

New Report Outlines Three Essential Strategies to Improve Success of Community College Students Aiming to Earn a Bachelor's Degree

Institutions Across the Country have Implemented Innovative Strategies to Boost Transfer Outcomes for Community College Students, Including Low-Income, Older, Black, and Hispanic Students

Washington, D.C. – A new report released today provides specific recommendations to improve the nation's failing transfer system, citing examples of success from across the country. The [Transfer Playbook](#), released by the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, outlines three primary strategies that could significantly increase the current bachelor's attainment rate for students who begin their higher education at a community college.

Despite surveys indicating that nearly 80% of community college students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, Aspen and CCRC's Tracking Transfer report found that nationally, only 33% of community college students transfer to a four-year institution, and only 16% of community college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college.

"Most community college entrants aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, but fewer than one in five are successful," said Josh Wyner, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. "If our nation is serious about economic mobility and developing the talent needed for our economy and many other endeavors, we have to do more than make incremental changes. If the practices outlined in this playbook were adopted at scale, colleges could double the number of community college students who successfully transfer and earn bachelor's degrees.

The top 10% of institutions achieved transfer rates of 52% and bachelor's degree completion rates among transfer students of 61% (compared to 33% and 48% nationally). If all institutions achieved this level of transfer success, they could double the bachelor's attainment rate of community college students from 16% to 32%, resulting in more than 100,000 additional bachelor's degree holders each year.

By analyzing data and interviewing college leaders, administrators, practitioners, and students, the authors found exceptional institutions that were achieving strong transfer outcomes, including for students who've been historically left out of higher education opportunity. The [Playbook outlines three essential strategies](#) that support transfer success:

- Prioritizing Transfer at the Executive Level to Achieve Sustainable Success at Scale
- Aligning Program Pathways and High-Quality Instruction to Promote Timely Bachelor's Completion within a Major
- Tailoring Transfer Advising and Nonacademic Supports to Foster Trust and Engagement

“The exemplary institutions we studied have made clear that excellence in transfer and bachelor's attainment is possible in any context – rural and urban settings; small and large institutions,” said Tania LaViolet, lead author of the report and Director of Research and Innovation at the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “This report gives other institutions and states specific, actionable steps they can take to ensure transfer pathways better serve students and ultimately strengthen the lives of individuals and families, as well as states and our country.”

Nearly 40% of the nation's undergraduate students are enrolled in community colleges, with nearly three-quarters of community college students coming from families in the lower half of the income distribution. Most of these students enter community college to earn a bachelor's degree, with the ultimate goal of securing a job that will support themselves and their families. For good reason: The Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce projects that 66% of “good jobs” (jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage) will require a bachelor's degree by 2031, up from 59% in 2021.

The report includes case studies reflecting the exceptional practices of institutions across the country that have led to transfer success, including:

- The dual admission ADVANCE program at George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College, a new kind of student guarantee aligned to meeting regional workforce needs
- Virginia Commonwealth University's partnership with two community colleges to strengthen both humanities and science pathways
- Arizona Western College's and Northern Arizona University's effort to activate transfer students' success as a core strategy to increase bachelor's attainment in their two-county region dramatically
- John Jay College's Justice Academy (part of New York's CUNY system) that helps every student see themselves as a potential bachelor's student by making transfer the default choice through auto-enrollment
- East Carolina University's program for transfer students that is uniquely designed to help working adults earn bachelor's degrees in x, y, and other fields
- Tallahassee State College's intensive efforts to get students on transfer pathways and complete essential gateway courses with embedded supports
- Imperial Valley College's efforts to ensure that students in high schools start on integrated transfer pathways that lead to bachelor's degrees at San Diego State University

“The colleges highlighted in the Playbook demonstrate what is possible for achieving transfer success,” said John Fink, Senior Research Associate and Program Lead at CCRC. “While our transfer system is failing students as a whole, these institutions have implemented innovative practices and are producing

exceptionally strong student outcomes. They are model transfer partnerships for others across the country.”

The Transfer Playbook report can be found here: ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-second-edition.html

The Tracking Transfer report (2024) can be found here: <https://bit.ly/tracking-transfer>

State-by-state data can be found here: <https://bit.ly/4beRfei>

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The **Community College Research Center**, Teachers College, Columbia University, studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations.

The **Aspen Institute College Excellence Program** aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes, especially for the growing population of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds on American campuses. For more information, visit higher.aspeninstitute.org.