

Enrollment Success Includes an Integrated Transfer Student Strategy

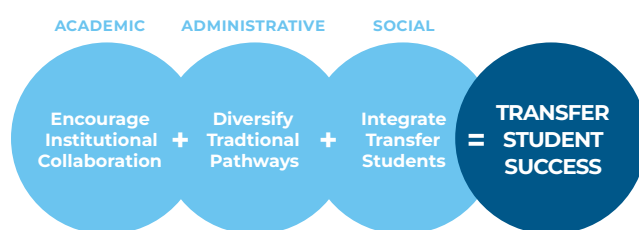
By Kristine Dillon and Steve Hahn

As the general contractors of their collegiate experiences, students are increasingly seeking alternatives to traditional postsecondary education that are individualized and personalized to their unique needs and interests. This was a growing trend even prior to the pandemic. Presented with more choices and the flexibility to piece together credentials from a variety of sources, students want to maintain their collegiate progression while prioritizing safety and security. This could mean withdrawing from school, pursuing an online-only option, taking a gap year or registering at a community college closer to home.

This trend will only increase as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to complicate enrollment, and safety concerns linger beyond 2020-21. These challenges, combined with the rapid [evolution of student demographics](#), highlight the importance of making transfer students (and general student mobility) an intentional focus of any institution's strategy.

Leaders can adjust to this new reality and manage the associated revenue impacts by developing agile approaches to attracting, retaining and supporting this vital population, approaches that emphasize holistic student success across three dimensions — academic, administrative and social. This effort involves diversification of traditional degree pathways, collaboration among colleges and universities, and the seamless integration and support of transfer students.

Equation for Transfer Student Success



As is often the case in responding to a crisis as it unfolds, [agility will be key](#). Leaders should use the disruption caused by the pandemic to reevaluate the effectiveness of their institutions' long-held strategies regarding transfers, determining which policies may still be relevant and which need to evolve. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is without precedent, as students return to classes, they may face new and unforeseen challenges stemming from this global event. This is why it will be more important than ever for institutions to be nimble and agile in response. Those institutions that can shift focus quickly will be better positioned to thrive in the future.

Streamline the Transition for Transfer Students

In 2017, the United States Government Accountability Office estimated that [students lost about 43% of transfer credits](#), amounting to a significant forfeiture of time and money.

As the student population continues to diversify, the creation and support of (via dedicated resources) transfer programs that optimize individual student journeys and offer multiple viable pathways to degree will be paramount to attracting transfer students eager to maintain the value of their earned credits.

Opportunities to Improve the Transfer Student Experience



Offer Personalized Advising



Increase Merit-Based Aid



Remove Barriers to Admission

- **Future-focused, flexible and personalized advising** that considers the unique attributes of transfers will help students identify and navigate the path best suited to the achievement of their short- and long-term goals. By reaching out proactively to potential candidates to help them curate a rewarding collegiate experience and offer one-on-one coaching support, institutions can differentiate themselves as an attractive option for students with transfer credits. These advisers should be well-versed in transfer credit algorithms and policies and authorized with a level of discretion to balance institutional rigor with student success
- **Reviewing opportunities to offer merit-based financial aid** for transfer students. This will also help to recruit talented individuals from community colleges and trade schools. While need-based aid is typically available for

students regardless of their enrollment status, merit-based aid is harder to come by for transfer students. Administrators should determine if there are opportunities to broaden the scope of financial support for this population.

- Whenever possible, **streamline and simplify the transfer transition by looking at the process through the eyes of your students;** this starts with clear articulation agreements and partnerships with your feeder institutions, but it doesn't end there. Ultra-fast credit evaluation processes not only help transfer students but also any student who brings in credits from elsewhere. And speed of review ensures the accuracy of the student record at all times, avoiding compliance issues for financial aid recipients, athletes, and others. Where school partnerships are particularly well defined, look to **turn articulation agreements into matriculation agreements** that set the expectation of transfer enrollment, without introducing any uncertainty around admission. This may require some creativity on the part of Enrollment Management to recognize when a complicated application is an unnecessary hoop, given clear articulation standards, one that may deter promising candidates.

Create Networks to Support Academic Success

According to data from the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), less than half of students who transferred from a community college to a four-year institution earned a bachelor's degree within six years.

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.

Opportunities to Enhance Academic Offerings



Ensure Academic Preparedness



Develop Matriculation Agreements



Consider Experiential Learning

- **Ensure the academic preparedness** of students by proactively working with feeder schools to standardize curriculum and/or align on the rigor of common prerequisite courses offered by feeder schools. Fostering avenues of inter-institutional faculty collaboration via co-teaching, guest lecturing, etc. can also help to encourage partnerships that will benefit both institutions and transfer students in the long run
- **Develop matriculation agreements** that go beyond the articulation agreements of the past to support transfer students' long-term goals. It's not enough to admit these well-qualified individuals; there should also be intentional supports in place to aid their trajectory toward graduation, degree obtainment and attractive career placement.
- Especially for strong transfer candidates, **consider experiential learning and skills for transferrable credits** that can be applied toward relevant degree programs. Incentivize their experience rather than penalizing them for delays or gaps in their educational journeys.

Transfers are no Longer the “Other” Path to Enrollment

A 2014 study by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) found that more than one-third of participants transferred or co-enrolled at least once over a six-year period. In fact, as student mobility increases and more individuals and families break their allegiances to traditional collegiate pathways, institutions may find that the vast majority of admits bring some level of transfer credit. That is one of

the reasons it is so important to respect the transfer student experience -- because, in the future, many more students will fall into this category. Seeking more intentionally to integrate this student group with an institution's strategies, in fact, catches up with what students are already doing. Students are embracing alternative ways to achieve their degree goals. It's time that colleges and universities get creative here too, and one way to do that is to simplify the transfer experience. The pandemic is shining a light on this now because families and students have to grapple with ways to make progress to a degree, while weighing issues of safety and security.

Opportunities to Improve the Transfer Student Experience



Solicit Student Feedback



Enhance Onboarding and Orientation



Create a Sense of Belonging

- **Solicit feedback** from recent graduates, current students and potential candidates about their experiences with transferring. Ask for specific insights that can guide further inquiry and shape future improvements in the short and long term. This feedback may be solicited in the form of a survey, student forums or a listening tour.
- Based on the findings of an intentional survey or listening tour, leaders can **enhance the onboarding and orientation experience** for this critical population. The concerns and focus areas of transfer students are often quite different from those of their more traditional peers. Consider adjusting the curriculum of introductory sessions to focus on the items that matter most to them (career services, childcare, etc.) and offer other more mainstream topics (housing, student life, etc.) on an as-requested basis. Be sensitive to the variability of prior experiences so that those within this population can identify their individual paths.

- **Create a sense of belonging** for transfer students and find meaningful ways to integrate them into the institution's culture. Leaders should consider enticing potential transfer students by offering certain student life perks (athletics ticket purchasing options, library access, gym membership, etc.) to them in advance of their decision to enroll. By giving students a sneak peek at the extracurricular and social opportunities they can expect, they may get a head start on finding their niche.

While the upcoming academic year is sure to be characterized by ambiguity, flexibility and compromise, leaders have the opportunity to capitalize on the current uncertainty to create exciting future paths to meet the needs of all types of students. Building the systems and processes now that intentionally respond to transfer students' needs and expectations will help institutions retain a competitive edge and offer a compelling value proposition regardless of what the post-pandemic future holds.

Key Takeaways

To strategically respond to transfer students' expectations, leaders should:

Think differently.

Solicit input from past, current and prospective transfer students to better understand their expectations and opportunities for improvement.

Plan differently.

Proactively develop collaborative matriculation agreements and formal partnership programs that go further to support transfer students' academic progression than traditional articulation agreements.

Act differently.

Devise an institutionwide plan to integrate communications with transfer students into every department so that they are better served from an advising standpoint (including financial aid and orientation).



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