

ENROLLMENT  
MANAGEMENT

# The Road to Success for Transfer Students: Best practices and innovative approaches to transfer pathways

## About Student Success Toolkits

The Student Success Toolkits from Trellis Strategies provide evidence-based recommendations for colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. The toolkits summarize the latest research in student success and outline practical steps for administrators and practitioners.

## About Trellis Strategies

We are a strategic nonprofit research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

## About the Author

May Helena Plumb joined the Trellis Strategies team in 2023 and is currently a Research Analyst specializing in telling students' stories through qualitative research. Before joining Trellis, she leveraged research to create learning tools, build community, and achieve stakeholder goals through work with the Ticha Project, the Archive of the Indigenous Language of Latin America, and other interdisciplinary research teams. Plumb holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Linguistics from The University of Texas at Austin.

## Recommended Citation

Plumb, M. H. (2024). *The Road to Success for Transfer Students: Best Practices and Innovative Approaches to Transfer Pathways*. Trellis Strategies.



# Transfer & transfer-intending students need more structure and support.

The majority of community college students plan to earn an associate degree or other credential, then transfer to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree. However, inconsistent advising, complex transfer requirements, and hazy guidelines pose a challenge to students pursuing this goal.

campus, and may struggle with academic or cultural differences between the two institutions—poor transfer policies can be a compounding factor. Students already facing barriers to entry may become discouraged by conflicting advice, complex requirements, and lost credits.

Ultimately, only 16 percent of incoming community college students attain a bachelor's degree within six years of beginning postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> While there are multiple reasons for this low success rate—transfer students often work while in school, commute long distances to

To support successful transfer, sending and receiving institutions must work together to create clear, structured pathways. This toolkit highlights key best practices from the research literature on improving transfer student success.

**80%**



**of incoming community college students intend to transfer to a four-year institution.**

**But only ONE THIRD will transfer within six years.**

Over **THREE QUARTERS** of transfer-intending students plan to earn a community college credential first.

But **59%** of transfer students arrive at their four-year college without a pre-transfer award.



**ONLY 16%**

**of incoming community college students attain a bachelor's degree within six years.**



Four years after entering a four-year institution, approximately

**ONE IN FOUR** transfer students still have no postsecondary credential.



References: CCCSE's Survey of Entering Student Engagement, 2022 cohort<sup>2</sup>; Tracking Transfer, 2007 and 2015 cohorts<sup>1,3-5</sup>



# Designing transfer pathways: Flexibility vs. specificity

Many studies have found that program-specific pathways, paired with early major selection among community college students, play a key role in decreasing excess credit hours and time to graduation for transfer students. On the other hand, state-wide and regional “mega-articulation agreements” allow students to make progress on their transfer pathway before committing to a transfer institution. Such agreements often cover general education courses across multiple institutions by focusing on core

competencies, rather than individual course requirements; this creates more flexibility for faculty, who are less constrained in their curriculum design. To best serve their students, institutions should be supportive of efforts to increase flexibility and consistency at the state or regional level, but they should focus their resources on developing carefully tailored articulation agreements with individual institutional partners.<sup>5-8</sup>



# Key areas for student support

**Advising should be proactive, universal, and consistent throughout the transfer journey.**<sup>2,14-16</sup> A key barrier for many transfer-intending students is inconsistent advising from the two schools. To avoid this, partner institutions should collaborate to develop a clear vision and develop consistent joint messaging. “Bridge advisors” should be trained on policies at both sending and receiving institutions, and they should be prepared to assist community college students in selecting their major and planning their pathway as early as possible. With regular advising, institutions can track students’ progress along their transfer plan and intervene promptly if they go off-track.

**Sending institutions: Prioritize early major selection and pre-transfer award completion.**<sup>2,16</sup> Completing a pre-transfer award is associated with a 25-percentage point increase in bachelor’s degree completion, with particular benefits for low-income and Black students.<sup>3</sup>

**Receiving institutions: Build a robust, transfer-specific resources.**<sup>3,13,17</sup> Transfer students share some advising needs with first-year students while academically aligning more with third-years, and they are likely to be workers and/or caregivers in addition to students.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT



In a survey of over 9,000 pre- and post-transfer students at seven institutions, students rated the importance of 12 advising functions:<sup>18</sup>

Students rated academic- and policy-related advising—such as guidance on degree timelines and choosing a major—higher than information about out-of-class activities and other nonacademic topics.

Pre-transfer students especially valued information on how to connect their studies to their career and life goals, which can facilitate early major selection.

Post-transfer students valued advisors who knew them as an individual, which can increase sense of belonging and combating feelings of anonymity at the new school.



# Fostering collaboration at every step

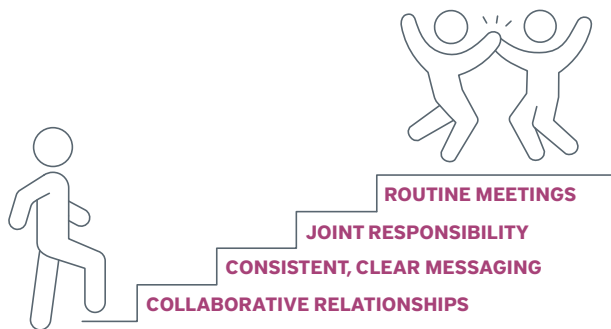
Successful partnerships require stakeholder buy-in across the board—including leadership, faculty, and staff—to make transfer student success an institutional goal.<sup>9-13</sup>

**When creating articulation agreements:** Collaborative relationships between faculty and dedicated transfer staff can increase efficiency while ensuring pathways align with academic goals. For example, at Kent State University two dedicated “mapping staff” personnel use existing curricula to draft transfer pathways, then collaborate with faculty to review and improve.<sup>9</sup>

**At the beginning of the transfer journey:** Consistent, clear messaging is crucial while community college students choose their major, plan their course schedule, and budget for their education. Good working relationships and regular contact between transfer staff at each institution will minimize contradictions during the advising process.

**Once transfer students reach the receiving institution:** Institutional partners should take joint responsibility to set each student up for success through prompt application of transfer credits. On the receiving campus, inter-office collaboration can help guide students through the academic, administrative, and social challenges of the transfer transition.

**To ensure long-term program success:** Institutional partners must meet regularly to understand student success, update and improve program maps, and clarify joint responsibilities.



## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT



In a study focused on minimizing excess credits among graduating transfer students, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board identified several key principles for transfer pathways:<sup>8</sup>



Program-specific pathways with guaranteed admission to major



Faculty involvement in articulation agreement design



Clear, up-to-date information readily available to students



Close monitoring of student progress



Timely evaluation of transfer transcripts and application of credits



Protections for students in case the agreement is discontinued

# CASE STUDIES

## Carefully tailored degree pathways from Alamo Colleges District

Alamo Colleges District (ACD) is a network of five community colleges serving over 60,000 students in central Texas. To support their students' education goals, ACD maintains over 1,500 Transfer Advising Guides (TAGs) across over 40 pre-majors; each TAG is tailored to a specific degree at a partnering four-year institution. Following the program outlined in a TAG ensures that students can not only transfer their credits to the partner institution but also apply those credits directly to their desired degree program. Included in each TAG is details about how each course will transfer (e.g. as an elective, or as a core degree requirement), which ACD campuses offer the necessary courses, and special admissions or credit requirements for the degree and/or institution. Maintaining this detailed information further allows ACD

advisors to support students who are still building their goals, guiding them to courses which will fulfill core requirements at multiple programs or institutions.

Creating and maintaining the TAGs requires significant staff hours; the program costs the district around \$700,000 each year. However, the guided pathways initiative has dramatically reduced the time students take to complete their coursework at ACD, from an average of 92 credit hours in 2015, to an average of 65 hours in 2022.

References: Alamo Colleges District online resources<sup>19,20</sup>; Mowreader, 2024<sup>7</sup>; Fletcher, 2024<sup>21</sup>

## Flexible transfer options within the Interstate Passport Network

The Interstate Passport Network was a decade-long project seeking to provide a maximally flexible solution to transferring general education credits. The initiative worked with faculty to develop credit transfer criteria based on learning outcomes and proficiency, rather than on specific courses; this method acknowledged the pressures put on faculty at both sending and receiving institutions, as well as the need to eliminate excess credits for transfer students. The Interstate Passport was based around Passport Blocks, groups of courses which were guaranteed to fulfill the lower-division general education credits requirements at any Network institution.

The flexibility of this mega-articulation agreement allowed coordination between a large network of institutions across multiple states, thus providing support for the nearly 20 percent of community college transfer students who transfer to a different state.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the focus on

general education credits meant that two-year institutions can integrate them into more specific guided pathways, while four-year institutions could better support lateral transfer.

A third-party evaluation of the first years of this program found that the network increased continuous enrollment, GPA, and overall credit attainment, when compared to students transferring from an out-of-network sending institution. While the program was discontinued at the end of 2023, after serving around 90,000 students across over 20 states, institutions can still learn from the Passport Network example when designing flexible articulation agreements, especial in regions with high rates of interstate transfer.

References: Interstate Passport Annual Report<sup>23</sup>; McKay et al. 2020, 2022<sup>6,24</sup>; Sherman & Shea, 2020<sup>25</sup>



## Looking beyond 2+2

### **High school dual enrollment programs are both popular and successful, but they require attention.<sup>17</sup>**

Prior dual-enrollment community college students are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within six years;<sup>1</sup> however, these students also tend to have excess credit hours at college graduation.<sup>9</sup> As prior and current dual-enrollment students comprise a substantial portion of college enrollment—more than half of incoming students at community colleges<sup>1</sup>—postsecondary institutions should consider dual enrollment programs when designing and evaluating their transfer pathways.

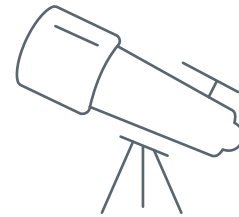
**HIGH SCHOOL DUAL ENROLLMENT PROGRAMS ARE BOTH POPULAR AND SUCCESSFUL, BUT THEY REQUIRE ATTENTION.**



### **Specialized coursework may inspire alternative pathways.**

Some degrees require institutions to look beyond the 2+2 structure, as community college students may not be able to access specialized lab or studio classes early enough. For example, after identifying that a 2+2 engineering program wasn't properly serving students, Front Range Community College and the Colorado School of Mines designed a 1+3 pathway which allowed students to complete 15 credits at the community college.<sup>5,9</sup>

**SPECIALIZED COURSEWORK MAY INSPIRE ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS.**



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