

Grade Point

# Colleges need to do more to help students transfer credits, GAO says

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By [Danielle Douglas-Gabriel](#)

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Students lose nearly half of the college credits they earn transferring from one school to another, placing them at risk of exhausting federal grants and loans to repeat courses, according to a [report](#) released by the Government Accountability Office Wednesday.

To save money, some students start at low-cost community colleges before heading to a university to complete their bachelor's degree. They are often frustrated to learn that the math or science courses they took do not meet the standards of their new school, where they must now enroll in classes they've already completed. That means more money and more time before they can graduate.

Using the most recent available data from the Education Department, researchers at the GAO estimate that students who transferred from 2004 to 2009 lost on average 43 percent of their credits. Two thirds of those transfer students had federal loans and almost half received Pell grants — aid for students whose families typically earn less than \$60,000 a year. Both forms of student aid have eligibility limits based on lifetime use or program length, 12 semesters for Pell and six years for direct loans.

"Students need more information to navigate this process," said Melissa Emrey-Arras, director of the GAO's Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues division. "Their money is at stake here. The federal government's money is at stake here. And students run the real risk of having to repeat courses and take longer to graduate from college."

At the very least, researchers at the GAO say schools should be more transparent about their transfer policies. Many public universities have what's known as articulation agreements with local community or regional colleges that make it easier for students to transfer credits. While the Education Department requires schools to post basic information about transferring on their websites, the agency stops short of making schools disclose articulation agreements

online. Some schools list the schools they partner with, but nearly a third of the colleges the GAO reviewed did not.

In a letter responding to the GAO report, Acting Assistant Secretary Kathleen A. Smith said placing special emphasis on articulation agreements could “seriously mislead students” because the lack of such partnerships is not a true measure of whether credits will transfer.

“A community college could have articulation agreements with a number of local four year colleges; but there could be many other colleges that will accept most, if not all, of the credits earned by students at the community college,” she wrote. “A student who sees the few schools with articulation agreements listed on the school’s website will think that he/she will not be able to transfer credits to any other school.”

Emrey-Arras contends that a sentence explaining that transfer agreements are but one way students’s credits can be accepted could clear up any confusion. Students, she said, simply need more information to make informed decisions, which is why the GAO has recommended the Education Department offer tips and transfer considerations on its website.

Smith did agree that the department must do more to provide students and their families with general transfer information. She said the Office of Federal Student Aid will flesh out the information available on StudentAid.gov.

The findings from the GAO report dovetail a [report released Thursday](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center that found fewer students are transferring from community colleges to four-year universities. Out of 852,439 students who enrolled at community college in fall 2010 only 31.5 percent went on to a university, down from 33 percent three years earlier. Researchers say the decline speaks to the challenges students face navigating the transfer system.

Even with agreements between schools, students have no guarantee of a smooth transition. An earlier Clearinghouse study of students who entered community college in 2007 found that only 42 percent of those who transferred earned a bachelor’s degree within six years of starting school. The results also varied by state and income level, with just a third of low-income community college students earning four-year degrees.

Several state higher education systems, including those in Tennessee, North Carolina and Texas, are using innovative strategies to streamline the transfer process. The University of California system, for instance, has “guided pathways” that chart the sequence of courses

needed to transfer. Some schools, such as George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College, offer dual enrollment for some majors.


While the GAO noted difficulties in transferring course credits across the higher education landscape, the problem was most acute for students coming out of for-profit colleges. Students who moved from private for-profit colleges to public schools lost an estimated 94 percent of their credits, while those moving between public colleges — the largest population of transfers — lost roughly 37 percent of their credits, according to the report.

The closure of for-profit ITT Technical Institutes and Corinthian Colleges exposed the challenges students face in trying to get public and nonprofit private colleges to accept their credits. In the days following ITT's collapse, the Education Department pleaded with community colleges to welcome the school's former students.

A part of the problem is for-profit schools are typically nationally accredited whereas public and private nonprofit colleges are regionally accredited, and prefer to accept credits from other regionally accredited schools, the GAO said. National accreditation is seen as less stringent than regional accreditation, and the coursework at career schools can be difficult to transfer because of the focus on vocational education.

#### 2 Comments

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Danielle Douglas-Gabriel covers the economics of education, writing about the financial lives of students, from when they take out student debt through their experiences in the job market. Before that, she wrote about the banking industry. Follow 

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