AACRAO
RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE IN SUPPORTING TRANSFER STUDENT SUCCESS

<div align="center">**Purpose**</div>

In an effort to codify institutional best practices in fostering transfer student success, AACRAO developed this set of transfer credit evaluation criteria based on a review of existing research and practice to measure, and subsequently formally recognize, institutions as transfer student success-centric. The criteria address six key areas of policy and practice related to transfer student success: institutional practices impacting access to official transcripts, academic and financial aid advising for outbound transfer students, academic and financial aid advising for inbound transfer students, articulation agreements and/or other mapped pathways, transfer credit evaluation policy and practice, and the use of technology to support these efforts.

Literature Review

The AACRAO Transfer Student Success Work Group was established to identify policies and best practices that distinguish an institution as effectively supporting transfer student success. As part of this effort, the work group started by completing a review of recent literature on transfer student success. This document summarizes key themes and recommendations that emerged.

AACRAO has championed effective transfer practices for decades through practice guide publications, transfer professional convenings and research. As a co-author of the "Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit" (2001), AACRAO contributed to a framework used by institutions to establish their own transfer policies and practices. AACRAO (n.d.) also published a Guide to Best Practices, offering additional resources to support institutions in establishing policies and practices that are both academically sound and focused on student success. In addition to countless articles, publications, and resources, AACRAO's conferences and convenings offer members the opportunity to hear from experts and collaborate with colleagues on best practices and innovations related to transfer. With an established leadership role in the area of transfer, AACRAO is well positioned to help institutions re-envision transfer.

Demonstrating the organization's thought leadership, AACRAO is a contributor to the National Task Force on the Transfer and Award of Credit, led by the American Council for Education (ACE). Their recent report, "Reimaging Transfer for Student Success" (2021), stands out to unify the key themes uncovered in this literature review. First and foremost, this report establishes transfer as an equity issue, a theme that surfaces throughout the recent literature on transfer. Their recommendations are built upon an environmental scan and series of white papers that paint a clear picture of the transfer landscape. The task force provides six recommendations for both sending and receiving institutions, each meant to reduce time to degree, limit student financial burdens, and, ultimately, minimize long standing equity gaps:

- Prioritize transfer students, acknowledge the various types of transfer credit they may acquire, and make it part of the institution's culture;
- Review and update policies to remove unnecessary barriers to transfer and diminish credit loss;
- Utilize technology to ensure the accurate and unbiased review and application of transfer credit;
- Increase transparency of transfer credit policies and processes;
- Commit resources for advising students throughout the transfer continuum, including cross-institutional advising; and,
- Create agreements with frequent partner institutions to develop pathways for transfer students (2021).

Prioritize Transfer

Transfer is an equity issue. Students are increasingly mobile, more likely to transition between higher education institutions, and often bring with them learning experiences outside an academic setting (ACE, 2021). Social equity and the intelligent use of resources require institutions to develop reasonable and definitive policies and procedures for acceptance of learning experiences, as well as for the transfer of credits earned at another institution (Sullivan, Ward, Eaton, 2001). Rosenberg & Koch (2021) further highlight the social justice implications related to transfer. They assert the system is:

...particularly rife with negative implications for the types of students that higher education in the United States has not served well historically—students from first-generation, low-income, and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who are disproportionately overrepresented in the transfer-bound populations at community colleges today. Viewed in this light, repairing the transfer model shifts from an institutional responsibility to a moral and societal obligation. In short, transfer must be reframed from an enrollment management mechanism to a social justice imperative (p. 50-51).

Reducing barriers is paramount to supporting low-income students and students of color, enabling transfer, persistence, and completion. Removing barriers also strengthens public trust in higher education, reaffirming "its value as an engine of economic and social mobility and justice" (ACE, 2021, p. vi).

Tracking and validating learning that has occurred elsewhere remains a stumbling block for many institutions, negatively impacting their efforts to serve students (ACE, 2021). To combat this, institutions must prioritize transfer and embed it into the institutional culture (Community College Research Center, 2017). Institutions should educate staff and faculty about the unique challenges and needs of transfer students, and should provide targeted programs and services for transfer students such as transfer center one-stops, special course sections targeted to transfer students, and supplemental instruction (Mintz, 2020).

Credit for Prior Learning

Increasingly, students bring work and life experiences from outside the academy that are equivalent to college-level learning and worthy of credit. Recognition of non-classroom learning experiences deepens the institutional commitment to supporting transfer of credit and removes barriers for students who may have taken a nontraditional path to achieve their educational goals. Multiple methods exist that allow institutions to provide credit for prior learning. Examples include:

- Standardized exams (e.g., AP, CLEP, IB, DSST);
- Faculty-developed challenge exams;
- Portfolio-based and other individualized assessments; and
- Evaluation of non-college programs such as ACE and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020).

Access to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has a positive impact on both students and institutions, improving student completion rates by more than 17% (Leibrandt, 2020). Additionally, research has found that PLA credits are associated with a 15-24% increase in completing a credential for underrepresented students (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020).

Lack of access to PLA opportunities continues to reinforce systemic racism. Underrepresented and low-income students are the least likely groups to know about and pursue PLA opportunities. Most students find out about PLA options through personal connections such as an advisor, high school counselor, peer, faculty member, or family member, rather than widely distributed information (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020). The lack of information, time commitment, and limits to how credits apply deter students from pursuing PLA credit (Leibrandt, 2020). Finally, with no regulation by the accrediting agency or federal government of the fees charged by an institution for the cost of PLA credit, and the lack of federal financial aid for students seeking such credit, PLA opportunities are only accessible to those with the most resources – further reinforcing inequity in higher education (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020).

Institutions have a moral obligation to their most vulnerable students to prioritize the awarding of credit for prior or non-traditional learning via policies and practices that are transparent, affordable, and inclusive. Communication about PLA options should be frequent throughout the student lifecycle, using a variety of formats (Leibrandt, 2020).

While PLA can reduce the overall program cost for a student, the immediate out-of-pocket expenses can be prohibitive (Leibrandt, 2020). Federal and state financial aid policies should consider covering PLA fees, so as not to limit access. In addition, institutions should absorb some of the costs since students who earn PLA are more likely to take additional courses, thus bolstering enrollments and, therefore, funding and degree-completion rates (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020).

Remove Barriers

Institutional policies and practices can create unnecessary barriers that make transferring credit more challenging. Evaluating end-to-end policies and practices with transfer students in mind is necessary to eliminate obstacles, including challenges accessing transcripts to continue their education elsewhere (ACE, 2021). Barriers in the transfer process can negatively impact academic progression. According to Krieg (2010), not only are students native to an institution more likely to graduate than transfers, but they are also likely to do so faster. In fact, students native to the institution are 23.4% more likely to graduate within 2.5 years of earning their 90th credit than transfer students are .

Policies and Practices

Policies and practices should focus on student preparation for the transfer transition and should reflect the responsibilities both students and institutions have in the transfer process. When creating or revising policies and practices related to transfer of credit, it is critical to understand the various jurisdictions in the institutions' environment and align policies to meet local, state, federal, and accreditation standards and requirements. Institutional policies should also reflect the institution's mission and goals. As such, each institution's policies will be unique and include the components that are appropriate to the institution (AACRAO, n.d.).

"The Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit" (Sullivan, Ward, Eaton, 2001), provides clear and practical guidelines to aid institutions in constructing effective transfer policies. The statement highlights key considerations for transfer policies and practices. These guidelines address: comparability and applicability of the content and level of the transfer credit, learning outcomes, and the existence of valid evaluation measures. Institutions should make every reasonable effort to reduce the gap between credits accepted and credits that will be applied toward credential completion. Consistency in evaluation and application of credits, and accountability for effective public communication of transfer policies, is critical. The guidelines also recommend openness to innovation and novel modes of instruction.

Credit Loss

Credit loss occurs when a student's previous credits cannot be applied to a program at the transfer institution. This extends a student's time to degree, increases expenses, leads to more debt, and lowers the likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment. Degree program credit loss, rather than the outright loss of credit, is more likely to be identified as a challenge. This occurs when credit transfers but is not applied to program requirements (Hodara et. al., 2016).

To combat credit loss, some states have implemented excess credit hour (ECH) policies. However, there is little evidence that ECH policies positively affect student completion. Kramer et. al. (2018) find statistically large estimates that adoption of ECH policies increase median student debt. Students from marginalized backgrounds (i.e., first-generation and low-income students) appear to be most adversely affected by ECH policies.

Various factors can lead to credit loss for transfer students, driven by both student behaviors and institutional policies and practices. Change of majors, type of advising, transfer credit policies and procedures, and change in institutional control type have a statistically relevant impact on credit loss (Kilgore & Sharp, 2020). In addition, a student's GPA prior to transfer was related positively to the number of credits accepted at the destination institution (Simone, 2014).

Credit transfer inefficiency can be reduced by encouraging students to explore and choose a bachelor's degree major early. Fink et. al. (2018) stress the importance of academic advising and other support services focused on helping students explore career and academic options and choose a program of study rather than emphasis on obtaining a transfer degree to get general education out of the way (2018). In addition, institutions are encouraged to examine their transfer credit evaluation policies and practices to streamline and maximize earned transfer credit as well as to complete a self-study on advising practices and their connection to applied transfer credit. A more student-centric definition of credit loss is recommended (Kilgore & Sharp, 2020).

Transparency

Transfer students have a right to clear information upfront about how their credits will be applied to their program requirements (ACE, 2021; AACRAO, n.d.). Consistency in evaluation and application of credits, and accountability for effective public communication of transfer policies, is critical (Sullivan, Ward, Eaton, 2001). Transparency is a thread that runs through all identified recommendations in this summary.

Prioritizing transfer includes making information and data about transfer ubiquitous so that transfer is part of the institutional culture. As noted, students often lack awareness of available options regarding credit for prior learning due to lack of transparency (Garcia & Leibrandt, 2020; Leibrandt, 2020). To remove barriers, policies and practices must be transparent. This includes not only communicating policies and procedures, but also personalized information about how credit will be applied, which credits will not be accepted or applied, and why.

The remaining recommendations can help improve transparency. Technology solutions can help ensure consistent and accurate evaluation of transfer credit and can provide automated communication mechanisms about the outcomes of transfer credit evaluation (Kilgore, 2020). Resources and advising also promote communication about policies and practices, and provide students with tools and information to aid in transfer student success (Mooring & Mooring, 2015). Finally, partnerships and pathways provide a roadmap for students to understand how to transfer successfully within a pathway developed collaboratively to support transfer student success (Mintz, 2020).

Technology

Technology aligned with policy and practice can improve transfer of credit throughout the student lifecycle. Technology solutions improve speed, accuracy, consistency, and transparency (Kilgore, 2020). Institutions should consider adopting innovative solutions to improve the transfer experience for students. Various technology solutions are available, and emerging solutions including artificial intelligence, machine learning, and blockchain can also be explored in this space (ACE, 2021).

Examining the student lifecycle, prospective students benefit from technology to identify institutions accepting transfer credit, determine how credit will transfer, review course descriptions, understand the admissions process, and connect with admissions staff. Electronic Data Exchange (EDX), for example, has been available for three decades but has not been widely adopted. This solution allows institutions to share electronic records as data. Applicants can benefit from technology that uses self-reported transfer credit to make an admission decision, apply transfer credit rules to an electronic file, automate articulation of transfer credit, communicate articulation decisions, handle exceptions, and share transfer decisions to the degree audit program. Admitted students benefit from technology that offers accurate and timely advising due to transfer evaluations being completed sooner, and self-service course registration that recognizes transfer credit in meeting scheduling rules. Matriculated students benefit from technology that allows them to understand how courses taken elsewhere will transfer in and "what if" scenarios to understand the implication of transfer credit (Kilgore, 2020).

Resources and Advising

Appropriate resource levels are needed to support transfer student success. Providing students access to well-trained, knowledgeable staff to support them early and throughout the transfer journey with personalized information and guidance is strongly recommended. In addition, coordinating advising with a cross-institutional approach with an institution's frequent transfer partners will allow students to receive accurate and holistic support from first enrollment to credential completion (ACE, 2021).

According to a recent study, Kilgore & Sharp (2020) found, among other factors, the type of advising provided to students has a statistically relevant impact on credit loss. In this study, a blended approach to advising where both student ownership and advisor guidance are employed yielded best results (Kilgore & Sharp, 2020). The Community College Research Center (CCRC) (2017) recommends providing personalized advising for transfer students. They also recommend that community colleges focus on helping students choose programs of study. When students explore and choose a bachelor's degree major early, they improve transfer credit efficiency. Support systems and advising that encourage career exploration with alignment to programs of study, rather than focus on knocking out general education requirements, is also important to transfer success (Fink, 2018).

At the receiving institution, a transfer-friendly onboarding process is key. Strong onboarding helps ease the transition to the four-year school. This experience should include extra help with financial aid, transfer-tailored orientation, expedited transfer evaluation, prioritized scheduling, and bridge programs (Mintz, 2020). Tutoring, workshops, and seminars may be offered at the four-year institution to ensure transfer students get the support they need. These support services can increase the GPA and, therefore, graduation rates of transfer students (Mooring & Mooring, 2015).

Partnerships and Pathways

Identifying key transfer institutions and developing partnerships can create a more positive and effective transfer experience for students. Building relationships between frequent sending and receiving transfer institutions may include articulation agreements and pathways that make degree requirements clear for students (ACE, 2021).

Purposeful articulation agreements make pathways clear while offering appropriate flexibility for students whose circumstances may change. These pathways make the transfer process more seamless between two-year and four-year institutions (Mintz, 2020). Creating clear programmatic transfer maps and guidelines helps students take the right lower division and pre-major coursework and thus minimizes credit loss (Fink, 2018). Students who transfer in established pathways, most often from two-year to four-year institutions, are typically more successful in transferring credits (Simone, 2014).

Articulation agreements have many benefits such as creating a roadmap for the students as well as the sending and receiving institution. This can remove barriers related to transfer. Strategic articulation agreements can also enhance diversity at receiving institutions and create needed relationships and conversations between institutions (Kamen, et al., 2019). CCRC (2017) recommends creating clear programmatic pathways and focusing on a handful of top transfer destinations to develop models after these select programs. Those models can then be applied to other partnerships.

A previous AACRAO work group provided best practices for articulation agreements. Institutions should create a framework for agreements to create consistency. Including the right people in the process will ensure effective agreements that meet stakeholder needs. Institutions should analyze their transfer data and establish transfer goals beginning with the most important articulation agreements. Effective articulation agreements have a single point of contact at each institution to coordinate the relationship. Once the agreement is signed, institutions should notify impacted populations and all stakeholders to create awareness. The agreement should also be integrated into the catalog, degree audit system, course equivalency guide, website, and marketing initiatives (Kamen, Seth, et al., 2019).

Final Thoughts

With a keen focus on equity, higher education institutions today must consider policies and practices that negatively impact students who have traditionally been underserved. Transfer students, collectively, have experienced greater challenges in degree completion. Transfer students are more likely to be low-income, first-generation, and racially diverse, which makes improving the transfer student experience even more essential to addressing equity issues in higher education. Prioritizing transfer credit as part of the institution's culture helps to align all stakeholders to provide a more seamless transfer experience. Recognizing that learning occurs outside the classroom and awarding prior learning credit for these experiences further reinforces this culture. Removing barriers such as unreasonable transcript holds and rigid policies that lead to credit loss advances transfer student success and credential completion. Creating greater transparency helps all stakeholders – students, faculty, and staff – understand policies and practices, processes for appeals, and how to navigate the transfer experience effectively. Partnerships with a focus on the transfer student experience create clear pathways that lead to seamless and timely completion. Investments in technology, resources, and effective, holistic, personalized advising provides transfer students the support needed to transition and complete credentials successfully.

<div align="center">**Process**</div>

New Application

Applications will be accepted on an annual basis and will be scored by the responses submitted on the online application. Institutions must have an active AACRAO membership during the period of application and recognition. Applicants must submit all necessary documents/materials for applications to be considered. There are three transfer designations for which applicants will be evaluated: exemplary, emerging, or developing. To meet the designation, applicants must meet 80% or more of the numbered items in each of the sections per level. Applications will be reviewed by AACRAO. Those institutions that meet the exemplary threshold will be formally recognized by AACRAO as described below. Others will be given feedback on their status and guided to resources to help them advance to exemplary.

Application Process for Renewal at Exemplary Status

Institutions need to reapply every three years. Institutions that reapply as an exemplary institution need to complete a shortened application with a submission of any changes that affect transfer students (both positive and negative). Applications will be reviewed by AACRAO.

Application Process for Applying to Advance in Recognition

Institutions interested in applying to advance in recognition will be able to reapply during one of the annual application submission cycles. Institutions that reapply to ascend their status will complete the general application and submit all documents or materials that provide evidence of advancement that warrant upgraded status. Applications will be reviewed by AACRAO.

Timeline

Institutions must apply by October 1 of each year and will be notified by no later than the annual meeting the following spring.

AACRAO Recognition

The benefits of applying to be recognized by AACRAO as a transfer success oriented institution includes a seal for institutional websites to show status and a website list published annually by AACRAO, in the AACRAO newsletter. State-affiliated AACRAO organizations' websites will be asked to post the recognition.

References

AACRAO. See American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. n.d.. A Guide to Best Practices: Awarding Transfer and Prior Learning Credit. Washington, D.C.: AACRAO. https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/signature-initiative-docs/trending-topic-docs/transfer/guide-to-best-practices.pdf?sfvrsn=4820bb55_6

ACE. See American Council on Education.

American Council on Education. 2021. Reimaging Transfer for Student success: The National Task Force on the Transfer and Award for Credit. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Reimagining-Transfer-for-Student-Success.pdf

CCRC. See Community College Research Center.

Community College Research Center. 2017. Building Transfer Student Success at Macomb Community College: A Report on Transfer and Degree Completion. New York, NY: Community College Research Center. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/building-transfer-student-success-macomb-community-college-report-transfer-degree-completion.html

Fink, John, Davis Jenkins, Elizabeth Kopko, , Florence Xiaotao Ran. 2018. Using Data Mining to Explore Why Community College Transfer Students Earn Bachelor's Degrees. New York, NY: Community College Research Center.

Garcia, Rose M. and Sarah Leibrandt. 2020. The Current State of Higher Learning Policies. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Hodara, Michelle, Mary Martinez-Wenzl, DavidStevens, and Christopher Mazzeo. (2016). Improving Credit Mobility for Community College Transfer Students: Findings and Recommendations From a 10-state Study. Portland, OR: Education Northwest.

References

Kamen, Seth, Marc Booker, Kelly Brooks, Daniel de la Torre, Thomas J. Grites, Megan Hills, Joseph Redington, Brandy Reeves, Katie Schwienteck. 2019. Guide to Best Practices Articulation Agreements. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/signature-initiative-docs/trending-topic-docs/transfer/aacrao-articulation-agreement-final_aacraocover.pdf

Kilgore, W. 2020. Transfer Credit Enabling Technology Considerations in Response to COVID-19 and Remote Work. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Kilgore, Wendy, and KennethSharp. 2020. Research Brief: Exploring the Impacts of Institutional Advising and Credit Evaluation Policy and Practice.

Kramer, Dennis A., Michael R. Holcomb, and Kelchen Robert. 2017. "The Costs and Consequences of Excess Credit Hours Policies." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. 40(1): 3–28. DOI: 10.3102/0162373717709968.

Krieg, John. 2010. Academic Performance of Native and Transfer Students Report. April. Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University Office of Survey Research,. https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wp.wwu.edu/dist/d/4572/files/2019/02/OSRReport2010-02-21mg19i-1stwty1.pdf

Leibrandt, Sarah. 2020. PLA from the Student's Perspective: Lessons Learned from Survey and Interview Data. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Mintz, Steven. 2020. "Tackling Transfer Issues." Inside Higher Ed, Feb. 5..

Mooring, Raymond D., and Suazette R. Mooring. 2015. "Predictors of Timely Baccalaureate Attainment for Underrepresented Minority Community College Transfer Students." Community College Journal of Research and Practice 40(8): 681-694.

References

Rosenberg, Michael J., and Andrew K. Koch. 2021. "Reframing Transfer as a Social Justice Imperative," Pp. 50-68 in The Transfer Experience: A Handbook for Creating a More Equitable and Successful Postsecondary System, edited by J.N. Gardner, M. J. Rosenberg and A. K. Koch Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Simone, Sean Anthony. 2014. Transferability of Postsecondary Credit Following Student Transfer or Coenrollment (NCES 2014-163). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014163.pdf

Sullivan, Jerome H., David Ward, and Judith S. Eaton. 2001. Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officer, American Council on Education, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.