

Two-year to four-year degree transfer issues in New Mexico – Challenges and Opportunities

New Mexico's comprehensive community colleges serve a wide variety of educational needs within their service areas. **Offering students an accessible and affordable pathway to a four-year degree through transfer to an upper-division institution is one of the important roles community colleges play.** This role is particularly important for non-traditional students, since the 2+2 approach is often their best - if not their only - option to obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Through ongoing efforts between institutions in the state, as well as legislative mandates, such as common course numbering, the transfer process is improving. Room for improvement still exists in this process. These improvements will offer benefits for the state, the institutions, and most important of all, for our students.

What are some reasonable goals for improvement?

- Increase the number of students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions in the state by decreasing the number of students “stopping out” at the two year point.
- Decrease the number of students transferring out of New Mexico at the two-year point.
- Reduce the “time to degree” period for transferring students at both two-year and four-year institutions.
- Reduce excess credit hours.
- Improve the 2+2 transfer experience for students.

What does the literature and our own professional experience tell us about ways to improve the situation?

Here is a good overview of transfer issues: <https://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/student-transfer.pdf>

1. Advising is critical!

Getting students on the right academic pathway reduces excess credit and time to degree. A degree plan that involves “*intrusive advising*” – perhaps augmented by technology – can help students persist, progress, and succeed. This approach includes deliberate and regular coordination in advising between institutions (including secondary level for dual credit). At larger institutions, a dedicated transfer center/hub can be an important resource for students planning to transfer to partner institutions.

- Intrusive advising article: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Intrusive-Advising-101-How-to-be-Intrusive-Without-Intruding.aspx>
- Good information on transfer advising: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Beyond-Articulation-A-Guide-to-Incorporating-Transfer-Guides.aspx>

- Transfer center website, HCC – Tampa, FL: <https://www.hccfl.edu/stem-transfer-center>
- Text-based advising information – WV example: <https://www.cfwbconnect.com/txt-4-success/>
- Another text-based platform:
https://www.signalvine.com/requestlivedemo?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Brand&gclid=EAlalQobChMI8Yqdg_f08QIV2XxvBB0vbwcXEAAAYAiAAEgJlr_D_BwE

2. Guided pathways for transfer work.

Clear and concise transfer plans for students give them the ability to “know what they are getting into,” and allows them to stay on track to transfer by making informed choices on course selection and sequencing. These plans can be as simple as a paper checklist, or they can employ a more technological approach. The key is showing the student how to make their educational journey happen, and following up periodically to be sure that they are staying on the path. Of course, this is predicated on having articulation plans in place with the receiving institutions built on common courses and programmatic outcomes.

- Information from the CCRC: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/policy-brief-guided-pathways.html>
- More on Guided Pathways from AACU: <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2017/fall/bailey>
- Example from Arizona: <https://admission.asu.edu/transfer/MyPath2ASU>
- Example from Florida (UCF): <https://directconnect.ucf.edu/>
- Example from Florida (USF): <https://www.usf.edu/undergrad/transfer-student-success/fuse/what-is-fuse/index.aspx>
- Example from Indiana: <https://transferin.net/ways-to-earn-credit/transfer-pathways/>
- Example from Texas: <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2021/02/05/innovating-transfer-regional-partnerships-houston-guided-pathways-success/>

3. Addressing the problems of “transfer shock” and the “buzz-saw effect.”

Transferring students are dealing with more than just a schedule of upper-division courses when they arrive at the university, they are also dealing with a different institutional culture. Transition advising and specific support for transfer students, offered before and after their matriculation, can make a profound difference. Peer advising can also be of great benefit to transferring students, especially for first generation students who lack the benefits of family experience with “navigating the system.”

AA and AS transfer students also face another challenge that students who started at a university as freshmen do not. When arriving with their general education courses completed, along with many electives, the courses that remain are often just the “majors courses.” This can make for a tough schedule, or in some cases a difficult schedule to put together due to course sequencing and pre-

requisites. Students filling gaps in their schedule with unnecessary courses in order to maintain a full course load can contribute to excess credit and prolong the time to degree attainment.

- Transfer shock article: <https://www.collegeparentcentral.com/2018/02/why-your-transfer-student-may-be-in-shock/>
- More from SERC: <https://serc.carleton.edu/sage2yc/transfer/shock.html>
- From Community College Review: <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/how-well-do-community-college-students-perform-after-transferring>
- Good information from Florida (FSU): <https://advisingfirst.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu881/files/Shock%20and%20Awe%20HANDOUT.pdf>
- STEER Peers – transfer peer advising: <https://www.usf.edu/atle/steer/events/transfer-peers.aspx>

4. Policy matters

A universally accepted “General Education Module” that allows for easier student transfer before an AA/AS degree is granted (and which is recognized as a (partial) completion at the two-year school), may benefit many transferring students. This approach may be combined as part of a “reverse transfer” plan that offers advantages for students who transfer before the AA/AS is granted. Reverse transfer provides a recognition of the milestone that a student would have received had they stayed at the two-year institution, often benefiting working students whose employers may offer increased compensation or opportunities for promotion for associate’s degree holders. Reverse transfer also enhances the state’s reported educational attainment data – an important consideration for some employers considering locating in New Mexico.

- Information on Indiana’s College Core plan: <https://transferin.net/ways-to-earn-credit/statewide-transfer-general-education-core-stgec/>
- Florida’s reverse transfer policy: <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19942/urlt/9-2.pdf>
- Information on reverse transfer in Indiana: <https://www.ivytech.edu/reversetransfer/>
- Additional reverse transfer information from ECS: <https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/18/77/11877.pdf>

The work on common course numbering in New Mexico makes many of the aforementioned things possible, but it is still a work in progress. In other states with common course numbering, periodic state-wide discipline/program meetings are held to revisit course outcomes and objectives, ensure consistency and appropriate “leveling,” and to discuss other curricular matters, including such things as textbooks. It is a mistake to underestimate the value of getting colleagues together around these topics. In addition to the published agenda items, much is often learned in the informal discussions that arise at these meetings that ultimately contributes to improvements in instruction.

5. Goal setting and metrics

At the beginning of this document a list of reasonable goals was stated. While this was a framework for the topics discussed, discussing the topic of goals themselves is now in order. How can metrics and goals that guide and incentivize intuitions be applied to this issue in a manner that recognizes and considers the disparity in both the sending institutions (community colleges) and the receiving institutions (universities)?

When dealing with goals that are tied to broad actions (such as Virginia's list – below) the determination of attainment is binary – did the intuition do what was recommended (or mandated), or not. In some cases, the goal may be able to be quantified, such as in the development of some number of transfer pathways, etc. These kinds of somewhat qualitative goals are important, and can stand alongside more quantitative in a complimentary manner.

For goals that are more closely tied to specific performance metrics, there are some that are applicable across an entire category of institution. In other cases though, there are goals that should be targeted to individual institutions on a case by case basis. By using an institution's benchmarked performance as a starting point, it may be possible to create a goal that allows it to "compete with itself" as a more fair and effective way to measure a performance improvement. In some cases, a standard could be derived from aggregated data obtained from several similar institutions, all striving toward a common outcome.

Using the Texas Transfer Alliance Goals (TTAG) as an example, some of these stated goals (listed below) could be adopted in New Mexico (with appropriate modifications), and universally applied. This might include the overall transfer-out rate (goal 1), time to degree rate (goal 4), and possibly even the average attempted credits (goal 3), for instance. In other cases, such as the completion of college-level math and writing (goal 5), and four-year bachelor's completion rate of community college transfers, a more effective strategy would be to set goals on an institution by institution basis. Likewise with the admirable - but challenging - goal of eliminating gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status, which appears throughout the TTAG list.

"Transfer Virginia" Goals:

<https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TransferVAIntro.pdf>

- Engaging key stakeholders to improve communication and facilitate collaboration.
- Engaging faculty across institutions to better align academic expectations at two-year and four-year schools.
- Developing program maps that will guide students from high school to community college to university degree completion.
- Streamlining transfer articulation agreements and improving guaranteed admission agreements.
- Creating models for regional dual-admission and co-enrollment programs.
- Developing an online transfer portal that serves all students.

Texas Transfer Alliance Goals

<https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/texas-transfer-alliance/>

1. Increase the six-year transfer-out rate from 21% to 33%, eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
2. Increase the four-year bachelor's completion rate of community college transfers from 58% to 67%, eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
3. Decrease the average number of attempted credits to degree from 142.9 for transfer students and 136.4 for native students to 135 credits for both groups, while eliminating all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
4. Decrease the average time-to-degree for transfer students from 7.6 years to 6.5 years and eliminate all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.
5. Increase the percent of Texas community college students completing college-level math and writing in the first year to 45% (from 19% and 33%, respectively) and eliminate all gaps by race/ethnicity and Pell status.

Concluding thoughts:

New Mexico's higher education institutions are as varied and diverse as the state's climate and geography. Identifying solutions to the challenge of improving college transfer will require a thoughtful approach that considers the varied factors that are in play, including student demographics, location, institution size and resources, and the educational goals and needs of the students (and their communities). There are many valuable lessons and examples that have been gained through the experience of other states dealing with similar issues. We would be wise to draw upon that collective body of knowledge in formulating our plans. There is room for improvement in New Mexico's transfer policies and practices. We must act, but we must act wisely - for the sake of our students.

Respectfully submitted,

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