



Why Texas Should Mandate that Associate Degree Credits Can Be Readily Transferred from Two- to Four-Year Colleges

Lauren Schudde, University of Texas at Austin

Nationally, a third of college students enter higher education through a community college. In Texas, that number is even higher, with 40% of college entrants initially enrolling at a community college and 75% of baccalaureate recipients earning at least some of their credits from one. Texas constituents rely heavily on community colleges to build knowledge and skills, and the seamless transfer of credits between the state's two-year public colleges and its public universities would benefit students, helping to ensure they do not waste time and money on coursework that will not count toward their degree.

Credit Transfer in Texas

Evidence from the [Texas Transfer Project](#), which examines college transfers in Texas, indicates that many community college students intending to transfer find it difficult to get information about how the credits they acquire at community colleges can count toward a degree at a prospective university. Several problems have been uncovered in this research:

- Many transfer agreements between colleges in the state do not spell out how courses transfer from one program to another; that requires a specific type of agreement, referred to as a program-to-program transfer agreement. But such agreements require different institutions to collaborate and are, as a result, limited in number. Students are often left without a blueprint to guide them through transfer.
- Advisors struggle to navigate the varied transfer guides and requirements across institutions and programs. Advisors and students alike are also unaware of the state's policies like the Field of Study Curriculum, which should guarantee that approved credits taken in a given major at one institution count toward a degree in the same major at another institution.
- Institutional signals can be contradictory. Community colleges tell students planning to transfer to complete the Core Curriculum or an associate degree prior to transferring, but many universities encourage students to transfer sooner to avoid wasted credits.
- From the state administrative data, we find that few students who transferred from a community college to a Texas public university had completed their Core or Field of Study Curriculum. Yet each additional Field of Study and Core credit taken before transferring improves their odds of earning a bachelor's degree.

Among the biggest challenges for students and advisors is the lack of clarity over how credits will transfer. Even when there is a transfer guide, the guides do not guarantee that credits will count toward a degree, because those decisions are made after the student is admitted to a given university. Uncertainty about what will and will not transfer pushes students who want to ensure they don't take unnecessary credits to transfer sooner.

Overall, students who see community college as a cost-effective alternative for the first two years of college work toward a bachelor's degree end up feeling torn between their need to earn college credits at low cost and their need to earn credits that are guaranteed to count toward a bachelor's degree.

How New Legislation Could Improve Student Outcomes

Several states, including Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, and California, guarantee that students who earn an associate degree from a community college in the state will be admitted at junior standing to a public university. Compared to Texas's current system – with weakly enforced, unclear transfer policies – these other states offer clear, concise messages that associate degrees are guaranteed to transfer to four-year

universities.

Although optimal transfer pathways between institutions would still require program-to-program collaboration, a new legislative mandate in Texas could compel and speed along such collaboration.

To minimize credit loss and waste and provide students with clear and effective information to achieve their educational goals, the Texas state legislature should mandate transferable associate degrees. This would ensure by law that an associate degree in a given major would fulfill the first two years of coursework toward a bachelor's degree in the same major. In addition, associate degree recipients should be guaranteed acceptance to at least one public university. Perhaps, the state's universal application system could be adapted to ensure this occurs.

This promising legal reform would allow Texas to catch up to a number of other states, where public officials and university leaders have realized that stackable credentials, transferrable from two- to four-year institutions, are necessary to improve educational equity. Such arrangements linking higher educational institutions in a state allow students from low-income families to make progress toward a baccalaureate degree through a community college gateway. In turn, facilitating new college opportunities for low-income students can help the state and its employers meet labor demands for a more skilled workforce. Today, many jobs require at least a bachelor's degree, and the state of Texas should join other parts of the United States in clearing the path to such degrees.

Read More in Thomas R. Bailey, David P. Jenkins, John Fink, Jenna Cullinane, and Lauren Schudde, **Policy Levers to Strengthen Community College Transfer Student Success in Texas: Report to the Greater Texas Foundation**, (2016); Lauren Schudde, Dwuana Bradley, and Caitlin Absher, **"Navigating Vertical Transfer Online: Access to and Usefulness of Transfer Information on Community College Websites,"** *Community College Review*, (Forthcoming, 2019); Lauren Schudde, Huriya Jabbar, and Andrea Chevalier, **"To Improve Community College Transfer in Texas, Students Need Better Information,"** *PRC Research & Policy Brief Series*, (2018).