EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transfer: An Indispensable Part of the Community College Mission

In policy conversations related to human capital development and not-so-veiled notions of institutional effectiveness, the current focus is squarely on graduation. While graduation is important to community colleges and their students, there is a concern among some that as colleges are becoming increasingly responsible for one outcome, other functions, among them the transfer function, are becoming less visible.

This brief examines transfer as a core function of community colleges. I examine multiple facets of transfer, including its role as a pathway to the bachelor’s degree, the mobility of credits between institutions, and current and future challenges associated with transfer.

Community colleges play a substantial role in bachelor’s degree attainment. Consider these facts: 28% of bachelor’s degree earners started at a community college and 47% took at least one course at a community college. While the community college student body is frequently depicted as needing large amounts of remediation, it is worth noting that these colleges also serve as a starting point for academically advanced students aspiring to transfer. It is therefore no surprise to learn that students who start at a community college and transfer are as successful as are native students (i.e., students who start at the receiving institution).

However, community college transfer students are even more successful when the receiving institutions focus on transfer student success. Research has shown that 82% earned a bachelor’s degree in the period observed when a 4-year receiving institution accepted all of a community college student’s credits, and 42% earned that degree when the institution accepted only some of their credits. Research has demonstrated the importance of seven elements of articulation and transfer policies needed to promote credit retention upon transfer. Over the past decade, the number of states who have included these elements in their policies has increased. While these policies can establish and reinforce practices to ease the transfer of credit, institutional activity related to transfer students is an area where research has noted the need for more work to increase graduation.

Credit mobility is not unique to community college students. Institutions from other sectors of higher education also report transfer rates. In some instances, their transfer rates are higher than those of community colleges. Whereas not all of the costs to the student—and to the public through related student aid programs—associated with transfer can be determined, it is possible to estimate the savings accrued to those students who start at a community college. For the nine cohorts examined in this brief, an estimated $22 billion was saved by students who started at a community college and transferred to a 4-year institution.

There are enduring challenges with transfer. The nonlinear paths students take to traditional credential attainment—through activities such as swirling, free courses, massive open online courses, and prior learning credit—suggest that a traditional model of student progression may no longer be appropriate. From an institutional accountability perspective, the primary concern that remains is who to count in the numerator and denominator of transfer rate calculations.

As we move increasingly to postcompletion measures of institutional and program effectiveness, institutional leaders and the community being served face some tough questions, including but not limited to these three:

1. Should an institution that provides just the last few credits before earning a degree be considered the institution of record for the student’s ultimate “success”?

2. What data are needed from a partner institution that wishes to provide baccalaureate options to community college students?

3. Do institutions offering only sub-baccalaureate credentials make the decision to offer bachelor’s degrees to alleviate the barriers associated with transfer?

As the student success conversation moves forward, it is worth remembering that transfer is just one of the many necessary functions of the community college.