

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges

Strategies for Improving Community
College Transfer-In and Bachelor's Degree
Completion in the Private Sector

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COVID-19 and its aftermath highlight the urgency for innovation around community college to independent college transfer. The pandemic is expected to produce an increase in community college enrollment due to students' inability to safely travel further from home and families' financial situations in the current recession. Meanwhile, independent colleges facing declines in fall enrollment will need to turn to local transfer students as a source of much-needed tuition revenue. Yet, the path from community college to four-year institution is often fraught with obstacles. Indeed, while four out of five community college students plan to eventually earn a bachelor's degree, shockingly few are able to transfer-in and graduate from four-year institutions. As most initiatives to increase transfer success have focused on the public sector, such opportunities in the private sector remain underutilized and understudied.

Especially in the current environment, streamlining the transfer pathway from public two-year and private four-year institutions will be critical both for the financial health of independent colleges and for the success of the increasing number of community college students pursuing a four-year degree. "[Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges: Strategies for Improving Community College Transfer-In and Bachelor's Degree Completion in the Private Sector](#)" examines how independent colleges can better serve community college transfer students, arguing that there are numerous opportunities for alignment between the two sectors and that groups of colleges working together are especially well-positioned to collaboratively serve these transfer aspirants. It presents strategies to improve transfer access and success in three main arenas:

- ***Academic dimension of transfer.*** These strategies confront the problem of credit loss and excess credit, the most prominent barriers to transfer students' bachelor's degree completion. Academic policies in particular can benefit from consortial, regional, and statewide action by independent colleges as this model of practice can deliver credit transfer at scale and leverage regional transfer trends in which transfer students are likely to remain in the same state and region as their community college. To this end, we highlight examples of consortial action in North Carolina, Illinois, California, Washington, New Jersey, and Texas. The three policies we highlight are:
 - *Articulation agreements*, shared contracts between community colleges and independent colleges, which guarantee the block transfer of earned coursework and junior-level status.
 - *Major-specific pathways*, guides shared early in two-year students' education, which clearly map course requirements, sequences, and prerequisites for completing the degree within a specific field of study.
 - *Transfer portals*, online tools that assist student and institution alike, which leverage information from articulation agreements and major-specific pathways to automate the transfer of bundled coursework in a transparent fashion.

- ***Cultural dimension of transfer.*** These strategies alleviate transfer shock, the disorientation that can occur when two-year students transition to four-year schools. Creating a welcoming environment that serves community college transfer students' specific needs is fundamental to help them stay on the path to graduation. We include examples of independent colleges that have put the following into practice:
 - *Tailored orientation programming* for transfer students, rather than pared down versions of the first-year orientation, which focus on developing appropriate first semester schedules based off students' majors and educational goals and are delivered in formats that promote personalization and community-building.
 - *Decreased enrollment barriers* such as required noncredit developmental coursework and delayed course registration, which greatly stall community college transfer students' progression to the bachelor's degree.
 - *Dedicated campus space*, an on-campus "one-stop service center" that offers a home-base for transfers (many of whom might need an area to work while commuting to campus) and provides a sense of community among transfer cohorts.

- ***Financial dimension of transfer.*** These strategies address the increased costs faced by students transferring from a two-year institution. While independent colleges' financial strategies will be greatly shaped by the specific academic strategies they choose to incorporate as they develop their community college transfer initiatives, we include two promising practices:
 - *Dedicated financial aid* for community college transfers, which will help increase the recruitment and graduation rates of these students in the private sector.
 - *Fee reduction* of high-cost, non-academic elements of independent college programming, such as required on-campus housing or mandatory meal plans, in order to ease the financial burden for students coming from community colleges.

The report concludes with specific recommendations for how the private sector can put into practice the academic, cultural, and financial strategies that promote transfer access and success. We recommend that independent colleges:

- ***Seek academic strategies that strengthen two-year transfer-in.*** We discuss several ways that independent colleges can leverage articulation agreements, major-specific pathways, and transfer portals so community college students understand how their credits will transfer and apply towards degree requirements, recommending that:
 - Independents not currently involved in multi-institutional agreements conduct research on how neighboring private and public four-year institutions and community colleges are facilitating the block transfer of core curriculum and pre-requisites for the major.

- Independents form taskforces with faculty and administrators to investigate available opportunities, interviewing prospective and current students as well as alumni who began their education at two-year institutions.
 - Independents without regional multi-institutional transfer contracts convene members of their independent consortia and begin building consortial, regional, or statewide articulation agreements.
 - Independents already participating in consortia- or state-level academic transfer policies improve their academic transfer strategies by building major-specific pathways and/or transfer portals.
 - All independents—both those beginning to implement their first academic transfer practices that specifically target community college students and those more seasoned in welcoming these students to their campus—ensure that their policies involve continual recalibration and development.
- ***Consider financial implications for community college transfer.*** Because the strategies we present come with a price tag, we discuss how independent colleges can think through how strengthening community college transfer pathways will affect their finances. Schools should consider that:
 - The financial implications of this investment are complex, and institutions will need to weigh their unique circumstances to strike a delicate balance between attracting enough families that can pay tuition and providing appropriate supports to the right number and type of students with financial and other needs, particularly since need-based institutional aid would need to be allocated for only two years, rather than the typical four, if academic credit is effectively applied towards baccalaureate requirements.
 - While the anticipated costs are usually top of mind for stakeholders involved in this process, the potential benefits from developing this pathway for many institutions may be understated and worth further exploring; for example, in the context of an effective consortium-wide articulation agreement, community college transfer students would quickly add to upper-level courses and drive down the cost per student to run those classes, translating into substantial financial aid savings for some institutions.
 - A consortial approach by independent colleges can work to both secure state financial aid funding for the sector as well as incentivize community colleges to invest in support services for aspirational transfers by creating the scale needed to justify directing resources toward the community to independent college pathway.
 - ***Collect data to enable steady evaluation of transfer initiatives.*** In order to evaluate institutional transfer initiatives, both community colleges and independent colleges must proactively collect data on their transfer activities and their transfer student outcomes. Independent colleges should consider:

- Developing “cradle through career” student metrics, deploying both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, which would allow institutions to alter and adjust their transfer interventions to improve student success.
- Tracking community college transfers’ recruitment statistics, application completions, financial aid awards, credit transfer figures, persistence rates, and bachelor’s degree completions, ideally broken down by student subgroups such as ethnicity and income-level and available to be compared to that of native students.
- ***Create a transfer-centric (not receptive) campus culture.*** Truly embracing a transfer-centric campus culture requires buy-in from faculty, offices of academic affairs, deans, offices of student life, registrars, offices of financial aid, among other key stakeholders at the independent college. To this end, we recommend:
 - Faculty championship of two-year transfer students, which is critical for the success of institutional community college transfer strategies.
 - Internal educational campaigns if faculty buy-in is lacking, which show how community college transfer students can succeed in upper-level courses and contribute to an improved learning experience for all students.
 - Regular exchanges between two- and four-year faculty to observe each other’s courses and share syllabi, readings, and assignments.
 - Direct collaboration between two- and four-year faculty, such as through the development of major-specific pathways, to bridge trust between sectors.
 - Relationship building at administrative ranks between community and independent leadership, as clear direction from the top can mitigate the internal pushback often associated with large, structural changes within institutions.

The report ends with an appendix of practical guides, actionable playbooks, and articulation agreements that readers can utilize for building transfer pathways from community colleges to independent colleges.