultivate your high school prospects and demonstrate this commitment by providing them with first priority in the admission process over other transfer applicants.*

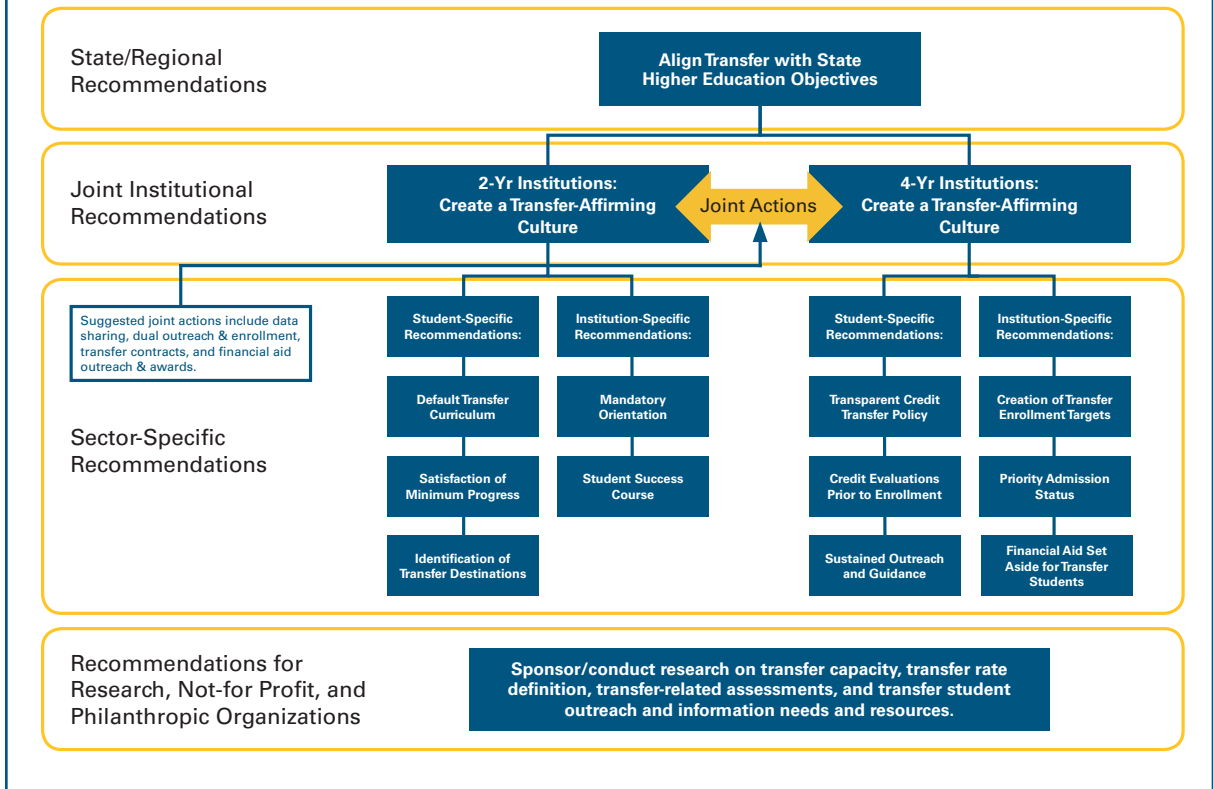
#### **4. For state government leaders:**

*Create a coherent transfer strategic plan that aligns with the state's overall higher education objectives. Incentivize the joint activity of community colleges and four-year institutions to serve community college transfer students, but also hold them accountable with reasonable and meaningful metrics that best assess what each type of institution does best.*

#### **5. For research, not-for-profit and philanthropic organization leaders:**

*Develop research methodologies that allow policymakers to assess the capacity of the transfer pathway nationally. Create a definition of transfer that two- and four-year institutions can use to meaningfully assess their progress. Build Web-based college-search and other informational databases for community college students preparing for transfer that are at least as sophisticated as those for high school students preparing for college. Develop new evaluation methods that can measure students' learning outcomes and thereby allow them to demonstrate competency in lieu of completing specific course work that may not have been articulated between any given two- and four-year institutions.*

**Figure 1**  
**Summary of Recommendations for State Governments, Two- and Four-Year Institutions, and Research, Not-for-Profit, and Philanthropic Organizations**



## Recommendations in Detail

### 1. Create transfer-affirming cultures:

***Two- and four-year institutions should create environments in which transfer and transfer students are affirmed and supported in their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree.***

The separate cultures of the university and the community college make it difficult to create a transfer-affirming environment that supports transfer students. Often times, the parochial interests of institutions surpass the needs of students who are then caught in an academic netherworld that is difficult to navigate and not of their making.

Although almost every community college considers transfer as a part of its institutional mission, exhortations in the college catalog are not enough. As described in Chapter 8, a transfer-affirming culture defines transfer as a shared responsibility between community colleges and four-year institutions, views transfer and the attainment of the baccalaureate degree as expected and attainable, offers curricula and

academic support services that make transfer and degree completion possible, leverages the social capital that students bring to college in service to their educational goals, and includes transfer as an essential element of an institution's mission and strategic vision.

For four-year institutions, creating such a culture will require four-year institutions to welcome prospective transfer students to their campus in ways as thoughtful as those developed for first-year students. Different institutional contexts will lead to varied interventions. At minimum, however, the very programs that are currently valued and provided to first-year students on four-year campuses (such as orientation programs, timely advising, adequate housing, and access to the same academic majors that first-time students receive), should be calibrated for transfer students as well.

We propose a set of recommendations to be enacted collectively by two- and four-year institutions:

**a. Establish interinstitutional partnerships that encourage student planning and preparation for transfer.**

Community college students must begin planning for transfer from the first day they enroll at a community college. The extent to which they are able to do this depends on the information and guidance they receive from two- and four-year institutions. Interinstitutional activities that promote student planning include the following:

- **Link students early with prospective transfer destinations.** Community colleges should share with four-year institutions (assuming students' permission) the names and contact information of prospective transfer applicants who have indicated a transfer destination. Four-year institutions would then, in turn, reach out to these students early and often about the ways in which they can best prepare for transfer to the four-year campus.
- **Provide dual enrollment opportunities.** Where geography permits, community colleges and four-year institutions should implement dual-admission programs in which community college students are allowed to complete one or more courses at the four-year institution. Research indicates that these arrangements help students make a successful transition from a community college to a four-year institution. By completing one or more courses prior to transfer, prospective transfer students experience the academic culture of the receiving institution.
- **Offer transfer contracts.** Where geography does not permit, community colleges and four-year institutions should adopt the use of transfer contracts in which four-year institutions develop agreements with prospective community college students outlining the courses students must complete and the grades they must earn to be eligible for transfer. These arrangements have demonstrated success in helping students transfer to a four-year institution. The advantage of this arrangement is that students understand their expectations for transfer and four-year institutions are assured an enrollment stream of well-prepared students.

**b. Establish interinstitutional partnerships that provide community college students considering transfer with a comprehensive**

**view of their financial aid opportunities as an undergraduate student.**

Few community colleges and four-year institutions supply information in which a student could estimate his or her total financial commitment to college and the likely aid to be received. Yet, a prospective transfer student's understanding of how financial aid serves to support their education is essential, especially given the fact that so many community college students do not apply for aid, attend college part-time, and work more hours per week than is optimal for academic progress. Two- and four-year institutions must work collectively to provide a comprehensive view of the financial aid process. Such initiatives could come in a variety of forms, such as:

- **Interinstitutional agreements that provide prospective transfer students with a guaranteed financial aid package for their undergraduate career, dependent upon a student's academic progress, completion of a prescribed course of study, attainment of a specified minimum GPA, and financial need.** These arrangements could be integrated with already established dual-admission programs, which provide students with a guarantee of admission presuming they complete an academic contract.
- **Interinstitutional financial aid workshops (in person or online) and Web-based tools that prospective students and their families can access for information about financial aid opportunities — and challenges — that transfer students are likely to face.** In the absence of explicit arrangements among two- and four-year institutions, financial aid experts should work on creating a curriculum that effectively highlights the financial aid process for a transfer student across two- and four-year institutions.

**2. Honor and support students' transfer intentions:**

**Community colleges should make the transfer the default curriculum for all new, first-time community college students.**

New students entering a community college for the first time want to transfer and earn the baccalaureate degree. We believe that community colleges should presume that students' intentions are serious and, unless students indicate otherwise, admit them into a default transfer curriculum.

What would a “default” curriculum look like? Probably something very close to what it looks like now on community college campuses. We defer to two- and four-year faculty as to the number and type of courses a student should complete in the lower division to prepare for transfer. We suggest, however, that the structure of this transfer curriculum include the following:

**a. The default transfer curriculum should be a definable program of study leading to an associate degree, with specific courses to be completed each term and an expectation that students will achieve at least minimum academic progress each term as defined by credits completed and earned GPA (these thresholds would be different for those attending college full-time or part-time).**

As described in Chapter 6, comprehensive community colleges offer a smorgasbord of courses and programs. This richness, however, can sometimes be a burden to first-time students who are unsure of their educational direction. Research indicates that students who enter a community college and enroll in a program of study within the first year are far more likely to complete their educational goals compared to students who lack a plan (Horn, 2009; Moore & Shulock, 2011). Moreover, an academic plan, even if a tentative one, encourages steady student academic progress. Whether students attend college full- or part-time, students who are continuously enrolled are more likely to achieve their education goals than students who stop in and out of school. Although not all students want to be continuously enrolled, new, first-time students should be provided with incentives to do so. Incentives could include priority enrollment, reduction or elimination of certain fees, and/or greater access to campus services.

**b. The default transfer curriculum should include a mandatory orientation program and/or a student success course for all incoming, first-time, community college students.** The current catchphrase among community college leaders is “students don’t do optional.” Although many colleges offer voluntary orientation programs, many students do not avail themselves of these opportunities despite research indicating the benefits of such programs. Higher education leaders are reluctant to make orientation mandatory believing that students (e.g., older students) attending their institutions may not require such intervention or cannot make time for such activities as the result of work responsibilities

and family commitments. Nevertheless, given the importance of these programs in helping students get on the right track for transfer, we recommend that all new, first-time college students be required to complete an orientation program or a first-semester student success course. This student constituency is largely inexperienced with college life and likely to be the greatest beneficiaries of such interventions.

**c. The default transfer curriculum should require students to identify a transfer destination(s) with the understanding that the institutions they identify would be notified of their interest and, in turn, would follow up with specific information about transfer.** Students’

transfer plans are significantly affected by the admission requirements of the receiving institution. Students need sustained contact with prospective four-year institutions to assure that they are on the correct track for a timely transition to the receiving institution.

### **3. Establish an authentic and equal partnership:**

**Four-year institutions’ admission, enrollment, and education of transfer students should be part of the campus mission and should be supported at the highest levels of administrative and faculty leadership. This should be made evident in the following ways:**

**a. Four-year institutions strategic enrollment plans should specify community college enrollment targets that are separate from freshmen enrollment targets.** Freshmen enrollment targets play a powerful role in motivating an institution toward its strategic objectives. Targets for transfer students will do the same.

**b. Four-year institutions should grant community college students applying for transfer first priority in the transfer admission process over other transfer applicants from four-year colleges and universities.**

Community college students must transfer to earn a baccalaureate degree. Whatever personally compelling reasons four-year institution students might have for transfer, they are still able to earn a four-year degree at their original institution. Obviously, this is not so for community college students.

**c. Four-year institutions should publicize admission information for prospective transfer students in the same fashion that such information is provided to first-year students.** At minimum, this information should



include admission statistics for the previous academic year (e.g., the number of transfer applications received, the number admitted, and the number that enrolled) along with an academic profile of the entering transfer class (e.g., average number of credits accepted and average and range of admitted students' GPAs). In addition, admission information should be provided, such as course and GPA requirements, assessment requirements, application deadlines, and credit limitations. Beyond these data points, four-year institutions must also convey information central to the transfer process.

**d. Four-year institutions should create transparent transfer credit policies so that students know how to prepare for transfer while attending community college.** Even if an explicit articulation agreement is not in place with one or more community colleges, four-year institutions that enroll transfer students have an obligation to provide guidance about the kinds of courses that are typically accepted for credit, the likely applicability of community college courses toward specific degree requirements (GE, major requirements, elective), required course components (e.g., lab section, studio), and any credit limitations.

**e. Four-year institutions should complete a credit evaluation for all transfer students before they enroll at the four-year institution.** Providing information about how a student's community college courses do and do not transfer after the student has enrolled makes no sense educationally. Providing this information before a student first enrolls should be a minimal standard of quality for any transfer-receiving institution.

**f. Four-year institutions should set aside financial aid resources for students applying as transfers from community colleges.** Community college applicants to four-year institutions are almost always evaluated after the freshman class has been assembled. Unless an institution has reserved financial aid specifically for transfer applicants, these students are likely to receive less grant aid and more loans.

#### **4. Create a coherent statewide transfer strategic plan:**

**State governments should create a policymaking environment that supports transfer students and transfer-affirming cultures and aligns with the state's overall higher education objectives.**

State governments have a pivotal role to play in strengthening transfer, especially among public two- and four-year institutions. Not only can state leaders establish a policy framework that supports transfer, it is the only entity that can effectively arbitrate the competing needs of community colleges and four-year institutions, a necessary corrective to ensure that both types of institutions see transfer as a shared responsibility.

Creating a policy environment that supports transfer also requires that the state provide appropriate incentives to two- and four-year institutions for the work they do on behalf of transfer. Part of this environment will be the establishment of incentives for two- and four-year institutions to *prepare* more students for transfer and help them earn a four-year degree.

Finally, the state can create those conditions necessary for the development of a simpler or more student-friendly process. In the past, states have attempted to simplify the transfer process by systematizing curricula between two- and four-year institutions, such as implementing a common course numbering system, creating blanket GE articulation agreements, and/or mandating the admission of students to the four-year institution upon completion of an associate degree. These activities are surely necessary, but — and the evidence bears this out — insufficient to significantly boost transfer. Therefore, we recommend the following:

**a. States should convene leaders of two- and four-year institutions in their own state and, where appropriate, in neighboring states as well to establish or advance a statewide or regional strategic higher education plan that involves transfer as one of its central components.** For a pathway as complex as this one, there is no substitute for careful planning and coordination. Yet, in our informal review of 15 four-year institution strategic plans, we found that only one explicitly identified mechanisms to increase its enrollment of community college transfer students. The state, or regional state consortia, is the only entity that can encourage — or mandate — education leaders to come together for mutual engagement and collective action. The type and scope of such action will vary depending on the needs and educational characteristics of each state (e.g., presence of community colleges, size and complexity of the higher educational infrastructure), but should include the following:

- **States should require that two- and four-year public institutions annually report statistics focusing on transfer.** These reports should provide, at minimum, the number of students who were made transfer ready by community colleges, the number of students who successfully transferred to a four-year institution (including the proportion of transfer-ready students who made this transition), and the persistence and graduation rates of students after they transferred to a four-year institution.
- **States should use the number or type of articulation agreements developed as a metric in evaluating the commitment of two- and four-year institutions toward transfer.** Two- and four-year institutions are given almost no credit for the work they do in this regard, despite the labor-intensive and time-consuming aspects of this process.

**b. States should insist that all statewide agreements adhere to a standardized format and be posted electronically for easy access by students and educators.** Creating a standard form for the presentation of articulation information is an obvious way of creating a simpler articulation process. Also, given the sheer number of agreements that are generated, collecting this information in an electronic database that makes it easy for students to search for connections between and among institutions and courses is tailor-made for today's Web technologies.

### **5. Invest in applied research that addresses the needs of transfer students and transfer-affirming cultures:**

**The research, not-for-profit, and philanthropic communities are especially well-poised to identify and fund applied research projects that will advance the needs of transfer and transfer students.** Community college students and the transfer pathway can benefit enormously from the contributions of these national organizations in the following ways.

**a. Research entities should develop a model or models that allow education leaders, policymakers, and others to assess the capacity of the transfer pathway to accommodate community college students wishing to earn a baccalaureate degree.** At this time, there is no accurate way to determine both the number of students who wish to transfer and the capacity of four-year institutions

to absorb that number. This information is pivotal in the development of effective transfer policy.

- b. Research entities should develop a definition of transfer that two- and four-year institutions can use to meaningfully assess their progress.** As noted in Chapter 5, transfer rate definitions appear to flourish in direct proportion to the parochial needs of institutions, districts, and governments. The development of effective transfer policy requires a common measure of transfer.
- c. Organizations committed to student success should develop prototype Web- and print-based sources of information for prospective transfer students that are at least as robust as those provided for high school students preparing for college.** There are dozens of books and websites designed for high school students to help prepare them for college, but almost none for community college students to help prepare for transfer. For example, there is no single source of information that tells students which four-year institutions actually admit students or the specific admission requirements of those institutions. Fortunately, the development of such resources is not difficult and would be an appropriate undertaking for educationally related organizations to address. Financial aid resources for transfer students should also be developed. Currently, two- and four-year institutions are required to make available to prospective students net price calculators revealing the actual cost of college attendance for a specific institution. The expansion of such calculators to serve transfer students would be a more complex undertaking but is well within the mission and purview of organizations focused on helping students prepare for college success.
- d. Organizations expert in assessing student learning competencies should identify additional strategies for assessing the academic preparation of students for the upper division.** Aligning courses and majors using articulation agreements is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Are there other ways of assessing transfer student readiness? Strategies might include the development of assessments that measure competency in specific transferable skills, such as quantitative reasoning, writing, and critical thinking; prior learning assessments; portfolios; or any combination of these indicators.

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## Notes

1. In his State of the Union address, January 24, 2009, President Obama said: *"In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish. This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. ... I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country ... That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."* Retrieved July 5, 2012 from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress)
2. Material for this section was largely derived from the following sources: Beach, J. M. (2011). *Gateway to Opportunity? A History of the Community College in the United States*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing; Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900–1985*. New York: Oxford University Press; Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2008). *The American Community College*, 5th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Dougherty, K. J. (1994). *The Contradictory College: The Conflicting Origins, Impacts, and Futures of the Community College*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Eaton, J. S. (1994). *Strengthening Collegiate Education in Community Colleges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; and Witt, A. A., Wattenberger, J. L., Gollattscheck, J. F., & Suppiger, J. E. (1995). *America's Community Colleges: The First Century*. Washington, DC: The American Association of Community Colleges.
3. *"Transfer is not [sole] ... the responsibility of the community colleges. ... [A] significant part of the transfer equation is the 'pull' factors—the degree to which the four-year colleges and universities attract and admit community college transfer students, and have the capacity to do so. Thus, the programs offered by the four-year institutions, the relationships that are initiated and sustained access across the colleges, the ease with which credits transfer, and the welcome provided by the institutions are all factors that influence whether students actually transfer"* (Gandara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012, p. 6).
4. See Supplemental Report 1, *Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer*, for a more comprehensive treatment of the historical record of the transfer pathway. It is available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.
5. Over the past three decades, the proportion of degrees awarded in traditional arts and sciences disciplines has declined relative to more occupationally oriented ones. According to Steven Brint, Mark Riddle, Lori Turk-Bicakci, and Charles S. Levy (2005), *"One of the most important changes in American higher education over the last 30 years has been the gradual shrinking of the old arts and sciences core of undergraduate education and the expansion of occupational and professional programs. Occupational fields have accounted for approximately 60% of bachelors' degrees in recent years, up from 45% in the 1960s, and hundreds of institutions now award 80% or more of their degrees in these fields"* (p. 1).
6. In responding to a question about the ability of the U.S. to meet President Obama's college completion goals, Thomas Bailey, Director of the Community College Research Center commented that: *"[C]ommunity colleges must play a disproportionate role in any significant increase in postsecondary attainment ... According to data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), which tracked students for eight years after their scheduled entry into a community college, about 15 percent of community college entrants left with between 30 and 59 credits ... [L]ow-income students, first-generation college students, immigrants, and minorities, especially Latinos, are over-represented in community colleges, and any increase in college attainment will have to involve these groups."* (Bailey, 2011, pp. 5–6).

7. Although all students with transfer intentions do not go on to earn a four-year degree, the desire of most new, first-time, community college students to earn a four-year degree has never wavered significantly in the published history of transfer. Brint and Karabel (1989, pp. 43, 99, 116) quote student survey results from a variety of researchers all of which report student intentions as primarily directed toward transfer and the baccalaureate degree.

8. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) estimates that virtually all the growth in the number of high school graduates between now and 2014-15 will be among Latinos (54 percent growth), Asian American/Pacific Islanders (32 percent), American Indians (7 percent) and African Americans (3 percent). (See Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008.)

9. For example, 51 percent of all Latino undergraduates and 54 percent of all American Indian undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012).

10. In eight of the last 10 years, tuition and fees at four-year institutions, public and private, have exceeded tuition and fee increases at community colleges. In two of those years (1999–2000, 2000–01), community college tuition and fees declined (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009).

11. But the transfer penalty — the presumed difference in bachelor's attainment rates between students who begin at a community college and those who begin at a four-year institution — is disputed empirical ground. What appears to be unassailable is the finding that students who begin at a community college have less chance of earning a baccalaureate degree compared to students who begin at a four-year institution. (For a review of this literature, see Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005.) This at least partially implicates the effectiveness of the transfer process. Where the research diverges, however, is in identifying differences in the attainment rates for community college students who have successfully transferred to a four-year institution compared to "native" students who have achieved junior status (rising juniors). In this latter respect, our research indicates the presence of the transfer penalty. That is, community college students who successfully transferred to a four-year institution were, nonetheless, less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree compared to rising juniors, although we acknowledge that the observed gap would have decreased if the student cohort had been followed for a longer period of time. Others, however, have found opposite effects. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) reported that transfer students attending flagship universities were

7 to 10 percent more likely to earn a four-year degree compared to rising juniors and 15 to 18 percent more likely at state universities. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that the degree completion gap between community college and four-year institution students becomes a relatively trivial matter if community college students successfully transfer to a four-year college. A more recent study found no difference in baccalaureate degree attainment rates presumably because the sample included more college-aged students who were observed for an extra two years (Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011). The findings from this report will not resolve the issue of whether a transfer penalty exists, but it highlights the need for future research to consider longer observation periods given the general tendency of community college students to take more time to complete their educational goals.

12. Even in regions where transfer is more robust, there is evidence that the students who successfully transition to a four-year institution are more likely to come from middle- or upper-income groups. This is a paradox for community colleges whose preeminent goal is to provide access to individuals whose backgrounds have been largely ignored in traditional higher education institutions, while also pointing to the importance of academic guidance. See Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006.

13. Carey and Aldeman (2008) concluded that: "... higher education has surprisingly few incentives to provide an affordable, high quality education to all students. Funding is based on how many students enroll, not how many graduate ... If these incentives don't change, colleges won't change either" (p. 1).

14. From Carey and Aldeman (2008): "*The 1990 Student-Right-to-Know Act required all colleges and universities to report the percentage of first-time, full-time students who graduate within 150 percent of the expected time: three years for students entering a two-year institution and six years for students who begin at a four-year institution. While federal graduation rates provide a solid foundation for accountability, the measures have limitations. Students who transfer to another college are counted as non-graduates in the same way as students who drop out entirely. Students who begin on a part-time basis or transfer into an institution aren't counted in the numerator or denominator of the graduation rate equation. Some students take longer than 150 percent of the allocated time to graduate, and the federal measures don't include important student characteristics like Pell Grant status or field of study*" (p. 8).

15. In its final report, the Committee on Measures of Student Success recognizes the need to make explicit the transfer-preparing function of community colleges: *"The Department [of Education] should calculate an institutional graduation rate that includes both students who graduate and those who subsequently enroll in another institution for which the prior institution provides substantial preparation"* (Committee on Measures of Student Success, 2011, December).
16. This generates a curious and pernicious outcome for prospective community college transfer students. Given that there is no incentive for four-year institutions to distinguish between transfers from community colleges or other four-year institutions, most institutions treat each type of applicant similarly, despite the fact that the community college student *must* transfer to have any chance to earn the baccalaureate degree. Even in states where there exist large numbers of community colleges, few mandate, for example, that public four-year institutions provide priority admission to community college applicants over four-year institution transfer applicants, even though such a policy has proven effective in creating a pool of well-prepared community college applicants in California and Florida.
17. Record keeping is not, strictly speaking, accountability. The way in which data are used in assessing an institution's productivity is also required.
18. Carey and Aldeman (2008) concluded that: *"When it comes to translating accountability data into strong incentives that influence institutional behavior, few states follow through..."* (p. 2).
19. Report available at <http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/admission-completion/community-colleges>.
20. Even experienced educators at two- and four-year institutions who are committed to streamlining the transfer process discover that numerous programmatic offerings makes coordination across two different institutions and systems difficult to implement and manage.
21. In a case study analysis of 14 public and private two-year colleges, researchers Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) concluded that: *"Community colleges offer many program options and give students the autonomy to steer their own routes through the educational process. This can be liberating for some, but overwhelming for others"* (p. 115).
22. Rosenbaum et al. (2006): *"...though community colleges are usually blamed for posing barriers to students, we have found just the opposite—these colleges offer many options, but they do not facilitate their attainment. Their efforts to create boundless opportunity are laudable, but climbing to the top of the educational ladder should not be blindly adopted as the only goal."* (p. 118).
23. Adelman (2005, 2006) identified other behaviors that promoted academic momentum, including delaying transfer until a student has achieved junior standing, encouraging explicit transfer aspirations, enrolling in college full-time, and completing English composition.
24. *"Unlike young, full-time students, nontraditional students often have rigid outside commitments and crises that impinge on their studies, and some don't know how to balance school with other demands"* (Medsker, 1960, p. 127).
25. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2011): *"...from 1999 to 2009 tuition increases outpaced median family income in states where community colleges are most critical to college opportunity and to achieving a baccalaureate degree"* (p. 3).
26. By comparison, the budget for public four-year institutions was \$21,447 and private four-year \$42,224 (College Board, 2011).
27. Orozco and Mayo (2010) also report that community colleges students receive less institutional grant aid as well, compared to four-year institution students (24 percent versus 41 percent). But this may have more to do with the limited amount of financial aid generally available at community colleges (p. 6).
28. Moreover, the general view that community colleges are more affordable because students live at home is in question. Orozco and Mayo (2010) report that two-thirds of all students who attend community colleges live off campus and not with their parents. It is not clear, however, how much of this percentage includes adult students who are not seeking transfer and a baccalaureate degree.
29. There are exceptions, of course, especially in states where community colleges are linked to a statewide higher education authority (e.g., Minnesota); serve as branch campuses for a four-year institution system (e.g., Wisconsin); or are statutorily required to admit transfer students (e.g., California, Florida).

## The Promise of the Transfer Pathway

30. In a 2010 report profiling promising policies in articulation and transfer, David Longanecker, director of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), remarked: *“Will this issue ever go away? Since substantial numbers of students began moving from one institution to another nearly a half century ago, particularly from community colleges to four-year colleges, transfer and articulation practices have been ‘an issue.’ Students who began in community colleges, often with the intent of saving time and money, frequently found that the transfer track took longer and cost more than if they had just begun at a four-year institution”* (WICHE, 2010, p. ii).

31. In their extensive literature review, Roksa and Keith (2008), concluded that articulation policies *“could encourage students to transfer, [but] the main purpose of [these policies] is to ease the process for students who have already decided to transfer”* (p. 237).

32. How widespread is this belief among community college leaders and educators? It is difficult to document since it is doubtful that few would go on record with a deliberate accusation that four-year institutions discriminate against their students. A recently survey of statewide community college leaders, in which they were asked *“Due to the inability of four-year institutions to meet the demand of growing transfer numbers, some or all of my state’s public flagship universities [regional public universities] have raised admissions standards to limit transfers,”* over two-thirds disagreed. And while some of the leaders in states with the largest and most active transfer programs agreed with the statement (California, Florida, New York, Maryland), almost an equal number disagreed (Illinois, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas). (See Katsinas, D’Amico, & Friedel, 2011.)







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