



# Playbook for Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts

How to Design and Implement Statewide Pathways  
from Community Colleges to Independent Colleges

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# Executive Summary

Bachelor's degree attainment for community college transfer students is one underutilized but essential pathway for expanding postsecondary access, increasing student success, and closing gaps in higher education attainment. One way to achieve this at scale is through state- and region-level initiatives dedicated to supporting transfer from community colleges to independent (i.e., private, not-for-profit) colleges and universities. The Teagle Foundation and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations' Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts initiative aimed to create such pathways. This playbook, which updates the recommendations featured in the initial playbook released in 2022, draws on the experiences of grantees building pathways in 14 states to design, implement, and sustain a successful statewide transfer initiative. Key steps are outlined below. Additional resources, including other deliverables from Ithaka S+R's mixed methods assessment of the initiative and project documents from some of the current initiatives, are [available](#) on the Ithaka S+R website.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Determine the Initiative's Collective Goals

In setting the initiative's goals, state associations and their partner institutions should:

- Examine the existing context at the regional, state, and institutional levels to find opportunities for transfer policy alignment
- Align goals to increase transfer access and transfer-in bachelor's degree attainment with the priorities and interests of relevant stakeholders
- Develop guiding principles to shape the initiative's planning and implementation

## 2. Establish the Initiative's Infrastructure

To build a successful initiative, state associations and their partner independent colleges need to:

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<sup>1</sup> "Liberal Arts Transfer Pathways," *Ithaka S+R*, <https://sr.ithaka.org/liberal-arts-transfer-pathways/>.

- Garner buy-in from key institutional stakeholders, including leadership, faculty, and staff in community colleges and independent colleges
- Identify thought partners and subject matter experts for added guidance, which may involve engaging with stakeholders from public institutions, system offices, or public departments for higher education
- Decide on project management structures such as project leadership

### 3. Ensure the Initiative's Success and Sustainability

When putting together a successful and sustainable initiative, state associations and their partner independent colleges should:

- Strategically market to potential transfer students, including high school students and transfer counselors at community colleges
- Establish supports for community college transfer students once they reach the four-year campus
- Adjust policies and practices to best serve community college transfer students, including offering robust financial aid packages
- Update discipline-specific transfer pathways as courses and curricula evolve over time
- Leverage relevant technology, such as transfer portals, and establish maintenance protocol to keep their information up to date
- Evaluate the success of the initiative to determine whether goals have been met

# Introduction

One oft-overlooked way to increase bachelor's degree attainment among community college students is to strengthen transfer pathways between two-year and independent (i.e., private, not-for-profit) four-year institutions. Such institutions often provide flexible degree options, personalized supports, and greater efficiency in credit transfer, all of which can help community college students complete a four-year degree. Most offer a liberal arts education, which research has found to be associated with increased well-being and participation in civic life,<sup>2</sup> as well as improved long-term financial outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Institutions also stand to benefit from improvements in their transfer rates. Across the nation, higher education is bracing for an “enrollment cliff,” or a projected long-term decline in the country’s college-going population that will subsequently shrink the pool of traditional-age students that colleges can enroll.<sup>4</sup> To keep enrollment numbers up and stay financially afloat, institutions will need to look beyond first-time-in-college students to recruit more students from alternative sources. Building well-defined transfer pathways with community colleges is a promising way to achieve this goal.

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<sup>2</sup> Carol D. Ryff, “Linking Education in the Arts and Humanities to Life-Long Well-Being and Health,” *The Mellon Foundation*, January 2019, <https://midus.wisc.edu/findings/pdfs/1928.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> “Summary,” Center on Education and the Workforce, 2019, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegeroi/>. For more information on the potential economic benefits of the liberal arts see Daniel Rossman et al., “Measuring a Liberal Education and its Relationship with Labor Market Outcomes: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Ithaca S+R*, September 29, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313872>.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Bauman, “Colleges Were Already Bracing for an ‘Enrollment Cliff.’ Now There Might Be a Second One,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-were-already-bracing-for-an-enrollment-cliff-now-there-might-be-a-second-one>.

Many independent institutions have taken steps to increase enrollment of community college transfer students, such as forming bilateral agreements with local two-year institutions.<sup>5</sup> While building these relationships is a necessary step, pursuing transfer work at the state or consortium level can create impact at scale and move the needle on access and success for community college transfer students at a much faster rate. To do this, a large organizational body such as a state association can align the transfer-related goals of multiple independent institutions and provide the direction and personnel needed to streamline transfer across the state or region for their sector. Consortium-level initiatives can also apply pressure on institutions that are reluctant to make changes to facilitate community college transfer. For example, when a large group of institutions agree to reforms to enhance credit mobility, there is additional pressure on reluctant departments and institutions to accept comparable credits to remain competitive with their peers. These larger initiatives also allow for the development of resources such as websites and portals that may not be financially or logistically feasible at the institution level.

Pursuing initiatives at the consortium level may also be beneficial for community college transfer students. Large-scale initiatives provide more options for students, who can utilize the same transfer pathways for multiple four-year institutions rather than having to customize their coursework for each independent institution they wish to transfer into. Simplifying GPA and other admissions requirements across institutions also makes the transfer process much easier. This is especially true for first-generation and low-income students, who may be less familiar with the complex processes involved in advising and transfer. Standardizing course requirements and making this information more readily available and visible gives community college students important information on the courses that satisfy major and bachelor's degree requirements, which likely decreases credit loss at the point of transfer. This is an important outcome because it has been estimated that up to 43 percent of students' credits are lost during transfer,<sup>6</sup> and lost credit often necessitates

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<sup>5</sup> Meagan Wilson, Julia Karon, and Rayane Alamuddin, "Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges: Strategies for Improving Community College Transfer-In and Bachelor's Degree Completion in the Private Sector," *Ithaka S+R*, June 11, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313368>.

<sup>6</sup> Government Accountability Office, "Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits," August 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-574.pdf>.

repeating completed courses, costing students time, wasting their often-limited financial resources, increasing their debt, and decreasing their likelihood of graduating.<sup>7</sup>

The Teagle Foundation and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations (AVDF) began their initiative in 2020 to create statewide transfer pathways and increase the number of community college transfer students earning bachelor's degrees at institutions that emphasize the liberal arts.<sup>8</sup> To date, 14 states have been awarded implementation grants as part of their participation in the initiative.

This playbook is meant to serve as a guide for independent four-year institutions—and their state or regional associations—seeking to increase community college transfer and completion on a consortial basis and in a manner that can be scaled to all community colleges in their state or region. The initial version of the playbook, published in 2022, drew on the experiences of grantees in the first six states that participated in the Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts initiative: North Carolina, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Ohio. This final version of the playbook is based on the experiences of 14 implementation grantees' states to expand and refine the insights and recommendations presented in the initial playbook: Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington. The grantees are in varying stages of implementation, as noted in Table 1.

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<sup>7</sup> David B. Monaghan and Paul Attewell, "The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37, 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373714521865>.

<sup>8</sup> "Arthur Vining Davis and Teagle Announce 7 New Grants to Create Transfer Pathways for Community College Students," *The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.avdf.org/news/arthur-vining-davis-and-teagle-announce-7-new-grants-to-create-transfer-pathways-for-community-college-students/>.



**Table 1: Implementation Grantees**

State	Managing Association(s)	Number of Independent Institutions Involved	Grant Status and Timeline
Connecticut <sup>†</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE); Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC)	9	Complete
Iowa <sup>§</sup>	Iowa Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (IAICU)	18	In progress, expected completion in 2026
Maine <sup>◊</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)	9	In progress, expected completion in 2025
Massachusetts <sup>†</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE); Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts (AICU Mass)	23	Complete
Michigan <sup>§</sup>	Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities (MICU); Michigan Community College Association (MCCA)	12	Complete
Minnesota <sup>§</sup>	Minnesota Private College Council (MPCC)	12	In progress, expected completion in 2026
New Hampshire <sup>◊</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)	7	In progress, expected completion in 2025
North Carolina <sup>‡</sup>	North Carolina Independent Colleges & Universities (NCICU); Council of Independent Colleges (CIC)	14	Complete
Ohio <sup>§</sup>	Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges (OFIC); Council of Independent Colleges (CIC)	14	In progress, expected completion in 2025
Oregon <sup>§</sup>	Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities	12	In progress, expected completion in 2026
Rhode Island <sup>†</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE); Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in	3	Complete

	Rhode Island (AICU Rhode Island)		
Vermont <sup>‡</sup>	New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)	6	In progress, expected completion in 2025
Virginia <sup>§</sup>	Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (VFIC); Virginia Community College System (VCCS)	13	In progress, expected completion in 2025
Washington <sup>§</sup>	Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW)	9	In progress, expected completion in 2025

‡ Project funded by the Teagle Foundation.

§ Project co-funded by the Teagle Foundation and Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

† Project co-funded by the Teagle Foundation and Davis Educational Foundation.

◇ Project co-funded by the Teagle Foundation, Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, and Davis Educational Foundation.

This playbook is designed to help independent colleges:

1. Engage in collective goal setting for the initiative.
2. Establish an infrastructure to support the initiative.
3. Adopt a strategy for sustaining a successful transfer initiative for the long term.



Both playbooks are accompanied by online resources from participating grantees, as well as other reports and materials produced as part of Ithaka S+R's work on the Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts initiative.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> "Liberal Arts Transfer Pathways," Ithaka S+R, <https://sr.ithaka.org/liberal-arts-transfer-pathways/>.

## Context

The Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts initiative, co-sponsored by the Teagle Foundation and AVDF, provides funds for each participating state to pursue a variety of strategies on a consortial basis to improve and expand transfer between community colleges and independent four-year institutions. The 14 grantees highlighted in this playbook are pursuing one or more of the strategies in Table 2 below. Regardless of which transfer strategies the participating states decided to pursue, each grantee first needed to determine how their goals matched those of individual stakeholders and how they could best tailor their initiative to their state or regional context.

**Table 2. Transfer Strategies and Implementation States**

Strategy	Definition	States
Block transfer	Four-year institutions accept general education or core credits earned at community colleges	Connecticut Massachusetts Michigan Minnesota North Carolina Ohio Rhode Island <sup>10</sup> Washington
Discipline-specific pathways	Allows students to count major-specific credits earned at a community college towards their degree at a four-year institution <sup>11</sup>	Iowa (Biology, Chemistry, History, Psychology, Sociology, English) Michigan (Art, Biology, Communications, Criminal Justice, Psychology) Minnesota (Biology, Chemistry, Communications, English, History, Psychology) North Carolina (Psychology, Sociology) Ohio (Biology, English, Psychology) Oregon (Biology, English, Mathematics, Psychology)

<sup>10</sup> The process of accepting block transfer of general education credits at participating independent colleges largely precedes the work undertaken during the current grants for all states except for Ohio, New Hampshire, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

<sup>11</sup> Connecticut also has 19 available standardized pathways through their Transfer Ticket program; see “Connecticut Guarantee – TAP Pathway Agreement Forms,” *New England Board of Higher Education*, <https://nebhe.org/ct-guarantee-tap-pathway-forms/>.

		Virginia (Chemistry, Environmental Science, History, Sociology, Biology, Communication, English, Political Science, Psychology) Washington (Biology, Psychology)
Transfer Guarantee	Guarantees admission for community college transfer students who meet certain criteria (such as a minimum GPA) to a set of four-year institutions	Connecticut Iowa Maine Massachusetts Minnesota New Hampshire Oregon Rhode Island Vermont
Reverse transfer	Allows students enrolled at four-year institutions to transfer credit back to the community college and earn their associate degree. <sup>12</sup>	Iowa Ohio Oregon

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<sup>12</sup> Studies show that students who pursue reverse transfer are more likely to earn their bachelor's degree. See "Top 5 Things Students Want to Know About Reverse Transfer," *National Student Clearinghouse*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/top-5-things-students-want-to-know-about-reverse-transfer/>; Lexi Anderson, "Reverse Transfer: The path less traveled," *Education Commission of the States*, May 2015, <https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/18/77/11877.pdf>.



# Step 1: Determine the Initiative's Collective Goals

The grantees featured in this playbook have set a variety of short- and long-term goals for their states or regions, but all are focused on strengthening the inter-institutional cooperation between community colleges and independent four-year colleges and universities. They seek to move from individual articulation agreements between institutions to a broader, collaborative culture across the state that positions independent colleges as a visible destination for transfer relative to their public four-year peers. Some goals are more holistic, such as developing relationships between key stakeholders in the state or improving the culture of transfer at participating institutions. Other goals are tactical in nature, whereby project leaders aim to implement a particular transfer strategy, such as statewide pathways in high-demand liberal arts disciplines.

## Examples of Short-Term Goals

- Develop and promote liberal arts transfer opportunities at independent colleges for community college graduates (New England).
- Create a strong framework for transfer advising at both community colleges and independent colleges (North Carolina).
- Design discipline-specific transfer pathways in biology, psychology, and English supported by clear, collaboratively designed articulation agreements, based on the Ohio Department of Higher Education Guaranteed Transfer Pathways for transfer between public institutions (Ohio).

## Examples of Long-Term Goals

- Increase awareness among prospective transfer students of the opportunities available at independent institutions (Virginia).
- Increase the number of community college students who transfer into all NCICU four-year institutions as juniors (North Carolina).
- Increase the completion rates of community college transfer students at MPCC member institutions (Minnesota).

Setting the right goals is critical for the success of any transfer initiative. To do this, it is imperative to survey the existing transfer landscape in a state or region to determine which transfer strategies are most appropriate. When setting goals, be sure to align the priorities of all relevant stakeholders at both independent colleges and community colleges to narrow the exact course of action for the initiative. We also suggest using guiding principles throughout both the goal-setting process and the planning process. In this section we provide a menu of tactics to get started.

## Appraise Existing State, Regional, and Institutional Context

Examining the existing context at the regional, state, and institutional levels is critical not only for deciding which transfer strategies to pursue, but also for determining the scope of a given initiative. For instance, independent colleges and associations should build on existing state-level policies that facilitate transfer to public four-year institutions when designing their own transfer pathways. At the institution level, knowledge of the transfer policies and agreements that are already in place as well as the transfer goals of individual institutions will help define the set of institutions that would benefit most from participating in a consortial initiative.

## Identify Institutional Transfer Policies

Understanding individual institutions' transfer contexts can help state or regional associations set goals that appeal to the largest number of independent colleges and universities, thus maximizing the reach and impact of the initiative. Associations should survey their member institutions to determine the transfer policies they have in place, the transfer-related data they are collecting (if any), their transfer enrollment rates, and how their own transfer-specific goals can align with the initiative's goals. Surveys can also help directly gauge institutional interest in participating in specific initiatives. Once institutions have been surveyed, associations can meet with institutions individually to confirm interest in participating in the initiative or convene their members to discuss the results of the survey and confirm interest in moving forward with a given set of goals.

### Surveying Institutions

The project leaders in Ohio sent out a Google poll to the chief academic officers (CAOs) of all 36 Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges (OFIC) institutions to gauge interest in pursuing a transfer initiative and then sent a follow-up survey to document existing transfer policy and enrollment. The Ohio project leaders also held individual virtual meetings with each independent college to discuss the importance of enrolling and supporting community college transfer students. These conversations allowed OFIC to build buy-in and determine whether their proposed goals matched the needs and environments of their member institutions. Equally important was surveying all Ohio community colleges to determine interest, assess existing bilateral articulations, and identify the academic areas with the most student interest for transfer pathways. In addition to individual meetings with independent colleges, OFIC held a focus group with several community colleges and independent colleges in the state.

Similarly, the Minnesota Private College Council (MPCC) project team surveyed their 17 member institutions to determine what transfer policies they had in place, with a focus on assessing transfer agreements, transfer student advising, and transfer-specific financial aid.\* MPCC also held several group conversations with its member institutions to learn about the common challenges posed by existing transfer practices and policies and celebrate success stories. These conversations, which spanned several months during the planning phase of the initiative, helped the project team determine what might be possible at the consortium level and which goals might be more appropriate for individual institutions to pursue separately.

\* See "Survey of member institutions about own transfer practices," *Minnesota Private College Fund and Council*, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OsJcqDYTYkDVUYmwsIZC43rERluUrfUJ/edit>.

## Examine State and/or Regional Policies

It is crucial to identify and assess state and regional policies that are already in place before selecting a transfer strategy. Many states already have established policies to facilitate transfer between community colleges and public four-year schools.<sup>13</sup> Independents can and should build on existing state and/or regional policies when designing their own transfer initiatives. This will save substantial time and resources, as well as provide students with clear and consistent transfer pathways, whether they choose to enroll in a public or private four-year institution. Independent institutions and their associations need to understand the existing transfer landscape in their state and region, connect with representatives from the public sector, and base initiative goals on existing policy.

### Building on State Policy

When setting their goals, the project leaders in Ohio knew they could model the pathways to independent four-year institutions based on what the Ohio Department of Higher Education had already established. This included subject-specific pathways in biology, psychology, and English, as well as a statewide general education agreement called Ohio Transfer 36 that outlined clear learning outcomes developed in concert by community college and public four-year faculty.

When selecting the goals for its initiative, North Carolina Independent Colleges & Universities (NCICU) built on a state-wide transfer policy to create the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA) for independent colleges. The ICAA was designed to align with existing articulation agreements between community colleges and public four-year institutions in the state.\* The ICAA allows community college transfers to enter participating independent colleges with all general education requirements waived, provided they have completed their associate degree. Having this baseline of general education credit transfer allowed NCICU to focus on developing discipline-specific pathways so students could arrive on campus with junior status in their chosen majors and decrease their time to degree. The project leaders at NCICU emphasized the importance of starting with block transfer of general education credits before moving on to develop policies such as admissions guarantees and major-specific pathways.

\* See “Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement,” *North Carolina Community Colleges*, <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/independent-comprehensive-articulation-agreement>.

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<sup>13</sup> Cassidy Francies and Lexi Anderson, “50-State Comparison: Transfer and Articulation Policies,” *Education Commission of the States*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.ecs.org/transfer-and-articulation-policies-db/>.



## Building on State Policy (continued)

An innovative state policy in Massachusetts inspired the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) to rollout a Transfer Admission Guarantee in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. In Massachusetts, associate degree completers are entitled to guaranteed transfer admission to public four-year institutions and access to financial aid depending on their GPA. The participating independent colleges in the three states chose to adopt the same transfer admission guarantee framework, making sure they also mirrored policies for block transfer of credit in their states as appropriate. For example, Connecticut independent colleges participating in their state's Transfer Admission Guarantee also honor Connecticut "Transfer Ticket" curricula intended to facilitate transfer to Connecticut State Colleges & Universities. By expanding the transfer guarantee to include participating independent colleges in the state, community college students can meet one set of requirements that allows them to transfer to many schools, providing students with more options and a more flexible path to a bachelor's degree.

Collecting and analyzing data on the current state of transfer is an integral part of understanding the context in which state and regional associations are operating. The Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities, for instance, commissioned a study looking at the prevalence and performance of community college students currently enrolled in a pathway as well as students who had already transferred from a community college to one of their institutions. The study aimed to use that information to identify new students who might use a pathway if they were improved and expanded. The results were then shared with stakeholders across the initiative to inform the implementation phase.

While state policy often facilitates transfer to all four-year institutions in the state, there are some policies that make it difficult for private colleges to align with the public sector. For instance, California state legislators mandated that the public University of California and California State University systems develop a common lower-division transfer pathway by fall of 2025.<sup>14</sup> Students interested in transfer will be automatically placed in the associate degree for transfer (ADT) pathway, which grants them guaranteed admission to a CSU institution when they transfer. While

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<sup>14</sup> Sara Weissman, "Law on Transfer Process Sparks Controversy," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/10/12/california-law-ease-transfer-process-sparks-controversy>.

proponents of the bill argue that this will simplify the process for students, many community college and independent college stakeholders worry that the law will result in more confusion for students, who may need to take additional courses outside of the ADT pathway to transfer to a non-CSU institution. In this case, the state's prioritization of one of its public systems puts the private institutions in the state at a stark disadvantage, something that other independent colleges will need to take stock of when assessing the policy landscape. Further, policy enacted during an initiative may require project leaders to adjust transfer strategies in response.

### **Evaluate Regional Opportunities**

Building transfer pathways at the regional level rather than at the state level provides an opportunity to create much broader impact and is practical and warranted when there is clear interest among students in transferring across multiple states, such as in smaller regions like New England. Independent association leaders in New England explained that its regional consortium NEBHE has been instrumental in moving their work forward because it has more resources than their state-specific organizations and is viewed across New England as an apolitical organization, which they felt better positioned it to bridge the interests of public and independent institutions in the region. The presence of a regional coordinating body, such as NEBHE, with a history of working across state lines and merging policies may be a prerequisite to successful inter-state collaboration.

Developing regional initiatives, however, is not always possible as some states may be incentivized to keep their transfer students from crossing state lines. Concerns about declining enrollments in certain regions of the country may preclude states from agreeing to pursue a regional initiative, and in such cases a state-level initiative may be more appropriate. In addition, students often need to remain in the state to maintain eligibility for state grants or scholarship aid.

## Align Interests of Relevant Project Stakeholders

Along with identifying the policies and practices in place at the state, region, and institution levels, it is important to select a transfer strategy that aligns with the priorities of relevant project stakeholders. These stakeholders include the institutions and associations themselves, as well as relevant state agencies, legislators, public systems, community colleges, and funders. Selecting a transfer strategy that appeals to all these actors will cultivate buy-in and set up the initiative for success during both the planning and implementation stages.

When setting the goals of their initiative, NEBHE made sure to collaborate and hold conversations with multiple actors across New England, including public four-year institutions, state associations of independent colleges, state government officials, individual independent colleges, and students. Choosing project goals that appealed to public institutions and state agencies in particular alleviated some of the tension that might have arisen due to declining enrollments in the region and solidified the public sector's commitment to collaborating on the New England Transfer Guarantee.

The interests of community college partners should also be incorporated when setting initiative goals. Because reverse transfer helps more students earn associate degrees and boosts funding for community colleges, OFIC in Ohio recognized that this strategy would encourage more community colleges to join their initiative. Increased community college attainment and funding can also be accomplished by linking guaranteed admission to independent four-year institutions to the completion of an associate degree. When designing their Guarantee, NEBHE chose to require students to complete their associate degree, both to boost associate degree attainment and to increase buy-in from community colleges.

If building transfer pathways for specific disciplines, understanding the regional context is key to setting goals.

When building transfer pathways for specific disciplines, understanding enrollment trends and identifying disciplines in high demand is an important part of the goal-setting process. In North Carolina, NCICU sent out surveys to all members of the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA) to determine which liberal arts majors were most popular while OFIC sent surveys to Ohio independent colleges to determine which majors needed students in upper-level classes. OFIC also surveyed community colleges to understand which majors were most common among their students. From there, they examined national trends in enrollment and decided to pursue pathways for the three most popular liberal arts majors nationally and across the state.

Aligning project goals with potential funders is also key. When deciding on the goals for their initiative, MPCC in Minnesota held calls with chief academic officers of participating institutions as well as the full planning group to determine which goals most institutions were interested in pursuing. From there, they narrowed down potential goals based on Teagle and AVDF's interest in the liberal arts. This allowed MPCC to set specific goals for the current initiative that were aligned with the current funders while pursuing additional funding to explore other priorities. In Ohio, pursuing reverse transfer helped them align their project with efforts pursued by the Lumina Foundation in the state.

## **Determine the Guiding Principles**

Guiding principles serve to center the initiative around high-level goals, such as increasing higher education attainment in a state or incorporating student-centric philosophies throughout the initiative. Asking participating institutions to sign on to these guiding principles can help institutions make a commitment to address transfer supports at the campus level. For example, participating institutions in Ohio signed the Ohio Consortium Pledge, which certifies each institution's commitment to the initiative, as well as delineates the roles and responsibilities of each institution and the collaborative.

## New England Board of Higher Education's Guiding Principles

NEBHE developed guiding principles for the Transfer Guarantee to which all participating independent colleges agreed.\* These principles ask independent institutions to provide specific supports to incoming community college transfer students, collect data on their outcomes, and allow them to transfer in and apply as much credit as possible towards a bachelor's degree. We call out four of the principles here:

- Institutions will acknowledge and value the rich perspectives, life experiences, persistence, diversity, and the academic preparation community college transfer students bring to their institutions.
- Institutions will honor the community college graduation audit, including credits from online coursework, CLEP, AP, IB, dual enrollment and more.
- Institutions will provide tailored pre-application and post-acceptance support services for transfer students, including intensive advising, academic guidance and counseling, academic support, peer advising, personal guidance and counseling, transfer student orientations, career services and supplemental services.

Independent institutions will take into consideration the transfer slump many students experience and to develop academic good standing policies that wait until the end of the academic year to determine whether any transfer student (regardless of participation in the Guarantee) should be placed on academic probation.

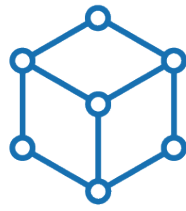
\* See "Massachusetts Independent College Transfer Guarantee Guiding Principles," *New England Board of Higher Education*, [https://nebhe.org/info/pdf/transfer/guarantee/massachusetts/B\\_Massachusetts\\_Guarantee\\_Guiding\\_Principles.pdf](https://nebhe.org/info/pdf/transfer/guarantee/massachusetts/B_Massachusetts_Guarantee_Guiding_Principles.pdf).

## Target Underrepresented Students

Reducing gaps in completion rates for students who are the first in their families to attend college, from low-income households, or other historically underserved backgrounds should be a high-level goal for all community college transfer initiatives. Institutions and state associations should devote resources to understanding and reducing these gaps in any way possible throughout the planning and implementation of the initiative.

In Minnesota, for example, MPCC analyzed data to identify students in the state who were less likely to transfer, persist, and graduate, and then investigate the barriers that these students faced during the transfer process. During the implementation phase, the MPCC team intends to continue using data to examine barriers and solutions for students from historically underserved backgrounds. Independent institutions in the

state are also committed to closing gaps in bachelor's degree attainment and believe that improving community college transfer is an important way to work towards this goal. Aligning institutions and state associations around the goal of providing the opportunity to enroll to a broader swath of their states' residents and making that commitment explicit will ensure that it is a key part of planning and implementation.



## **Step 2: Establish the Initiative's Infrastructure**

After setting goals, states and institutions need to establish the necessary relationships and processes that form the infrastructure of the initiative. Project leaders must be sure to build relationships with and get buy-in from key institutional stakeholders, including faculty and staff as well as leadership. Partnerships with external parties and the public sector are also essential. In the planning stage, state associations should select key project leadership and set other project structures such as meeting formats and data collection protocols. In this section, we provide several tactics initiatives may want to consider.

### **Garner Buy-In from Key Institutional Stakeholders**

When assembling a set of institutions for an initiative, it is important to garner buy-in and commitment from stakeholders, including leadership and staff—particularly faculty members, as they often make the final determination as to which credits can apply towards a degree. Projects leaders should assess what relationships already exist between participating institutions and whether they can build on such relationships or will need to lay the groundwork to establish new ones. Relatedly, as emphasized by grant leaders in Washington, they should be careful to avoid the assumption that institutions within proximity have more developed relationships, as even those institutions may have little interaction or familiarity with each other. Building trust between faculty at community colleges and faculty at four-year institutions is essential to getting faculty buy-in and designing transfer pathways that meet the needs of all institutions. In addition, involving community college and independent faculty in conversations around transfer at their respective institutions can provide the needed awareness and support for transfer initiatives. Commitment from leadership at independent colleges is also needed to ensure that transfer will be an institutional priority and that

resources will be devoted to the initiative and related transfer student supports. At the community college level, leadership buy-in ensures that transfer to independent colleges is promoted and that relationships can develop between community colleges and independent colleges in a state or region. While involving faculty in curriculum-focused initiatives is clearly a priority, it is also important to include other staff who will be involved in implementing a transfer initiative.

Commitment from leadership at independent colleges is also needed to ensure that transfer will be an institutional priority and that the needed resources will be devoted to the initiative and related transfer student supports.

With that said, transfer initiative leadership must be mindful of the complex dynamics between participating independent institutions, especially considering that many of these institutions are facing enrollment and revenue pressures. While a shared understanding of the broad importance of this work for independent institutions may help to alleviate concerns about working with institutions they view as competitors, some stakeholders may still feel apprehensive about sharing best practices with other institutions. Planning opportunities that bring independent college staff together on a more regular basis, such as workshops and convenings, may help to build trust among the participating institutions over time.

### **Independent College Faculty**

Faculty buy-in at the independent college level is critical for supporting transfer initiatives and establishing a transfer-friendly culture at participating institutions. One potential barrier is the misconception that transfer students from community colleges are less capable or prepared than students who begin at their institution straight from high school or from another four-year institution.<sup>15</sup> In fact, community college transfer students at four-year institutions fare, on average, just as well or better than their “native” student counterparts.<sup>16</sup> There is also a misconception

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<sup>15</sup> Several faculty noted that this perception can lead faculty members to be less willing to participate and/or endorse transfer initiatives

<sup>16</sup> Di Xu et al., “Are Community College Transfer Students ‘A Good Bet’ for 4-Year Admissions? Comparing Academic and Labor-Market Outcomes Between Transfer and



that community college curriculum is less robust than the curriculum at four-year institutions and taught by less qualified faculty members. This can lead to four-year faculty resisting institutional efforts to accept general education credits or pre-requisites for the major from community colleges, even when they share the same accrediting agency. Lack of awareness around transfer responsibilities is another barrier; faculty at independent colleges often do not feel accountable for adjusting their curriculum or teaching practices to better support transfer students.

In fact, community college transfer students at four-year institutions fare, on average, just as well or better than their “native” student counterparts.

The initiatives highlighted in this playbook have used several strategies to break down barriers and increase faculty buy-in.

## Five Steps to Breaking Down Barriers

### *Build trust between community college and independent college faculty*

- Provide face-to-face time for faculty at both schools. Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio conducted joint faculty development to strengthen ties between their faculty and faculty at nearby community colleges. This connection has helped Baldwin Wallace faculty gain insight into the strong qualifications and credentials of community college faculty. Washington hosted two summits to bring together faculty and staff from the partner community colleges and independent institutions. Washington’s project leader shared that it was important to involve as many members from each department as possible in these sessions because of how integral they are to the development of discipline-specific pathways and course equivalencies.
- Schedule class visits. One university in Minnesota arranged for faculty to sit in on STEM classes and labs at the local community college to demonstrate the high quality of coursework at the community college level.

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Native 4-Year College Students,” *Community College Research Center*, February 2018, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/are-community-college-transfer-students-good-bet-4-year-admissions.html>; Tania LaViolet et al., “The Talent Blind Spot: The Case for Increasing Community College Transfer to High Graduation Rate Institutions,” *American Talent Initiative*, July 11, 2018, [https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Aspen-ATI\\_Vol.1\\_The-Case\\_07112018.pdf](https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Aspen-ATI_Vol.1_The-Case_07112018.pdf).

## Five Steps to Breaking Down Barriers (continued)

### *Leverage state associations to build bridges*

- OFIC in Ohio convened working groups for each discipline-specific pathway, each populated by faculty members with curriculum or program authority from both independent four-years and community colleges. Each group was led by two faculty co-chairs, with one from a community college and the other from an independent institution. This collaborative process was intended to give faculty more ownership over the transfer pathways and cultivate trust between four-year and community college faculty, assuring four-year faculty that their colleagues at community colleges are qualified and invested in ensuring their students are transfer ready.
- NCICU established a peer-to-peer learning program, where two faculty from an independent four-year were paired with two faculty from a partner community college, with the goal of building the trust and collegiality necessary to establish common lower-division preparation for discipline-specific transfer pathways that apply for all North Carolina community colleges and all participating independent colleges.

### *Use data*

- Thanks to its data collection processes, Capital University in Ohio was able to demonstrate that many of its high-performing students had transferred from community colleges. Sharing these data with faculty dispelled common misconceptions around transfer student performance.
- An admissions staff member at a Minnesota university highlighted the new high-performing community college transfers in the lists that she sent to department chairs each term.
- National data can also provide evidence about how transfer students perform just as well as “native” students.

### *Highlight enrollment*

- Administrators at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in Minnesota informed faculty about declining enrollments and the need to admit more transfer students to support the sustainability of the institution.
- Surveyed faculty list enrollment increases, especially enrollment in their upper-level courses, as a major benefit of undertaking work on transfer pathways.

### *Showcase the students*

- When surveyed, faculty noted that improving transfer pathways increased their institution’s ability to enroll strong students from a multitude of different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Initiatives can foster understanding that a variety of perspectives and backgrounds can enrich campus and classroom experiences through professional development and workshops.

## Community College Faculty

While the current transfer literature focuses on the importance of involving four-year faculty in the transfer process, it is also worth investing time in securing buy-in from community college faculty. Community college faculty interact with students early in their postsecondary journeys, which is when they would ideally start thinking about transferring and their specific transfer pathways. Community college faculty are also involved in curriculum design at their colleges and need to be kept informed as to how their curriculum can best align with current transfer initiatives.

Getting community college faculty invested in transfer may be challenging, as they often have a large set of responsibilities and are sometimes not aware of the role that they can play in helping students transfer, particularly in disciplines that place less emphasis on the completion of a four-year degree. A transfer staff member at a community college noted that arts and sciences faculty are often less involved in transfer because of the way their departments are structured. Arts and sciences faculty typically do not serve as advisors for students and, as a result, are less familiar with the transfer process than faculty in fields like nursing, where advising is common due to the necessity of transferring to a four-year institution to complete the desired degree. To address this, the staff member participated in the arts and sciences' departmental and curriculum committee meetings to bring issues around transfer to the attention of faculty, in the hopes that it would encourage faculty to consider transfer pathways when making key decisions about course structure and curriculum.

At both the community college and independent college levels, project and institutional leaders should dedicate resources towards providing financial and time incentives for faculty to participate in transfer work.

At both the community college and independent college levels, project and institutional leaders should dedicate resources towards providing financial and time incentives for faculty to participate in transfer work. When surveyed, community college faculty noted that their teaching loads are high, and their limited capacity can prevent them from participating in external initiatives. To address this, the surveyed faculty suggested that state associations should offer some financial compensation. For

example, faculty assisting with the development of the discipline-specific transfer pathways in Ohio were awarded small grants for their participation, with an additional amount given to those who also participated in faculty work groups. Community college faculty also suggested that their institutions temporarily decrease their teaching load to allow them to fully immerse themselves in transfer work and to make effective use of their time. This could involve employing virtual meetings rather than requiring travel time and having very targeted inquiries for faculty whenever possible.

### **North Carolina's Peer-to-Peer Program**

To meet their goal of designing pathways in psychology and sociology that would allow community college students to transfer in with junior status, the NCICU project leaders relied on relationship building between faculty and staff at individual two- and four-year campuses in the state. These connections were facilitated by a peer-to-peer learning program, which allowed NCICU to combine learnings from multiple bilateral meetings to inform the broader initiative.

NCICU's peer-to-peer learning program was designed as a series of in-person meetings between faculty, chief academic officers, and advisors from one community college and a partnering independent college. Pairs of institutions were selected based on partnerships that already existed, typically based on location within the state. Prior to the pandemic, NCICU staff members planned on traveling to every campus and hosting meetings for participating faculty and staff to discuss the details of the pathway agreements NCICU was developing in psychology and sociology. The hope was that faculty would be able to determine which courses students should take at the community college level, and NCICU would then take the results from all the meetings and combine them into the final version of each pathway.

While many of the peer-to-peer meetings ultimately ended up happening remotely, they still accomplished the consortium-wide goals set by NCICU. Faculty members were able to delve into the details of the pathways such as which biology course students would take at each participating community college. In addition to moving the pathways forward, these peer groups fostered faculty cooperation and interaction, and faculty reported that they had gotten to know their counterparts at the partner institution even better than they had before the pandemic. CAOs also reported that connecting with their counterparts at community colleges reinforced that NCICU members were committed to the success of community college students, which likely increased buy-in from community college administrators.

## North Carolina's Peer-to-Peer Program (continued)

The project leaders at NCICU reflected that it would have been preferable to conduct the meetings in person as planned, but they were impressed with the commitment shown by their institutions during a global pandemic. Despite staff shortages, illness, and institutions having to transition to remote instruction, every campus volunteered to participate in the peer-to-peer groups and faculty were able to set aside enough time to meet with their community college counterparts. This high level of engagement despite limited capacity underscores the importance of building connections between faculty at different institutions.

### Independent College Leadership

High-level support for transfer initiatives from independent institutions will ensure that the goals of the initiative are prioritized and that work on the initiative will progress as needed. Even when staff are ready and willing to work on transfer pathways, meaningful changes to policies and practices are unlikely to be enacted if institutional leadership is not actively participating in the transfer initiative. State associations must ensure buy-in from presidents and provosts as well as high-level administrators who influence institutional decision-making.

Overall, it is important to communicate to independent college stakeholders that they will not be sacrificing what makes their institution and curriculum unique even as they become more transfer-friendly institutions.

State association leaders shared that when starting conversations around transfer initiatives, it is important to emphasize that independent colleges will still be able to provide a unique and tailored education to their students. Each independent college offers their own type of coursework, student supports, and campus culture, and independents are often concerned that standardizing their curriculum and/or accepting more community college transfer students will necessitate sacrificing what makes their campus unique. One commonly cited example is in graduation requirements—-independent colleges may have long-standing requirements such as theology coursework that they want all students to

participate in. These requirements may be threatened by a general education block transfer from community colleges. State associations can encourage institutions to shift these special courses from general education requirements to graduation requirements so that community college students can still transfer all their general education courses and experience specialized courses at the independent college, provided community college transfer matriculants can be assured timely degree completion. Overall, it is important to communicate to independent college stakeholders that they will not be sacrificing what makes their institution and curriculum unique as they become more transfer-friendly institutions.

For institutions in regions where the population of traditional-age students is declining, enrollment declines can be a powerful motivator for engaging in transfer pathways initiatives. Transfer enrollment can be a key source of revenue for tuition-dependent private institutions and may also drive independent leadership to join broader transfer initiatives. For example, after a participating institution closed due to declining enrollment, Iowa's initiative gained two new institutions after recognizing the need to expand their enrollment strategies to include transfer students.

### Enrollment declines can serve to motivate institutions in regions where the population of traditional-age students is declining.

A history of working with institutional leadership around transfer and other issues can also help associations direct their members towards their transfer initiative. State association leaders in Minnesota, for example, already had strong relationships with presidents of their member institutions, with whom they had engaged in conversations around transfer student admissions. This made participation in their transfer initiative a natural next step for members. Similarly, in North Carolina, NCICU's history of working with institutions in the region around transfer policy helped cement buy-in from institutional leadership. In Washington, the grant's principal investigator sits on the state's Joint Transfer Council, a multi-sector committee focused on improving transfer in the state and composed of leaders from Washington community colleges, public four-year institutions, independent institutions, and relevant higher education associations. The project leader described how being able to work with institutional leaders she was familiar with and who she knew were already

highly engaged in transfer-oriented work has been incredibly useful for accomplishing the goals of their grant.

## **Community College Leadership**

Transfer initiatives, at their core, are built on partnerships. Therefore, buy-in from community college leadership is paramount. Community college administrators have extensive knowledge about the pathways their students often utilize and the programming, policies, and practices that are needed to improve transfer to private four-year institutions. They must be engaged early in the initiative since it is ultimately their responsibility to ensure that their students have access to needed coursework, transfer advising, and other relevant supports.

Community college administrators we surveyed noted that they are less likely to partner with independent institutions that expect community colleges to make significant curricular changes.

The need for community colleges to align their curriculum with public four-years' transfer policies may serve as a barrier for them to participate in transfer initiatives with private institutions. One transfer staff member at a community college noted that leadership is often concerned with how their courses line up with the most popular public institutions in the region. Community college administrators we surveyed also shared that they are less likely to partner with independent institutions that expect community colleges to make significant curricular changes. This is yet another reason why independent colleges and associations should strive to align and build on existing policy in the public sector [see "Examine State and/or Regional Policies" above]. By aligning with existing transfer pathways, independents can assure community college leadership that they will not have to sacrifice existing connections to public four-year institutions in the state.

Another way to address this barrier is by communicating to community college leadership that developing pathways to independent colleges will give their students more options and improve the transfer process. When cultivating buy-in from community colleges, independent associations need to emphasize that building these pathways is in the students' best interests as they will be able to use their degree to transfer to any

participating public or private institution. This is especially important in cases where the community colleges and public four-year colleges are part of the same system, which may incentivize the public four-years to be reluctant to relinquish transfer students to the private sector.

Building these pathways is in the students' best interests as they will be able to use their degree to transfer to any participating public and private institution.

Staff at the community college level also highlighted the importance of using data to make the case for expanding transfer pathways to private institutions. A staff member at the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) system office noted that independent college associations should collect data on how students fare at independent four-years in their state, including how many excess credits students take, how much it costs to earn a degree, and how long it takes students to graduate compared to their peers at public institutions. NCICU leaders in North Carolina shared that community college leaders are willing to partner with their institutions because they have demonstrated that community college transfer students are successful at NCICU member schools. Building a data infrastructure and using the data in communications with potential community college partners is one way to ensure buy-in from more community college leaders in a state. Collecting information on cost of attendance and institutional grant aid can also help dispel the misconception that independent colleges are too expensive for most community college students to afford.

### **Staff**

Independent college staff in offices related to transfer are most often tasked with executing policy and are therefore essential stakeholders in any transfer initiative. Institutions and/or associations should garner buy-in from staff whose offices engage with or impact potential and current transfer students. This includes registrars, who examine and determine preliminary credit; financial aid offices, which award aid to transfer students; and admissions counselors and advisors, who directly assist transfer students throughout the transfer process. Often, ensuring buy-in across the institution may simply require involving as many offices as possible in early conversations. Reflecting on the implementation of their Transfer and Articulation Policy (TAP) between community colleges and



public four-years in Connecticut, a CSCU staff member noted that involving staff early in the conversation would have made the implementation process much easier. While faculty voices were incorporated early on, staff who were charged with implementing changes were only involved towards the end of the planning process. To avoid challenges and delays in implementation, the CSCU staff member recommended that independent college associations make efforts to include multiple institutional offices in the planning process and include staff voices early in the initiative.

## Engaging Institutional Offices

- When OFIC planned their transfer initiative in Ohio, they conducted interviews with staff in academic affairs, admissions, and enrollment at each of their 16 member institutions. The interviews revealed that despite varying capacity to support transfer students, staff were particularly interested in enrolling community college transfer students from underrepresented parts of the state. This willingness to enroll more transfer students helped OFIC secure buy-in from key offices at their member institutions.
- MPCC in Minnesota worked to involve offices they already had relationships with, such as registrars and financial aid offices, and used those connections to involve staff from offices they were not as familiar with. They extended invitations to all offices to join their meetings during the planning phase and are continuing to engage staff from a variety of offices that interact with transfer students at both independents and community colleges.

Independent colleges and associations should also make efforts to build relationships with transfer counselors and advisors and involve them in early conversations so their needs and voices are represented in the planning process. Cultivating buy-in from community college advisors and transfer counselors ensures that students are made aware of and ultimately follow the transfer pathways set up as part of the initiative. As one staff member at Springfield College in Massachusetts noted, if transfer counselors from community colleges are not supportive of transfer initiatives, they are less likely to direct students towards those institutions or associations.

## Find Thought Partners and Subject Matter Experts

Developing a transfer initiative requires an understanding of complex issues such as transfer-specific student supports and pathway maintenance for those pursuing discipline-specific transfer pathways. Project leaders can bring in external subject matter experts and learn from those who have already pursued similar transfer initiatives, including other state or regional associations. Project leaders should also engage public institutions and systems in the state or region, as they likely have expertise on transfer issues and broader state policy that can be applied to independent college transfer initiatives.

Institutions and state associations should engage subject matter experts around multiple areas of transfer policy, especially advising and student supports. Professional organizations such as the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) can be excellent thought partners when examining key issues in the transfer process. State associations found that inviting subject matter experts to present to participating member institutions during the planning phase and involving these experts throughout the implementation process helped member institutions consider how to adjust their supports for community college transfers. Oregon project leaders sought feedback from the Oregon Math Chairs, Oregon Mathematics Association of Two Year Colleges, and the Oregon Writing and English Advisory Committee on the mathematics and English transfer maps they drafted. These experts offer decades of experience in their field as well as an outside perspective that can help campus leaders examine their policies and practices and determine what changes are needed.

Although each state is unique and strategies may not be implementable across different contexts, it is still worthwhile learning from state and regional associations who are further along in their transfer initiatives.

At the state association level, project leaders should also learn from associations in other states. Although each state is unique and strategies may not be implementable across different contexts, it is still worthwhile

learning from state and regional associations who are further along in their transfer initiatives. When MPCC in Minnesota was starting their planning process, they engaged with NEBHE as well as state associations in California, Washington, Texas, and Michigan. They also used the network developed by their funder to reach out to additional states and gather lessons learned. The Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities also leveraged the grant's network to meet with Virginia's project leaders and the vendor that developed the Transfer Virginia portal to inform the development of their own transfer portal.

## **Engage Public Institutions**

Public institutions and systems have extensive experience developing transfer pathways between community colleges and four-year institutions. While not all practices will be transferable between the public sector and independent colleges, project leaders should involve state system stakeholders and state offices in the planning process. Gaining buy-in from state systems and leveraging their experience with implementing transfer pathways are important for success.

State association leaders shared that emphasizing a shared commitment to student success facilitated the forming of partnerships with public institutions. The initial project leader at NEBHE underlined the importance of using a student-centric perspective when interacting with public four-years and recognizing the work that has already been done in that sector. Rather than see the independent colleges as competition, public institutions and state officers of higher education across all participating states acknowledged that contributing to expanding transfer pathways benefited students and as such was a collective goal worth pursuing. This shared perspective has allowed NEBHE to rely on resources from the public sector for their own initiative—each independent college transfer pathway is listed on each state's website, making it easier for students to access that information in one place and understand their transfer options.

Public institutions can also serve as excellent thought partners, even if they are not willing or able to provide direct support. MPCC worked with the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, which includes the state's public four-years and community colleges. The project leader at MPCC noted that Minnesota State has shared accomplishments and

challenges and was a very willing thought partner throughout the planning phase of their transfer initiative. Similarly, project leaders at OFIC noted that the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) shared learnings from its transfer pathways work and served more generally as an additional resource for OFIC.

## **Decide on Project Management Structures**

When planning a transfer initiative, it is essential to outline how the project will be organized and funded. Project logistics such as the meeting location and schedule should be determined and budgeted accordingly. Project teams, whether at the state association or region level, should select someone with the necessary expertise and capacity to lead the initiative. Locating and deciding on potential funders is also a key step which may take place before any other project logistics have been established, as the final selection of a funding source may impact project goals as well as the details of implementation.

### **Establish a Core Leadership Team**

At the outset of the project, it is essential to identify a project leadership team. Project leaders are responsible for deciding how to structure the team, who to hire, and what their roles and responsibilities will be. With so many stakeholders across institutions and relevant organizations involved in each grant, state association leaders explained that it is important to identify one member of the project team whose primary responsibilities will be to communicate and liaise between institutional partners and the state association. This provides participants with a clear person who they can go to with questions and issues and establishes an individual who is responsible for ensuring there is continued interest and momentum for the grant work. Leadership continuity throughout both the planning and implementation phases of a project is also key to ensuring the initiative proceeds as planned.

Some state associations have relied on internal staff, while others—such as Virginia, Ohio, Oregon, and Iowa—have found success hiring a consultant to lead or co-lead their transfer initiative, given the considerable amount of time and effort this work requires. When hiring a consultant, state associations should consider selecting someone with a variety of skills and experiences, such as a former academic advisor at a

community college or a former faculty member at an independent institution. Familiarity with the context and environment of two-year to four-year transfer in a state and pre-existing relationships with relevant stakeholders are additional considerations when selecting a project lead. State associations may also wish to prioritize hiring a consultant with expertise in non-traditional student populations, since nearly one-third of community college students are adult learners<sup>17</sup> and many independent colleges recruit transfer students for their evening or online programs oriented towards adult learners.

The development of project leadership teams should also be heavily informed by organizational structure. This point is best exemplified by the New England project. Because NEBHE serves as the backbone coordinating body for an entire region, the initiative's organizational structure requires additional coordination between NEBHE, state associations, and institutional partners rather than between just one state association and multiple institutions.

### **Set Meeting Guidelines**

It is important at the outset for project leaders to establish norms and guidelines around meetings and communications, including their mode, frequency, and structure, and to ensure they are compatible with the project timeline and key milestones. This includes considering the feasibility, costs, and benefits associated with in-person and virtual meetings. While virtual meetings are cost-effective and offer more flexibility for attendees, in-person meetings might be better at building relationships. One promising and cost-effective strategy is to host in-person meetings at the early stages of the initiative, when relationship building is most critical, and then turn to virtual meetings later in the project.

**Project leaders must make a concerted effort to hold meetings that encourage and facilitate communication and participation.**

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<sup>17</sup> John Fink, "What Happened to Community College Enrollment During the First Years of the Pandemic? It Depends on Students' Age," *Community College Research Center*, January 9, 2023, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/what-happened-to-community-college-enrollment-depends-students-age.html>.

Regardless of format, project leaders must make a concerted effort to hold meetings that encourage and facilitate communication and participation. For instance, MPCC in Minnesota shared in their progress report that most of their Zoom meetings included breakout sessions to create intimate settings in which smaller groups could interact and share ideas with project managers, something staff and faculty may be less likely to do in front of a larger audience. Similarly, prior to the pandemic, NCICU in North Carolina had planned to host large in-person meetings to finalize discipline-specific agreements. When they were forced to transition online, the state association leaders decided to host smaller meetings among individual project teams because they believed they would foster greater collaboration among participants than larger virtual meetings. The project leaders also noted, however, that faculty and staff from participating institutions in North Carolina had already built relationships in person prior to the shift online, which made online meetings much more productive. Oregon established working groups of faculty and staff during the planning phase of its grant work for members to act as institutional liaisons and develop stronger cross-institutional connections. Each participant sits on two working groups, which vary from discipline-specific groups to larger groups focused on more general transfer topics, such as evaluating the barriers students face during the transfer process. Institutional stakeholders who participated in the working groups praised this structure, explaining that the smaller working group conversations were often highly productive because they were centered on participants' specific areas of expertise.

### **Locate a Source of Funding**

Institutions or state associations should identify a funder with the resources to support their transfer initiative and a mission that aligns with the strategies the project leaders wish to pursue. As many foundations have worked extensively on transfer and can provide insight and recommendations that can help to narrow project goals and define implementation processes, they can be invaluable partners in this work. Project leaders should keep in mind that the mission and aims of the funder may further refine the scope and focus of the work.

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## **Step 3: Ensure the Initiative's Success and Sustainability**

During both the planning and the implementation stages, project leaders will need to consider how the initiative will sustain itself after the initial funding has expired. Key to the success and sustainability of any transfer initiative is marketing to potential transfer students, since no project will meet its goals if students are unaware of the transfer pathways that have been made available to them. Participating institutions will also need to set up supports for community college transfer students once they arrive on campus and adjust their policies and practices to best serve this student population. Project leaders must also consider project maintenance such as updating discipline-specific transfer pathways as courses and curricula evolve over time. Evaluating the success of the initiative is also an important step that can both determine whether the initiative has met its goals and inform future implementation.

### **Market Independent Colleges as a Transfer Destination**

While transfer pathways and policies are being developed, project leaders should devote time and resources to publicizing their efforts to potential community college transfer students. Pathways to public institutions dominate the current transfer landscape, and students are often less aware of the options at independent colleges despite those pathways being broadly available.<sup>18</sup> Effective marketing is key to reducing this gap. Websites and portals have become a critical part of the transfer landscape because they provide a way for students to quickly and easily locate transfer information, but these resources must still be strategically

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Keane, Thomas Gutto, and Emily Decatur, "Sustaining Successful Transfer Pathways," *TransferTalk*, 2021, [https://read.nxtbook.com/nacac/the\\_journal\\_of\\_college\\_admiss/fall\\_2021/transfertalk.html](https://read.nxtbook.com/nacac/the_journal_of_college_admiss/fall_2021/transfertalk.html).

advertised. For example, Minnesota directly markets the Transfer Guarantee to community college students through email communications and geofenced advertisements, which appear on devices when they are on community college campuses. Project leaders are also working with community colleges to add the Minnesota transfer portal to webpages that advertise the state's public transfer portal, so students can see both of those resources when searching for transfer information.

Advertising transfer pathways on a large scale is an involved and expensive undertaking, so project leaders should consider ways to collaboratively market the initiative to spread costs across institutions and further the overall reach of their marketing efforts. When the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) introduced the Michigan Transfer Portal, they provided a suite of marketing resources for the participating institutions to utilize when advertising the portal, such as a press release template and short instructional video to teach users about the site. The MCCA project leader noted that students are generally unfamiliar with state associations like theirs, so the marketing materials they created for the Transfer Network are intended to help institutional stakeholders, particularly advisors, share the network with their students. Similarly, a project leader in Connecticut described how they are seeking to develop shared marketing materials for online and print media to standardize the messaging about the Transfer Guarantee, which institutions have been marketing separately. They explained that leveraging state associations and NEBHE for these materials would help to cut the advertising costs for institutions that have been creating and promoting their own materials, while also ensuring that all participating institutions, regardless of their resources, are able to share high-quality materials with their staff and students to build awareness of the Guarantee.

### **Create Personalized Connections between Campuses**

Marketing to potential community college transfer students requires both centralized information sharing through online platforms and personalized outreach through face-to-face or other direct contact. State association leaders and institutional staff alike noted the importance of developing relationships between independent institutions and community college transfer counselors and students. Community college students often seek information from sources they trust, such as their own community college website or their counselor and transfer advisors. Establishing direct connections with community college students and staff will help keep independent college transfer pathways top of mind when students are



examining their transfer options.

State association leaders and institutional staff alike noted the importance of developing relationships between independent institutions and community college transfer counselors and students.

Many independent colleges with strong transfer pathways have dedicated transfer staff in their admissions department that spend time directly at community colleges. In Minnesota, staff from various independent colleges work together to set up booths at community college events. Transfer staff hand out paper guides featuring various programs and even advertise programming from other institutions that might be of interest to students. While information is posted on individual institutions' websites, transfer staff noted that visiting community colleges in person is often the best way to reach potential transfer students. Similarly, schools such as Johnson C. Smith University in North Carolina have dedicated transfer counselors with knowledge of relevant transfer pathways visit community college campuses in person. Administrators at several independent colleges in North Carolina emphasized that transfer staff having face-to-face time with students is essential for marketing transfer pathways.

## Bringing Students to Campus

Some campuses have taken this marketing strategy a step further and invited potential transfer students to spend time on campus. Wingate University in North Carolina not only sends representatives to community colleges but also invites potential community college students to spend time on campus. Inviting community college students to campus helps them feel like part of the campus community before they enroll. A staff member at Brevard College, also in North Carolina, also noted the importance of students having direct contact with the campus itself. Students who are interested in applying to Brevard can participate in both curricular and extracurricular activities and are invited into the classroom so they get a sense of what their experience would be like at the four-year institution. This can encourage students to overcome their initial apprehension to applying to an independent college over a public institution. Lenoir-Rhyne University has taken a similar approach with its Bear Bound program, which grants co-admission to community college students so they can participate in campus experiences before transferring.\*

\* Lenoir-Rhyne University, "Bear Bound," <https://www.lr.edu/admission/undergraduate-admission/transfer-students/bear-bound>.

## Communicate the Benefits of Attending an Independent College

Institutions and state associations must demonstrate to community college students that transferring to independent institutions in the state is financially feasible and beneficial. Community college students and staff often assume that attending a private institution is too costly, which leads them to focus solely on public institutions. However, many independent institutions offer tailored and robust financial aid packages to low-income students and accept enough transfer credits that students can complete their degree in two years instead of three. Some states, like Iowa, also offer grants specifically for students who attend a private institution.<sup>19</sup> Yet, many students are unaware of the fact that the amount they will pay for their education is generally far less than an institution's published tuition price once financial aid is applied. One strategy used by independent institutions to avoid prospective students' sticker shock is resetting tuition. For example, Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire implemented a tuition reset in the 2023-24 academic year to reduce the published annual tuition price by more than 45 percent.<sup>20</sup> In a letter describing the reset, the college's president explained that this change was intended to increase transparency around the educational costs that their students will be responsible for and decrease the number of prospective students who are deterred by the college's high tuition prices, despite the reality that 100 percent of enrolled students receive financial assistance.

Independent colleges also offer flexible programming for adult students that might appeal to community college transfers looking for something outside of the traditional four-year experience. Project leaders in Minnesota described how independent institutions in the state tend to offer more evening and weekend programs than campuses in the Minnesota public system. For working students seeking a bachelor's degree, flexible programming makes it easier to complete a degree on

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<sup>19</sup> Iowa Department of Education, "Iowa Tuition Grant," <https://educate.iowa.gov/higher-ed/financial-aid/scholarships-grants/iowa-tuition-grant#:~:text=Award%20Amount%20and%20Limits&text=The%20funded%20maximum%202024%2D25,be%20eligible%20for%20adjusted%20amounts>.

<sup>20</sup> Susan D. Stuebner, "Lowering Tuition to Expand Opportunities," <https://www.colby-sawyer.edu/admissions/tuition-reset>.

time. Effectively articulating these benefits to prospective students is crucial to sustaining a transfer initiative.

“I’ve appreciated the flexibility and involvement that my private partners have brought...to our students. I think some of the publics I work with could learn from our private partners.”

Another often overlooked benefit of attending an independent institution is the sense of community that it offers both inside the classroom and on its campus. Project leaders in Ohio noted that the smaller and more intimate campus at independents offers a more unique and personalized experience compared to public institutions and that this can be used to encourage students to apply. A staff member at a community college in Ohio echoed this sentiment, saying “I’ve appreciated the flexibility and involvement that my private partners have brought...to our students. I think some of the publics I work with could learn from our private partners.” Similarly, one institutional stakeholder in North Carolina described how independent institutions can be a better fit for some students from more rural areas of the state, since students coming from small school districts may appreciate the small class sizes that many private liberal arts colleges offer.

### **Utilize Relevant Technology**

Online resources are an essential part of a transfer initiative. While transfer pathways and agreements can be advertised through press releases and individual outreach to students, listing relevant information online ensures that students will always be able to access key details on the initiative, its features, and student requirements, among other things.

While much more labor and cost intensive, it is also important to develop a system that shares transparent and accessible information on how students’ credits will transfer to various four-year institutions. This is especially pertinent for community college students who often question how much of their credit will transfer to any given independent institution. Project leaders should be sure to budget enough time and resources

across the planning and implementation phases to successfully develop and roll out the online solution they choose.<sup>21</sup>

## Leveraging Existing Resources

Since building a new transfer website or portal is often prohibitively expensive, state associations should try to integrate their online presence into existing resources whenever possible. In Virginia, state lawmakers passed legislation in 2018 mandating the creation of a statewide transfer portal. Created by the vendor Indtai, Inc, the portal hosts information about public and independent institutions and allows users to explore how their credits will transfer, find equivalent courses, and view recommendations for their “fastest degree” option. Six of the 13 independent institutions participating in the Transfer Pathways grant were fully featured in the portal prior to the start of the grant. The Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (VFIC) is currently working to onboard the remaining seven institutions to the portal, including training institutional staff on the process for maintaining their information in the portal moving forward.

If funding allows, state associations should consider developing their own transfer portal. MPCC, for example, created a new transfer resource for independent colleges in Minnesota.<sup>22</sup> The Council developed a website where students can search by combinations of areas of study, receiving four-year institution, and sending community college to see how their courses will transfer. Project leaders have been promoting the web resource with community college staff so they can use the tool to help students plan their transfer journey and see the benefits of pursuing a liberal arts education at an MPCC member institution.

Institutions and associations should also explore the possibility of adding their information to existing transfer portals maintained by for-profit vendors or advocating to ensure they are represented on state-run websites intended to promote transfer. Staff at St. Catherine University and College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in Minnesota noted that adding their information to such platforms is vital, but it requires an immense load on the part of any individual institution, at least during the “start-up” phase. Multiple offices, including IT and Academic Affairs, must

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<sup>21</sup> “Transfer Explorer,” *The City University of New York*, <https://explorer.cuny.edu/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Transfer Pathways,” *Minnesota Private College Council*, <https://www.mnprivatecolleges.org/college-planning/transfer-students/transfer-pathways>.

work together to ensure that the correct information is uploaded and updated on a regular basis. Further, adding information to the portal often requires hiring a new staff member whose primary responsibility is to maintain this system. With that said, it is possible that its costs will be offset by the revenue generated through new transfer student recruitment.

Whether developing a new transfer portal or leveraging an existing one, associations should regularly gather user feedback to guide continuous improvements to the portal. These resources can be exceptional tools for students, but they must be user-friendly and share accurate and complete information. Project leaders should explore ways to enhance the transfer portal beyond user-friendly updates, further centralizing information and support for students. For example, the Transfer Virginia portal contains information on a wide variety of careers so students can see how their credits and chosen degree plan align with careers they are interested in pursuing. Students should regularly be surveyed and interviewed to gather their perceptions and experiences of these tools to inform future development and modifications.

## **Conduct User Testing**

Minnesota conducted usability testing on its transfer search tool to make it more user-friendly. The Minnesota Private College Council (MPCC) partnered with the organization Centralis to lead virtual testing sessions with community college students interested in transferring. The student feedback gathered in these sessions led them to make several improvements to the tool to improve clarity and make the site more navigable. For example, students were confused by some of the transfer terminology used in the tool, so MPCC adjusted the language to help users better understand section headings and available search filters, such as rewording the filter 'Area of Study' to 'Intended major.' Simple updates such as these can have a big impact for portal usability, ensuring they remain accessible and effective tools for students. While user testing is highly important in the early development stages of a transfer portal, consortia leaders should consider building this testing into the long-term maintenance plan for the portal to inform continuous improvements to the resource as it grows and develops over time.

## **Build Best Practices for Community College Advising**

While four-year institutions will need to dedicate resources to connect with community college students, much of the marketing depends on community college advisors. Advisors are often the most important source

of transfer information for community college students, which means that advisors must be well informed regarding available transfer pathways to independent institutions and must meet with students early and often to share that critical information. Improving community college advising is an issue being considered by all the state associations represented in this playbook and remains one of the toughest challenges to any transfer initiative.

One challenge is reaching students early on, often before they even register for their first community college classes. Project leaders at NCICU noted that students who want to transfer into majors with certain math requirements will need to register for specific courses such as statistics and not take the general math pathway typically offered to community college students in the state. Delivering this information before registration has proven difficult. Community college advisors also need information about financial aid at independent colleges—many state associations are still hoping to develop guidelines to assist with this process. Capacity concerns at the community college level can also prevent advisors from being able to provide necessary information on transfer pathways to students. A staff member at Connecticut State Colleges & Universities system office shared that their student to advisor ratio can be as high as 600 to 1; while they are working on reducing that to closer to 250 to 1, there are still huge capacity challenges.

To support community college advisors, consortiums must offer professional development around their transfer pathways and equip advisors with knowledge of available resources and tools for them and their advisees. One way to help facilitate this professional development is by training a subset of admission staff as transfer specialists, as project leaders in Minnesota utilized their grant funding to do. These specialists are highly engaged in the work of the initiative, including providing guidance to other staff on transfer pathways. For example, Minnesota project leaders hosted a meeting with community college advisors to share information and address questions about the Transfer Admission Guarantee. The event included panel discussions, student stories, and one-on-one conversations between the initiative's transfer specialists and the advisors to ensure the advisors could receive targeted support. Oregon also hosted a series of in-person and virtual, synchronous professional development workshops with community college advisors to share information about their transfer pathways so advisors could effectively communicate those options to students. Budgeting for and

providing resources to assist participating community colleges will likely be necessary if they are to successfully coach students towards independent college transfer pathways.

## **Engage with High School Students**

While transfer recruitment efforts are typically geared towards current community college students, institutions should consider ways to engage with high school students as well. As previously noted, community colleges should ideally meet with students early in their educational journey to help them understand the courses they will need to complete for their intended major. For many students, this means speaking with them when they are still in high school, as recent data estimate that nearly 2.5 million high school students across the country participated in at least one dual enrollment course in the 2022-23 academic year.<sup>23</sup> A staff member at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College in North Carolina shared that their college has seen growing interest in two- to four-year transfer among families of high school students, who wish to make more savvy decisions when helping their child map out their postsecondary plans. While some families may go directly to the community college for this information, community colleges and independent institutions should also seek ways to proactively share this information with students. Staff with Transfer Virginia, for example, work with high school counselors to directly share transfer pathways information and raise awareness of available resources for dual enrolled students to help them understand how their credits will transfer once they graduate high school. Developing relationships with high school counselors and meeting with high school students can also allow institutions to begin debunking misconceptions about independent institutions—particularly regarding cost—with students much sooner. Project leaders can also build relationships with state associations focused on secondary education to raise awareness of the transfer pathways in the state. For example, representatives from the Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW) spoke at the Washington Council for High School-College Relations Summer 2023 Board meeting to share more information about the psychology transfer pathway member institutions developed.

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<sup>23</sup> John Fink, “How Many Students Are Taking Dual Enrollment Courses in High School? New National, State, and College-Level Data,” *Community College Research Center*, August 26, 2024, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-many-students-are-taking-dual-enrollment-courses-in-high-school-new-national-state-and-college-level-data.html>.

## Set Up Campus Supports

Institutions and state associations need to consider how transfer students will be supported once they arrive on the independent college campus. Independents must be sure to create a culture that celebrates transfer students, respects their past experiences, and supports their unique needs. Financial aid, particularly scholarships and grants, is essential, as many transfer students have already exhausted a portion of their federal aid and may require additional assistance paying for college. Relatedly, institutions must strive to accept as many credits as possible and reduce students' time to degree. Given the demographic composition of transfer students, independents should also seek to integrate supports and policies for transfer students with existing policies for adult learners or other non-traditional populations to help meet their specific needs.

It is worth noting that many of these supports must be provided by individual college campuses, but that does not mean that state associations or other project leaders cannot intervene to encourage institutions to pursue such policies. As part of the guiding principles for their transfer initiative, NEBHE requires that institutions examine their policies to support transfer students and then tracks their progress via a survey. The results of the survey inform the professional development that is offered to campuses to help them improve their student support structures. While NEBHE cannot mandate that every institution adopt a particular policy, they hope that this initiative will encourage institutions to look inward and better support their incoming community college transfer students. Similarly, the Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities sponsored a series of campus self-studies to help institutions identify areas to improve support for transfer students. The consulting group Credo provided recommendations for each institution to address common student needs, such as offering transfer-specific orientation programming and improving services that address the needs of non-traditional students. Oregon plans to conduct follow-up evaluations in 2024 to assess the progress institutions have made to address these issues.

### Create a “Transfer-Friendly” Culture

One barrier to community college transfer success is the disorientation that arises from the vast differences in culture between community colleges and independent four-year liberal arts colleges. This



phenomenon, sometimes referred to as “transfer shock,” can lead to a dip in performance among students who have recently transferred. While community college transfer students can recover from this shock and perform just as well as their counterparts on average, there is a risk that this temporary drop in student performance can lead to academic probation, which can delay or prevent degree completion.

Institutions tend to address transfer shock by taking steps to make transfer students feel welcome on campus and part of the campus community. As such, it is imperative that institutions put as much careful consideration into the onboarding of transfer students as they do for first-year students. One key consideration is registration; transfer students often register late due to delays in determining how their credits will transfer and challenges covering tuition and other costs, which can lead to a less desirable schedule. Institutions should seek to provide credit reviews as early as possible and allow transfer students to register for courses at the same time as their “native” peers. Transfer-specific orientation, introductory coursework, and tailored academic and other supports can help with the transition from community college to the four-year institution. Institutions should consider providing more holistic supports to address students’ basic needs as well, since many community college students come from low-income backgrounds and may need more wraparound services.

## Managing Transfer Shock

Transfer orientation and advising can ameliorate transfer shock. Schools such as Johnson C. Smith University in North Carolina have developed sections of their orientation courses specifically for incoming transfer students. Staff at Johnson C. Smith noted that they let students participate in orientation seminars before they even transfer, making it easier for potential transfer students to imagine their experience as a four-year student. Campbell University in North Carolina also offers a new student seminar specifically for transfer students and provides dedicated advisors that specialize in working with transfer students. Transfer-specific advisors ensure that incoming community college students can register for the right courses and have the assistance they need when designing their path to a four-year degree. These can be paired with other academic supports to even better serve transfer students—Brevard College in North Carolina, for example, offers transfer-specific academic advisors as well as success mentors that are paired with incoming community college transfer students.

In addition to providing academic support, institutions should take steps to address every aspect of the transfer student experience. Staff at St. Catherine University in Minnesota noted that institutions should adjust residency policies, which often require that students reside in on-campus housing. While inviting transfer students to experience dorm life can incorporate them into campus culture, transfer students should also have the option to commute and reduce their cost of attendance. Providing a dedicated space on campus for transfer students is another way to make transfer students feel like they belong on campus. Institutions such as Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio have an office where transfer students can ask questions and retain a point of contact with the university. Dedicated space for transfer students can create a sense of community amongst transfer cohorts and housing many transfer-specific supports in one office can also reduce the burden of navigating complex college structures.

Often, creating a space that welcomes community college transfer students involves expanding holistic supports for all students. Capital University in Ohio partnered with nearby Columbus State Community College and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education to examine their transfer processes and identify additional holistic student supports, which are now being implemented. One of these programs allows Columbus State students to utilize housing on Capital's campus. Since Columbus State does not have the resources to provide affordable housing, Capital is currently allowing several students and their families to reside on campus less than three miles from their community college. Even if collaborating with local community colleges is not an option, independents should seek to provide holistic supports such as housing and childcare for transfer students and other student populations with higher levels of need.

Faculty also play a large role in creating a transfer-friendly culture. Institutions should consider professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to increase their familiarity with common challenges that transfer students face and strategies they can implement to support these students. For example, the Minnesota Private College Council hosted a virtual webinar, led by a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that focused on supporting transfer student success in the classroom for faculty from partner institutions. In North Carolina, NCICU partnered with the Gardner Institute to create two videos for faculty and staff professional development at independent institutions on the topics

of “Advising and Supporting Adult Students” and “Best Faculty Practices for Advising Transfer Student Success.” These and similar activities equip faculty with the knowledge and skills needed to provide crucial support for transfer students.

### **Commit to Fair Credit Transfer**

Part of making transfer students feel welcome on campus is honoring their experiences, including accepting credit for prior coursework. Accepting credit not only demonstrates to transfer students that their past academic experiences have value, but it also reduces time to degree. Minimizing the number of additional credits that transfer students must take before graduating is essential, especially since community college transfers may only have a limited amount of state or federal aid left to dedicate towards pursuing their degree. Independent colleges that wish to include unique graduation requirements should balance these requirements with the need to ensure that incoming transfer students can complete their degree in two years.

Honoring past credit can sometimes involve reimagining the curriculum structure at an institution. College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in Minnesota redesigned their general education curriculum to accept as much previously completed coursework as possible. A staff member from CSB/SJU noted that if transfer students are not able to transfer in credits and complete their degree in two years, colleges risk students’ willingness to come, so adjusting the curriculum to allow for more credit transfer is essential. Capital University in Ohio also made substantial changes to its general education curriculum. Capital switched from a goal-centric framework to a learning outcomes framework which better aligned with coursework that transfer students wanted to bring from their community colleges.

Independent institutions should be flexible about accepting transfer credits and communicate that flexibility to potential transfer students. However, it is also important to provide specific information so community college students know what is expected of them and understand which of their credits will transfer to a given independent institution. While flexibility is key, it must be accompanied by transparency.

## **Integrate Transfer with Initiatives around Adult Learners**

Project leaders and institutional staff members across states noted that strategies around encouraging adult learners to return and earn their degrees often align with strategies to increase transfer enrollment. This includes accepting different types of credits and credentials, including credit from examinations and military learning. At the institution level, offices and programs that support adult learners should consider policies that will support transfer students as well.

Institutions can consider merging supports for transfer students with those for adult students or other student populations. Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio has an office that focuses on and dedicates time towards issues relevant to student veterans, adult learners, and transfer students, among other groups. Merging these offices might be an option if institutions lack the space or resources to open a dedicated transfer office. Institutions in North Carolina like Gardner-Webb University also offer professional advisors for adult and transfer students who enroll in their online coursework. These advisors contact students twice a semester to ensure that they are on track to meet their academic and career goals.

## **Provide Dedicated Financial Aid**

While cultural change is certainly a barrier to transfer success, the direct financial burden of attending an independent college is often an even greater challenge for community college transfer students. The shift in cost from community college, with tuition in the hundreds of dollars, to independents with tuition in the thousands of dollars can be daunting. Even with grant aid from the federal government or other sources, community college transfer students can struggle to afford their four-year degree. Institutions should dedicate financial aid specifically for community college transfer students and take steps to reduce fees for these students, such as eliminating residency requirements as described above.

Many independent institutions offer institutional scholarships for incoming community college transfer students. Institutions like Johnson C. Smith University in North Carolina offer merit scholarships for students utilizing their articulation agreements who maintain a certain GPA at the community college level. Suffolk University in Massachusetts offers 20 to 30 percent off tuition for students transferring from a community college with a 3.0 GPA and offers a few additional transfer-specific merit

scholarships.<sup>24</sup> Wingate University in North Carolina has taken a slightly different approach by pledging that students transferring from nearby South Piedmont Community College will pay no more than \$2,500 out of pocket per year, after federal and state aid are applied and have made concerted efforts to advertise that pledge publicly. The president of Wingate explained that they made such a public pledge to remove the tuition sticker shock that deterred too many prospective students from applying to the institution.

Independent institutions can look to their peers in the public sector for additional ideas around transfer-specific aid. Public institutions and state systems have been implementing various award structures across the country. The state of Maryland, for example, has implemented a 2+2 Transfer Scholarship aimed at students who earn an associate degree, have a GPA of at least 2.5, and have attended a community college in the state. The program also offers higher awards for those pursuing degrees in fields with workforce shortages, such as teaching and STEM fields.<sup>25</sup> While the state only offers up to \$2,000 per year for eligible students, this is one model that private institutions can pursue if they wish to encourage community college transfer and align with workforce needs in their state.

### **Include Transfer Priorities in Institutional Strategic Plans**

To ensure transfer initiatives receive the funding and staffing needed to sustain them, institutions should incorporate their transfer priorities into their strategic plans. Institutional strategic plans are public documents that describe key focus areas and goals for an institution over several years, which guide institutional decision-making and operations. Including transfer-related goals into these plans affirms an institution's commitment to improving transfer and ensures transfer-related efforts remain a priority during budget planning. Many of the implementation states shared challenges related to staff turnover, which can slow the momentum of transfer progress when the work is turned over to staff who are less

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<sup>24</sup> "Undergraduate Scholarships & Grants," *Suffolk University*, <https://www.suffolk.edu/student-financial-services/types-of-financial-aid/undergraduate-students/scholarships-grants>.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Schmertz, Emily Dow, and Yuxin Lin, "Maryland's 2+2 Transfer Scholarship: A Preliminary Analysis," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/tackling-transfer/maryland%E2%80%99s-22-transfer-scholarship-preliminary-analysis>.

informed about transfer, have less capacity, or are less motivated to pursue transfer-related goals. A strategic plan cannot shield initiatives from the challenges of high staff turnover, but cementing transfer goals in a strategic plan can help the initiative weather staff turnover.

## **Assess and Evaluate the Efficacy of the Initiative**

Determining whether the initiative has achieved its goals is perhaps just as important as setting the goals and implementing the various aspects of an initiative. Evaluating the initiative will provide project leaders with a sense of the progress that has been made, the challenges that lay ahead, and the changes that can be made to move more quickly towards meeting the initiative's goals. Evaluations should focus on key outcomes such as increased enrollment and graduation and should examine the impact the initiative has on those outcomes in a state or region. Breaking down outcomes by income and other demographic characteristics will reveal the extent to which the initiative has addressed gaps in access and attainment and whether the initiative needs to make changes to meet the needs of various populations.

In addition to Ithaka S+R's assessment, some states have contracted separate evaluators to further examine the impact of their initiative. In North Carolina, NCICU partnered with the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) to conduct an evaluation of the initiative. CIC developed a survey to measure progress against their goals, collected data on enrollment, and worked with campuses to identify challenges and successes during early implementation. CIC released findings from the evaluation in a 2023 report to help other state associations seeking to develop discipline-specific transfer pathways with a transfer model.<sup>26</sup> OFIC in Ohio is also engaging an evaluator from CIC, which assisted OFIC in applying for their initial grant from Teagle and AVDF. The evaluator is conducting a qualitative evaluation of the early years of the initiative in Ohio and measuring progress against project goals. These more granular evaluations can supplement information from initiative-wide evaluations

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<sup>26</sup> The Council of Independent Colleges, "Paving the Way for Transfer Pathways in Psychology and Sociology," December 27, 2023, <https://cic.edu/research/community-college-transfer-pathways/>.

and provide key insights that can inform future years of implementation.

Both community college and independent colleges should also collect data on transfer students and their outcomes to measure progress towards initiative-wide and institutional goals. At the four-year college level, institutions should collect data on enrollment, application completions, financial aid awards, credit transfer rates, persistence rates, time to degree, cost, and bachelor's degree completion. Ideally, this data should be reported by key student subgroups and by major at the four-year school to provide insights into the effectiveness of discipline-specific pathways. At the community college level, data on transfer-out rates can be collected to assess the utilization of various transfer pathways and policies. Collecting data on the success of community college transfer students may help persuade reluctant community college administrators that their students thrive at independent colleges and that pursuing pathways beyond the public sector is beneficial. Moreover, these data can be leveraged to further expand transfer partnerships within a state or region, as NEBHE did to grow the Transfer Guarantee to three states in northern New England. NEBHE analyzed data on students participating in the Transfer Guarantee program in southern New England. The findings revealed that students who used the Guarantee withdrew from their receiving institutions at very low rates and, on average, achieved a GPA of 3.55 at the end of their first semester after transferring.<sup>27</sup> In addition, early completion data indicated that, on average, Guarantee students who earned a bachelor's degree did so within four semesters and had a GPA at graduation of 3.66. The NEBHE project leader acknowledged that an initiative's success in one state does not guarantee success in another. However, having data in hand demonstrating that transfer students perform well academically and are retained at institutions that have adopted the Transfer Guarantee has bolstered stakeholder confidence in the Guarantee.

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<sup>27</sup> New England Board of Higher Education, "New England Transfer Guarantee Second Annual Enrollment Report," March 2024, [https://nebhe.org/info/pdf/transfer/guarantee/Winter-2024\\_Guarantee-Enrollment-Report.pdf](https://nebhe.org/info/pdf/transfer/guarantee/Winter-2024_Guarantee-Enrollment-Report.pdf).

## Address Needed Project Maintenance

State associations and independent colleges must commit to maintaining the various aspects of transfer policy established by the initiative, whether that be disciplinary pathways or block transfer of general education credit. Institutions should convene relevant transfer staff periodically to ensure that incoming community college transfer students are able to bring in as many credits as possible and that pathways are not made obsolete by changing curricular requirements or course titles. At the state association level, time can be allocated during project-specific or general association meetings to check with each participating institution and ensure that transfer pathways are working as intended.

Maintenance of pathways may require additional resources beyond what has been budgeted for in the initial transfer project. When undertaking similar initiatives, state associations or other project leaders should ensure that there is funding available, either through an external funder or internally, to cover the maintenance of pathways. This could include resources to convene relevant transfer staff or conduct audits of transfer pathways.

Transfer tools, such as online transfer portals, must also be maintained to ensure the information housed within them remains accurate. Institutions and state organizations must determine the appropriate cadence for transfer portal maintenance and the parties responsible for updating the information over time, and ensure those expectations are clearly communicated to institutional partners. For example, all institutions featured in the Transfer Virginia portal are required to review and update their information in the portal twice a year as needed.



# Summary and Conclusion

Building better transfer pathways between community colleges and independent institutions has the potential to yield important benefits for both institutions and students. Independent institutions can boost their enrollment, and smooth transfer pathways can save students time and money in the process of completing their bachelor's degree by reducing confusion and credit loss in the transfer process. The experiences of the 14 states featured in this playbook provide important insights into the key steps and decisions institutions and associations should make when developing their own transfer policies and procedures, as well as illustrate the complexities of implementing new transfer strategies. Numerous stakeholders from independent and community colleges must be involved, including institutional leadership, faculty, and staff. Garnering buy-in with these groups takes time and care, since project leaders will likely need to align stakeholder interests and break down cross-institutional barriers.

Institutions and associations must strategically engage students at the college and even high school level to effectively convey the benefits of attending an institution that has historically been overlooked as a transfer destination. Further, students often turn to family and friends for advice, who are more likely to recommend the public institution that they themselves or someone they know attended, not a private institution they are much less familiar with. This requires that institutions first take stock of how well they are supporting current transfer students and develop strategies for improving that support so their campuses are more transfer-friendly, especially regarding the financial aid available to transfer students. Online tools, from one-stop-shop websites to advanced transfer portals, are incredibly helpful for raising awareness of available transfer pathways so students can make more informed transfer choices. Yet, students still heavily rely on their connections with their faculty and advisors for transfer guidance, so staff must be knowledgeable about transfer pathways and destinations so they can best assist students with their transfer plans.

Transfer pathways are long-term commitments that require sustained funding and staffing to be maintained. Transfer portals have become essential tools in the transfer landscape, but they are only useful if the information housed within them is accurate, and for these tools to remain

accurate, there must be staff who are tasked with reviewing and revising their content on a regular basis. Beyond maintaining transfer resources and pathways, institutions should seek ways to improve and expand their transfer systems so they may continue to meet the needs of key stakeholders. Many of the institutions across the participating states have already expanded or are currently working to expand their transfer pathways beyond their grant work. In Virginia, for instance, ten of the 13 participating institutions have committed to developing more than the two or three transfer pathway guides required by the grant, with some colleges seeking to develop 30 guides. Other states are already growing the number of discipline-specific transfer pathways between community colleges and independent institutions. In Iowa, three private colleges are working with a community college to develop a music pathway and several of the independent institutions in Ohio have used the grant as a scalable model for developing a new consortium consisting of nine four-year institutions and six two-year institutions to build transfer pathways in computer science. These expansions in transfer opportunities demonstrate how institutions across the nation are finding significant value in the transfer strategies supported by this initiative, but they also underscore the need for institutions and associations to ensure their transfer resources are kept up to date moving forward.

Though the grantees have established a strong foundation for improving transfer in their state, it is important to acknowledge that state policy and higher education context are dynamic and may necessitate revisions to transfer strategies or management. For example, when the initiative began in Connecticut, there were 12 community colleges in the state. However, in summer 2023, Connecticut consolidated those 12 institutions into a single statewide system—Connecticut State Community College.<sup>28</sup> This change bodes well for improving transfer in the state in the long term since independent institutions in Connecticut will only need to form and maintain transfer pathways with a single system in the state. But in the short term, the consolidation has brought new administrative challenges. A representative from the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC) described how the consolidation changed institutional leadership and points of contact, so institutions have had to reform those communication lines. The consolidation has also prompted a reframing of

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<sup>28</sup> Sara Weissman, “Connecticut Community College Merger Imminent,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2023/06/27/connecticut-community-college-merger-imminent>.

transfer for many independent institutions. While they may still feel beholden to the community college campuses nearest to their institution, the consolidation means that independent institutions must form new relationships with campuses across the state. Project leaders are now working to move transfer resources to a centralized CSCC source, so information is consistent and easily accessible for all campuses. Connecticut's experience illustrates how institutions engaged in transfer partnerships must remain flexible, as they will likely need to adapt to changes—both big and small—to those pathways in years to come.

The time to make transferring from community colleges to independent colleges simpler and more efficient is now. This playbook outlines the general process for this work and highlights significant factors that should be taken into consideration, yet the circumstances of states and institutional systems are unique and may require alternative approaches to be successful. But while there may be some variation in how systems tackle transfer, this work, at its core, is built on the willingness of institutions to consult with various stakeholders involved in student transfer across their partner institutions. It requires an openness to new ideas and compromises when necessary, as well as a commitment to maintaining this work over the long term. The collaboration between independent institutions and community colleges across the 14 states involved in the Transfer Pathways to the Liberal Arts initiative have yielded valuable lessons on how to build successful transfer pathways at scale while prioritizing student success.

# Appendix A: Data Collection

To gather information on the progress of the initiatives included in this playbook, we reviewed documentation submitted to the Teagle Foundation and Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, which included the states' implementation grant proposals and yearly grant updates detailing the extent of their progress thus far. Our documentation review was supplemented by desk research on the current transfer landscape and a review of our previously published report on community college to independent college transfer.<sup>29</sup>

To supplement our review of the documentation, in 2021, we surveyed independent college faculty, community college faculty, and community college administrators to better understand their role and willingness to participate in transfer initiatives. A total of 33 independent and community college faculty and six community college administrators participated in the survey and their insights were incorporated into the relevant sections of the playbook. We also gleaned information on the use of technology in transfer initiatives from a transfer technology meeting held in November 2021 by the Teagle Foundation.

In addition, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with state association leaders and institutional staff members. In 2021, we conducted seven interviews with seven state and regional association members and 15 institutional staff members across the four grantees covered in this playbook. Interviews covered topics related to grantees' experiences planning and implementing their transfer initiatives. After each interview, we sent an email to the interviewees with additional questions. Responses to the questions were also used to inform the contents of the playbook. In 2022, our team interviewed state association leaders and institutional research directors in ten of the grantee states to better understand institutions' data collection and submission processes and capabilities. Information gleaned through these interviews informed the playbook and the development of a data collection template

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<sup>29</sup> Meagan Wilson, Julia Karon, and Rayane Alamuddin, "Transfer Pathways to Independent Colleges: Strategies for Improving Community College Transfer-In and Bachelor's Degree Completion in the Private Sector, *Ithaka S+R*, June 11, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313368>.

institutions use to monitor their progress over time. In 2024, we conducted 21 group interviews—11 with institutional stakeholders and 10 with state association leaders. As with the first round of interviews, these interviews covered topics related to grantees’ experiences of their transfer initiative work funded by the grant and their plans for transfer-focused work moving forward.

## **Appendix B: Acknowledgements**

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