The Efficacy of Transfer Policy and Practice in the State of Texas
Research Report

This research was a collaboration between the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, previously at the University of North Texas and now at the University of North Georgia, and UNT’s Center for Higher Education. Funding for this project was generously provided by the TG Philanthropy Program. The views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of our partners and funders.

Introduction

The National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (NISTS), formerly hosted at the University of North Texas (UNT), and UNT’s Center for Higher Education was awarded funding from the TG Public Benefit Program to conduct research to fill gaps and provide further inquiry into the policies and programs that enhance and hinder higher education transfer student success in the state of Texas, an exercise essential to improving both and moving Texas closer to the college graduation goals of “Closing the Gaps in 2015.” While the research conducted was Texas-focused, the findings and methods of inquiry have national implications and potential for replication. The results of this study also contribute to the national conversation, particularly as the research relates to underserved students, where these issues and their resolution are most immediately and directly felt.

Building upon recommendations made following the 2008 Presidents’ and Chancellors’ Transfer Success Summit, sponsored by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and facilitated by NISTS, the research explored the efficacy of Texas educational policies and institutional programs relating to transfer student success and baccalaureate degree attainment. Research objectives were to explore: 1) how campus administrators perceive and enact transfer policies; 2) transfer experiences of community college students preparing to transfer and university students who have recently transferred to four-year institutions from community colleges; and 3) whether transfer experiences of minority, first-generation, and non-traditional students differ from transfer students’ experiences in general.

Qualitative research was conducted during site visits to thirteen Texas two- and four-year public institutions, utilizing in-depth individual interviews and focus groups, as well as a quantitative review of relevant university policies and programs. A graduate course on qualitative inquiry was built around the research and was a primary source of trained site investigators. Dissemination of the findings for the benefit of state legislators and institutions of higher education has been, and will be, intended to enhance and refine both policy development and its implementation. Improved policy and practice will have direct benefit for all students, particularly for lower-income and minority students who are heavily concentrated in two-year
institutions, and will increase successful matriculation and achievement of a four-year degree in a timely and cost effective manner.

**Brief Literature Review**

**Transfer Efficiency**
More than half of university graduates nationwide complete degrees with credits from more than one institution (Adelman, 2005). In Texas, the number increases to nearly 80% (THECB, 2008). While migration patterns include swirling and reverse transfer, the clear majority of transfer students follow the traditional community college-to-university pathway (Handel, 2007), with 75% of freshmen and sophomores enrolled at Texas higher education institutions in 2008-2009 doing so in community colleges. In an era when community college enrollments continue to swell due to the general economy and rising tuition rates, fulfilling the mission of preparing individuals to transfer to universities becomes more crucial (Cutright, 2010).

National research trends indicate students entering higher education through community colleges generally have not been as successful at getting four-year degrees (Long and Kurlaender, 2009); whereas in Texas, community college students completing at least 30 semester credit hours have university GPA and graduate rates comparable to native students (Malandra & Walne, 2007). This is not an issue exclusively for two-year institutions, but rather requires the attention of all higher education entities. Many solutions will be based in knowing more about today’s transfer students and understanding the institutional ideology and the way culture organizes practices associated with transfer (Shaw and London, 2001). Community college and transfer students are delightfully diverse. Data reflect that many of the nation’s traditionally underserved populations (i.e., minority, low-income, and first-generation students) begin their post-secondary education at community colleges (NCES, 2011; Perna and Titus, 2004). Additionally, our two- and four-year institutions are seeing an influx of veterans returning educational ambitions, government assistance, and large caches of transfer credits (ACE, 2009).

Strengthening of transfer rates from two- to four-year colleges, and ultimate baccalaureate degree attainment for these students will continue to take on increasing importance in coming years. Economic circumstances accelerating the population growth of transfer students who start at a community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution; the intention of some public universities in financially pressed states to cap or reduce enrollments as a means of cost control; and the tendency of minority, financially disadvantaged, and first-generation students to choose community college enrollment as a path to the baccalaureate, all make the risks of successful transfer and ultimate degree completion more acute. Finally, national and state completion agenda necessitate a focus on ensuring successful transfer.

**Law and Policy Context**
State policy—an interaction of law, institutional financial support, and regulation—can, in theory, have an effect on successful transfer. Facilitating successful transfer has certainly been the intention in the growth of policies such as common course numbering systems, financial incentives to institutions for the graduation of transfer students (Titus, 2009), reverse awarding of degrees, and required acceptance of associate degree holders to junior status. All of these
policies represent policy makers’ increasing focus on transfer issues. While state policies appear to influence institutional selection (Perna and Titus, 2004), virtually all research over the past decade has concluded that state policy, weak or strong, has had little or no effect on transfer success, and particularly on four-year degree completion (Wellman, 2002; Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Roska & Keith, 2008).

Quantitative analyses dominating the research to date indicate little as to whether these failures are ones of poor design or poor implementation (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009). Regarding design, do policies offer sufficient incentive or penalties to institutions to enhance performance? Likewise, are there unintended consequences of policy that work against transfer focus, such as penalties for time-to-degree, when many community college students are engaged in attenuated patterns of enrollment? Regarding implementation, are institutions, particularly universities, thwarting the intention of transfer policy by the most conservative of interpretations of transfer eligibility and credit acceptance? These possibilities have been suggested in the literature, but are essentially unsubstantiated by research.

Student experience in the transfer process can tell us a great deal about how policy translates into practice. Surprisingly, there is a paucity of research based on dialogues with transfer and transfer-intent students about their institutional experiences as relate to successful transfer. Existing research is small-scale and single-institution. In light of the importance of additional research to improve individual institutional practice, the existing limited studies do little to inform views of the efficacy of state policy on a larger scale.

As costs for education increase, we can expect more external regulation of transfer processes and acceptance of credits. National and state completion agendas also necessitate a better understanding of transfer and the mitigation of unnecessary policy barriers to matriculation and graduation. Systems and institutions are advised to address the issues through consistent and progressive institutional action based on solid and plentiful data. This project seeks to develop solutions to the challenges of transfer by offering higher education professionals at two- and four-year institutions the opportunity to examine state policies, transfer trends and data, and develop partnerships for action in a dynamic and concentrated setting. Also included in the conversation will be crucial state education agencies and legislative entities. Setting the state’s transfer agenda through policy and practice refinement will ultimately improve transfer student success and supports our nation’s college completion agenda.

**Higher Education in the State of Texas**

Texas boasts 146 public and independent institutions of higher education; including 50 public community college districts (with multiple campuses), 38 public four-year universities and upper-division centers, and four campuses in the Texas State Technical College System. Between fall 2000 and fall 2010, enrollment in Texas public community colleges increased 67.1 percent (from 431,934 students to 721,962 students). During that same period, enrollment in Texas public four-year institutions increased by 34.5 percent (from 414,626 students to 557,550 students) (THECB, 2012).

With a nearly 21% increase in population between 2000 and 2010, Texas recorded the fastest growth of any state in America. At the same time, the percentage of adults over the age of 25...
who hold at least a two-year degree is below the national average. According to the 2010 Census data, only 32% of Texans in this age group hold degrees, compared to a national average of 38% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Lumina Foundation has established a goal to increase the higher education attainment rate of the United States to 60 percent by the year 2025. Implications for Texas are that given the current increases in attainment rate, the state will experience a near 21% degree gap in 2025. To remedy this, there will need to be an 8% annual increase in the number of degrees awarded in the state (Lumina, 2012).

In 2000, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, realizing that Texas lagged behind other states, launched an ambitious plan designed to increase the state’s higher education graduation numbers. “Closing the Gaps by 2015” was thus designed to bring Texas into parity among the ten most populous states in four areas of higher education – participation, success, excellence, and research. This comprehensive approach called for both two-year and four-year institutions to demonstrate plans for improvement in these four crucial areas. One significant area of concern has been the transition and completion of transfer students. While there have been significant increases in enrollment rates and the number of degrees awarded by public two-year and four-year institutions in Texas, a significant proportion of students either stop-out or drop-out before degree completion.

Research from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2009) indicates only 20% of the state’s Academic Associate (AA) graduates make application to attend four-year institutions, in spite of the near 100% acceptance rate of transfers in Texas. Further, students who stop out after completing the two-year degree can get lost in the mix since they are not flagged as a “non-persister” by either the two- or four-year institutions. When coupled with a weak policy/practice environment, this reality is exacerbated, as illustrated in recent research (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009) questioning the efficacy of state policies relating to increasing transfer success and graduation from a four-year institution.

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**Study Design**

For the large scale qualitative study, a total of fourteen institutions were originally targeted for study, seven four-year institutions and seven two-year institutions. Four-year institutions were chosen based on a combination of: 1) the size of their transfer enrollment (institutions enrolling the highest number of community college transfer students), 2) location within different state regions (regional diversity), and 3) inclusion of each of the six Texas state higher education systems. Based on 2008 Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) enrollment data, the primary criteria for choosing the community colleges was the overall number of transfer students enrolling in the selected universities such that community colleges sending the largest number, or among the largest number of transfer students to each of the selected universities were chosen. In the end, one two-year institution chose not to participate, resulting in a total of thirteen institutional site visits.

Each site was visited by a two-person team consisting of a project principle investigator and a graduate student enrolled in a year-long qualitative research methods class. Graduate students
conducted the student focus group interviews, while faculty investigators conducted administrator interviews. In some cases graduate students observed some administrator interviews and project investigators were able to observe some student focus groups.

**Administrator Interviews**

In order to explore how campus administrators, at multiple levels, perceived and enacted transfer policies, a purposeful sample of interviews was conducted with a cross-section of between four and seven administrators at each campus for a total of sixty-seven individual interviews and five small focus group interviews. The project coordinator worked with a campus liaison at each site to recruit professionals from four functional areas, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and registrar. Additionally, input was solicited from the two most senior-level administrators involved in transfer efforts. It was important to the researchers to interview both senior administrators involved in transfer policy and/or implementation at either the institutional or the student and mid-level administrators responsible for directing and/or implementing departmental activities serving transfer students to explore if those who were responsible for directly administering the polices and/or who worked directly with students had differing perceptions on policy efficacy.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts of the administrator interviews were reviewed by the project investigators, and an initial set of codes developed for six specific transfer policies. Two graduate students then went through transcripts and pulled out quotes based on the list of codes. From these, a comparative analysis was conducted to explore how administrators in universities and community colleges perceived and enacted transfer policies, unintended consequences of these policies, and suggestions for improving transfer policies and practice.

**Student Focus Group Interviews**

Student experience in the transfer process can tell us a great deal about how policy is enacted through institutional practices. Two student focus groups were conducted at each of the sites. Our primary campus contact at each site helped us to recruit students via email, flyers and word of mouth. Criteria for inviting students to participate included community college students with intent to transfer, and university students who had transferred from a community college. Each focus group lasted 90-minutes. The size of focus groups varied between four and fifteen students, with an average of ten participants. Twelve student focus groups were conducted at six university sites, (125 participants), and twelve student focus groups were conducted at six community college sites (128 participants). Recognizing that in order to participate in a 90-minute focus group interview on campus students may need to forgo work time, may have to secure childcare or occur other expenses, each focus group participant was given a $30 cash gift and a light meal such as sandwiches or pizza was provided for each group.

Graduate students were trained to conduct the student focus group interviews. A semi-structured protocol elicited participants’ experiences navigating transfer, including questions on how they learned about transfer requirements and recommendations for other students. At the end of the interview, students completed a brief questionnaire so that we could gather information on the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups (See Table 1).
Each focus group was digitally recorded, and recordings were transcribed directly by the graduate student interviewer. Student focus group data was analyzed as part of the special TG project research course. After an initial, independent review by each graduate student, two teams of field researchers then coded each transcript at a descriptive level of analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Next, the teams came together to discuss the initial coding schema and arrived at consensus on a set of descriptive codes. Codes were revised and continued to develop as data was received. The findings reported later in this report focus on three themes: 1) student perceptions of transfer advising, 2) the need for comprehensive transfer advising, and 3) services and programs that promote the building of transfer capital.

Administrator Findings

Four to seven administrators were interviewed at each of the thirteen university and community college campuses across Texas where the site visits were conducted. Key informants were recruited from a combination of more senior-level administrative positions in departments such as admissions, financial aid, and advising who would have knowledge of state transfer policies, and mid-level administrators who were familiar with, and involved in, policy implementation. In semi-structured interviews, participants were essentially asked to reflect on the efficacy of state transfer policies in helping their institution successfully serve transfer students. The primary themes that emerged from transcript data relate directly to the administrators’ perceptions of transfer policies and are detailed below. Additional themes discussed include transfer course applicability to degree programs, institutional recognition for successful transfer students, administrator perceptions and comments on academic and transfer advising. Lastly, participant recommendations for policy and examples of practice are presented.

Administrator Perceptions of Texas State Transfer Policies
When queried about Texas state transfer policies, several specific policies were mentioned frequently by name, listed in order of frequency of quotes: 1) The Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS), 2) The 6-Drop Rule, 3) The 3-Peet Rule, and 4) The 30 Excess Hour Rule. The majority of participants articulated positive aspects of each policy. In many cases they discussed an understanding of the original rational for the policy, but then at times followed with comments about unintended consequences of the policy or its implementation that negatively affect transfer students, and in some cases resulted in institutional burdens to a variety of already under-resourced staff who serve students. The pros and cons of each policy, as perceived by university administrators, are presented below, along with institutional examples of policy implementation and participant suggestions for improving policy and/or practice. More, rather than fewer, quotes are included in the following sections to support the trustworthiness of our findings and coding schemes.

Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS)
The Texas Common Course Numbering System is a voluntary, co-operative effort among Texas community colleges and universities to facilitate transfer of lower level undergraduate courses. By providing a common number for courses that have been identified as equivalent by the college or university that offers the course, courses can be more efficiently transferred between two participating TCCNS institutions. The common numbering applies only to academic and
degree program courses and does not apply to workforce and technical degree programs. Students and academic advisors have access to a fully searchable resource that includes common course numbering for the 110 Texas postsecondary institutions that participate in TCCNS (TCCNS, 2012).

Virtually every participant mentioned the Common Course Numbering System has been highly useful for articulating course credit between institutions, helped streamline transcript evaluation procedures, and benefited students by helping to maximize the number of community college credits they can transfer to the university. For example,

_The TCCN matrix that they have is awesome because right now I'm working with admissions and we're looking at the TCCN matrix and what I'm doing is going in and making sure that equivalencies are updated on the matrix...and now they've hired temps to put that into the main frame system so that when evaluators get the information they can articulate and it'll just be exact, and that is totally awesome._

— University Director of Academic Advising Transition Center

_The common course numbering system has been very helpful because we do the lower division, and because we do a 42 hour core, all but 18 of those hours are fairly well defined and that has really, for the community college student been a tremendous advantage._

— Community College Vice President of Instruction

_The Texas Common Course Numbering System, which has been huge I think for the state of Texas. Certainly in working with the colleges and universities, changes in degree programs, degree requirements. I'm hoping we've stayed up current with the Common Course Numbering System. I know that has been something that has been tremendously helpful for many, many, many, including my daughter._

— Community College, Vice President for Student Success

Students who have knowledge of the TCCNS, and know which institution(s) they are interested in transferring to, can use the electronic system to plan ahead and check if their intended courses will transfer to the university.

_I think for our part, the beauty of it is that it enables a student to self-advise, because if they know that they have to satisfy these kinds of requirements for this particular degree plan, and they're already at another institution, the Texas Common Course Numbering system helps a great deal because they can basically — if they're using common sense, they can walk through the steps, I think, and realize that, "Oh, if I take this class here, it satisfies that course there."

— University Associate Dean, Admissions Advising

_Explaining Texas common course numbers, and showing students that if they take dual credit English in high school, if they take English at [the university], if they take English at the community college, it's all the same class and they receive the same credit. So, students don't necessarily have to sit out of college even if they_
have to sit out of [the university]. It seems to help students a lot, especially with not losing the momentum and ending up dropping out of higher education entirely.

— University, Academic Advisor

We love the common course numbering system. That has been a great, great help in terms of transcript evaluation... But I think overall for the students it’s been very, very positive because there’s been much less loss of you know, transfer credit in terms of that.

— University, Assistant Dean, Admissions

From the university perspective, an additional benefit of TCCNS is the increased potential for recruiting transfer students from outside of the region, beyond the local sending community colleges. For example,

I would say the first piece that helps us, and this has been going on for a couple of years now, is the Texas Common Course Numbering System...the joke is that it’s not really that common, but, at least, it’s an opportunity to make sure that students know completing this course at this institution will be the equivalent of the course at the place they’re going to transition to and transfer and hope to get a bachelor’s degree... I think that’s been the biggest thing for us. And we had articulation agreements and such before TCCNS was out there, but I think it’s only allowed us to be able to attract students from other places that maybe we don’t have large feeders.

— University, Director of Student Recruitment

Although noting many positive aspects of TCCNS, about two-thirds of the participants also described several of the System’s limitations, which include the fact that TCCNS is a voluntary system, not all universities have chosen to participate, and universities have final discretion in assigning course equivalencies. There was consensus among participants, even among those from institutions that have not adopted TCCNS that it should be mandated. As it currently stands, there is certain amount of confusion, especially at the community college in advising students. For example,

Common course numbering. That would be great if we used it. We don't use a common course numbering system. We use our own numbering system and then we refer to the common course numbering system. So if you want to influence state policy, if there's a common course, can we please use it? Can we just call it that?

— University, Associate Dean, University Advising

...why we can't all just come together, especially since we have the core indicators? We were already saying, okay, this is the Common Course Numbering System. We're saying that these are the core indicators. We're putting those on the transcript. So it would seem that the next logical step would be that universities embrace that system as well.

— University, Associate Dean, Undergraduate Admissions
You’re talking about state-wide policy though, so common course, field of study, core curriculum, those are good things. If, institutions aren’t using common course numbering, that’s a problem. That becomes a problem. It just becomes hard to understand.

-Community College, Director of Admissions

I just don’t — allowing four-year institutions to just decide on their own whether they’re going to participate or not is not a good thing. It does not help that student to transfer easily. I wish it was mandated.

-Community College, Academic Coordinator

Institutions that do not [fall] underneath that Texas common numbering system. That has got to be the biggest [barrier to advising transfer students] and that’s the one that is always rearing its ugly head.

-Community College, Academic Coordinator

The common course summary system has helped, although I don’t think it’s a very complete – it kind of is misleading to some extent because a lot of students assume well, that’s the only courses that will transfer, and of course we know that there’s more. And of course the community colleges have common course equivalents, but the four-year institutions still have their own numbering system, which makes things very confusing.

-Community College Director of Transfer Center

Keeping courses in the system up to date is a perpetual challenge, especially with myriad, and often changing, departmental course and curricular changes. Participants commented on the fact the TCCNS is great “when it’s up to date,” but frequently community college advisors reported that even for universities that do participate in the TCCNS, university websites were out of date.

...I’m not sure what’s happened with keeping [TCCNS] up to date, but it seems like the last time the online searchable one was updated was in ’07. Unless I’m just missing a new updated version.

- Community College Manager of Student Services

The TCCNS, the Texas Common Numbering web site is now maintained by UT San Antonio, and I think that they just became responsible for that. What I love about the core, and it’s the core and the common numbering crosswalk, is that it’s great when it’s up to date. I don’t know what the best decision is, because, one, you’re not giving the student any guidance; two, you’re giving them guidance that’s possibly outdated and incorrect. So is it better to have something like that or nothing at all?

— University, Assistant Registrar
We use the Texas Common Course Numbering System website a lot, but it's dated and it hasn't been updated from what I see in the computer. Somebody did research on it and set it up for us, but they haven't updated it.

-Community College, Counseling Coordinator

Not surprisingly, when participants offered suggestions for policy change, it was to make TCCNS mandatory for all institutions.

That every catalogue would have a common course number. If every school that uses a common course number English 1301, it would say, Texas common course number right next to it. And that way, we don't have to, when we evaluate it, we just know okay, this is English 1301, it is English 1301 here as well.

-University, Assistant Registrar

...making [TCCNS] mandatory for people, even if we don't go to an actual common course number, that all schools be required to update their material because some of it is like three, four years old. They're not even using the same numbers.

- University, Admissions

The 6-Drop Rule
Beginning with the fall of 2007 academic term, the 6-Drop Rule, (S.B. 1231), was passed to limit the number of times over an undergraduate career a student can withdrawal from courses after the semester’s “census date”. The six drops are cumulative and apply to drops incurred at both two-year and four-year institutions and at both in-state and out-of-state institutions. After six drops, the student is denied permission to drop any remaining courses. The law is designed to encourage students to graduate in a more timely fashion thus limiting the amount of debt and student loans they incur. Institutions must track student withdrawals and have procedures for determining the reasonableness of the withdrawal, in some case granting permission to students to withdraw from more than six courses. The policy is not intended to penalize students whose life circumstances cause them to withdraw from several courses. Administrators appreciated the idea behind the policy in regards to expediting student degree/certificate completion, but several were emphatic in their desire to see the policy changed.

Particularly troubling is the fact that students enrolled in community colleges tend to drop courses at a higher rate than students enrolled in four-year institutions for a number of reasons. Thus, community college students who transfer are more likely to have already reached their 6-drop limit than native students who have been enrolled for the same number of semesters at a four-year institution.

I personally would like to see that excessive hour go away and this six course drop rule. Those are the two worst rules out there. If the State would require universities to have to accept an associate degree I think more of our students would complete that.

-Community College, Coordinator of Transfer

See if you can get the six drop rule rescinded.
Tell 'em [legislature] how crazy that is. So getting involved in that — there are as many exceptions as there are the rules. And it’s just a nightmare.

-Community College, Vice President of Student Support

...I think all of us are still in the process of trying to make [the 6-drop rule] work. It’s certainly easier for incoming freshmen, but... at this point it’s been a detriment, it’s actually harmed students. Whether or not it actually serves its purpose is another matter. I have no way of knowing — until we go through this for five or ten years, I mean, I would think that if it’s an effective piece of legislation, then we could look back in five or ten years and say, “Wow, look at the improved rate of graduations.” The time to graduation has actually gone down. I mean, but I think that’s still an open question. I think it creates stress for students sometimes, and I think most public universities have tried to create rules and policies which accommodate some of the real world situations that students face....You know, sometimes the need to drop a class is outside their control. I mean, their — their employer changes their hours. Well, you know, so you have the 6-drop maximum, but I think you also have to have some ability to waive or create exceptions in that, where good sense dictates it....Otherwise we — we're driving students away from the university, which is exactly the opposite that we wanted to do.

— University, Enrollment Management Marketing

Transfer students are more likely to come up against the 6-Drop Rule after having transferred to the university.

For instance, the six drop rule...they carry that with them when they get to the four year and then once they have exhausted the six drops then the four-year [institution] can charge out of state tuition. And this is a population that can afford that the least, probably. And so, but it doesn’t hit them here. It hits them after they transfer and I don’t know if there are resources there to help deal with that, so that’s another. I mean, there are little things like that that kind of it’s part of the transfer conversation.

-Community College, Vice President of Academic Affairs

The six drop rule is also something that our students are very aware of, and they have, have concerns about that, that some are spending more time at a community college, and they use their drops, then what happens when they go to that four year university, and they are in classes that are at a higher level, and more difficult, or something happens within their families, or their personal lives, that would necessitate dropping, and how that could affect them and the completion of their four-year degrees.

-Community College, Academic Advisor

The six drop policy... many students who are in community college maybe they don’t encounter the six drops until they get to [university name] so they’re going to be surprised that they cannot drop any more courses.

-University, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies

The onus of tracking withdrawals falls upon institutions, and some institutions have developed student-centered practices to help students avoid running afoul of the policy, such as sending students an email at the end each semester reminding them of their 6-drop status, and taking advantage of the flexibility within the policy to individually determine if a student can have a withdrawal exempted. Below, administrators described how they implemented procedures for tracking withdrawals with a care for not penalizing students whose life circumstances caused them to withdraw from courses.

It’s tough, but what we’re finding is that especially when it comes to the student, it’s giving them a heads up. So at the end of the semester, for example, I mentioned to you earlier that we do a disenrollment. And so for the students, again, listening to the students and their concerns, we’ve gone back and changed some of our processes. And one of the things that we do at the end of the semester after grades are posted, we send an e-mail to the student to let them know what their six drop status is. Although they can actually go in by self-serve and see where they are, we still send them an e-mail just to give them a head’s up.

- University, Registrar

Our six-drop rule, when we were told we had to implement it, one of the concerns by our Provost was that it would not hurt anyone on their graduation. That’s their goal, is to graduate. So we have – and it is documented in our registration system – but once they meet that six-drop limit, then the screen comes up, and they have a list of several justifiable reasons to be able to drop. They are allowed to pick one of those reasons, and if they do, then they do not have to go any further, and it doesn’t – we allow them to drop it, and it doesn’t count because we call that a justifiable reason. Very few, if any, go and pick the last reason, “None of these reasons above apply; I have to go to my advisor.” So that’s how we do the six-drop rule. So I can’t see that it really hurts them. I do know that there’s a few times whenever – because of illnesses – which students will reach that sixth drop, and parents will be concerned and will come in. and then that’s when we – those are excusable, and we just ask for documentation. They’ll bring in that into our office, and we’ll take care of it from there.

-University, Registrar

A community college administrator described her institution’s process for helping to manage student withdrawals before students hit the six drop limit,

Regarding the six drop rule – we have it coded in our system where if the student drops we can, that we’ll count it – but we manually have to look at every drop because there are reasons and exceptions why students have to drop. And so we
have to manually go into the system and remove the, take off the counter when the student meets one of the exceptions. And so, basically, at the end of every semester we are going through probably a thousand drops to try to determine if the student really should be penalized for their drop. And the reasons for the students’ dropping changed during the semester. Maybe they dropped the first class 'cause it was hard but then by the end of the semester they had babysitting problems and so now they have to leave school and so we don’t want to count those against them. So, it’s a manual process, and it’s growing and it really, really hurts the community college student - academically, and it prevents them from being able to transfer when they want to. So it just, I don’t see one good thing about the bill.

-Community College, Director of Admissions

A handful of participants shared that the policy “has no teeth behind it,” because institutions have discretion to administer the policy, taking maximum advantage of mitigating circumstances. Yet, one noted, “institutions feel compelled to spend a lot of time administering it and some students are being penalized.” In spite of the loopholes in the policy, some transfer students, many of whom were not even aware of the policy, find that it may adversely affect their GPA or degree completion. For example,

And we also recognize that the transfer student population, you’ve got a very non-homogeneous group. We don’t have the 17-, 18-year-old freshman just out of high school...You’ve got those that may be 19 years old with 30 hours of coursework, or coming back to pursue a second bachelor’s degree. And I think that’s where we really wanted to make sure the bulk of their time is spent in their academic college, having that connection with the college and also hearing about some of the state regulations, as far as the 30-hour cap, the 6-W rule, those kinds of things, mandates from the state, as well as university policy and the college policy, as well.

–University, Director of Student Recruitment

So if you attempt then dropped [more than] six hours, I mean, of course, that’s a lot of W’s. Now, the University, and I don’t know if this is State policy or what policy this is, but there’s a 6-W rule. Basically, you’re allowed six W’s, and that, in and of itself, has big implications. Students will take an F now instead of getting a W, which who does that benefit? How are you trying to help this kid? He’ll sit there – I don’t know. Are we now hindering them from graduating because now they’re going to have even longer to bring up that F? I see lots of students that just take F’s, “Well, you have a 6-W rule.”

–University, Director of Financial Aid

And having that limit of six [withdrawals] through their entire academic career...I think that’s... a tough one for the students. ...I don’t know that all institutions or really how good a job they’re doing tracking that and making students aware of... that policy so I would say like, for the transfer students...those are the two policies that it’s really hard for them is when they transfer
and they've been here maybe, depending, you know, like with the 30 hour rule they may have been here a semester or two and now they've got this huge bill and they're like "What's this all about?" Or when we're...when the advisors are meeting with them and talking about these policies then they're going "Well no one ever told me about that policy." –University, E.D. Advising

The 3-Peat Rule

Effective as of 2005-2006, the 3-Peat Rule places a limit on the number of times a student may take a course and the college/university will receive reimbursement from the state. The intent of the policy is to discourage students from repeating courses, and from the state having to pay, or reimburse institutions for repeated courses. Since the institution cannot submit for reimbursement a course when the student enrolls a third time in the same, or substantially the same course, some elect to charge a higher, or out-of-state, tuition rate which allows the institution to recover some of the cost. Like the 6-Drop Rule, several administrators explained that they understood the intent of this rule, but noted that it is most likely to affect transfer students after they have transferred to the university.

Now, the repeat rule – that I see more of its bothering students, financially, especially; I mean, you have to pay out-of-state tuition. But I understand what the state – why we’re having to do that. And I feel like that we encourage them, if possible, to go to a community college or a junior college to avoid that repeat. But now, if it’s an upper level, there’s really nothing else we can do.

-University, Registrar

Students repeat courses for a number of reasons, including not feeling academically prepared to complete the class, trying to raise their grade, life circumstances that may prevent them from finishing class, and when attending several different institutions. There’s a 3-peat rule, and that usually hits a lot of the students because they may take a class at three different institutions, and it hurts them, of course – their GPA. So that, and the fact that each institution has a different rule then affects that student because if they took the class at, let’s say, [name of community college], and they retook it there – took the same class there again, so that’s twice. They may take it a third time there, and the community college may count it very different than what we would count it. They may just take the last course. For us, we’re, of course, gonna take the last two courses. So I think that may be not that great for the student, because they’re thinking they’re trying to raise their GPA, when in fact when they transfer to a four-year it may drop it.

–University, Dean of Admissions

As mentioned above, the 3-Peat rule is more likely to catch up with transfer students at the university level, and as echoed later in the student focus-group interviews, few students seem to be aware of this policy until they receive a billing statement in the mail for extra tuition.

The repeating the courses more than twice, students have to pay additional fees and most community colleges are not enforcing something like that and
sometimes they're not encountering those difficulties [at the community college] so sometimes in the job that I do here, basically is all the students who petition to waive their additional fees they come to me, many of them. So, here, I don't know, they don't know that such a rule existed... basically they have not been advised because they have not reached that point [prior to coming to the university].

- University, Associate Dean, Undergraduate Studies

The 30 Excess Hour Rule
The 30 Excess Hour Rule went into effect for first-time students in fall 2006 and is intended to provide financial incentives for institutions to facilitate expeditious degree completion. The rule refers to the amount of hours a student can take beyond the 120 credit hours typically required for most baccalaureate degrees. Students who go beyond the 30 excess hours may be charged out-of-state tuition. The rule also applies to dual credit courses; but does not apply to remedial and developmental courses (within 27 hours), special topics and seminar courses, independent study, or continuing education courses repeated to retain professional certification. Consistent with administrator perceptions of previous policies, participants were supportive of the spirit of the policy, but noted unintended consequences for transfer students. This was particularly true given that previously, at both universities and community colleges, it was permissible, advisable even, for students to explore interests by taking different types of courses.

I don't know if it's changed, but you could take two classes for the price of one. And before this rule [30 Hour Rule] came into effect, this was kind of a selling point. Well look, you can take six hours and it's the same cost as if you were just taking one, and if you decide you don't like that class you can drop it. I mean there really was that perspective that W's [withdrawals] are okay. And now the philosophy has really changed because students need to understand that there are financial consequences if they hit this mark.

-Community College, Transfer Center Coordinator

And now, of course, you potentially can create problems for students by suggesting that they take exploratory courses that in fact they don't follow-up on because of state legislation that penalizes students who take more than 30 hours above the minimum for a degree, or it eliminates them for consideration for the speedy graduation, which is – they receive a payment of up to $1,000.00 if they just take three hours more than the minimum number required for the degree.

-University, Dean of University College

Oh it's [30 hour rule] is awful. All they're thinking about is saving money and, I don't know about you, but postsecondary degrees should include some exploration.

-Community College, Director of Transfer

The 30 Excess Hour Rule is not only contra to the idea of course exploration but may place undue burden on transfer students who for a variety of reasons may have stopped out of school, changed their career plans and majors, started out without declaring a major and/or attended multiple institutions.
We also recognize that the transfer student population, you’ve got a very non-homogeneous group. We don’t have the 17-, 18-year-old freshman who just is out of high school and says, “Okay, this is what’s next.” You’ve got those that may be 19, with 30 hours of coursework or coming back to pursue a second bachelor’s degree.

—University, Director of Student Recruitment

For some students, I could foresee that some of the more recent state legislation could be a hindrance. You know, the students who are going to multiple institutions, and some of the more recent state policies regarding how many, you know, limit — degree plans — four year degree plans, 120 hours. If they exceed 30 over that, then they are, you know, universities are charging out-of-state tuition.

—Community College, Academic Advisor

...we see a lot of students returning, even you know, older students returning, maybe having started a degree, and then, left off to have a family, and work, and they come back. So that’s often where they might have accumulated a lot of hours that are difficult to fit into any one particular degree plan. And they might exceed the hours [allowed by the State], you know, some kind of extra — some kind of monetary penalty, or some other kind of penalty might kick in.

—Community College, Academic Advisor

...with regards to students who were out in the workforce and did the workforce development courses or have an Associate’s from the community college and are now coming, wanting to come back to school or if they’re switching majors. Maybe they were in one major and maybe that college or that department has strict policies so they’re exited so they...or were kicked out of that college so [they] need another college that’s going to, you know, or department for those courses, those credit hours would apply without making them go 30 hours over their degree... They pay a higher tuition or a fee, yeah....There is a waiver that’s...they have to do that but it’s another hurdle and for some students they don’t...I know I talked...our graduation initiative office has mentioned that they had a student who was paying and didn’t even realize [laughs] that he was paying the extra surcharge for that, so...

—University, Advising

I personally would like to see that excessive hour go away and this six course drop rule. Those are the two worst rules out there. If the state would require universities to have to accept an associate degree I think more of our students would complete that.

—Community College, Coordinator of Transfer Center

You can’t fund more than a certain number of hours for an undergraduate, so if they come here with 80 hours from [a community college], but only 36 of them apply to the degree... Yeah, that ends up being a problem that the student faces...
with us and that they attach to us, because the community college has no motivation to ensure efficiency of the credits that are going to apply toward the degree.

-University, Institutional Researcher

Given the restrictive nature of the 30 Excess Hour Rule, some institutions have been very thoughtful about changing requirements for certain programs by reducing the number of hours so that students can take advantage of special programs without going over the 120 hour degree plan. A university Associate Provost for Undergraduate studies explained that prior to this policy, their study abroad program required all students to have completed 24-30 credit hours in residence for eligibility, but transfer students typically matriculated with 60 plus credits, and as juniors, and the residency requirement meant that they would exceed 120 credit hours. They therefore reduced the number the program eligibility requirement to 12 hours, and students were allowed to apply for the program by the end of the semester. Additionally, the university had the foresight to discuss this change with transfer advisors at their feeder community college so that students would be aware of and could begin planning for study abroad during their freshman and sophomore years.

Additional State Transfer Policies
Two additional Texas state policies – Field of Study Curricula and Credit Transfer for Associate Degree – were mentioned only intermittently during the interviews, but have implications for transfer students. Field of Study Curricula, was developed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and states that if a student successfully completes a field of study curriculum developed by the THECB, that block of courses may be transferred to a general academic teaching institution and must be substituted for that institution’s lower-division requirements for the degree program for the field of study into which the student transfers, and the student shall receive full academic credit toward the degree program for the block of courses transferred.

A student who transfers from one institution of higher education to another without completing the field of study curriculum of the sending institution shall receive academic credit in the field of study curriculum of the receiving institution for each of the courses that the student has successfully completed in the field of study curriculum of the sending institution. Following receipt of credit for these courses, the student may be required to satisfy the remaining course requirements in the field of study curriculum of the receiving institution, or to complete additional requirements in the receiving institution’s program, as long as those requirements do not duplicate course content already completed through the field of study curriculum.

On June 17, 2011, the Texas legislature enacted House Bill 3025, Credit Transfer for Associate Degree, which addresses timely degree completion for students in public higher education through the reverse awarding of associates degrees. Specifically, students who successfully complete at least 30 credit hours from a state two-year institution; then transfer to a four-year institution and subsequently earn a cumulative total of at least 90 credit hours; are given the opportunity to earn an associate degree. The process of doing so requires the university to notify and request permission from the students to release their transcripts to their previous two-year institution, which then conducts a degree audit and awards degrees to those meeting the credit
requirements. Ideally, this legislation will produce more credentialed individuals and provide students an important milestone in their academic journeys. Additionally, two-year institutions will be able to count these students in their graduation rates and universities will be filled with successful students who will potentially persist to their baccalaureate degrees. Several of the participating institutions were engaged in the reverse awarding of associates degrees prior to the legislative mandate. The researchers anticipate this policy will support transfer student degree attainment and success, but caution that without adequate resource allocation toward establishing the infrastructure necessary to implement the policy, its impact will be greatly diminished.

**Transfer course applicability to degree programs**

Noted nearly universally by administrative participants, and echoed in the transfer student focus group interviews, was not the transferability of courses, but the *applicability* of those courses to students’ major, especially within certain fields of study such as those in the hard sciences or music. Many students who transfer having completed the 40-42 hour core block of general education courses, or who have completed an associate’s degree may get transfer credit for all of their courses, but find that some of the courses will not count directly for requirements in their major field of study. When this happens, students have to take additional courses, or may have to repeat courses. Since the TCCNS is not required of all universities, ultimately, this is a course articulation issue between institutions, but with implications for existing policies such as the 30 Hour Excess Rule.

*You can’t find more than a certain number of hours for an undergraduate, so if they come here with 80 hours from [community college], but only 36 of them apply to the degree...Yeah, that ends up being a problem that the student faces with us and that they attach to us, because the community college has no motivation to ensure efficiency of the credits that are going to apply toward the degree.*

-University, Institutional Researcher

*There are no electives on degree plans anymore at all unless you do liberal arts, so students are losing a lot of hours, elective hours and it’s not their fault. I mean, they are out there thinking they want this kind of degree and then they change their mind. When they do, some courses in it, sometimes courses are lost.*

-University, Associate Dean, Admissions

*Common course numbering legislation is certainly probably the most helpful... In the sense of at least it’s a place where we can start in terms of being able to help students understand what’s transferable at least in terms of credit hours, and not transferable. As you know, the rub comes with what’s transferable to a degree.*

-University, Enrollment Management

[Students have] missed the idea that it’s not transferability, it’s applicability, alright? And students don’t get that message so they go out there and say “will these courses transfer” and the answer is “yes;” then they’ll take the class and it transfers for their core and it doesn’t do any of what we call “double-dipping” which has become more and more important as 120 hours locks in which reduces
the number of total hours in the degree program, as [the] number of hours that can be funded by the State clicks in, and the number of hours that are findable through financial aid clicks in. So there are three upper barriers for students: financial aid, state support, and 120 hours that really limit what they can pull into a degree. And they’re not getting the message that although it may transfer, it won’t apply.

— University, Deputy Provost, Academic Affairs

It can be really hard to get policy level folks at the State to understand why actual completion of a degree may not be actually what the State really wants… What they really want is for them to complete the core curriculum and transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree, so they can become an engineer. Because how you get to be an engineer, is not doing that, not to complete the entire [community college] degree plan and lose four courses, and have to repeat those anyway.

—Community College, Vice President of Workforce Education

In certain fields of study, such as engineering, business or music; and applied courses students find that fewer of their courses count towards their major.

There are some things in engineering and some schools where there is a different pathway for transfer students than there is for associate’s students because the universities could care less of you got an associate’s degree, they want to make sure you had this – specific courses, that’s what they’re happy with.

—Community College, Vice President of Instruction

In the following quote, a community college Vice President of Academic Affairs articulates how the impact of course applicability in the field of music is felt more acutely by low-income and for generation students,

In fields like music and engineering there’s no way the students can complete the core and get what they need, those students are inordinately hampered by the fact that they are supposed to be only getting 120 hour degree. And they are so specialized, too, that I think they need extra course work. And so here at [our community] college we are mindful that they are not supposed to take 30 hours above and you know, before they end up getting socked with that out of state tuition later. In order to be able to compete and get through an addition process at the University, they need to be taking four ensembles at a time. They need to be taking extra music theory. They need to be taking extra piano, and why? Those skills are hard to acquire and they are closely related to income level. Students who don’t have money, when they grew up…they almost certainly didn’t have piano. Folks who had money, that’s sort of a rite of passage.

You see a lot of students transferring in with vocational work, and yet, the vocational work may not have applied towards their degree that they are trying to fulfill here. Basically vocational work will transfer in from four year schools
without question. Two year schools, if we don’t offer the course, then we don’t accept it. And that’s basically the way we run it.

– University, Associate Dean, Admissions

Several participants at both community colleges and universities discussed that a major impediment to course applicability in the field of study are strongly held perceptions at the university level that community college courses are not as rigorous or rich in content. For example,

*I think that there is still that mentality of us versus them as far as content as concerned. If we would be able to provide more credit within degrees it would eliminate a student having to repeat something they have already taken it at a community college but just because the academic side felt that arbitrarily that the content might not be called university level therefore they are not going to accept it.*

–University, Registrar

...we do still have hitches...even within the field of study, we still have areas where we think something is going to transfer and it may or may not...it really depends so much on the attitude of the four year institution, how seamless any transfer is, regardless of the articulation agreement...Some institutions are very, very, very interested in working with us and making sure our students transfer seamlessly and others are just not as interested in that. And that more than anything, kind of defines how those things work.

–Community College, Vice President, Academic Affairs

...there is still distrust by some universities of the rigor of community college courses. And the best way you can get around that is to have some face-to-face discussion about what are those learning outcomes that are taught.

–Community College, Director of Transfer

The applicability of transfer courses to students’ majors is also very much an academic advising issue which will be addressed form the student perspective in the student focus-group section.

*One of the biggest heartbreakers is in the area of advising, and if [students] don’t know the difference they get a degree plan and even if they have it their head they want to transfer but they didn’t state explicitly state that, they are put on an applied track at the community college and they find out later that those classes don’t count because they are applied. So it’s sort of a reoccurring theme that students take these classes.*

–University, Registrar

A few participants described how they have designed programs, policies and/or created articulation agreements in certain fields to maximize the acceptance of applied course credit, a trend we will very likely see increasing in the near future given the push for baccalaureate attainment and policies such as the 30 Excess Hour Rule.
I know there are schools within the state that draw a distinction between technical and academic courses... We award technical electives, which a lot of times filter into our technology department and allow students to graduate faster. We’ve also built articulation agreements on some of the AAS [Associate of Applied Science] programs. That’s actually a reverse transfer that we have, but it’s not a reverse transfer in the traditional sense. A student can transfer in with their Associate of Applied Science and we take a block of their hours...that will apply to their major here. We’ve provided them with construction management and logistics technology, and we allow them to fill that block of courses for their major requirements and then they take their core courses here and we graduate them.

—University, Assistant Registrar

Institutional recognition for successful transfer students
A reoccurring theme that emerged in the data was the fact that community colleges do not get credit, so to speak, from the state for successfully transferring students to the university unless they complete an associate’s degree and universities only get credit for their full-time freshman students who complete the baccalaureate degree, even though some campuses are graduating larger numbers of their community college transfer students. Moreover, as discussed in previous sections, in some cases it is not in the best interests of transfer students to complete an associate’s degree given that while all of the courses may technically “transfer” to the university they may not be applied to their field of study causing them to repeat courses and go beyond the 120 hour degree.

You know, I think, I think part of the problem driving kind of where [community colleges] sit and their attitude towards transfer is that they don’t get credit for those who transfer in and if they did, I think the whole situation would change dramatically, because they would see us as a very valuable source. Why wouldn’t they want a community college graduate when those folks tend to do better than the native student? And we’ve done all their DE [developmental education] work for them. I mean, we’ve done all the hard work. We’ve gotten them ready for you, the four year.

—Community College, Vice President Academic Affairs

And then the other thing I would do is, I mean as far as actual changes that would make a big difference is number one, give the transfer institution credit for the [baccalaureate] graduation for a transfer student. Number one, that’s huge.

—Community College, Vice President, Instruction

If they don’t get a degree here, we don’t get to count the...we count [students] in two ways. We count them as course completer, which the 24 hours, and that’s one benchmark. And then we count them as graduates.

—Community College, Director of Transfer

Well, one thing certainly I’d like to see that our evaluation – if we’re moving toward an evaluation system that’s going to hold us accountable, we’re all in
support of that. It’s going to hold us accountable for graduation rates, student success rates. I would certainly like to see the funding support that, that we will be fully funded based on our success rates, and that that be clearly defined, and out of the number of students that are not only retained, but that also that are transferring onto a four-year college or university, since it is our core group.

-Community College, Vice President for Student Success

At the time of the study, this issue was addressed to some extent by reverse transfer programs whereby students who transfer to the university without completing a degree can transfer back courses in fulfillment of their associate’s degree.

As far as our students transferring to and from here, we’re trying to do some more reverse transfer where we can help the students understand that if they do go to the four-year school that they can come back here and finish up degrees ‘cause we’re being – the legislature is saying we’re not doing our job because we don’t have as many graduates.

-Community College, Vice President, Instruction

In a great example of inter-institutional collaboration, one of the participating university/community college feeders in our study used an automated system at the university level to track all of students who transferred with at least 15 semester hours from the local community college. When students complete the qualifying courses at their university, they get a letter in the mail from the community college stating, “Congratulations, you’ve received your associate’s degree.” Their efforts have been tremendously successful. According to the University Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies,

“hundreds and hundreds of students receive that first degree when they couldn’t have otherwise. And now that we have it all in our banner system, we call it – “it’s bannerized.” And so it’s done. It’s automatic. It just happens.”

As a result, the community college is able to increase graduation rates, students have an interim degree supporting employment and other professional opportunities, and this assures them a degree in the event that they do not complete the baccalaureate. Their reverse transfer program may have another positive residual affect at the familial and community level. I asked the Associate Provost if students actually went to commencement and she replied that a large number of students do participate in the community college graduation ceremony sharing,

So they get that letter in the mail that they received that associate’s degree and they go to commencement and they get that degree because that’s the first college degree of the family. And we just can’t help but think that provides that motivation to keep on going and go to the next step. Take it to the next degree.

Understanding how and to what extent reverse transfer degrees may affect student motivation for baccalaureate degree completion and beyond, and how this may affect familial and community aspirations for college going and success is worthy of future research. In 2011, the State legislature passed a reverse transfer law, HB 3025, whereby universities are required to track
their community college transfer students entering with 30 or more credit hours. For those students who have earned at least 90 semester hours at the university and have granted permission for their transcript to be released, universities must notify the community college who will then grant the student an associate’s degree pending an audit of the transcript. This is a strong step both supporting community colleges in their transfer role.

Administrator perceptions and comments on academic and transfer advising
Academic advising is a critical component of transfer student success, essential for informing students about policies that directly affect their success and progression through higher education. Today, transfer advising is incredibly multifaceted and happens through myriad institutional agents, throughout multiple campus departments, within and between institutions. In the community college, transfer advising may occur at the advising center, transfer center or through a dedicated transfer advisor; through orientation sessions, classroom visits, and developmental courses; and through student success programs such as TRIO, Honors and Transfer Alliance Programs (TAP). Students also receive transfer advising from staff professionals at the departmental level, from faculty, through university recruiters/advisors visiting or working within community colleges, from university admissions staff; and, as we learned in student focus-group interviews, informally through other students, friends and family. Students and academic advisors alike reported using institutional websites to gather up-to-date transfer-relevant information.

Academic and transfer advising, whether one-on-one or within an organized group setting, whether formal or informal is “where the rubber meets the road” in regards to informing and educating students about transfer preparation, procedures and policies. Administrators, advising staff and students alike described the complexity and often “confusing” nature of transfer advising, for example,

*For sure, it’s just not a transparent system. It is very murky, very blurry, and confusing. And students – there are different answers for different colleges and universities. And even within that college and university. And then what you find – whether it’s faculty advisors or advisors otherwise – are then reluctant then to get detailed and specific and help.*

-Community College, Vice President of Student Support and Success

Counselors working in the advising or counseling center typically comprise the front line of academic and transfer advising. The majority of the community college campuses that were visited had either a transfer center or a dedicated transfer advisor responsible for maintaining transfer information, collaborating with university representatives, organizing transfer fairs, and working directly with students. Participants reported using a variety of methods to advise students; and the trend in academic advising within about half of the participating community colleges was developmental in nature, designed to have students plan their career and degree pathways when they matriculate, in a step-by-step fashion. Oftentimes, this includes advising students to be in contact with an advisor from their intended transfer university early in the process.
Transfer advising is crucial. Give them the paperwork to let them know step by step what they need to do and to let them be participants in the transition, because transition begins when they begin.

- Community College, Counseling and Advising Office

When I do degree plan, I show them a timeline of a year out and what they’re supposed to be doing over that years’ time in terms of visiting that institution, meeting with those people, making the application, seeing the financial aid people and making sure that they’re in well in advance for that transfer scholarship or any other scholarships with typically the March 1 deadline.

-Community College, Academic Coordinator

The bridge project is huge for us because I say, look, you need to build this backwards. If you want your BA in biology you need to know what school or two schools [where you plan to transfer]. You need to go over there and say, “Hey, I want a BA in biology from here and I’m a freshman at [this community college]. What do you suggest?” So we get students actively involved in their two- and four-year programs and even six-year programs so that they have a plan and they can see the plan. We think that’s huge.

-Community College, Director of Transfer Center

What we’re developing now is actually an electronic education plan, which will be available in June [2011]—they will be sitting with an advisor or a counselor, and we will be talking to them again about their intent and the actual institution that they want to go to.

-Community College, Vice President of Student Support and Success

We had an advising conference two years ago on this very subject of working with the community colleges to help the students make those career decisions much easier, not just simply, "What am I majoring in?" but, "What am I doing?" decisions – long-term life planning. And because of the things that have come up – excess hours rules, the six-drop rule, federal financial aid rules prevent the student from over-exploring all their options; they’re having to make those choices early.

–University, Academic Advisor

I think the Transfer Advising Program helps smooth the way because advisors are there for a more extended period of time working with the students, letting them know what’s right, what program the student can go into. We have an advisor for particular colleges so the students can get that help, it’s the matter of knowing as a freshmen what they want to be doing so they can make that transition and know everything counted, we both win.

– University, Director of Student Recruitment
Universally, one of the challenges noted by participants was the difficulty in getting students to take advantage of academic and transfer advising. This is consistent with research from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCSSE). Using the CCSSE survey (2006), students were asked, “While attending college, what has been your best source of academic advising?” A full 70% of students reported that they received their academic advising online, 43% from a faculty advisor, 26% from friends, family, or other students, 13% had not received academic advising, and only 10% said that they received advising from an academic advisor. In a report of the 2011 CCSSE cohort, the majority of students feel that their colleges emphasized providing the support they need to help them succeed, yet only a small number of students actually used these services (CCSSE, 2012). Participants described processes they had developed to encourage students to seek academic advising and suggestions for making advising mandatory.

[We place] a hold on them to register until they’ve gone through the counseling and get advised. So the good thing is that we’ve chosen to put a hold on all students that haven’t met TSI. Some schools do, some don’t. And that helps us because we often discover students are not taking the math they need to, or they’re avoiding their math and science that they need. So that’s when we grasp them, because they’ll log on to register, see they can’t register and have to go see a counselor. So in that sense I like it a lot, because it gives them – it forces them to come see us and we can advise them.

-Community College, Coordinator of Counseling

We have information on our core schedule so students know about our core curriculum, getting degrees, and of course trying to find different ways for them to come to the advising center and develop a relationship with our advisors. Our advisors make classroom presentations, encourage them to come to the center when it’s not registration so that they can have their personal plan.

-Community College, Registrar and Dean of Student Services

I think it should just be mandatory for them to talk to an advisor before they start registering for classes. ...for freshman students it’s mandatory. they meet with an advisor, at least the first year.

-University, Community College Admissions Specialist

It’s about giving them that plan and making that plan be a four year plan. Not a two year plan, and that is something that the universities could work with us on. It could be something where everybody in town was on the same piece of paper, like a get your life plan. We could keep our talent here. You know, we could do something using peer advising. There is this whole thing about how we don’t have enough counselors, we will never have enough, but you get them back in and they say, I started here and I went to [this university] and you can do it too. And here’s what you have to do. You know, you start, it’s trying, again, making the most of the connecting piece between the community college and the university in terms of people and plans or relationships, it’s the actual connection that makes the difference and that this is not rocket science, but just having the plan doesn’t do it in itself. So, and I think we have to think out of the box and we have to get
the universities to understand how valuable this relationship is and that we are not just a place where they sometimes get people.
- Community College, Vice President Academic Affairs

Resources for Advising

Without a doubt, the ability of colleges and universities to provide advising is tied to the resources they have to serve an increasingly large numbers of students, many of whom are first-generation college goers who are likely to be going to school part-time, working full or part-time, caring for children or family and required to take remedial/developmental courses.

I think we need more counselors and advisors. I think we all need a lot more of them because just telling faculty that they have to do all the advising, makes sense somewhat, but for instance, in an institution like ours, we have 24,000 students and we have 20 counselors, we have less than 1 [advisor] per 1,000 students. So we have to serve a large number of students at once. They get that mandatory group advising so it’s not even individual at the beginning and then they don’t even have to check in unless they get on academic probation or something, so they just dissipate.
- Community College, Vice President Academic Affairs

Advising resources, has nothing to do with state policies, but it has a lot to do with funding. Because I think that no matter where you go, your advising resources are limited and I think that is huge. There aren’t enough advisors, so students don’t want to stand in line, they don’t want to wait. They skip it completely. U.select helps to assist the student who wants to self-advice, but we’re not going to touch every student. I think that there needs to be some type of financial support for advising resources across the board, community colleges and universities, because we can communicate transfer policies to those students through advisors. Whereas now they’re flooded with information, they don’t have the tools that they need to convey that information.
- University, Assistant Registrar

... But again I go back to how can any entity keep up with the kinds of enrollment growth – they can’t be hiring the advisors in the ratio needed. And I haven’t seen a study of the advising ratios at community colleges but it might be interesting to look at. But advising’s multifaceted – like I said, it’s online, it’s all kinds of different things, but continued focus there will be a key in my opinion.
- University, Transfer Liaison

There seems to be among universities the idea that community colleges aren’t putting enough resources or personnel into adequate advising for transfer purposes that the information isn’t very current or very good or it’s just not an institutional focus.

- University, Institutional Researcher
Student Focus Group Findings

A total of 253 community college and university students participated in 26 focus groups interviews at 13 institutions (6 community colleges and 7 universities). Ultimately, 128 community college students participated in 12 focus groups, and 125 university transfer students participated in 14 focus groups lasting for 90 minutes with group sizes ranging from 4-12 students. Participants received a $30 cash gift and a meal, typically sandwiches or pizza.

To capture general demographic data related to postsecondary persistence and success, a questionnaire was administered after each focus group so that we had more information about the students who participated. This data allowed also allowed us to compare any differences between community college and university transfer students, such as race/ethnicity and full or part-time enrollment and employment. We can also compare the students who participated in our study to community college and university students at the state and national level. See appendix for a sample of the student questionnaires and comparison table. Our site contacts for each campus helped us to recruit students through email, flyers and by word of mouth.

Table 1: Demographics for Student Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A diverse group of students participated in our focus groups with regards to race and gender. (See Table 1) We found in many ways that our sample was somewhat atypical in that students at both levels were more likely to have completed a high school diploma, be enrolled full-time, and not work more than part-time, factors linked to student success, this was even more so for university transfer students, 96% of whom completed a high school diploma (compared to 86% of community college students) , 94% were enrolled full-time (compared to 75% community college students), and 93% reported working part-time or not at all (compared to 86% of...
community college students). Given that focus groups took place during the day, in the middle of the week, this makes sense. It is a limitation of the study, although, student quotes demonstrate the challenges and complexity of transfer, even for a group of students that is in some ways is less typical than their peers in regards to full-time enrollment and employment.

Half of our community college participants were first generation, compared to 32% of the university transfer students. Nearly 61% of our community college participants (and 36% of our university transfer students) reported speaking a language other than English at home. Roughly 5% of the community college students indicated undocumented status.

Focus group findings are organized in five main sections: 1) Student experiences with transfer policies; 2) Students perceptions of transfer advising; 3) Helping students build transfer capital; 4) Using Websites to navigate transfer; and 5) Additional insights.

**Student Experiences with Transfer Policies**

In focus groups, students were asked general questions about their goals and aspirations, college choices, and where they received information about the transfer process. We did not ask direct questions about specific policies because the research team felt that students would not be likely to discuss policies by name. Nonetheless, highlighted below are student quotes that speak directly to the transfer policies areas mentioned by students and discussed by administrators in the previous section. The three policy areas mentioned by student participants were the 30 excess hour rule, TCCNS, and 6 drop rule. As expected, it was university transfer students who spoke of the 30 excess hour rule, and in most cases where mentioned, students indicated that they were not aware of this policy until they had met with an advisor at the university level or until they been billed for out-of-state tuition.

_I got my associates first, and I wasn’t aware that you could only take so many hours before you have to pay out of state tuition...I think it’s like forty/thirty over plan, you have a thirty hour buffer before they charge you out of state tuition. So all of my hours transferred in from community college, about ninety-something and the engineering program here is one hundred-thirty six [hours], so this last semester I had to pay out of state tuition. I wasn’t aware of that._

-*University Transfer Student*

_The only complication was with my transcript would be excessive hours, because I was coming with about 106 credit hours. Mind you, I have two associates’ degrees, so at least I have something to show for my years there. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do in community college, but after getting a degree in music I decided I wanted to go to [the university], but overall, I mean I went online and applied, sent my transcripts, all that was pretty easy. I went to orientation, and met with the adviser to discuss what classes we should be taking, it was then that I heard about the excessive credit hours, which really scared me._

-*University Transfer Student*

_I had been thumbing through the Texas State website, I saw something about the excessive credit hour limit...a semester or maybe two semesters later I was meeting with the adviser in the music department and she mentioned, “you’re_
going to be in really deep trouble, you’re going to have to pay the non-resident tuition”...and I was pretty much really stressed out.

-University Transfer Student

A few students mentioned the TCCNS Website, typically noting that they had discovered this on their own. In the exchange below between two university transfer students, one describes having found the website and the other noted that the TCCNS website is confusing to navigate.

Course numbers they don’t coincide. The community colleges will call a course one thing, then you go to the university and they might be calling it something else. Before you know it you have taken the same class. I found one website that had the course numbers and what universities will call what, but unless you know that it is out there, you are not going to find it...

If I could touch on that real quick, the Texas common course numbering system is quite confusing. You open and here they are but then you need to open this site up so you can look at what the specific school does. If they can find a way to integrate it so that it is on one page it would be a complete time saver.

One student shared that she had learned about the 6-Drop Rule after having to drop a semester’s worth of classes due to family circumstances.

That is another thing for people to know is that you can only have six classes dropped. I had no idea about that at all then I had problems with my family and I ended up withdrawing from all my classes because I just couldn’t handle it and now I am already down to like, I can only withdraw from two more classes and I had no idea.

-Community College Student

From interviews with university administrators we learned that students are more likely to encounter the 6-Drop Rule after they transfer, and although institutions are allowed leeway in determining criteria for allowing students to drop more than six courses, not all institutions implement the policy in the same way, or in ways that tend to favor a wide variety of student life circumstances. In addition, a student who is not aware of or advised about options for petition of this policy may choose to remain in a class or classes to the detriment of his/her GPA; which may have other implications for competitive scholarships, fellowships or other future opportunities such as application to graduate school.

**Student Perceptions of Transfer Advising**

In the community college, transfer advising happens throughout the campus, at the advising/counseling center, in a specialized transfer center or through a dedicated transfer advisor, through orientation sessions, advisor classroom visits, student development courses, and through student success programs such as TRIO, Honors, and athletics. Students receive information about transfer from advisors at the departmental level, faculty, university recruiters/advisors visiting or working within community colleges, university admissions staff, and informally through peers, friends and family.
While myriad individuals within and beyond the institution “advise” transfer students, this role is formally allocated to the counseling staff who, as institutional agents, are most primarily responsible for helping students successfully navigate the transfer process. Research on college counseling in high school clearly shows that “counselors, when consistently and frequently available and allowed to provide direct services to students and parents, can be a highly effective group of professionals who positively impact students' aspirations, achievements, and financial aid knowledge,” (McDonough, 2005, p. 2).

Currently the transfer advising function is not an important point on the State policy agenda. However, increasing the number of community college students who successfully transfer and complete baccalaureate degrees is a major economic policy issue and a lynchpin issue in P-16 reform and “closing the gaps” initiatives in a state where 75% of the freshman and sophomore students, and 78% of the college students of color begin at community colleges yet less than 30% of these students will complete a degree or transfer within six years (Thevenot, 2010). Advisors can and do play important front line roles in increasing student transfer, although in some cases, training, staffing and other issues affect the quality and consistency of transfer advising.

The following is an analysis of transfer advising that includes the following themes: 1) “Luck of the draw” access to advisors; and student perceptions about the advisor knowledge and consistency; 2) the role of university recruiters; and 3) the role of faculty. Note, “transfer advisors” represent a broad range of institutional agents, oftentimes staff in the counseling center, but may also include department advisors, and in some cases staff in other service areas such as admissions or financial aid.

The majority of quotes below are quite critical of advisors. Concerned that the report would portray an overly and/or unfair portrayal of advisors, we reviewed all quotes where advising was mentioned an additional time, specifically looking for quotes that were positive about advising. What we learned was that there were a handful of students, more likely to be university transfer students, who spoke positively of general advising experiences, saying things like, “The staff here are some of the nicest people I’ve ever met...I wish I had called in more, because now that I go to the offices and talk to people, tons of help.” Furthermore, it’s very important to point out that complimentary quotes about advising are used extensively in the context of discussing our idea for building transfer capital. While the section below is critical, section 3 emphasizes positive encounters with advisors. Both the positive and negative perspectives are useful for understanding student experiences and have implications for transfer advising policy and practice within counseling centers and academic departments.

The Luck of the Draw
Students described inconsistencies in the quality of transfer advising related to advisor knowledge and training and the level of personal service provided to students. “Luck of the draw” also has to do with the fact that students were not assigned to a particular advisor, and expressed frustration in having to meet with a different person each time they sought counseling.

It seems like the advisors here don’t really tell you... in the college of business you just get the luck of the draw. They don’t tell you exactly what you need but
they say, “this, this, and this counts.” That doesn’t really show you how it fits in the structure.

-University Transfer Student

I don’t want to bash anybody but the counselors here are not very thorough, they just want to get you in, get you out. They don’t care, it depends on the counselor you talk to, and I told them I wanted to do business management and they didn’t ask me if I planned on transferring, they didn’t ask me if I wanted a 2 year or 4 year degree, they didn’t ask me anything.

-Community College Student

...there are few [advisors] who are really bad here, they don’t really know what to do with the transfer processes. So, I just recently found someone here and he was really, really good. He actually called [the university] for a lot of information instead of ‘hey, this is the website, go figure it out for yourself.’

-Community College Student

You actually just wait in line for like two and a half hours until they get to you. And then someone calls you. And I think a lot of the advisors here are part-time. But there are times I go in and ask to see the same person and that person is not working that day...When you have all these people trying to advise students where this isn’t their full-time job, I don’t think they take it as seriously as the students are expecting, because they really need the help. And sometimes it’s just not there.

-Community College Student

Each [advisor] has said different [things]. And it’s just mind boggling to where I get annoyed. I’m not undermining our advisors. Some are good, some are subpar, and sometimes I get misinformed which—I’m investing my time and when I’m [guided] in the wrong direction there goes lost time.

-Community College Student

...that’s something that I actually like in the natural sciences department. When I go in for the computer science advising I always get the exact same advisor that I had before. We’ve got a pretty good relationship. I maybe see her once every year.

-University Transfer Student

Receiving Conflicting Information about Transfer
Several students voiced irritation when describing how they had received conflicting transfer information from different advisors and/or campus staff both with and between institutions. In many cases this is not an issue exclusive to the advising or counseling center staff and relates to conflicting information students receive across campus units, such as academic departments, admissions and financial aid offices, and between agents serving transfer students at different institutional levels.
Sometimes when you call or e-mail, you get – you talk to different people and you get different answers.

-Community College Student

Yeah, in the same line as these two guys, there was a bit of a disconnect, because I transferred in with 68 hours as well as a pending 17-hour semester and there seemed to be a kind of a disconnect between what was being said by counselors in different areas.

-University Transfer Student

For myself I went to the advisors three different times, was told three different things. One even gave me wrong classes.

-Community College Student

Keeping up-to-date with transfer information, policies and procedures is like trying to hit a moving target. Advisors and students alike have to compensate for the fact that university Websites are often out-of-date and/or difficult to navigate, not all institutions follow the TCCNS, and course changes happening at the department level may not filter down to advising staff or other campus units in a timely manner.

What I think what is difficult too is how it changes a lot. They might tell you: “This is the course you need to take for equivalent at [this university]” and then the next semester it might be “Oh it’s not that one anymore it’s this one”

-Community College Student

[community college advisors] will tell you one thing but it’s not the same thing here, or the rules, they keep on changing, transfer rules. So, when I was taking math, I needed to take all three calculus [courses] for them to transfer as one, and that wasn’t the case when I transferred. I took an extra class that I did not need.

-University Transfer Student

As a related theme, several students stated that they in essence, “double-checked” their transfer advising, and felt more confident after having received the same information from two or more sources, for example,

You have to double check everything because like she said, she got the wrong transfer plan and she didn’t even know. Go to somebody else and see if it’s the right thing, it doesn’t hurt to double check.

-Community College Student

**Student Perceptions of Advisor Knowledge about Transfer**

For students, receiving incorrect or out of date information is a barrier to transfer that may cost students time and money when as a result students complete duplicate or additional courses. Another consequence may be that students forgo future opportunities to meet with advisors.
I think getting bad information from advisors is the biggest barrier [to transferring]. Because I found out that I have to take more classes to complete my associate's than I thought I did, because he told me you can combine these to get elective credits when actually I can't do that, I have to take another class to complete it, so I have to take an extra class in the summer that I hadn't planned on taking, which is really frustrating.

-Community College Student

It seems like whenever I go they [advisors] are just reading from the same page I have, they don't really know anything besides what I can find out online.

-University Transfer Student

They're not prepared...Some of them are not counselors, they're advisors, and they're hired as advisors because they don't have degrees themselves so they're still in the process of getting their counseling degrees...

-University Transfer Student

There seems to be the perception that maybe they [advisor] just read it out of a book and they're just reciting it to you. Then if you ask them a question, they'll get confused and sometimes they will get huffy and puffy or get on Instant Messenger to try to find answers sometimes. So it can be hit or miss. I think that is the general perception of a lot of students here.

-Community College Student

What I do like about here at [university name] is that you have an advisor for your major. Whereas in [the community college] it's just a general advisor who doesn't—who may or may not know anything about your major.

-University Transfer Student

As a result of this and that, some students have chosen not to use advising or use their peers.

There's a huge bureaucracy...and there are people working in the offices that shouldn't be working there. You ask questions, like she said, and you're going back and forth—you're getting nowhere and ultimately your best resource isn't your school, it's your peers.

-University Transfer Student

...every year I come here and I ask you the same question and you always say, "You're fine" and you give me those classes that I don't need...That's my big thing so I don't really talk to them here anymore.

-Community College Student

The Role of University Recruiters/Advisors at Community Colleges
University recruiters play an important role in transfer advising. Recruiters visited campuses occasionally during transfer fairs/events and in some cases, university recruiters/advisors held
regular hours at the community college where students could expect to find them up to 2-3 days a week. Students consistently referred to recruiters as helpful, and in many cases, stated that recruiters had gone “out of their way” to advise students, provide a preliminary review of transcripts, and help them navigate the transfer process.

There were [university name] representatives at the community college trying to recruit transfer students and so I talked to [name]. He helped me a lot showed me degree plans and which classes transferred, which ones were exactly the same. So he helped me out a lot and he kind of went step by step and emailed me things so he helped me out to get everything done.

-University Transfer Student

There was a transfer fair...they had all these [university name] schools at tables. ...that was really helpful, because there was a [representative for] financial aid and she gave me her card and everything, and each school had their own table, and that was really helpful because they gave books about everything. That was really, really helpful.

-Community College Student

... they had a representative from [feeder University] and she actually helped me a lot. She gave me her e-mail and her cell phone number so if I had any questions whatsoever I could just e-mail or call her. She was really helpful with transfer questions, or even questions about living there, life there. She was really helpful because I could e-mail her if I was confused on a certain course [such as a course] not on the university website, I would e-mail her and ask about the course...and she would e-mail me back in a day.

-Community College Student

I went and talked to the guy who worked for [university name] and he was really helpful. I wish I knew his name because I'd give him a plug right now, but he was good. He just told me do this, this and this and you'll get in... He bounced around [working at other community colleges].

-University transfer student

There's an office in the counseling center and two ladies from [university name] they work here and they help you with all of the questions you might have to transfer specifically to [university name] you can jot down information, and they will help you fill out your FAFSA and your application online. They give you information about scholarships, how to apply for the scholarships, very, very helpful and informative and they take their time with you they don't treat you like you should know, they're really great, so anyone transferring to [that university].

-Community College Student

Transfer people from the schools will actually come and just sit in the cafeteria every once in a while and they have their pamphlets and you can ask them...
questions and it is not necessarily a part of the transfer academy, that’s just open to anybody who is transferring

-Community College Student

The Role of Faculty in Transfer Advising

We found that when students mentioned faculty, it was usually in the context of encouraging students’ pursuit of academic majors, and encouraging students to transfer to certain universities because of the departmental reputation and/or faculty resources.

I got my advising from my professors in the English department, they’re really helpful. I really enjoy the English department, a lot. They kind of actually bribed me, they’re the ones that convinced me to become and English major. I was taking so many English classes anyways. They really did help me a lot, a little bit more than the counselors but then I found a counselor that was really helpful and I went to him and he was very helpful as well. He spent, literally, over an hour with me going over my degree plans and what I want to do, what I should do. It just really depends.

-Community College Student

I spoke to my professor and she gave me advice what school she thinks would look better for me to attend, and also she offered to give me a reference, a recommendation to help me to get into the, I think, the honor program.

-University Transfer Student

My government and policy sci teacher here is actually the one who encouraged me to be a poly sci major and she’s the one who walked me through a lot of the steps of how to apply, what school would be good for me maybe. Where I should look at and has really been my mentor while I’ve been here to help me do the things that I need to do.

-University Transfer Student

My former English professor who’s now at San Diego State was helpful to me and he still continues to advise me on...on what I should take depending on the program that I was going into which was Chicano studies but...but even though he’s still advising me on what to take and what not to take.

-Community College Student

Given their role as mentors and the amount of time they spend with students, faculty are instrumental in encouraging transfer and advising students. By developing partnerships with faculty, campus advisors can increase faculty consciousness about their role in increasing transfer and transfer student success, alert faculty to transfer related policies and resources, and request opportunities to visit classrooms to talk about transfer. They may also coach faculty by suggesting alternatives to traditional office hours (often inaccessible to commuter, working, and evening students), such as meeting with students in the classroom 15 minutes before or after classes or building intentional opportunities for group or one-on-one advising during class time. (See Deil-Amen, 2011)
Helping Students Build Transfer Capital

The following section addresses the idea of helping students to build transfer capital, and the need for advising that is instructional. While analyzing student focus group interviews, it became evident that challenges around the transfer process were in many ways parallel to the college access issues experienced by high school students, especially first generation high school students (see, for example, McDonough 1997; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Moreover, because community colleges are open access institutions, students planning to attend public two-year colleges, either by design or by default, are unlikely to receive college counseling in high schools, especially that which educates students about the transfer process. Aspirations abound, but students may not know what to ask, who to ask, or where to start. Entree into this unknown territory was described by a second year community college student:

"I’m a first-generation college student. I didn’t really know where to go or what the process was. Since [the college] was close to my home, I thought, “It’s a place for me to start. I came here and asked how to apply.”

Students in the study were primarily concerned with the transferability of classes and in some cases, students described significant negative consequences due to their lack of knowledge of the transfer process and not being well advised that included having to repeat courses, taking additional courses, delaying time to transfer and/or degree completion, and costing more money. In a more extreme example, a community college student shared,

"I told [the counselor] I wanted to do business management and they didn’t ask me if I planned on transferring, they didn’t ask me if I wanted a 2 year or 4 year degree, they didn’t ask me anything, they just grabbed the [degree plan], and it was an Associate of Applied Science, it’s not an Associate of Arts... I got half way through [program] and I went to talk to a Texas State recruiter and he said, “We’re not going to take half these classes because they are technical vocational classes.” What was the point of getting a degree plan and following it if half of these classes aren’t even going to transfer? Essentially I started over...”

She ultimately decided to attend a different university offering an applied baccalaureate degree in general studies, where the majority of her classes would be accepted, but did so at the expense of her first choice school, and forgoing her chosen major.

Students’ needs for basic college knowledge and help navigating the system do not dissipate because they have made it through the front door of the community college. Our conceptual framework for transfer capital is based upon the “Building a College Culture” work of McDonough (1997, 2004, 2005) and Jarsky, McDonough, & Nunez (2009), as a lens for examining organizational efforts that foster college access. This framework suggests a holistic approach for organizational change that increases student transfer, especially for first-generation, low-SES and underrepresented students. The premise of McDonough and colleagues’ work is that college access can be understood from an organizational culture approach, recognizing institutional roles in reproducing social inequalities. Rather than focusing on what individuals do to advance educationally, an organizational cultural approach examines what institutions can do to support individuals. With this in mind, students who begin (or are planning to begin) at the
community college would be well served by organizational efforts to help them develop “transfer capital,” which we define as: the information, skills, social networks and other resources that facilitate successful transfer. The goals of advancing transfer capital are:

1. Ensure that all students who enter the community college are informed and prepared for a full range of postsecondary options (whether this includes transfer or not).
2. Counselors, academic advisors, faculty and staff are partners in helping students build transfer capital.
3. Institutional articulation and collaboration between high schools, community colleges and universities is essential for increasing transfer and creating a seamless pathway to the baccalaureate.

It is important to note that equality in transfer access for low socioeconomic students requires more than policies based on reducing structural and informational barriers to transfer (Melguizo, T., Hagedorn, L.S., and Cypers, S., 2008).

**Comprehensive Transfer Advising/Advisors as Teachers**

Building a positive campus transfer culture involves all institutional agents, with advisors at the heart, leading their institutions in developing resources and practices across campus units and academic departments where all students are informed and given the opportunity to prepare for a full-range of postsecondary and career options, including transfer. Participants consistently described exasperation over being given various and sundry pieces of information relevant to transfer, without being given the opportunity to understand the transfer process as a whole. For example,

“They don’t tell you exactly what you need but they say, “This counts.” That doesn’t really show you how it fits into the structure.”

—University transfer student

“[My counselor] takes his time, he’s not going to rush and just give you the paper and make you go home and handle it. He explains everything, like the differences in degree plans...”

—Community college student

For those students who are gaining all of their knowledge about college as they go along, a comprehensive transfer counseling approach is needed so that they can come to understand the transfer process in relation to career and life plans. A comprehensive, intentional advising model geared towards helping students build transfer capital would entail teaching students, from the first advising encounter, about options for academic/career pathways, and how classes, degree plans and transfer options vary, so that students to avoid costly and demoralizing missteps like the one described earlier in the paper where the business student was advised to complete an applied business degree.
Practices that Support Transfer Capital

Both community college and university transfer students described institutional practices, such as orientation sessions, orientation to college courses, and specialized programs that were useful in helping develop transfer capital. University transfer students in particular discussed the utility of new student orientation sessions which, through various methods, helped new students understand information vital to success, for example,

"I found registration [orientation] really helpful because they kept saying things over and over and over again."

Courses on orientation to college typically teach things such as study skills and time management as well as the processes for navigating the college system, and were touted as useful with some frequency by community college participants. At several institutions, students who were placed into a remedial English or Math class were required to enroll in a "student development," course while other students enrolled hoping to gain college knowledge. For example,

"The student development course that I took... was the most helpful thing because other than that, everything else I did on my own, searching for myself."

"My instructor was really helpful, she walked us around the transfer center, told us where all the offices were, told us where to look for stuff on our own without having to wait in line. She helped us find a lot of resources on the [college] website because it's kind of wild sometimes. She helped us figure it out and that's what I've been basing my curriculum on, what I learned in that class."

Specialized programs, such as those offered through TRIO were also cited as useful for helping students build transfer capital,

"I got into the SSSP [Student Support Services Project] they offer textbook lending, laptop lending, personal counselors to help you transfer [and] to help you sort through personal issues... They're really helpful, but there is usually a waiting list for that one, it fills up really fast."

As noted by the student, specialized programs tend to fill quickly, and due to both limited budgetary resources, and in some cases policy constraints (such as only being able to serve students who completed the FAFSA, or students who can prove U.S. Citizenship), the need for such programs is far greater than the service they are able to provide.

The Internet and Institutional Websites

It was clear that most students used the Internet was the primary source of transfer information.

Well I went on their website. They have a, I think a comparison course thing that you can look at and so I'm able to look at how my courses that were taken at my college then and how they will transfer to my department okay, this is what can
transfer. I called them as well and they were very helpful and we got everything set up without any problems.

-University Transfer Student

The [university name] website told me what I needed to do.

-University Transfer Student

I liked the fact also that they had like a checklist on my [university name] where you can go--actually go and see what they have or what they don't have so you can call your school and say, "Hey, has this transcript been mailed yet?" or whatever because, you know, my other school hasn't gotten it so I just kind of like that, the fact that there's a checklist there.

-University Transfer Student

I did all of mine online since I was in another city. I didn't really have to come up here much. But when I finally did find that checklist -- the transfer student checklist that helped. But I just went on [the university] website and it is really difficult to navigate. And so everything I did I just kept finding different bits and pieces of the puzzle and completing what I could. And then I finally found that checklist and the checklist helped. It would have been a lot more helpful had I found it earlier in the process.

-University Transfer Student

The only thing I've looked up online have been the transfer guides because sometimes a lot of my advisors for chemistry they don't know—they only talk about chemistry classes, they don't do any basic classes so I would have to go online and check like math classes which one is the numbers over there and the ones—because the advisors didn't talk about that... but even the web is not very helpful because they can say like—that was last year's but we've totally changed it.

-University Transfer Student

The Internet is where I find all my information as far as transferring and I think in relation to the website, I think dates aren't as easy to find like on the calendar, like the academic calendar when things are due and what not. A lot of it is search and find which I had to search a lot through on this website. You kind of have to look; it is not where you would think it would be.

-University Transfer Student

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Several important implications for educational policy and practice have emerged from the study's findings and lead to the following recommendations. While the study was centered on Texas state transfer policies and university practices, this section will be written more broadly to reflect the potential for applicability in other states.


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Fiscal Policies

Address limitations of current funding formulas. State legislatures are encouraged to examine fiscal credit offered to institutions for completion by non-originating students. Credit is currently awarded primarily for first-time, first-year students who start and complete at the same institution. This does not recognize the prevalent nature of transfer in Texas and particularly penalizes those institutions admitting more transfer students than native students. The legislature is also urged to institute policies that offer fiscal incentive for community colleges to shape student course selection to create efficient pathways to transfer based upon intended major and career path. Current funding formulas encourage degree completion at the community college without placing an emphasis on creating a transfer-intending culture.

Reexamine current policies for unintended barriers to transfer success. Well-intended policies do not always translate equally for all student populations. For example, the Texas six-drop rule was developed as a cost containment measure and to stimulate degree completion. However, unintended negative effects on transfer students include a lack of support for life changes and acknowledgement of the fluid nature of transfer pathways. State legislatures and educational institutions should review policies using a transfer student lens to determine potential unintended consequences.

Articulation Policies

Ensure alignment between the use of the common course numbering system at community college and university levels. Community college students and those who advise them have difficult time anticipating course applicability when four-year institutions are allowed to deviate from the common course numbering system when evaluating transcripts and awarding credit. States are also encouraged to develop a common transcript format to be used across institutions. Transcript evaluations can be delayed by efforts to decode various forms and students are unable to comparison shop when they are not provided advanced evaluations of their coursework.

Engage 2-year and 4-year faculty in meaningful disciplinary discussions to address inconsistent application of earned course credit toward degree. Perceptions persist, real or imagined, that faculty harbor prejudices against community college students regarding their academic potential and the quality of courses offered at the community colleges. This can especially be issue for courses in the major field of study and in specific disciplines like STEM and business. This discrimination can manifest in the reluctance or refusal to award credits toward degrees, in spite of evidence of equivalency in course content and rigor. It would also benefit the process to have university and college faculty participate in formal curricular alignment discussions.

Place a priority on providing accurate, timely, and appropriate articulation. Institutions must remove the unpredictability of the course evaluation and credit granting process, as well as the lateness of the evaluation relative to admission and enrollment. Students also need to be engaged in conversation regarding not only which courses will be accepted, but equally, if not more importantly, which courses will apply to their intended major or course of study.

Accountability

Require community colleges to collect data and report on transfer in the same manner as four-year institutions. Community colleges have not traditionally be encouraged, or given the
resources, to maintain extensive data on transfer student migration and performance. Tracking student data and communicating with receiving universities is imperative to creating a comprehensive institutional and State transfer profile and identifying gaps in services.

While vertical transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution is still the most traditional transfer pathway, there are a number of students making a lateral transfer between community colleges or a reverse transfer from the university to the community college. Providing transfer students and their families accurate two-year institutional information is imperative to making informed decisions of application and facilitating a smooth transition for new transfer students.

*Expect equal accountability for transfer student outcomes (e.g., degree completion) from community colleges and universities, while providing analogous reward.*

**Transparency**

*Improve measures to evaluate the effectiveness of reported transfer efforts at both two-year and four-year institutions.* It is more common than not for students to receive final decisions on transfer credits after they are accepted and enrolled, than it is to have that information to help make application and institutional selection decisions. This also inhibits the ability of students to factor credit acceptance into institutional choice.

*Ensure that transfer students receive accurate and timely information about the transfer process, credits acceptance and application, and institutional policies.* A campus-wide responsibility, requiring involvement across campus units, such as academic departments, admissions and financial aid offices; and between agents serving transfer students at different institutional levels, all of whom must be aware of policies and practices affecting transfers and can communicate such information to students early in the transfer process. The transfer process should be obvious and easy for students to navigate rather than riddled with barriers.

**Advising Practice**

*Operate from a dynamic, comprehensive advising model.* Transfer students must be provided with a holistic view of the transfer process rather than given information on an as-needed basis, which increases the potential for missteps that add time and money to students’ degree paths. This requires the institution to formulate a comprehensive transfer advising model inclusive of early identification of transfer intending students at the community college and designating specific transfer advisors at the universities.

*Provide adequate training to individuals involved in transfer advising.* Transfer advising may be provided by a variety of individuals, including faculty, advisors, and counselors who should be collectively trained to provide accurate, consistent information within and across disciplines and institutions. Advisors should be trained to view each student encounter as an opportunity to educate about transfer pathways and options, not assuming the student will know the nuances between different types of programs (e.g. applied vs. academic courses and programs). Community college faculty in particular must be made aware of the critical role they play in encouraging student transfer.
Orientation and Transition Programs Practice
Offer intentional, mandatory orientation programming at both community colleges and universities. Transfer students may have the misperception that they do not need additional orientation when preparing to transfer or having recently transferred. However, comments from student focus groups indicate otherwise. This is an institution’s opportunity to establish consistent expectations for transfer student success and expose students to essential university resources, as well as provide accurate information about the transfer and articulation processes. Simply providing transcript evaluation, academic advising and course registration fails to fully equip transfer students for the transition into their new institution.

Establish more, and better funded specialized programs and services that help build transfer capital. Programs such as TRIO have proven beneficial to transfer students; however, these programs simply are unable to serve enough students. Additional opportunities to expose students, first generation student in particular, to the information, skills, social networks, and other resources that facilitate successful transfer are critical to proving transfer completion rates.

Information Delivery Practice
Provide up-to-date, user-friendly online information. Transfer students are heavily reliant on the Internet to retrieve information pertinent to the transfer process and should be able to access information relevant to their transitions in no more than two clicks from an institution’s home page. Institutions must exercise diligence in maintaining accurate and consistent information on college, departmental, and discipline-specific sites given the rapidly change landscape of higher education policy and practice.

Conclusions
The intention of the study was to explore the efficacy of Texas educational policies and institutional programs relating to transfer student success and baccalaureate degree attainment. Throughout the administrator interviews it was clear that many of the well-intentioned state education policies had unintentional consequences for students attempting to transfer between institutions and were most acutely felt post-transfer. While attitudes toward and beliefs about policies sometimes varied by the higher education sector examined, both administrators and students expressed frustration about policies that were either inconsistently enforced across sectors or were simply not common knowledge to students. In spite of the challenges related to the policies, a committed institution can help students avoid running afoul of the policy by closely monitoring progress and intervening before there are complications.

This study had the luxury of input from students preparing to transfer from a community college and those who had made the transition to a four-year institution. Much research has been concentrated on one population or the other, with limited alignment between sending and receiving institutions. The study found common ground between both populations in relation to encountering multiple barriers in the transfer process; particularly situated around clear, consistent, and timely information acquisition. Communication regarding course transferability and applicability, general and discipline-specific transfer requirements, and state policies was
found to be dependent upon the students’ ability to ask questions in ways that solicited correct response from institutional representatives. This supports the notion that the more transfer capital students possess, the more likely they are to successfully transition between institutions. Without the resources and insight required to decipher the transfer process, moving between institutions can be daunting to the point of discouraging persistence in higher education. This does not bode well for minority, first-generation, and non-traditional students who often lack transfer capital.

Because of its size and diversity, Texas is often referred to as a microcosm of the nation at large. Thus, it is the opinion of the researchers that these findings are cautiously generalizable to other states, noting differences in higher education governance, fiscal appropriations, and system structures. At least, the recommendations can be scaled appropriately for use by institutions in other states. The researchers also believe the study design is easy replicable for use by other states. The results of this study also will contribute to the national conversation, particularly as the research relates to underserved students, where these issues and their resolution are most immediately and directly felt.

References


