



# From Patchwork to Pathways

## State Approaches to Improving Transfer

### INTRODUCTION

Very little can be generalized about the student journey through American higher education, but there are two key experiences that the vast majority of college students share. Firstly, most students receive their initial exposure to postsecondary education by way of a local community college — whether as college students or through dual enrollment opportunities in high school.<sup>1,2</sup> Secondly, during their early enrollment in community college, most students will complete one or more general education courses. These introductory experiences are crucial, challenging and inspiring young people as they mold their college-going identities. In the best cases, students discover newfound passion and direction through foundational coursework, seeding a sense of purpose as they progress into degree-specific coursework. In the worst cases, general education experiences are disjointed and demotivating, leaving students unsure how to make use of the credit they've worked hard to earn. In these scenarios, introductory coursework costs students precious time and money, exacerbating the challenge of bachelor's degree attainment for the students with the fewest resources available to them. Policymakers and scholars have zeroed in on general education credit as a fulcrum of college completion, resulting in an array of policy approaches across the country.

Today, more than 40 states have passed statewide policies addressing general education curriculum and transfer.<sup>3</sup> A small handful of solutions have emerged as modern pillars of transfer policy, tackling the student experience from various directions:

- ➔ **Common course numbering** creates statewide credit equivalencies among introductory course offerings, making catalogs easier to navigate for transfer students and advisors alike.
- ➔ **Transferable core policies** seek to standardize general education curriculum statewide, improving credit transfer among in-state institutions.
- ➔ **Guaranteed associate degree programs** establish motivating checkpoints for transfer students, offering assurance that their community college coursework will set them up for on-time graduation at in-state universities.

Each of these policies has meaningfully improved the experience for certain subsets of the transfer student population. For example, common course numbering provides particularly helpful clarification for first-generation college students aspiring to transfer to four-year institutions.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in aggregate, nationwide transfer metrics have remained stagnant for decades. Today, though the vast majority of first-time community college students enroll with intentions to transfer, only 33 percent of them do.<sup>5</sup>

Those who do successfully transfer lose 22 percent of their credits on average, leaving many students with additional general education requirements at their receiving institutions.<sup>6</sup> As a result, transfer students are more likely than their peers to graduate from bachelor's degree programs with excess credit.<sup>7</sup> Because transfer policy staples,

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like transferable core curricula, have failed to move the needle for most students, they are often cast as patchwork solutions to an evolving challenge.

Indeed, the “transfer problem” is more elusive than ever: 67 percent of bachelor’s degrees recipients now graduate with credits from multiple institutions, frequently engaging in both lateral (two-year to two-year) and vertical (two-year to four-year) transfer.<sup>8,9</sup> The “continuous swirl” that today’s hyper-mobile transfer students engage in makes the average student nearly impossible to define — much less design for.<sup>10</sup>

To improve outcomes for students, leaders in states such as Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, and Louisiana are seeking opportunities not to *add*, but to *strengthen* and *streamline* the connective tissue between pre-existing transfer structures. To unlock the benefits of attainment for transfer students, states, systems, and institutions must work together to ensure introductory academic experiences serve as driving, not deterring, forces.

**Credit loss** and **excess credit** — separate but related challenges — threaten student persistence in similar ways. Credit loss happens when a receiving institution outright rejects a transfer student’s previous coursework. By comparison, excess credit often accrues as a result of “degree program credit loss,” which happens when a receiving institution relegates a transfer student’s previous coursework to elective credit. In both instances, transfer students must complete additional general education coursework, which can meaningfully extend their time-to-degree. Thus, policymakers should seek solutions that not only guarantee the **transferability** of credit, but also the **applicability** of transfer credits to students’ degree programs.<sup>11</sup>

## Innovating Along the Postsecondary Pipeline

Based on ESG’s findings from leading states, to improve general education transfer and protect students from excess credit accumulation, policymakers should pursue innovations that:

- ➔ Increase the **comprehensiveness** of existing transfer policies, ensuring compliance from all postsecondary institutions;
- ➔ Enhance **cohesion** among existing programs, allowing students to leverage multiple policies at once, rather than scrambling to identify a “best option”;
- ➔ Embed **responsive** mechanisms into curriculum requirements, buttressing statewide policies against minor tweaks at the institution level;
- ➔ Integrate general education curriculum into statewide **dual enrollment** opportunities;
- ➔ Bolster **guided pathways** for community college students through policies that provide direction towards timely degree declaration;
- ➔ **Automate** application, transcript, and enrollment processes for transfer students;
- ➔ Enrich policy design with **data transparency and reporting**; and
- ➔ Invest in **implementation-friendly practices**, including advisor supports, faculty involvement, and communications technologies.



Throughout the late-twentieth century, transfer policies emerged nationwide as community colleges grew to serve rapidly expanding pools of transfer-intending students. In the 1990s, states like Arkansas, Texas, and Florida pioneered the first iterations of **transferable core curricula** — a policy design that lives on as the most common transfer intervention to this day.<sup>12</sup> By layering consistency and certainty into general education coursework, transferable core policies seek to shore up the early academic experiences of transfer students.<sup>13</sup> **Guaranteed associate degrees** add additional scaffolding into the policy ecosystem, articulating transfer pathways of 60 credits or more. Over the last ten years, **common course numbering** has been widely embraced as a third pillar of transfer policy, quickly taking root in dozens of states.<sup>14</sup> These three policy designs — transferable core curricula, guaranteed associate degrees, and common course numbering — now influence the experience of transfer students across the country.

## Transferable Core

Transferable core policies articulate discrete sets of 100- and 200-level courses guaranteed to transfer statewide as at least elective credit. Most states organize their core curricula into an array of subject areas, e.g., physical sciences. Some policy designs mandate transfer blocks, which attempt to protect students from accumulating excess general education credit by circumventing 1:1 course approvals. 38 states have transferable core policies.<sup>15</sup>

<p><b>WHERE DOES GENERAL EDUCATION FIT IN?</b></p>	<p>Transferable core policies dictate the extent to which foundational coursework completed at one public institution must be articulated for credit at another.</p>
<p><b>WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?</b></p>	<p>Nationally, extreme variance in state policy design makes transferable core programs difficult to empirically assess. Researchers postulate that articulation guarantees for general education coursework provide clarity and guidance for transfer-intending students. However, even with this guidance in place, students struggle to identify core courses that will ultimately apply towards baccalaureate degree requirements — particularly in STEM.<sup>16</sup> Policies that offer receiving institutions discretion to relegate incoming coursework to elective credit only exacerbate this challenge.<sup>17</sup></p>
<p><b>STATE EXAMPLE</b></p>	<p>Since the 1990s, the <u>Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI)</u> has promoted student-friendly transfer practices among public and private institutions alike. The IAI, codified into state law in 2017, includes the state’s transferable core, known as the <u>General Education Core Curriculum (GECC)</u>. Distributed across five curricular categories, the GECC amounts to 37-41 credits that transfer as a package to more than 100 institutions in Illinois. Notably, among the 2015 community college cohort, transfer students in Illinois reported the highest rates of bachelor’s degree completion.<sup>18</sup></p>

# Associate Degree Transfer

Thirty-five states have articulated guaranteed associate degree pathways for transfer students.<sup>19</sup> These policies guarantee at least 60 hours of transfer credit and junior status to students who complete an eligible associate degree program. Advanced policies facilitate credit applicability by prohibiting receiving institutions from requiring additional general education coursework from students on articulated pathways.<sup>20</sup>

<p><b>WHERE DOES GENERAL EDUCATION FIT IN?</b></p>	<p>General education courses typically account for approximately half of associate degree program requirements; program-specific coursework accounts for the second half. In many states, general education transfer blocks are guaranteed only if a student completes an associate degree prior to transfer. In these scenarios, the applicability of general education credits precariously hangs in the balance for transfer students.</p>
<p><b>WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?</b></p>	<p>Earning an associate degree before transferring has been associated with improvements in bachelor’s degree completion.<sup>21</sup> However, this use case only represents one-third of transfer students.<sup>22</sup> Within their first few semesters, many students move between degree programs and institutions, decreasing the likelihood that they will earn an associate degree along the way.</p>
<p><b>STATE EXAMPLE</b></p>	<p>In 2009, the Louisiana Board of Regents established the Louisiana Transfer Degree in eight (8) broad fields of study. Each degree includes 39 credit hours of general education requirements, plus 21 additional hours of program-specific coursework. Upon completion of the requirements, students are guaranteed that these 60 credits will transfer at any public institution in the state. In 2023, the Regents moved to replace the Transfer Degrees with <u>Universal Transfer Pathways (UTPs)</u>, creating guaranteed associate degrees for the state’s 24 most common majors. An additional 20 pathways are under development as of 2024. All courses included in a UTP are also included in the state’s common course catalog.</p>

## Common Course Numbering

Though they boast catalogs of drastically different sizes, 31 states have established a uniform codification for introductory courses at public institutions.<sup>23</sup> These policies promote clarity for students, reduce the administrative burden of transfer in the registrar’s office, and improve transparency in data reporting.

<p><b>WHERE DOES GENERAL EDUCATION FIT IN?</b></p>	<p>Common course numbering primarily implicates 100- and 200-level courses. However, innovative states have extended their common course catalogs to include advanced coursework in popular degree programs.</p>
<p><b>WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?</b></p>	<p>For students who know what field of study they are interested in, and have taken the time to investigate various articulation agreements, common course numbering can propel vertical transfer. As a standalone policy intervention, however, common course numbering does not necessarily help students distinguish between transferable courses and applicable courses. Notably, the impact of common course numbering is easily compromised in decentralized policy environments, where institutional participation is voluntary.<sup>24, 25</sup></p>
<p><b>STATE EXAMPLE</b></p>	<p>Mandated by legislation in 2010, Arizona’s <u>Shared Unique Number System (SUN)</u> creates direct course equivalencies at all public institutions in the state. The SUN system articulates a seven-character code for institutions to lay alongside their native course codes. Originally focusing on courses included in the state’s General Education Curriculum, the SUN database expands each year to better represent the most common transfer courses in Arizona.</p>

More than 40 states have implemented at least one of the three policies detailed above. As new policies and programs layer on top of one another, complementary and complicating effects reverberate throughout the ecosystem. Amidst this crowded landscape, policymakers should prioritize opportunities to maximize **comprehensiveness**, **cohesion**, and **responsiveness** in statewide approaches to transfer.

**Comprehensive** policy designs achieve coverage across a state’s postsecondary system. The least comprehensive policies are bilateral agreements, whose scope is limited to course equivalencies between two specific institutions. On the other side of the spectrum, states like Illinois have achieved statewide agreements that articulate course transfer among all public institutions and even some independent colleges. Certainly, comprehensiveness is somewhat mediated by the level of centralization in state governance structures. But no matter the maturity of a state’s transfer landscape, room to expand institutional coverage almost always remains. For example, many policies accommodate exceptions for selective institutions, creating disparate requirements for students transferring to regional institutions versus flagships. *[See samples from Kansas and Tennessee.]* When policies only partially apply to any given use case, the burden of reconciliation passes to students, introducing greater risk of credit loss.

Improving **cohesion** among transfer policies is another opportunity to increase navigability for students. When policies are presented as discrete options, rather than a cohesive set, students are left to make their own optimization calculations. For example, recent qualitative evidence from Texas found that students are defaulting to the state's 42-credit transferable core, often without consideration for their intended degree pathway.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, many students are foregoing the opportunity to simultaneously leverage Texas' fields of study curricula, which explicitly promote statewide credit applicability. In contrast, Florida's policy landscape embeds the state's general education transfer block into its guaranteed associate degree pathways. Whether or not a student completes an associate degree prior to transferring, their general education coursework may be protected by Florida's 36-credit transfer block. Exceptionally strong policy signaling in Florida has measurably influenced student behavior: Among the 2015 community college cohort, students in Florida transferred with an award at the highest rate nationwide.<sup>27</sup>

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One of the biggest threats to the long-term impact of any transfer policy is inflexibility. **Responsive** policy designs heed the dynamic nature of curriculum, bracing for the frequent changes that institutions inevitably make in academic program design. Consider a scenario in which a state articulates a transferable core policy attached to specific course codes in the common course catalog. If an individual institution chooses to alter its general education framework to include requirements outside of the common course catalog, credits earned by students transferring in and out of the institution are no longer protected. In responsive policy ecosystems, tweaks made at the institutional level should not upend the transfer student experience. To enable such flexibility, states are experimenting with various approaches to iterative review cycles. In Colorado, the General Education Council meets monthly to review proposals for new additions to the state's Guaranteed Transfer Pathways course database. Institutions submit course syllabi to be evaluated for alignment with one of the state's six general education categories. The legislative mandate informing the General Education Council's work facilitates efficient review cycles with an eye towards student-friendliness. Today, the GT Pathways database includes more than 1,800 courses, each of which are guaranteed to transfer for general education credit at all public institutions in Colorado.





When comprehensiveness, cohesion, and responsiveness have been achieved among a suite of transfer policies, these design principles can be applied to a more holistic perspective of the student experience. Modern approaches to dual enrollment, guided pathways, and automation are redefining the scope of transfer solutions. Supported by growing bodies of evidence, these innovations demonstrate that policy can do more than just remove barriers along the postsecondary journey — it can construct new expressways.

## When Integrated with General Education, Dual Enrollment Offers Early Scaffolding

The benefits of dual enrollment are clearer than ever. The latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse estimates that approximately 22 percent of first-time-in-college community college students are former dual enrollment students — and that dual enrollment participation nearly doubles the likelihood that a transfer student completes a bachelor’s degree.<sup>28, 29</sup> Nationwide, states are working to improve access to dual enrollment and other early postsecondary opportunities, which have historically been a glaring source of inequity in postsecondary preparation. In leading states like Indiana and Idaho, however, dual enrollment expansion is happening in concert with statewide policies that promote general education transferability. When woven into dual enrollment opportunities, mature transferable core policies can generate more strategic course-taking patterns among high school students:



**Indiana’s College Core**, created by a 2012 legislative mandate, consists of 30 credit hours distributed across six “core competencies.” High school students who complete the Core with at least a 2.0 GPA receive a College Core Certificate, and the assurance that their credits will transfer to any public college or university in the state. The simplicity of the Core allows for seamless integration with related efforts by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education and the Indiana Department of Education. On the postsecondary side, the Core has been built into every Transfer Pathway in the statewide database. In the K-12 realm, more than 200 high schools are designated as “delivery sites” for the Core; recent legislation requiring every high school to offer the Core will create a rapid uptick in delivery sites over the next few years. In both sectors, the state has designed financial incentives to encourage school districts and postsecondary institutions to support students in completing the Core. As early evaluations of the program are made available, the results are encouraging: 70 percent of college freshmen who complete the Core in high school meet all benchmarks for early college success as they enter their sophomore year.<sup>30</sup>



Idaho's General Education Matriculation (GEM) courses are distributed across six curricular categories, laddering up to a 36-hour transferable core. The GEM courses transfer as a block, ensuring that students can advance into degree-specific coursework upon transfer. The Idaho State Board's General Education Committee is a collaborative space for higher education and K-12 practitioners to sharpen the transition points between high school, community college, and university. As a result, more than 75 percent of the college credit earned by Idaho high school students in dual enrollment qualifies as GEM credit, generating momentum for postsecondary degree progress. More generally, Idaho continues to stand out as a leader in both dual enrollment participation and funding: Among the class of 2020, 58 percent of graduates participated in dual enrollment opportunities.<sup>31</sup> Access to early college coursework continues to expand, due in part to Idaho's Advanced Opportunities program, which offers students up to \$4,625 to pay for advanced academic experiences.

## Guided Pathways Provide Direction

Transfer students who complete bachelor's degrees are more likely than their peers to accumulate excess credit — most of which is made up of 100- and 200-level courses aimed at satisfying general education requirements. At high schools and community colleges, general education course selection is often made without regard for a student's intended degree path, resulting in a jumble of credits that will ultimately transfer as elective credit. (For example, an aspiring nurse practitioner may elect to fulfill foundational science requirements with Ecology and Geology courses, only to later discover that they need Anatomy and Microbiology as pre-requisites to courses required for their intended major.) While general education is a nonnegotiable element of the bachelor's degree, evidence suggests that core curriculum must be contextualized within pre-major curriculum in order to keep students on-time and on-track.<sup>32</sup> As experts from the Community College Researcher Center put it: “[It’s] a myth that there exist program-independent general education courses.”<sup>33</sup>

Through the signals that they receive from both state policies and institutional messengers, too many students approach general education as an obstacle to “get out of the way,” instead of an on-ramp into their intended major.<sup>34</sup> To combat these signals, more than 40 percent of community colleges are experimenting with guided pathways at the system or campus level.<sup>35</sup> Ideally building off of college and career exploration in middle and high school, guided pathways can push students to select a meta-major or field of study *before* they've accumulated 30 credit hours. In doing so, students are better protected from excess general education coursework, which typically piles up as students progress from 30 credits to 60. Guided pathways have produced disproportionately positive benefits for students of color, low-income students, and academically-underprepared students, who report excess credit at higher rates.<sup>36</sup> Though these interventions are largely institutionally-driven, some states have enacted policies that articulate a statewide vision for the early college journey:





**North Carolina’s Comprehensive Articulation Agreement** — which builds consensus around general education courses and degree maps — offers a compelling example of state policy simultaneously providing for stability, flexibility, and direction. In addition to its standard articulation functions, the NC CAA explicitly encourages all transfer students to declare their majors before accumulating 30 hours of coursework. This provision was approved by the NC Board of Governors in 2014, along with a suite of additional transfer-friendly measures. In a national comparison of transfer metrics, North Carolina’s 2015 community college cohort reported the *highest* increases in transfer-out rates and cohort bachelor’s completion.<sup>37</sup>



The **Tennessee** Board of Regents launched its “**Reimagining the Community College Experience**” pilot in the Fall of 2023. Through experimental projects across four campuses, TBR seeks to elevate the importance of career exploration in the student experience. At two campuses, flipped degree programs invite students to begin their postsecondary experience by completing stackable credentials as they earn courses within designated meta-majors. These programs expertly leverage community colleges’ robust capabilities in workforce preparation and training, ensuring that the early coursework students accumulate will translate into labor market value.

## Automated Transfer Processes Fuel Momentum

At this moment — when both enrollment and trust levels in higher education are dropping — state and institutional leaders are seeking opportunities to ameliorate bureaucratic hurdles standing between students and matriculation.<sup>38</sup> Automated admissions pilot programs have launched in states across the country, already producing promising indicators of impact.<sup>39</sup> Students will soon expect automation across all aspects of their experience, and transfer students must not be lost in the conversation.



**Arizona’s General Education Curriculum** (AGEC) — one of the first transferable core programs ever created — guarantees that students who complete the program’s required 35-37 credits will benefit from “block transfer,” automatically receiving a locked set of credits at receiving institutions. In this way, transfer blocks are a high-leverage means of automation. But the AGEC program goes further: students who complete the transfer block with at least a 2.5 GPA are guaranteed admission to ASU, NAU, and UA. The Arizona model creates a meaningful incentive for students as they progress through the state’s general education curriculum — and rewards them early.



In many states, admission is included in guaranteed associate programs. [See *Tennessee’s Transfer Pathways*, or *program-specific admissions agreements in Virginia and Indiana*.] These policies arguably incentivize associate degree completion, but fail to serve the vast majority of students who seek to transfer before accumulating 60 credits.<sup>40</sup>



“Guaranteed” programs are notably different from “automated” options. Disparate application portals, data re-entry, and transcript evaluation continue to stand between transfer students and university enrollment. Recognizing potential synergies between two nascent initiatives — “Promoting Admissions” and Universal Transfer Pathways — the **Louisiana** Board of Regents (LBOR) is currently leveraging grant funding to experiment with automated solutions for transfer students. Through local pilots with a small subset of institutions, LBOR seeks to systematically eliminate data exchange challenges in the transfer process, ultimately producing a seamless transcript- and repetition-free experience.



As of August 2023, 31 states showed *no evidence* of publicly-reported transfer data.<sup>41</sup> Among the states that do publicly track transfer, coverage is spotty. For example, 21 states report on “access” metrics like transfer-out rates, but only seven report on credit accumulation as a signal of “efficiency.” Worse, an even smaller portion of states disaggregate data by race and income. In states that have yet to establish centralized reporting mechanisms, individual systems and institutions have attempted to fill the gap with tools like [Boise State’s Fate Dashboard](#). Unfortunately, these snapshots only capture transfer activity at one institution.

To support policymakers and practitioners, states should invest in public reporting systems that collect and publish data points throughout the transfer student journey:<sup>42</sup>

## Transfer Metrics

- **Dual Enrollment Participation Rates** predict college enrollment.<sup>43</sup> When dual enrollment offerings are integrated with transferable core programs, students are more likely to earn *applicable* credits in high school.
- **Community College Enrollment** reveals trends in college-going and can help institutions tailor their resources and offerings to their unique student populations.
- **Transfer Out Rates** reflect the extent to which community colleges are successfully expanding access to bachelor’s degrees.
- **Transfer In Rates** offer the ability to compare the access and appeal of various institutions as transfer students determine their next destinations.
- **Completion Rates (Associate and Bachelor’s)** illuminate disparities between transfer and non-transfer students.
- **Time to Degree** exposes bottlenecks along a transfer student’s progress towards a bachelor’s degree.
- **Credit Accumulation** diagnoses the severity of excess credit accumulation, which typically takes place in the midst of transfer. To the extent possible, excess credit diagnoses should seek to expose major culprits, e.g., dual enrollment, credit for prior learning, general education core.
- **Core Completion *if applicable*** indicates the extent to which students are responding to general education policy design — and whether core completion is ultimately beneficial.
- **Pathway Completion *if applicable*** indicates the extent to which students are adhering to articulated pathways — and whether those pathways are ultimately beneficial.
- **Major Changes** provide insight into unpredictable student behaviors, and may detect the most common student pathways for codification. (See [NSC Transfer and Progress Report](#))

In Ohio, the Department of Education recently demonstrated what data-driven, student-centered policy iteration can look like. The Ohio Transfer Module (OTM) boasts a 30-year history of promoting transfer among the state’s 36 public institutions. In 2017, a General Education Steering Committee was asked to evaluate the extent to which the OTM was “meeting the current needs of Ohio public institutions of higher education and students.”<sup>44</sup> The committee’s work led them to propose two mechanisms to better promote credit applicability for transfer students: First, the OTM, rebranded as the “[Ohio Transfer 36](#),” was reconstructed to better align with the state’s Guaranteed Transfer Pathways, providing guidance for both “decided” and “undecided” students. Second, the “Ohio Transfer Promise” was affirmed by institutions across the state, creating firmer credit assurances for transfer students. Today, a few years post-implementation, the state continues to uplift resources like its [Transfer Demographics Profile](#) to empower institutions to better serve transfer students.

To explore best-in-class examples of statewide transfer dashboards, visit [Arizona’s ASSIST system](#), [Virginia’s Transfer Feedback reports](#), or [Washington’s data hub](#).

# Seeding Success with IMPLEMENTATION-FRIENDLY PRACTICES



Studies evaluating various transfer policies conclude with a common caution: the long-term effects of any approach will ultimately be mediated by implementation — for better or worse. For example, in some states, completion outcomes for low-income students vary by more than 30 percentage points from one community college to another.<sup>45</sup> These staggering differences uncover two parallel truths: Some institutions have achieved outstanding outcomes, seemingly in spite of their statewide ecosystems. From these institutions, we have much to learn. At the same time, neighboring institutions reporting transfer-out rates in the single digits are an important reminder that policy alone cannot transform the transfer student experience.

Supporting advisors, investing in modern communication tools, and collaborating closely with faculty members can have transformative effects on the transfer landscape:

## Counselor and Advisor Support

Advisors often find themselves playing a truth-seeking role — comparing various policies and articulation agreements with one another, sifting through outdated information from sources at the state, system, and institutional levels.<sup>46</sup> To better equip advisors with the tools they need to navigate transfer, state leaders are finding creative ways to integrate practitioners into the policymaking process, building awareness and buy-in along the way:

- ➔ In **Idaho**, the statewide General Education Committee includes representation from campus registrar and dual enrollment offices. At the state’s centralized State Board, program managers in academic affairs regularly collaborate across K-12 and higher education to share information across their respective stakeholder groups.
- ➔ Through participation in the Strong Start to Finish network, **Colorado** developed a council of advisors to ground their policy work in on-the-ground perspectives. State leaders also look to their Concurrent Enrollment Advisory Board for opportunities to better serve high school students.
- ➔ AZTransfer, a statewide service organization, has infused its operations with practitioner perspectives — hiring staff members directly from **Arizona’s** School Counselor Association. As the state’s transfer initiatives scaled, AZTransfer adopted a “train the trainer” approach, developing annual training materials for school counselors, college advisors, and college admissions professionals.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- ✔ To what extent are school counselors and college advisors represented in your policy design process?
- ✔ What training, resources, and support do you or your partners provide to school counselors and/or college advisors on transfer?
- ✔ What are the primary communications channels that you leverage to reach school counselors and college advisors? How often are you utilizing these channels?
- ✔ In the long run, where does advising fit into your strategic vision? What kinds of resources are you prepared to invest in advising?

## Transparent Communications

At under-resourced institutions, some advisors carry caseloads in excess of 1,000 students.<sup>47</sup> As a result, students experience limited or inconsistent guidance, often coming across discrepancies between sending and receiving institutions. Defaulting to their own research, students consult state, system, and institution web sources for guidance on crucial decisions.<sup>48</sup> Thus, technology and digital communications are playing an increasingly important role in transfer student support:

- ➔ **Indiana's** My College Core tool helps high school students compare their school's course offerings to requirements for the state's 30-credit College Core Certificate. The interface prompts students to consider how their course selections could eventually ladder up in a 2+2 program, and encourages them to share their thinking with guardians and counselors.
- ➔ **Arizona State University's** MyPath2ASU aims to “take the guesswork out of transfer work.” Meeting transfer students at various points along their journeys, the transfer guide can help students select community college courses based on their intended major at ASU or compare how their coursework would apply to various majors. ASU has long been a trailblazer in student transparency — empowered by Arizona's national leadership in transfer data reporting.
- ➔ The **Colorado** Department of Higher Education is leveraging recent legislative momentum in transfer reporting and accountability, exploring opportunities to present data in a student-facing portal. Their efforts are guided by an enticing vision: Students make data-backed course selection and enrollment decisions based on the documented experiences of students who traveled parallel paths in the past.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- ✔ How are transfer students in your state gathering information?
- ✔ Have you dedicated staff resources to maintaining updated, centralized informational tools for transfer students?
- ✔ How are your staff members collaborating with campus-level administrators to streamline student communications across sources?
- ✔ Have you explored dynamic solutions to transfer student communications, e.g. portals, planning tools, or third-party platforms?

## Faculty Involvement

In conversations about transfer reform, faculty members are often cast as resolute protectors of institutional autonomy in curriculum design. Of course, faculty members play a critical role in designing general education and degree pathways. But their criticality to process should not be categorically written off as a bottleneck or blocker. Instead, if integrated thoughtfully, faculty members can serve as powerful facilitators of student-centered transfer practices.<sup>49</sup> Faculty committees and councils give scholars a chance to put their fingerprint on academic program design, while simultaneously creating moments for relationship building across sectors and regions. In community with peers, conversations about quality and content can transcend assumptions and work towards solutions grounded in a shared desire to promote student success:

- ➔ AZTransfer convenes more than 1,300 faculty members across a number of articulation task forces in Arizona. Task force projects are carefully framed with some of the most advanced data reporting in the country — reminding faculty members that student success depends on consensus and collaboration.
- ➔ Idaho’s State Board of Education deeply integrates faculty perspectives into general education curriculum design through the statewide General Education Committee. The Committee includes faculty who enjoy the intellectual exercise of curriculum design, and deliberates under a shared commitment to student success. Though it operates under the Board’s supervision, the Committee sets its own priorities and takes pride in the “uniquely Idaho” nature of the GEM framework.
- ➔ Oregon’s Transfer Council includes a Provosts’ Council and a Council of Chief Academic Officers, representing four-year and two-year institutions, respectively. Recently, these two sub-Councils have agreed to come together multiple times per year to strengthen relationships and identify shared approaches to problem-solving.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- ✔ How are you nurturing faculty relationships among various sectors and institutions in your state?
- ✔ To what extent are faculty members and/or CAOs actually represented in your policy design process?
- ✔ How are you centering the transfer student experience in curriculum design?



# PRIORITIZING TRANSFER STUDENTS, from the Capitol to the Campus



Transfer students traverse nearly every square inch of the postsecondary pipeline, often navigating especially circuitous journeys. As they travel among sectors, institutions, and degree programs, transfer students challenge policymakers and practitioners throughout education systems to reexamine patchwork approaches to their early postsecondary experiences. Modern experiments in integration, collaboration, and automation offer glimpses of seamless transfer student experiences. To transform these experiments into widespread student impact, state leaders in legislatures, State Higher Education Executive Offices (SHEEOs), and institutions must embrace their unique duties for change.

## LEGISLATURES

**LEGISLATIVE MANDATES:** Particularly in decentralized governance ecosystems, legislation may be necessary for action. Consider the effects of [HB2998](#) in Oregon: In 2017, responding to evidence of widespread credit loss among transfer students, the Oregon State Legislature mandated the creation of at least three [degree transfer maps](#) every year. As a result, the Oregon Transfer Council has now rolled out Transfer Maps in English Literature, Biology, Business, Computer Science, and more.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** Legislation can generate public awareness of institutional transfer practices through accountability mechanisms. In 2024, the Colorado General Assembly passed a [multi-part bill](#) aimed at promoting credit acceptance and protecting transfer students. In addition to instituting mechanisms to reduce the prevalence of elective transfer credit, the bill requires every public institution to compile annual transfer reports. Through a collection of mechanisms, the bill sets a new bar for transparency and [“transfer student rights.”](#)

**FUNDING ALLOCATIONS AND INCENTIVES:** Legislators can also use funding to incentivize innovations in transfer policy. For example, Texas’ new [community college funding formula](#) awards institutions for three specific outcomes — one of which is vertical transfer. In Louisiana’s [outcomes-based model](#), universities are rewarded for reducing time-to-award for transfer students.

## STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICES

**STRATEGIC PRIORITIZATION:** SHEEOs must consistently and emphatically signal the importance of transfer policy in their strategic plans. Prior to 2023, Kansas was the only state in the central United States without some form of systemwide general education. In 2021, motivated by a legislative task force on transfer policy, the KS Board of Regents set an explicit goal to establish a shared statewide framework. The Board’s strategic vision resulted in the successful implementation of the [“Seven Bucket Framework”](#) in 2024.

**CONVENING AND NETWORK DEVELOPMENT:** To infuse policy with insights from practice — and to generate buy-in — governing and coordinating bodies carry the responsibility for coalescing leaders and practitioners around shared goals. Successful community building can break down tendencies towards territorialism, and pave the way towards consensus. Plus, when transitioning from policymaking to implementation, close relationships with practitioners take on an additional level of importance.

**DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING:** In facilitating centralized data collection and exchange, coordinating bodies can establish statewide definitions for the metrics that matter most. Standardization can unlock new capabilities in evaluation and measurement. And, once data can be reported consistently, institutions identified to be leaders in transfer can share and scale best practices.

**INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY:** Coordinating bodies should serve as advocates for students during the transfer process. Though many states have established transfer credit appeals mechanisms, these policies are typically poorly communicated and cumbersome. In Colorado, legislators have narrowed in on student appeals as a lever for meaningfully improving credit transferability; [SB24-164](#) instructs CDHE to oversee a universal appeal process, giving students the ability to challenge credit rejections in a timely manner.

## UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

**STATEWIDE THOUGHT PARTNERSHIP:** Universities have a responsibility to identify strong ambassadors for statewide task forces and working groups. Often, ambassadors may be pulled from the ranks of faculty or registrar’s office. Yet, states like [Oregon](#) are discovering the benefits of convening Chief Academic Officers and Provosts to improve coordination on transfer.

**COOPERATION WITH STATEWIDE INITIATIVES:** The impact of statewide transfer policies is mediated by observance at the institutional level. For example, institutions arbitrate the *applicability* of credits in transferable core programs. They also determine if and how their degree programs will deviate from statewide transfer pathways. To promote transfer student success, institutions should invest in the resources necessary to continuously monitor and strengthen their alignment with statewide articulation efforts.

**ELIMINATION OF HARMFUL TRANSCRIPT PRACTICES:** Historically, institutions have been able to withhold student transcripts to prompt the collection of unpaid balances. The practice has been widely documented as a major barrier to seamless transfer. In late 2023, the US Department of Education [announced sweeping regulations](#) restricting transcript withholding. In adjusting to these new regulations, institutions should take the opportunity to introduce more student-friendly transcript practices writ large.

**AWARD OF CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING:** In ACE’s [Reimagining Transfer Report](#), the Council states that awarding credit for prior learning should be “embedded into the culture” of institutions. Prior learning takes place in a myriad of settings — secondary school, workforce training, military experience, etc. To equitably honor prior learning, institutions must invest in the resources and expertise necessary to develop a suite of evaluation tools. These tools will better enable the application of prior learning to general education requirements.

**TRANSFER STUDENT ADVISING AND COMMUNICATIONS:** As the first place that students and advisors look for transfer resources, institutional websites and communications must keep up with changes happening at the system and state levels. As changes are implemented, institutions should have codified processes for building awareness around new policies, and evaluating the extent to which advising sessions are actually incorporating new policies.

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**Today, transfer students face an uphill battle as they navigate disjointed policy structures. To transform these structures into streamlined policy ecosystems, policymakers and practitioners throughout state systems must come together to invest in connective solutions that prioritize student success.**

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