

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

High-Impact Pathways: Developing Sustainable, Strategic Partnerships to Support Enrollment Pipelines

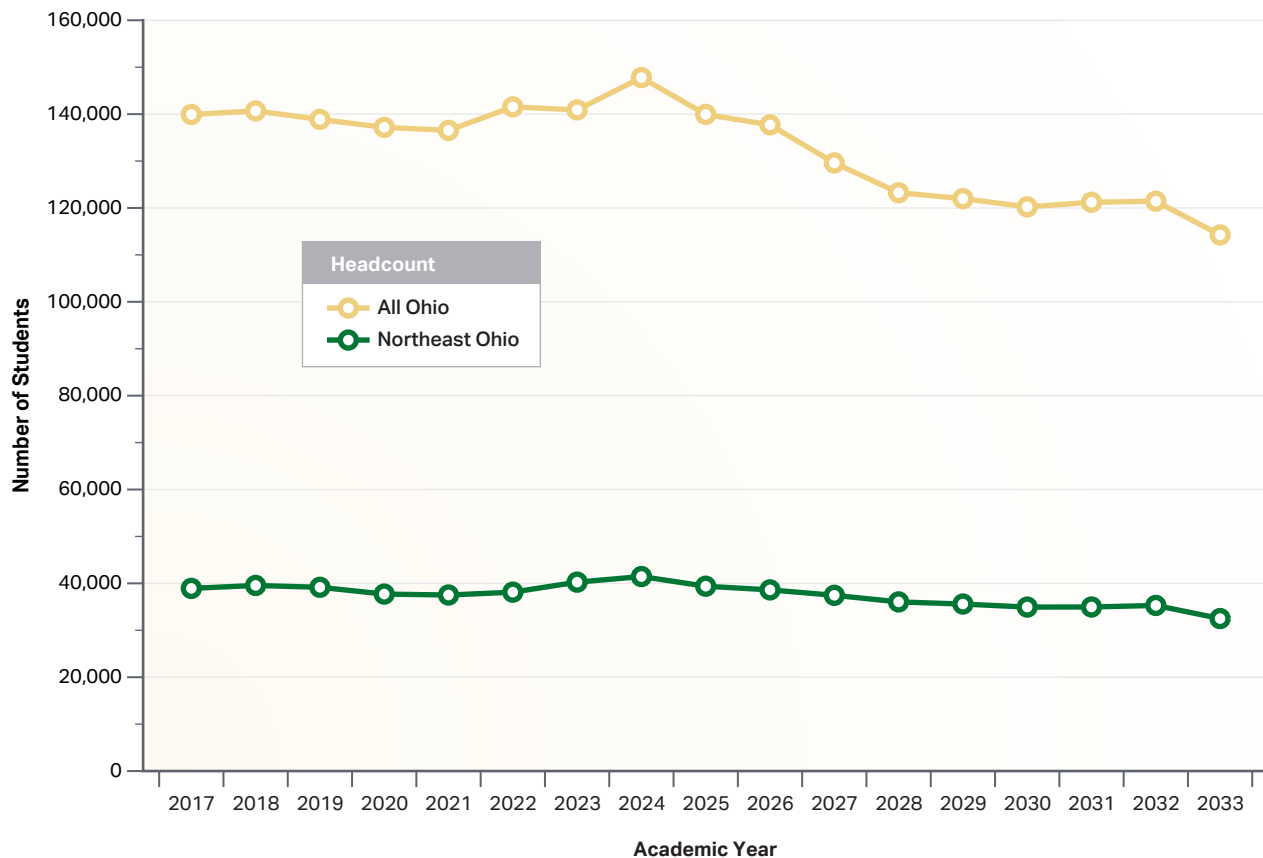
By Andrew Crawford, Jonathan Gates, and Donald Bean

With a looming enrollment crisis, colleges must explore new efforts for developing strategic and sustainable partnerships that support institutional advancement. As such, Kent State University (KSU) partnered with three regional, two-year institutions developing high-impact pathways to expand upon the transfer student experience and success rates. These transfer specific activities and opportunities were crafted to explore additional degree pathway opportunities with scalable transfer programs and services to increase access and success. As a large, multi-campus regional system, KSU leveraged these relationships to support its own institutional goals, while also ensuring the new regional collaborations provided value to these partners in a mutually beneficial way.

Now more than ever, institutions of higher education recognize the need to address questions surrounding value proposition. As the issue of affordability continues to be magnified, many institutions are also trying to evaluate admissions criteria to become more accessible to various student populations. With the threat of low enrollment numbers, leaders in enrollment management need to ensure institutional tactics and goals meet the increasing consumer investment concerns. As seen in Figure 1, K–12 enrollment at Ohio public schools will soon experience a steady decline. Internal

and external collaboration to recruit and assist students in completing their degree is critical. With a pending enrollment cliff (Campion 2020) as well as a decline in the college going rate, an opportunity presents itself for two- and four-year institutions to collaborate in a mutually-beneficial partnership. As a result, Kent State University (KSU) has a renewed focus to formalizing new efforts in support of transfer student enrollment and success with some of the regional two-year institutions.

In the spring of 2019, Ascendium Education Solutions, Inc awarded KSU with a grant supporting their

**FIGURE 1** ➤ K–12 Enrollment at Ohio Public Schools

Source: Ohio Department of Education

endeavors to develop a comprehensive statewide transfer blueprint. As part of the initiative, KSU would partner with a few area community colleges to build this prototype. The partner institutions included in the grant include Lorain County Community College (LCCC), Columbus State Community College (CSCC), and Eastern Gateway Community College (EGCC). By expanding upon transfer pathways, developing extended options for adult learners and cultivating seamless transfer support services, these institutions could leverage resources to meet the needs of the students. The project developed vertical, high-impact pathways to support student success and enhance transfer student advising and engagement.

As one of the largest regional systems in the nation, KSU's eight-campus system enrolls more than 33,000 students and spans all of Northeast Ohio. Similarly, the

region is home to numerous two-year institutions that value some of those same themes around supporting access, affordability, and success. Over the last three years, KSU, LCCC, CSCC, and EGCC redefined their relationship and enhanced the transfer student experience. The grant explored future opportunities and helped strengthen these relationships to better serve student needs.

The History: Impetus for Partnerships

In 2017, then KSU President Beverly Warren invited enrollment managers from all regional campus admitting units to a summit to address declining enrollments and get ahead of the looming enrollment cliff (Harvey 2021, 14). This summit encouraged enrollment managers to think “outside of the box” and brainstorm new

possibilities for closing the enrollment gap at their respective campuses. The responses included a variety of new and old—but underutilized—enrollment strategies that campus leaders believed would create a more strategic approach to enrollment management and help mitigate the coming challenges posed by declining population trends.

One of the strategies proposed suggested working more closely with community colleges within the service area to create meaningful degree pathways for students interested in continuing their education at the university level. Such agreements were not new to the university, but little emphasis had been given to marketing these opportunities or providing a robust transfer experience to interested students.

Some of this was due to a perceived competition between the two institutions. Community colleges and regional campuses (KSU has 7 regional campuses) have similar missions to provide access to quality, affordable certificates, and associate degree offerings close to the student's home. This overlap inevitably causes competition and potential friction for partnerships. This was exacerbated in 2017 when the state of Ohio began discussions that would allow community colleges to offer applied bachelor's degrees (Filby 2017). This news heightened perceived tensions at the regional campuses and caused concern that the lines of demarcation between the institutions would be further eroded.

One solution, posited via the enrollment summit, was to partner with community colleges in a mutually beneficial way so that they did not perceive a need to pursue bachelor's degrees and thereby heighten competition for a decreasing student population. In short, the regional campuses needed to change their thinking and begin to view community colleges as potential partners and not competitors.

This idea took root with KSU at East Liverpool and Eastern Gateway Community College, located just 25 miles apart. In 2018, the two institutions formed a partnership to provide meaningful associate-to-bachelor's degree pathways and provide KSU-branded office space on the EGCC campus to meet with and advise prospective students (Abraham 2018). This model was

then expanded upon when KSU received the \$1.09 million grant from Asendium to further this partnership and include two additional community colleges (Lorain County Community College and Columbus State Community College).

The grant encouraged the institutions “to develop an innovative model that can be shared and replicated statewide and will lead to increased retention and graduation rates” (McClellan-Copeland 2022). It also included the following initiatives: implement a series of 2 + 2 vertical pathways designed to increase retention and graduation rates; provide integrated support and outreach for underrepresented students; share data to improve the transfer process; provide transfer advising in the community colleges; provide specialized daylong orientation and advising sessions for students transferring to Kent State; create opportunities and advising sessions for students transferring to Kent State; create opportunities for transfer students to connect quickly to Kent State faculty; provide research and internship opportunities; and enhance the role of faculty in aiding in the retention and graduation of transfer students.

The Ascendium Grant: Progress in Partnerships

A “Distinctive Kent State,” the institution's strategic roadmap, enacts a student-first mindset to ensure learners thrive, belong, graduate, and become engaged beyond their time at KSU. Within that plan, a commitment to creating diverse learning environments, as well as engaging partners to address community needs and enhance the quality of life in the region, is highlighted (Kent State University 2022). With those priorities in mind, the institution acknowledged the need to increase interactions with community college partners and ensure meaningful and productive relationships continue to develop. Fostering these collaborations included targeted interactions with students and purposeful connections with staff and faculty. The contributions of the grant provided funds and resources to consider new tactics, engage in innovative partnerships, and promote student success and completion. As pathways between KSU and public community colleges were fi-

nalized, additional strategies to promote student growth could be explored. While traditional, tried-and-true services remain essential, the newly created pathways attracted students and, as a result, required the ramping up of one-on-one interactions. Building upon existing efforts and to continue to develop a transfer-oriented focus, the following strategies were a few identified:

- Create 2+2 vertical pathways to increase retention and graduation rates;
- Explore dual admission/enrollment processes;
- Design and offer a first-year experience course that addresses the needs of transfer students;
- Provide transfer advising in the community colleges;
- Include integrated support and outreach for underrepresented transfer students;
- Provide scholarships for transfer student populations; and
- Increase data sharing opportunities between institutions.

The success of these objectives was in large part due to the staff, faculty, and administrators who built these experiences and developed the blueprint. Exploration of articulation agreements and student support services and discovering innovative approaches to dual admissions/enrollment were foundational pieces to ensure the connection of students from community college to a four-year institution is seamless. A review of best practices among transfer student services and pathway development was essential as the institutions worked together to create a strategy. While process, procedure, and content development provided foundational structure for the work, the campus teams working with students allowed this plan to grow. The teams developed a comprehensive approach to supporting students during their journey. They established a comprehensive communication plan that provided timely and meaningful outreach with a streamlined support focus. They hosted regular office hours at all locations to increase personalized points of contact and enhanced advising surrounding transfer-out services. By continuously monitoring student progress, the team was able to quickly identify

students who were off track and pivot accordingly to support their needs. Academic advisors, transfer center staff and articulation specialists were all integral in these exchanges and proved to be key for improving student success and offering a customized experience (Wyner, *et al.* 2016).

Across all partner institutions, faculty and academic leadership guided much of the work with the transfer pathway development. Ongoing dialogue between faculty members is essential to a transfer partnership's long-term health (Handel 2021, 91). Every time a pathway is published, transfer staff on each side (*i.e.*, community college and at Kent State) meet with the faculty involved to discuss implications. This interaction provided staff members with more detailed and applicable information as they worked with students. On an annual basis, pathways were reviewed for updates or curricular changes that happened throughout the academic year. This occurred regularly during the summer semester to ensure accuracy of pathways and also adequate time should any adjustments need to take place. Since faculty members engaged with students more often than staff members, they were some of the most important allies for promoting pathways and sharing resources for interested students.

Advancements with web, digital and other modalities of technology elevated the user experience. An increase to accessible and accurate transfer information from website sources and other areas reduced what was a previous pain point for students. This became a necessary focus area, so a working team was constructed, and they developed a more organized arrangement of website strategy that improved the navigation and exploration tools. An enhanced search engine optimization reduced time for students and included more appropriate information for all stakeholders to explore. Interacting with the website allowed interested students immediate answers to questions, while also providing the necessary next steps and point of contact for further discussion. The creation of new pathway programs between institutions is more than just a sequence of courses, they are academic roadmaps that students track and adjust. Registration in a pathway provided

automatic and specific communications while completing courses at the community college. The Kent State transfer specialist can track the student's progress and conduct personal outreach if necessary.

Advertising and marketing remained critical during the launch of these partnerships. As the institutions worked on promotion of these opportunities, a direct marketing campaign was developed that outlined options for potential students. This personalized approach was distributed to specific students, in identified programs. An example would be a pathway created for the Bachelor of Science in Education in Early Childhood Education. Marketing materials were co-branded between the two institutions and included information about curriculum, scholarships, and admissions materials. The Kent State transfer specialist was available for individual advisement, and the communication plan reached every student enrolled in the Introduction to Early Childhood Education course—a course that students in this major take during their first semester. Academic pathways are most successful when students start on them early to limit friction. Friction can be anything that counteracts a student's momentum (Wang 2020). Reducing friction and barriers for students was central in the approach. With practitioners at the heart of these initiatives, supplemented by strong communication plans, students could easily garner the necessary information and seek support as needed.

Pathway development is paramount for expanding enrollment goals as well as providing students in need with critical options for degree completion. Like so many other initiatives, the pandemic changed the look and feel of how services were administered, and how students could connect with resources. The investments made over the last few years have greatly reduced student transfer barriers. Recruitment, advising, and admissions areas have prioritized the student journey and equipped the staff working with these populations the necessary tools for advanced student support. By establishing regular, reliable processes and designing collaborative touchpoints that share data, an ever-changing and evolving practice was implemented to lead to improved student outcomes.

Future State: Advancing Partnerships

The competition of students, coupled with growing pressure on tuition revenue, continues to drive so much of the work around transfer partnership and pathway creation. Prioritizing transfer as an intentional, collaborative enrollment strategy is imperative, particularly for a large regional campus system like KSU. Institutions of higher education must adapt to battle the demographic cliff and other economic factors that may hinder enrollment. The pandemic expedited some of the urgency around this. Providing degree access at community college locations and leveraging technology to support the completion of those degrees is paramount as we go forward. As a growing number of students consider alternatives to higher education, the alignment, collaboration, and intentionality behind partnerships must be central for institutional strategy.

The pandemic certainly adjusted the work of the grant and similarly altered what success looked like. While the original goal of 31 pathways was surpassed and currently stands at 55 (*see* Figure 2 and 3 [on pages 42 and 43] for institutional numbers and program types), the work has also proved to be meaningful from a relational model standpoint (how administrators, staff, and faculty connect across institutions). For example, the institutions participated in a process-mapping *kai-zen* event. This exercise identified barriers and gaps in service, while also further explored areas of connectivity between institutions. The audit produced recommendations that expanded upon previous working partnerships. Evolution of transfer student orientation, redesign of transfer websites, launching of new digital media platforms, and advertising campaigns were all necessary issues to address. Further, other programmatic refreshes that addressed dated practice and enhanced service were installed. More importantly, this event emphasized the need to collaborate and connect as partners regularly. The development of strong working relationships allowed for premiere student support services and streamlined communication.

Moving forward, the Ascendium grant project has led to a renewed focus on transfer student enrollment

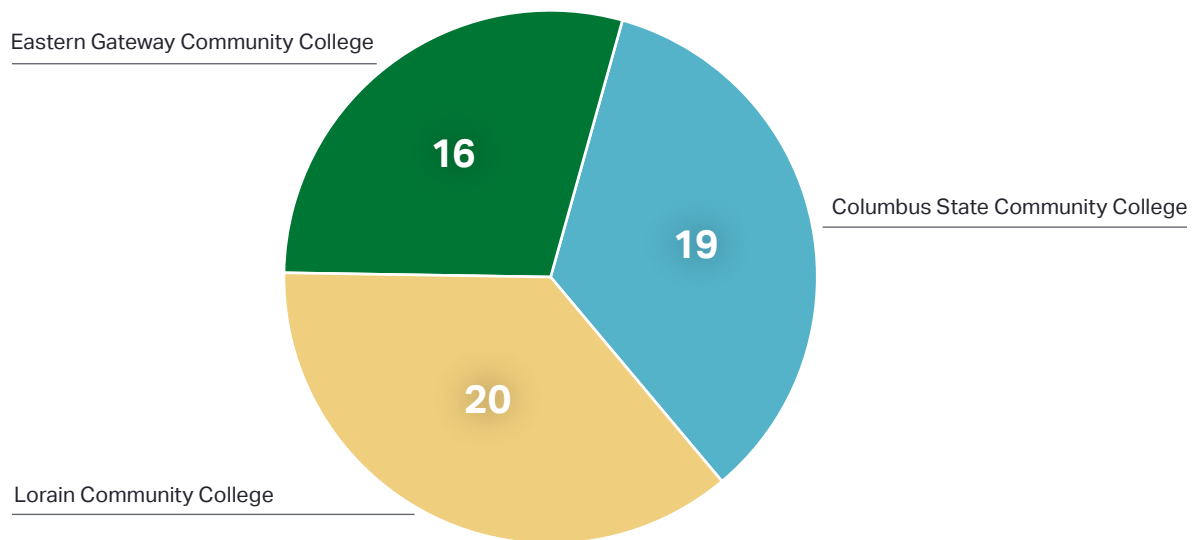


FIGURE 2 ➤ Number of Pathways at Each Partner Institution

and success with neighboring institutions. As of today, data on transfer enrollment and retention are unknown due to the time it takes for a student to complete a pathway program. With the grant's three-and-half-year time frame, results are limited as pathways take typically four years to complete. The institution expects to report these successes over next few years. Important investments have been made in transfer enrollment, and they will continue beyond the scope of the grant project. KSU is positioned to expand these opportunities, but defining success goes beyond the scope of this work. Some of these areas include:

- Aggressive development of vertical transfer pathways
- Increased communication with partner transfer centers on pathways and promotion to students
- Development of a sustainable transfer scholarship strategy
- Expand upon transfer marketing and communication campaigns
- Alignment of admissions and advising to support transfer student experience

Success ultimately relies on community colleges and four-year institutions working synchronously to

create a supportive student journey. Effective partnerships have clear course sequences, a mapped student experience and extracurricular activities that transfer students need to successfully transition (Wyner, *et al.* 2016). Strong transfer preparation and transfer enrollment services are essential in developing a strong pathway program.

For higher education practitioners, a review of processes and procedures concentrated on seamless system integration is necessary. Transfer champions must have a shared vision and common strategy for improvement. Faculty between institutions must participate in a curriculum review process. Registrar offices and institutional research departments need to explore data sharing opportunities that simplify procedures for both staff and students. Blending processes to streamline the student journey, developing specialized programming across institutions, and continuous evaluation are critical for successful implementation. Understanding that programmatic scope may be unique for each institution, the fundamental core pieces surrounding these collaborative partnerships requires a student experience lens for which transfer initiatives and collaborations are developed.

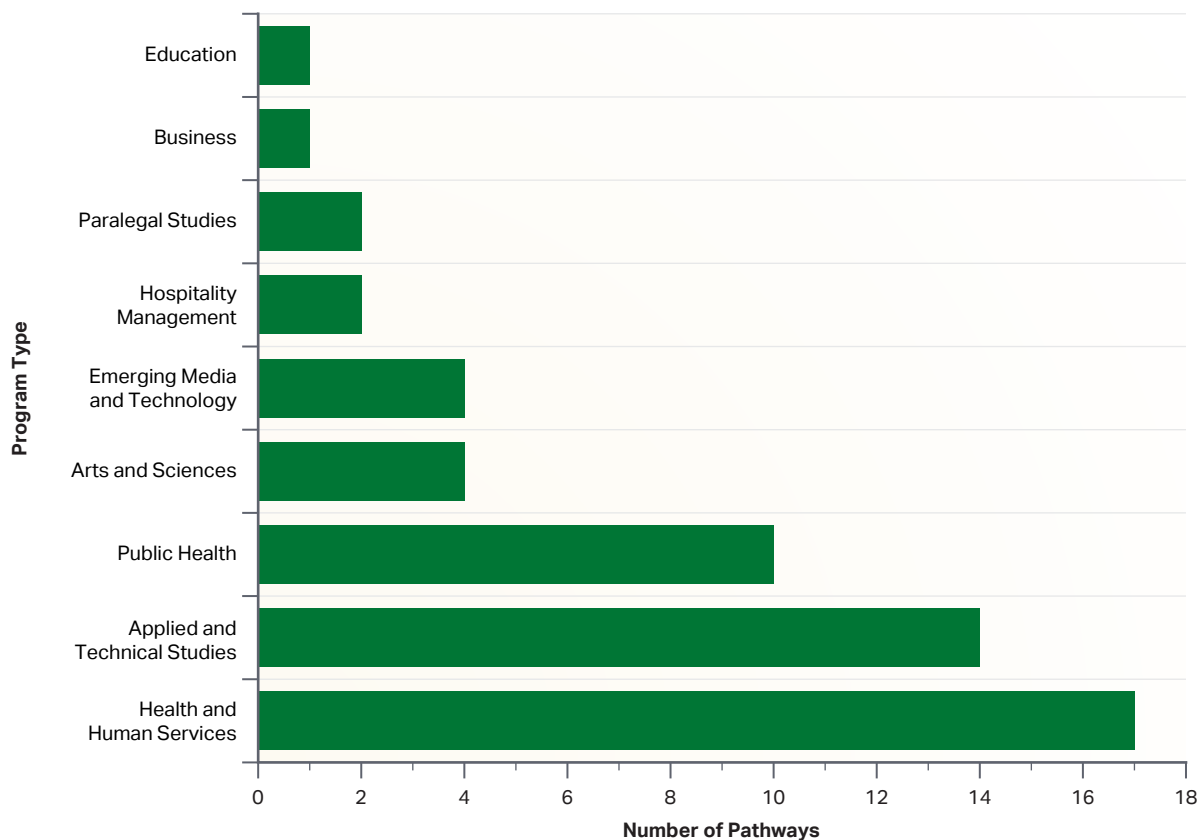


FIGURE 3 ➤ Pathways Created, by Program Type

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About the Authors



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