

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS REQUIRES COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

By Ben Chrischilles, Kristine Dillon and Steven Hahn

In recent months, some of higher education's biggest challenges have been exacerbated — from enrollment declines to a widening gap in equity and accessibility. To curb these trends and remain resilient, leaders across public and private four-year institutions and community colleges are focused on supporting transfer students as they map their educational journeys in an era of uncertainty, economic hardship and disruption.

But to do so, institutions must first reckon with the attitudes and practices that have historically impeded transfer progress, then share the accountability for making systemic changes. Those that forge partnerships and bridge the transfer gap can not only seize an opportunity to clear long-standing barriers to student success — they can secure an advantage in an increasingly competitive market.

Students and administrators across four- and two-year institutions agree that transferring from one institution to another is harder than it should be. They also agree, according to a [recent survey](#) by Inside Higher Ed in partnership with Hanover and Huron, that a more “centralized approach to credit evaluation” could improve the transfer student enrollment process. Where they disagree, however, is on nearly everything else regarding the transfer

process — from accreditation and administration decisions to how effectively institutions are preparing students to transfer and supporting them on the other side. The findings in “[The Transfer Landscape: A Survey of College Officials](#)” highlight a striking perceptual gap between four- and two-year administrators that has long stood as a barrier to successful solutions.

Overcoming the divide will require collective accountability and a coordinated approach to achieving systemic change. To build a bridge that seamlessly supports student transfers, four- and two-year institutions must think carefully about how they broker strategic discussions, nurture and explore new partnerships, and make changes that improve the transfer student journey from start to finish.

Making the Case for Change

Building bridges between four- and two-year institutions not only requires mutual responsibility — it also promises mutual benefits. Take undergraduate enrollment, for example, which fell 4.9% compared with the previous fall, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) Research Center's final report from the fall 2020 term. All forms of student transfers declined during the pandemic at a rate [three times higher](#) than nontransfer students, and [community colleges](#) were hit especially hard. They recorded a 10.1% overall enrollment drop and [19.4% fewer students transferring in](#) from four-year institutions than the

previous year. To prevent the decline in transfer student mobility from further amplifying the financial strain that Moody's Investors Service and Fitch Ratings expect to [continue](#) for at least another year, four- and two-year institutions must act collectively and strategically to bridge the gap, regain transfers and curb the downward slide in enrollment.

Improving transfer mobility can also help institutions [close a widening gap in diversity and equity](#). The pandemic's [disproportionate impact](#) on underserved communities and students has set back many institutions' diversity and inclusion efforts, to say nothing of the impact it has had on the lives and livelihoods of their students. The enrollment drop-off was the steepest at community colleges and public two-year colleges, which in turn impacts the four-year institutions that often receive upward transfers from these student populations down the road. Across the academic community, student transfers declined among every racial and ethnic group tracked. By promoting flexible transfer pathways and supporting student mobility, institutions can have a meaningful and compounded impact on advancing their missions to increase accessibility and strengthen equity and diversity outcomes.

Shifting Attitudes and Perceptions

Leaders of two- and four-year institutions share differing views about how well they are supporting transfer students but acknowledge the need for a clearly coordinated approach to student transfers. To collaborate effectively, these institutions must first overcome discrepancies in the perceptions and attitudes regarding their roles in the transfer student process.

When brokering conversations among faculty and administrative officers across four- and two-year institutions, facilitators should acknowledge and respect the work that has been done on both sides, and take care to avoid any finger-pointing that surfaced in the findings from "[The Transfer Landscape: A Survey of College Officials](#)." For example, at two-year institutions, only 13% of administrators stated that their four-year counterparts are extremely or very effective when working with transfer students to approve academic credits. On the other hand, 51% of respondents from four-year private and public institutions stated that their institutions are effective in this area. And less than half of all respondents stated that two-year institutions are extremely or very effective at managing the transfer student process. Moving beyond these gaps in perception to a better understanding of student experiences will allow colleges and university leaders to consider the student transfer pathway from start to finish, rather than focusing on one side of the hand-off.

Aligning on Strategic, Systemic Changes

To build bridges that support smoother and more successful transfers, institutions should consider making strategic changes, rather than working in a silo. There are many opportunities to build partnerships, clear roadblocks to successful transfers, and re-imagine the system that supports students on their educational journey.

The following strategies can help leaders create smoother on-ramps and off-ramps for transfer students moving between two- and four-year institutions:

COMMON STUDENT CONCERNS	STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT TRANSFER STUDENTS
<p>I think I'm ready to transfer to a four-year institution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which schools will allow me the most scheduling flexibility? • What is the most affordable credit pathway to my degree? • Am I registering for the right courses? 	<p>Popularize associate degrees: Community colleges can help students plan an upward transfer by advising them to pursue associate (A.A. or A.S.) degrees. Associate degrees can enable direct admission to four-year institutions and allow flexibility for students who are unsure about where to go or which major to pursue. They also require the same number of core coursework credits to be completed during the first two years of most four-year degree programs. With the associate degree as the initial target, advisers and faculty can anchor their guidance toward the four-year institution(s) that best align with the continuation of the student's academic pursuits.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which institutions recognize the progress and investment I've already made? • How complicated are the deadlines and requirements? 	<p>Streamline transfer pathways: Community colleges should evaluate the fit between their academic portfolio and local and regional job markets, and seek compatibility with the degree programs, credentials and certifications offered by compatible regional four-year institutions to ensure that the pathways to success align. Four-year institutions should do the same and communicate these collaborations to students considering transferring.</p>
<p>I'm ready to cross the bridge. What happens next?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many of my credits will count toward my degree, and will I find out before I enroll? • How soon can I take courses in my major? 	<p>Recognize student academic achievements: To support community college students' transition to four-year institutions and increase the attractiveness of their own institution, four-year institutions can ensure students receive adequate credit for their accomplishments and core coursework. Credit approval should happen quickly and efficiently.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I can't enroll for a semester, how will I stay on track for the following term? • Are there resources specifically for transfer students? 	<p>Create off-ramps for reverse transfer students: As student populations grow more diverse, four-year institutions will need flexible off-ramps so that learners can shift to a two-year institution when their financial, family or academic needs demand it, without putting their education on pause. Tracking and supporting these students after they stop out or attend a two-year program part time can lead to reenrollment in the four-year degree later.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I take a few courses to test the water before transferring? • How do I get the financial aid package and counseling I need? • I wish I had known that my federal aid would be allocated across both schools. How much is left? 	<p>Nurture partnerships for dual enrollment and bolster transfer advising: Proactive, intentional collaboration between postsecondary institutions can play a major role in the success of transfer programs by ensuring transfer students do not fall through the cracks. Strong relationships and regular communication between faculty and advising staff at community colleges and four-year institutions can help institutions position themselves as strong feeder and receiving schools in their local or regional academic community.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm older than other students; will I fit into the community? • Am I going to be able to balance my work and family responsibilities? • What student services and academic resources are available? 	<p>Innovate to support the whole student: Consider the wraparound services that best support a broad range of students with needs ranging from child care and technology access to healthcare and counseling services. Establish external partnerships to provide holistic student services.</p>

Supporting Student Mobility

As institutions react to the latest enrollment trends, the market for transfer students will grow increasingly competitive. For community colleges and four-year public and private institutions, it will be more important than ever to support transfer students, bolster enrollment and nurture many paths to success. Those who think carefully about how they broker strategic conversations between four- and two-year institutions, bridge the perceptual gap, keep the conversation focused on students, and enact strategic, systemic changes will move ahead of the curve and position their institution — and their students — for success.



[huronconsultinggroup.com](https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com)

© 2021 Huron Consulting Group Inc. and affiliates. Huron is a global consultancy and not a CPA firm, and does not provide attest services, audits, or other engagements in accordance with standards established by the AICPA or auditing standards promulgated by the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board ("PCAOB"). Huron is not a law firm; it does not offer, and is not authorized to provide, legal advice or counseling in any jurisdiction. Huron is the trading name of Pope Woodhead & Associates Ltd.

21-1970