

Community College Transfer

Preparing students to transfer to a university and earn a bachelor’s degree has long been a primary mission of community colleges. Four of every five entering community college students seek to transfer and earn at least a bachelor’s degree—a credential that is increasingly needed to secure a good job with family-sustaining wages. Students may opt for this transfer pathway to a bachelor’s degree because community colleges are generally more affordable and closer to home than four-year colleges.

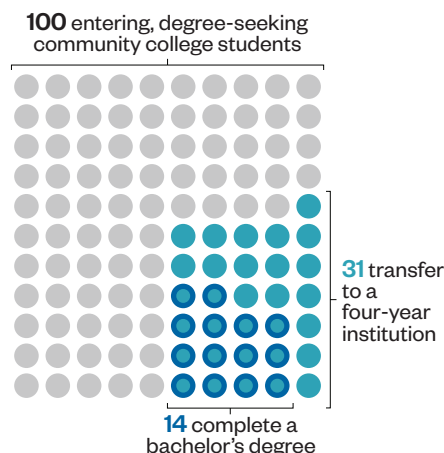
WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

Only a small fraction of community college students who intend to transfer make it through to a bachelor’s degree.

- Of 100 entering, degree-seeking community college students, about 31 will transfer to a four-year institution, and only about 14 will complete a bachelor’s degree.¹
- White students are twice as likely to transfer as Black and Latinx students. Similarly, higher-income students are twice as likely to transfer as lower-income students.²

The paths to successfully transfer in a chosen major are unclear, with the result that too many community college students who do transfer lose credits and risk running out of financial aid benefits before earning a degree.

- Despite the popular conception that transfer students spend two years at a community college plus two years at a four-year college, there is little uniformity in transfer patterns: Only 8% of successful community college transfer students follow the “2+2” sequence. Many students transfer multiple times, change colleges at varying points along their pathway, and complete after six years or longer.³
- Community colleges struggle to help students reach early academic milestones such as passing college-level English or math, completing 24 or more college credits, and earning an associate degree for transfer. Students who meet such milestones are substantially more likely to transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree, and this is especially the case for Black and Hispanic students.⁴
- Information on transfer websites is notoriously difficult to navigate,⁵ and articulation agreements with four-year colleges are often complex and hard to interpret.⁶
- Students are often surprised to discover that their community college credits are not accepted at their four-year transfer institution, or that the credits are accepted but not applied to the bachelor’s degree requirements in their chosen major. Students lose an estimated 43% of their credits when they transfer.⁷



- Transfer credit loss decreases students' chances of completing a bachelor's degree, undercuts the benefits of financial aid, and adds extra time and cost for students who do complete a bachelor's degree.^{8 9}
- A survey of 90,000 transfer-aspiring community college students found that half reported never utilizing transfer advising.¹⁰

Transfer students may face unreceptive university policies and cultures, yet perform well academically after transferring.

- Community college students who transfer to four-year institutions may encounter unsupportive campus policies and norms and faculty/staff misperceptions of community colleges.¹¹
- Four-year colleges sometimes exclude transfer students from institutional aid.¹²
- Unwelcoming transfer cultures can intersect with challenging campus racial climates, creating further barriers for transfer students of color.¹³
- Despite these challenges, research shows that transfer students perform as well or better than freshman admits.^{14 15}

Community colleges and universities with strong partnerships can improve transfer outcomes.

- Despite low outcomes nationally, some community college-university partnerships have achieved stronger transfer outcomes.^{16 17}
- Strong community college-university transfer partnerships create major-specific program maps and have regular, reliable processes for updating and improving program maps across institutions.¹⁸
- Another important element at the community college is student advising that clearly articulates students' transfer options and helps them determine, as early as possible, their field of interest, major, and preferred transfer destination.
- Four-year colleges with stronger transfer outcomes commit dedicated personnel, structures, and resources for transfer students and clearly communicate essential information to prospective transfer students.¹⁹

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY

- Federal policy should better reflect the highly mobile nature of student enrollment across multiple postsecondary institutions. Federal investments related to community colleges should prioritize incentives for postsecondary institutions and states to improve credit transfer and transfer student outcomes.
- To provide a fuller view of student outcomes as students transfer across institutions, policymakers should consider measures—such the recently reintroduced College Transparency Act²⁰—to lift the ban on a federal student-level data system.

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Endnotes

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