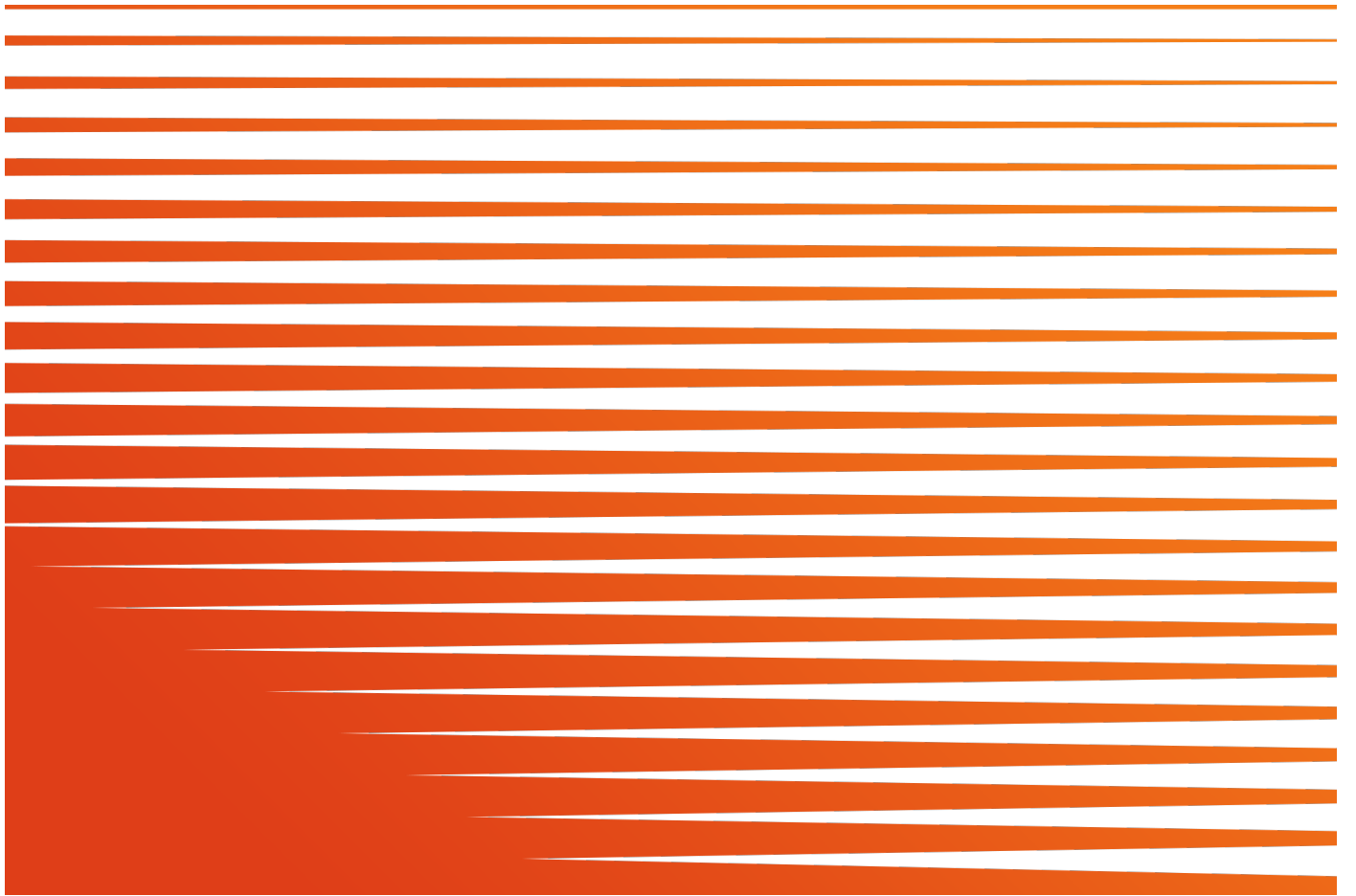


Right in Your Backyard

Expanding Local Community College Transfer Pathways to High-Graduation-Rate Institutions

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Introduction

Each year, our country’s most selective four-year institutions invest significant resources to recruit talented high school students from across the country. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, admissions representatives traveled far and wide to convince these prospective students that the academic rigor, amenities, and opportunities at their institution are unparalleled. These students, mostly affluent and white, contemplate admission offers and consider moves to new locales to pursue their postsecondary plans. Yet, many of these selective institutions are overlooking a talented and diverse pool of students in their own backyard: transfer students from local community colleges.

Nationally, the pool of talented community college students is vast. Each year, more than 100,000 community college students earn induction into Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society for community college students with grade point averages (GPAs) above 3.50.¹ And, each year, more than 50,000 lower-income community college students nationwide do not transfer despite having a 3.50 GPA or higher; 15,000 of these students have a 3.70 GPA or higher.² These students, should they successfully transfer to a selective, four-year institution, are more likely to graduate than students who enter these schools as freshman.³

Yet, despite comprising nearly half of all students who earn a bachelor’s degree, community college transfer students make up only 10 percent of entering undergraduate students at “highly competitive institutions,” and just five percent of entering undergraduate students at the “most competitive” institutions.⁴ These disparities are more pronounced at private institutions than public institutions, partly due to transfer-friendly state policies and the preferences of soon-to-be high school graduates and community college students to attend college near their home, preferences likely intensified by the financial and health impacts of COVID-19.⁵ Selective colleges—especially private ones—looking to enroll more community college transfers, therefore, should recruit students from their local areas.

In this issue brief, we set out to answer the following question: What is the supply of qualified community college students in the local area of our nation’s high-graduation-rate colleges and universities? We define “high-graduation-rate” as those 334 public and private, not-for-profit colleges and universities with six-year graduation rates consistently above 70 percent. We also

¹ “Phi Theta Kappa Celebrates 1,081 Chapters for Outstanding Growth,” February 17, 2021, *Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society*, <https://ptk.org/news/2021/02/17/phi-theta-kappa-celebrates-1081-chapters-for-outstanding-growth/>.

² Tania Lavoilet, Benjamin Fresquez, McKenzie Maxson, and Josh Wyner, “The Talent Blind Spot,” *The Aspen Institute*, June 2018, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/the-talent-blind-spot/>.

³ “Interview with Phi Theta Kappa President and CEO,” *Columbia School of General Studies*, October 19, 2020, <https://gs.columbia.edu/news/interview-phi-theta-kappa-president-and-ceo>.

⁴ “Ready to Succeed: Community College Transfer Students at Four-Year Institutions,” *AAC&U News*, January/February 2019 <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/2019/february/facts-figures>.

⁵ Meagan Wilson, Julia Karon, and Rayane Alamuddin, “Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges,” *Ithaka S+R*, June 11, 2020, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/transfer-pathways-to-independent-colleges/>; “The Impact of COVID-19 on College Decision Making,” Brian Communications, Fall 2020, <https://www.briancom.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Full-Report-The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-College-Decision-Making.pdf>; Jillian Jorgenson, “Coronavirus Prompts Some Students to Attend Colleges Closer to Home,” *Spectrum News New York*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2020/05/29/coronavirus-prompts-some-students-to-attend-colleges-closer-to-home>.

provide examples of two high-graduation-rate colleges, both privates, that have developed partnerships with their local community colleges to expand transfer enrollment to their campuses. These examples demonstrate the different forms these partnerships can take depending on the needs of both the two- and four-year colleges and their students. They serve as a model for other private institutions that aim to expand transfer pipelines, diversity student enrollment, and improve student outcomes.

What is the supply of transfer-ready community college students in the local area of our nation’s high-graduation-rate colleges and universities?

To answer this question, we first had to make a few assumptions:

- *Defining the “transfer-ready” students at each community college:* We define “transfer-ready” using recent research that suggests as many as 30 percent of community college students, nationwide, have GPAs above 3.7, which suggests they have the academic experiences and skills to be successful at a four-year institution. To determine the number of transfer-ready students at each community college, we multiply the number of full- and part-time students enrolled in the college’s 2019 entering cohort by 30 percent.⁶
- *Defining the “local area” for each high-graduation-rate institution:* We define the “local area” as the 50 mile “as the crow flies” radius surrounding each high-graduation rate institution. We established this area using research that suggests that the median distance traveled for students attending college ranges between eight miles, for community college students, and 46 miles, for private, four-year colleges and universities.⁷ This research also finds that most students (57 percent) who attend four-year, public colleges enroll within 50 miles of their home. To provide more nuance to our estimates, we also calculate the supply of transfer-ready community college students within a 100 mile radius, which is likely at the high end of the distance community college transfer students are willing to travel. Because some high-graduation-rate institutions do not have a single community college within the 50 mile radius, we also calculate the supply of students for each of the four closest community colleges.

In this issue brief, we only report results for the 251 private four-year institutions, but the data for all 334 high-graduation-rate institutions, including publics, is available to download as an Excel file here, <https://sr.ithaka.org/ithakasr-transfer-pathways-community-colleges-to-high-graduation-rate-institutions-071621/> (we explain the data in more detail at the end of the issue brief). Our analysis shows that of these 251 private institutions, 244 have at least 500 transfer-ready community college students enrolled within a 50-mile radius, and 137 have at least 5,000

⁶ We use data from the Columbia University Community College Research Center to classify institutions as two-year institutions if the predominant degree offered is an associate’s degree. See more: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/shifting-sectors-community-colleges-undercounting.html>.

⁷ Nicholas Hillman and Taylor Weichman, “Education Deserts: The Continued Significance of “Place” in the Twenty-First Century,” 2016, <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Education-Deserts-The-Continued-Significance-of-Place-in-the-Twenty-First-Century.pdf>.

transfer-ready students enrolled nearby. For all but 15 of these 251 of these institutions, the pool of transfer-ready students comprises at least 30 percent of current incoming enrollment.

The supply of students is highly dependent on the population density of the region. For instance, private high-graduation-rate institutions in the Los Angeles (n=12) and New York City (n=11) regions have a supply of between 24,000 and 60,000 transfer-ready community college students due to the sheer number of community colleges in those areas. Three private institutions have no community college students within 50 miles, but all 251 institutions have at least one community college within 100 miles. Allegheny College, for instance, is 58 miles from its two closest community colleges, Jamestown Community College and Butler County Community College, which together enrolled 772 transfer-ready students in 2019.

In many cases, a single community college is the closest community college to multiple private institutions. For instance, in Pennsylvania, Harrisburg Area Community College has more than 1,700 transfer-ready students enrolled each year and is the closest community college for six private, four-year institutions: Bucknell University, Dickinson College, Elizabethtown College, Lebanon Valley College, Messiah College, and Susquehanna University.⁸ Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts enrolls more than 1,000 transfer-ready students each year and is the closest community college for four private institutions: Emerson College, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Tufts University. This situation—where two or more high-graduation-rate colleges share a single proximate community college—is not uncommon, and suggests there may be value in multi-institutional collaborations to expand local community college transfer pipelines. A collaborative, or “consortial,” approach amongst four-year institutions has numerous benefits, including reducing the administrative burden felt by the community college, scaling the number of students that can be served in a geographic region, and bolstering the case for philanthropic or state aid to support efforts.⁹

For this group of 251 institutions, the closest community colleges are between half a mile and nearly 58 miles away. The average distance to the closest community college is 10 miles. In fact, there are 18 institutions for which the closest community college is less than two miles away. Some of these 18 institutions have established local transfer pathways, like Marquette University, which recently announced a partnership with Wisconsin’s 16 technical colleges.¹⁰ Others can likely do more.

In many cases, one strong local community college partnership is all that is needed to make meaningful change, and in the examples that follow, we outline compelling examples of partnerships between private four-year institutions and their local community college.

⁸ Harrisburg Area Community College is also the closest community college to Penn State’s University Park Campus.

⁹ Meagan Wilson, Julia Karon, and Rayane Alamuddin, “Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges,” *Ithaka S+R*, June 11, 2020, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/transfer-pathways-to-independent-colleges/>.

¹⁰ “Marquette participates in historic transfer agreement with technical colleges,” *Marquette Today*, July 8, 2020, <https://today.marquette.edu/2020/07/marquette-participates-in-historic-transfer-agreement-with-technical-colleges/>.

Examples of Local Transfer Partnerships

Many two- and four-year colleges and universities establish transfer pathways through articulation agreements, formal compacts that define course equivalencies between a set of institutions and ensure that students' credits seamlessly transfer from one institution to the other. These course equivalencies ideally help students plan their coursework in preparation for transfer, avoid credit loss or the inefficient application of credit upon transfer, and improve students' likelihood of graduating on-time.

Articulation agreements are a good first step towards improving transfer pathways, but to maximize transfer student success, participating institutions must also deepen and sustain their collaboration through activities such as responsive advising structures, coherent program maps, shared student success goals, and continuous development.¹¹ To achieve these deeper and more sustained collaborations, some high-graduation-rate institutions are establishing dual admissions or guaranteed admissions programs with one or more local community colleges. In a dual admissions program, the community college student is admitted to both the community college and the four-year institution at the same time, and completes their initial coursework at the community college, before finishing their coursework at the four-year institution. In a guaranteed admissions program, the student is admitted to the community college, with a guarantee of admission to the four-year institution upon completion of program requirements.

Dual and guaranteed admissions have a host of benefits, including: streamlining course transfer or eliminating the need for “transfer” altogether; helping community college students assimilate into the four-year campus community; giving community college students access to the resources of the four-year college throughout their college experience; and promoting deeper and sustained collaboration in academic disciplines and student support systems across the two- and four-year partners. Below, we provide two examples of high-graduation-rate, private institutions that have established dual or guaranteed admissions agreements with their local community colleges: **Elizabethtown College** in Pennsylvania and the **University of Dayton** in Ohio.

Elizabethtown College offers a dual admissions program in partnership with the three closest community colleges, Harford Community College (HCC), Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC), and Reading Area Community College (RACC).¹² After completing an associate's degree at HCC, HACC, or RACC, students in the program automatically have full junior standing at Elizabethtown, where they finish their bachelor's degree. The dual admissions program provides comprehensive course equivalency information so students can streamline their coursework and avoid accumulating “fallthrough” credits, transfer credits that do not apply toward their degree.¹³ Dual admissions students can save money and accelerate graduation by

¹¹ “Beyond Articulation Agreements: Five Student-Centered Principles to Improve Transfer, The Aspen Institute,” 2020, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Beyond-Articulation-Agreements_Final.pdf.

¹² “Admissions DUAL Enrollment Programs,” Elizabethtown College, <https://www.etown.edu/offices/registration-records/DUAL-ADMIN-PROG.aspx>.

¹³ “Etown HACC Course Equivalencies,” Elizabethtown College, <https://www.etown.edu/offices/registration-records/transfer/hacc-etown-equivs.aspx>.

taking up to two classes at Elizabethtown while completing their associate's degree, at no additional cost.

Dual admissions smooths the transition between community college and Elizabethtown, especially if students have the opportunity to participate in activities on the four-year campus or benefit from the four-year's support services. While taking classes at HCC, HACC, or RACC, dual admission students have access to Elizabethtown's academic, financial aid and career advising; library resources and other on-campus facilities; and specialized transfer admissions counselors.¹⁴

In 2016, the **University of Dayton** established the UD Sinclair Academy ("Academy") in partnership with Sinclair Community College, the largest community college in Ohio, which offers more than 70 unique pathways from Sinclair associate degrees to Dayton bachelor's degrees.¹⁵ Once enrolled, Sinclair students can opt into an Academy program pathway, which guarantees their admission to Dayton upon completion of their associate degree requirements. In addition to guaranteed admission, Academy students receive a tuition guarantee for their remaining semesters at UD, which helps them graduate on time with less debt.¹⁶ To help relieve the financial burden, UD also waives all fees and offers textbook scholarships for UD Sinclair Academy students. Through the Academy, students planning to transfer have the opportunity to participate in UD student organizations and clubs and have access to both Sinclair and UD academic advisers, athletic facilities, and some extracurricular programs. During the spring 2021 semester, about 250 students were enrolled at both Sinclair and UD.

While not featured here, there are many public, high-graduation-rate institutions that have strong local transfer pathways with guaranteed admissions. For example, the University of Central Florida's *DirectConnect* program offers guaranteed admissions for students who enroll at six community colleges, including the four closest.¹⁷ Similarly, the Virginia Community Colleges Transfer Gateway offers students who meet a minimum GPA guaranteed admissions to more than 30 of Virginia's public colleges and universities, including the four high-graduation-rate institutions in Virginia: the University of Virginia, George Mason University, the College of William and Mary, and James Madison University.¹⁸

¹⁴ "HACC Dual Admissions Program," Elizabethtown College, <https://www.etown.edu/offices/registration-records/Hacc-dual-admin-prog.aspx>.

¹⁵ "UD Sinclair Academy Students," University of Dayton, <https://udayton.edu/academy/index.php>.

¹⁶ Eric Spina, "President Speaks: How to ease transfers between two- and four-year colleges," *HigherEdDive*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/president-speaks-how-to-ease-transfers-between-two-and-four-year-colleges/561952/>.

¹⁷ "Direct Connect to UCF," University of Central Florida, <https://directconnect.ucf.edu/>.

¹⁸ "Transfer Programs," Virginia's Community Colleges, <https://www.vccs.edu/transfer-programs/>.

Conclusion

This issue brief builds on prior research that demonstrates that the pool of talented community college students is vast. Yet, many four-year institutions, especially private non-profits with high graduation rates, enroll relatively few community college transfer students. Pre-pandemic demographic shifts and pandemic-related changes to students' preferences are likely to increase the pressure on selective institutions to expand their enrollment pathways¹⁹ And, to truly serve the public good, selective colleges and universities must further diversify their student populations by seeking out new pipelines for talented and deserving students, especially those right in their backyard.

Our analysis shows the potential of enrolling students from local community colleges. Many high-graduation-rate institutions, especially privates, enroll relatively few community college transfer students at all, and even fewer from community colleges in their immediate vicinity. We demonstrate that the supply of students is there, and these institutions need only meet that supply with requisite demand through robust partnerships with local community colleges. Some institutions already know the benefits of these local partnerships. We hope to see others do the same.

¹⁹ Nathan Grawe, "Demographic Changes Pose Challenges for Higher Education," 2018, <https://econofact.org/demographic-changes-pose-challenges-for-higher-education>.

Appendix: Data

The spreadsheet (download the Excel file here: <https://sr.ithaka.org/ithakasr-transfer-pathways-community-colleges-to-high-graduation-rate-institutions-071621/>) is organized with one row per high-graduation-rate, four-year institution (n=334). The data is organized into three sections:

- **Four-Year Institution Descriptors:** These data provide directory information for the four-year institution, such as IPEDS Unitid, institution name, sector, and location (city/state), along with two key enrollment data points: the total number of undergraduate students enrolled and the most recent Pell share.
- **Aggregate Transfer-Ready Supply:** These data points provide the count of community colleges within both 50 miles and 100 miles “as-the-crow-flies,” along with the total number of transfer-ready students enrolled at those institutions. As explained above, we estimate that the number of transfer-ready students is 30 percent of the total full- and part-time entering cohort.
- **Proximate Community Colleges:** For each four-year institution, we include the four closest community colleges, as well as those colleges’ IPEDS Unitid, institution name, distance (in miles) from the four-year institution, and our estimates of the number of transfer-ready students. Since some institutions do not have four community colleges within either 50 or 100 miles, these data provide additional insights beyond the “aggregate transfer-ready supply.”