

MAIN BARRIERS TRANSFER (-INTENDING) STUDENTS EXPERIENCE & OVERCOME

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For transfer supporters and advocates, it is no secret that transfer is a convoluted process. But we need a succinct yet comprehensive source that lists common barriers and challenges that students experience to inform how we think about, approach, and support transfer. This brief document serves exactly that purpose. It summarizes the main structural issues students encounter—and often overcome due to their resilience—in their quest for transfer. This document focuses on transfer from

community colleges to baccalaureate institutions. This type of transfer—vertical transfer—remains an outstanding dilemma, with imperfect structures and policies persistently bottlenecking student movement, articulation, credit transfer, and more. All the same, the takeaways from this document would apply to other transfer types. Read on for new and (re)new(ed) ways to look at transfer and students' experiences along the way.

Curricular Complexity

Transfer-aspiring students are flooded with numerous curricular choices at community colleges that are challenging to make meaning of in ways that clearly align with students' goals, interests, and life contexts. The curricular complexity can cause students to detour around their transfer path much longer than anticipated.

Cafeteria-Style Advising

Transfer advising is often insufficient due to underfunded and under-resourced advising systems at community colleges. This leaves students muddling through the transfer process mostly on their own, cafeteria-style, grabbing whatever they can get when the advising services happen to be available.

Scarcity in Major-to-Major Articulation

Although students often set their eyes on a particular academic major to transfer into, there is limited articulation at the level of major-to-major transfer. Community college students may have taken courses they thought would apply to the major they intend to transfer into, only to find out that much fewer courses count toward that major.

Narrow Access to Articulated/Transferrable Courses

Transferrable course availability rarely meets student demand. Coupling that with community college students' busy schedules and numerous responsibilities, narrow access to transferrable coursework can result in students taking classes that don't count toward and thus hinder their transfer path.

Inconsistent Transfer Information and Support

Students often encounter conflicting messages and information regarding the transfer process. This is largely owing to a general lack of alignment and coordination of the transfer support system both within community colleges and between transfer-sending and receiving institutions. Because of this, students face the challenge of reconciling inconsistent information to avoid making misguided decisions.

Lack of Financial Support for Transfer

One of the biggest barriers community college transfer students encounter is financial. Many of the financial aid, grant, and free college programs do not address transfer or come up short for students due to guidelines, restrictions, and other supports students need. As a result, students are often forced to defer their transfer goals or, if they do transfer, continue to endure mounting financial stress and added pressure to complete their degree as soon as possible.

Credit Loss

Many students lose credits post-transfer, ending up on a longer path to a degree. Loss of credits is often the compounded result of multiple curricular, articulation, and transfer support issues referenced above. Credit loss also causes delayed labor market entry despite transfer students' comparable attainment with their non-transfer peers at four-year institutions.

Transfer Shock

Some students experience "transfer shock"—a temporary dip in their academic performance post-transfer. This transient phenomenon can be explained by differences in structures, support, curriculum, and environment between two-year and four-year institutions. However, transfer students bounce back quickly, performing as well or better than their non-transfer peers.

Transfer Stigma

A misguided and ill-informed stigma prevails around transfer students at four-year campuses, often reflected in a lack of transfer receptive culture that is crucial to these students' transition, adjustment, and success. Without institutional action, transfer students are left on their own to challenge and try to change the false narrative about their capabilities.

Social Isolation

Transfer students tend to be less involved socially than their non-transfer peers and may experience social isolation, given their later entry into the four-year social scene that is not structured for transfer students' needs, schedules, and responsibilities. Despite transfer students' high academic engagement and accomplishments, an absence of social relationships can result in disconnectedness and a lack of sense of belonging.

This list shows that transfer is a holistic journey that takes place over time, well before and after the actual point of transfer. It is a journey that is further muddled by disparities and inequities, with students of color, women, students with mental health issues or learning disabilities, first-generation students, and those from lower-income backgrounds often having the largest hurdles to jump. While students often push through and hold fast to their dreams, determination, and agency, the barriers and challenges laid out above should not be up

to the individual students to fix. Instead, we as transfer supporters and advocates should work toward breaking down these ingrained, often unrecognized friction points in the current system causing inequities. We also need to shift our mindset away from assuming that individual students are solely responsible for undertaking transfer. By rethinking transfer responsibility and removing barriers, we can be better positioned to transform transfer and get students on their way to where they want to go, from beginning to end.

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Dr. Xueli Wang is the Barbara and Glenn Thompson Endowed Professor in Educational Leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her work centers on community colleges, transfer, and STEM education. She consistently collaborates with community and technical colleges on research that improves transfer pathways and success, as well as examines faculty development and teaching practices that shape students' experiences and trajectories. She is the author of *On My Own: The Challenge and Promise of Building Equitable STEM Transfer Pathways*, an award-winning book based on her longitudinal mixed methods research. This book sheds critical light on enduring inequities in transfer, particularly in STEM fields, and offers a call to action for transfer practitioners and researchers alike to enact transformative change toward equitable transfer pathways.

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