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2 + 2 Shouldn't = 5

In many states, community colleges and four-year institutions renew efforts to promote seamless transfer.

By [Ashley A. Smith](#) // June 8, 2015

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One of the largest barriers to completing a bachelor's degree is losing credits when transferring from a community college. Even with articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions, a significant number of credits may end up lost in the shuffle.

These missing credits are driving colleges from one side of the country to the other to try to fix a problem educators have been trying to fix for years and in the process boost completion rates across the board. Now, with more political and education leaders convinced that smooth transfer is essential to more people earning more degrees, the issue is attracting more attention.

Last month Gateway Community College in New Haven, Conn., released a study that followed 479 two-year students who transferred last year from Connecticut community colleges to the University of Connecticut. The transfer students had an average of 54.17 credits earned at community colleges, but only 42.57 credits per student were applied by the university toward major or general education requirements.

Or take, for instance, students transferring from Alamo Colleges – the community college district serving San Antonio – to the city's branch of Texas A&M University. There the issue is staying too long at the community college to earn a four-year bachelor's degree.

On average those students transferred into the university with 80 to 90 credits. Approximately 92 percent transferred from Alamo with 70 or more credits, although the minimum required was 45, said Cynthia Teniente-Matson, president of Texas A&M University-San Antonio. So these students are almost certain to have their credit rejected because they aren't taking the upper-division courses that would go toward a four-year degree plan.



At most universities it takes 100 to 130 units to earn a degree. Students with 80 to 90 units should be 60 percent of the way toward a degree, but they're not, Teniente Matson said. "They'll run out of institutional aid before they earn a degree."

And that could be one reason why the majority of community college students who want to earn a bachelor's degree don't do so, said Bruce H. Leslie, chancellor of Alamo Colleges.

Texas very much mimics national numbers, which show 80 percent of students at two-year institutions plan at the time they enroll at the community college to earn a bachelor's degree. Yet 25 percent actually transfer to a four-year institution within five years. (Thirty-six percent of those students do earn an associate degree or certificate first.) Of that 25 percent, 17 percent actually walk away with a bachelor's within six years of transferring, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

The transfer system can be difficult to navigate, especially for students who are either in remediation or come from first-generation, low-income families, or have some language barriers, Teniente-Matson said. "So you have a student who is trying to navigate two systems, the community college campus while also the four-year campus, and balancing financial aid. That sort of system can be complex for students," she said.

The systems can be even harder to navigate with an adviser who is working with hundreds or thousands of other students and doesn't have time to focus on each student.

In Connecticut the 12 community colleges and 4 state universities are working on agreements that would establish pathways to ease the transition between the two entities. The process should be completed by fall 2016, however, UConn isn't a part of those agreements, said John Mullane, the counselor at Gateway who analyzed the data and published the report on credits loss in the state based on UConn's state-reported information.

"Those [agreements] will guarantee if a student goes through a particular pathway, 100 percent of credits will transfer and they'll be a junior with two years to go," he said. "We don't have those agreements with UConn.... The only real solution is to have statewide transfer and articulation agreements."

UConn officials declined to comment for this story, [but referred to a statement they released last month \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/05/08/transfer-credits-uconn\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/05/08/transfer-credits-uconn) stating

"We clearly specify on our website which courses transfer and which do not, and we have specific reasons for our decisions based on careful analysis of students' needs and the courses required for certain majors. We also ask all of our community colleges' academic counselors to help students interested in transferring to UConn by advising them early in their course selection to maximize the allowable transfer credit," said Stephanie Reitz, UConn's spokeswoman, in the statement.

Common Credits

Both the Texas and Connecticut Legislatures have attempted to follow the steps of a number of states have taken in solving the credit transfer dilemma. [California has been working for years \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/02/03/progress-transfer-california\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/02/03/progress-transfer-california) -- at the urging of state officials -- to develop transfer pathways for two-year graduates. Meanwhile, Florida has statewide agreements between its state colleges and university system, and all institutions but the New College of Florida use the Florida Statewide Course Numbering System.

Connecticut in 2012 passed a law that encouraged smooth transfer, but the law excluded UConn. That law has led to the discussions taking place now between Connecticut's state universities and community colleges. Texas considered a common course numbering system during this past legislative session, however, the bill failed to pass and received some pushback from a couple of state institutions, such as the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University-College Station, which argued renumbering their courses could be expensive, said Leslie, the Alamo chancellor.

Barriers to transfer programs or initiatives aren't new. Educators tend to agree with the concept of transferring, but the details can be controversial. Take for instance the City University of New York, where many faculty members have objected to the [Pathways \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/02/26/judge-backs-cuny-transfer-program\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/02/26/judge-backs-cuny-transfer-program) transfer program, which they say was developed without enough input from instructors and would hurt the quality of instruction. The university argues that this isn't the case, that it has made changes in response to concerns and that a new system was needed to help community college students.

The view at CUNY, as elsewhere, has been that modest steps won't lead to real change.

Putting transfer information on a university's website and detailing what they will or won't accept doesn't actually solve the problem, Mullane said. He points to a pharmacy program track that existed a year ago between community colleges and UConn, but was canceled.

ason schools give for rejecting classes is when students transfer over they say they're not academically prepared and if they don't retake the class it'll harm them academically," Mullane said. "But UConn's data contradicts that. The more credits a student can transfer to UConn, the better they'll do academically and they're more likely to graduate."

Students who are allowed to transfer almost all of their credits are two and a half times more likely to completely a bachelor's degree than those who transfer fewer than half, according to the Community College Research Center.

Mullane said he is pleased to see [lawmakers are interested \(http://wnpr.org/post/sen-murphy-wants-four-year-colleges-accept-more-community-college-credits#stream/0\)](http://wnpr.org/post/sen-murphy-wants-four-year-colleges-accept-more-community-college-credits#stream/0) in fixing the problems, though.

Much of the hard work is being done at the campus level. At Texas A&M-San Antonio, the university's advisers work closely with Alamo advisers within a 2+2 program (the goal being to get students a bachelor's in four years), but fewer than 10 fields of study are approved within that program, said Leslie.

In that program, students use guides that help them determine the courses they need at the community college, and that same guide will help them know what courses to take at the four-year institution, so they aren't taking unnecessary credits, said Melissa Mahan, vice president for student affairs at A&M-San Antonio.

"It's a good model and we support it, but it hasn't gotten the support and financial backing needed to bring faculty together across the state to work it out, and unfortunately not all of the universities have signed on to it," Leslie said. "Because that hasn't gotten us anywhere, we're all trying to do better memorandums of understanding with local partners for San Antonio."

The college system has partnered with a number of local public and private four-year institutions to set up the agreements.

Alamo is also dealing with the advising issue by lowering the ratio of advisers to students from 400 to 1, in some cases, to 350 to 1, he said. The colleges also are creating milestones so that at certain points students will have to declare to an adviser what career they're seeking and which university they plan to attend.

That means the college has been reducing its requirements down to 60 hours, with some exceptions, and "secondly we're making sure our students are having intrusive advising so they're not taking unnecessary courses," Leslie said.

still a host of other issues the colleges are continuing to contend with when it comes to transfer credit. For instance, universities can be so decentralized that individual departments control what is or isn't accepted for transfer, which can mean hundreds of different agreements from college to college or disagreements about what is or isn't needed for a degree. There's also the problem of students at two-year colleges having too many course options. Another problem is the effect remedial courses sometimes have on altering the sequence of degree plans, which leads to students taking extra courses.

The one solution everyone seems to agree with is students declaring their long-term plans early in their educations. That's led to an upcoming summit this fall with Alamo, university advisers, business leaders and high schools to develop a "push-pull" model, Leslie said.

There's already legislation to support a seamless transition from high school to the community colleges in the state. That legislation requires eighth graders to declare five "endorsements" before entering high school -- STEM, business and industry, arts and humanities, public services, or multidisciplinary studies. These endorsements are essentially pathways that allow high school students to take courses in the areas they've selected to prepare them for college and a future career. Alamo has taken those five endorsements and aligned them with their own courses to better help those students understand which degree plan to pursue following their high school graduation.

"As high schools push [students] to us, we need to pull them as we push students to the universities, and they need to pull our students into the universities. The goal is no longer just send them to community college," he said.

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