

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 31, 2019

9:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Gary Stevens, Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair
Senator Chris Birch
Senator Mia Costello

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Tom Begich

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 31

"An Act relating to the transferability of academic credit for specified courses among postsecondary education programs; and relating to the Board of Regents of the University of Alaska."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 31

SHORT TITLE: UNIVERSITY CURRICULA; TRANSFER CREDITS

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) STEVENS

01/23/19	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/23/19	(S)	EDC, FIN
01/31/19	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

TIM LAMKIN, Staff
Senator Gary Stevens
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 31 on behalf of the sponsor.

PAUL LAYER, Ph.D., Vice President
Academics, Students and Research

University of Alaska Fairbanks
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on SB 31.

KEITH HAMILTON, Ph.D., representing self
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 31.

MIKE COONS, representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Opposed SB 31 because it does not go far enough.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:00:12 AM](#)

CHAIR GARY STEVENS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Costello, Birch, Hughes, and Chair Stevens.

SB 31-UNIVERSITY CURRICULA; TRANSFER CREDITS

[9:00:22 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS announced consideration of SB 31. Senator Stevens said his intent is to introduce and hear testimony on SB 31 and hold the bill in committee.

[9:00:41 AM](#)

TIM LAMKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, said that SB 31 is an effort to improve the transparency of the transfer process of credits for students transferring between schools in the University of Alaska (UA) system. Historically, across the nation, students have lost nearly half their college credits when transferring from one school to another. They deplete their financial aid by having to repeat courses. Often, to save money, students tend to go to a lower-cost community college before going to a university to complete a bachelor's degree. They are often frustrated to learn that the base courses they have taken don't transfer and must be repeated. That means more time and money before they can graduate.

MR. LAMKIN said that data for 2004-2009 from the U.S. Department of Education confirms this. This bill is an effort to improve that. He said he did want to acknowledge the efforts made by the

UA Board of Regents. The board has a policy that addresses this, but there is no statute. They have made strides to improve the alignment of curriculum across the campuses and transferability of credits, but the question before the committee is whether it is enough.

MR. LAMKIN said the question for the UA system for decades has been, "Are we one or are we three." The Board of Regents wrangles with this question and the transfer of credit. He pointed out that the bill packets contain a study by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) that has a breakdown state-by-state regarding four questions regarding the transferability of core, lower division courses. These include do they have common, statewide course numbering, guaranteed transfer of an associate degree, and statewide reverse transfer.

MR. LAMKIN said he looked specifically at the transferability of the core, lower division courses. There is a board policy that indicates that a student who completes a general education requirement (GER) at one campus can transfer that to another university.

MR. LAMKIN said that common course numbering and transferability of associate degrees is encouraged, but not guaranteed.

[9:05:16 AM](#)

SENATOR COSTELLO said that it was surprising that transferability of credit requires a bill. She referenced a comprehensive study looking at all challenges the university faces. She said she would like a report on the status of all those issues. Transferability was one of the major frustrations for students and was highlighted in the [James] Fisher report.

CHAIR STEVENS noted that Mr. Lamkin served on the Board of Regents while a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF).

MR. LAMKIN said he has the official report on file. He also noted that he was the Vice President of the Board of Regents and the first student regent elevated to the executive level of the board.

[9:06:34 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES said in the EDC report about the transferability of credits, some states were shown as yeses to all four questions. Alaska was shown as a yes to one and no to three. The yes question was for board policy regarding transferability of

credit. She asked if the legislation was needed if the transfer of GERs in the system already was board policy.

MR. LAMKIN said the question is if the policy that is in place is enough. Half the states have statutes to reinforce that and half do not. The online versions of each campus's GERs appear to align, but part of bill is to ensure that it is easy and transparent for students to understand.

[9:08:39 AM](#)

SENATOR BIRCH cited an instance of someone encountering differences between journalism programs at UAA and UAF. He said he looks forward to hearing from the university about progress to alleviate this situation, absent legislation. He asked if the loss of accreditation for the UAA School of Education would affect the transferability of those credits.

CHAIR STEVENS said progress has been made. When he was with the university 20 years ago, students were upset about having to repeat classes. He understands that campuses can have different course requirements, but it is appropriate to ask the university about this issue. He said he hopes to hear from students and faculty about whether they feel this legislation is needed.

[9:11:11 AM](#)

MR. LAMKIN presented the sectional for SB 31, version M. He noted that the language was drafted from an Oregon law adopted in 2017:

Sec. 1: Adds a new section to the duties of the University of Alaska (UA) to include: AS 14.40.185

(A) The Board of Regents (BOR) shall establish foundational curriculum for each major degree program, identifying a list of required first-year, lower division courses that will be fully transferable between each campus of the UA system. In establishing the foundational curriculum, the BOR shall:

1. Consult with Directors from each campus of the UA system;
2. Evaluate current lower division courses offered at each campus for transferability between campuses;
3. Identify major areas of study based on workforce demand and academic need;
4. Publicly disclose the criteria used to establish the foundational curricula and major areas of study;

5. Distribute the foundational curriculum for each major area of study to each campus of the University of Alaska for replication;
6. Determine and describe the courses, completion standards, and the optimal number of academic credits for the foundational curriculum for an academic degree program in each major area of study;
7. Update the foundational curricula and major areas of study as necessary;
8. Provide information and technical assistance to each campus about implementing the foundational curricula and the transferability of credits; and
9. Evaluate the effect of the foundational curricula on transferability of course credit and report annually to the legislature on the implementation and success of the foundational curricula and credit transfer activity within the UA system.

(B) Specifies the BOR shall make foundational curricula course credit fully transferable for UA students within the UA system.

(C) All students of UA shall be provided with information about foundational curriculum and respective course transferability.

CHAIR STEVENS pointed out that the bill applies only to foundational curriculum, not every class.

SENATOR HUGHES recalled her struggle to transfer credits more than 30 years ago when she transferred from a community college to the university. She said she too wants to hear from students because she has been aware of requests year after year since she has been in the legislature for the university to step up and make improvements.

SENATOR HUGHES asked about one year instead of two since it usually takes two years to complete GERS to earn a bachelor's degree. She asked why it would be for each academic program as that implied there was different foundational curriculum for each area of study. She asked if there could be two years of GERS for any bachelor's degree program so that undeclared students would not be wasting their time.

MR. LAMKIN replied that page two, lines 30-31, of the bill refers to students who have not yet identified a major area of

study. GERS are one and two hundred level courses that are usually for every student. He will let academicians address that.

SENATOR HUGHES said she was confused about why there would be a need for curriculum for each academic program. She asked whether it could be two years instead of one.

9:20:12 AM

PAUL LAYER, Ph.D., Vice President, Academics, Students and Research, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska, said the university has done a lot regarding the transferability of credits for foundational courses or GERS. As required by regents' policy and regulation, the university has taken steps to ensure transferability of credits across the system. As far as the question about whether UA is one university or three, it is one with regard to general education requirements. UA has one set, 34 credits, of general education or foundational courses. It is a multiyear experience in the areas of oral and written communications, math literacy, science literacy, and arts and humanities.

DR. LAYER said the system has provisions that if a student completes all or part of the GERS at any campus, those credits will transfer across the system. He highlighted that the faculty did a lot of work, based upon the results of the Fisher report, to align course numbers across the system. That is relatively new this year. For example, Writing 111 is the same at all campuses. UA does meet those four criteria across the systems. He thanked the Senate for the opportunity to highlight the changes and improvements UA has made in transferability of credits.

SENATOR HUGHES said it seems that the university is already implementing the policy in the bill. She asked if they are still receiving complaints from students about credit transferability.

DR. LAYER said UAF always has students who have difficulty in transferring credits. For example, a student in an associate program at a community campus may choose to take a geology class that meets the requirement for an associate degree, but for a later major should have taken chemistry. That is an advising issue. Some of those barrier have been removed but it has not eliminated all student concerns.

SENATOR HUGHES said that with the science course example she could see that perhaps only one year of courses could apply to all degrees.

DR. LAYER said that for undecided students, there are a basic set of courses to meet requirements for almost any major: writing, communications, and quantitative skills. An undeclared student could have two years of curriculum in any university.

SENATOR BIRCH said in the past printed catalogs specific to a year described degree requirements. He asked how that works across the university system today.

DR. LAYER answered that there are no longer any printed catalogs, but catalogs are still tied to the year. Students can graduate under the catalog of the year they entered or the year they graduate so that there are no moving goal posts. Catalogs do have details about GERS and a matrix of courses across the system that are available to meet those GERS.

[9:29:17 AM](#)

SENATOR BIRCH said his district, and Alaska in general, has a large military contingent. Many of them are younger and interested in advancing careers through continuous education or degree programs. The transferability issue has surfaced in some of those discussions. He asked Dr. Layer to speak to the accreditation issue in Anchorage and how it would affect students who want to transfer credits.

DR. LAYER responded that [University of Alaska President] Dr Johnsen will be testifying next week about the School of Education accreditation issue. All three of the universities are accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). That means the courses are accredited by NWCCU. UAA just successfully completed its review with that group. The Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP) focused on programmatic issues rather than courses or curriculum issues. Some UAA education students have transferred to UAF or UAS (University of Alaska Southeast).

DR. Layer said that most difficulty with credit transfer comes at the upper division level. Different majors may have different emphases at different campuses.

DR. LAYER said that as far as the military goes, there are many transfer arrangements with outside universities to UA and mobility within the university. Many courses are online now and

the objective is that students can take those courses across the system and have them count toward their degrees. This has been implemented especially for foundational or core courses.

CHAIR STEVENS said it is good to hear that students can transfer a year of foundational courses within the UA system.

9:33:50 AM

SENATOR HUGHES commented that other states handle this through agreements, not statutory mandate. She asked if work has been done so that not just credits but also associate degrees will be accepted between campuses. She offered her understanding that although it is the UA system, the accreditation process is separate for the campuses.

DR. LAYER answered that it is board policy to transfer an associate degree and the foundational GERs between campuses. He said he would like to work with the committee to show how the university has made improvements in these areas. He said UA has three separately accredited universities, but through policy and regulation, has established one foundational set of GERs. The community campuses are part of UAA, UAF, or UAS. For example, a student at Kenai is a UAA student. This is a bit different from most states where the community college is a separate system.

SENATOR HUGHES commented that the June 2018 Education Commission of the States report shows Alaska as a no for statewide guarantee of transferability of associate degrees. She asked if that chart is incorrect.

DR. LAYER answered that he would need to look at the ECS definition of "guarantee" because the commission's policies are explicit regarding transferability. He pointed out that Alaska is also a no for reverse transfer on the ECS report but it doesn't apply because there is no separate community college system in Alaska. Reverse transfer means that if someone completes most of an associate degree at a community college and then finishes courses at a university, that community college would award an associate degree.

DR. LAYER added that the faculty completed the work on general education courses and curriculum alignment in May of last year, after the ECS report was compiled.

CHAIR STEVENS opened public testimony. He noted that Dr. Keith Hamilton is a member of the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and president of Alaska Christian College.

9:41:00 AM

KEITH HAMILTON, Ph.D., representing self, Soldotna, Alaska, said he is grateful to see SB 31 but it might not go far enough. He said that since the transfer of 100 and 200 level courses and associate degrees in the UA system have had hiccups, he was glad to hear the prior testimony. In the past two years, ACPE and the State Board have sent two separate resolutions calling for a streamlining of credit transfer from colleges that are not part of the UA system. Dr. Hamilton said he is aware of no changes following those resolutions.

DR. HAMILTON said as a college president, he is aware of the difficulty of transferring credits into the UA system when not part of the system. He has spoken with the president of Alaska Pacific University about APU's difficulties with credit transfer. A leader at AVTEC spoke with him about two great AVTEC programs that UAF will accept for full transfer, but UAA would not rearticulate an agreement when it expired. For years he has attempted to get articulated agreements or a streamlined credit transfer process with UA. It would be a triple win for Alaska, for students, and the university to have seamless credit transfer articulation among all accredited colleges throughout the state.

CHAIR STEVENS said that is an issue beyond SB 31.

SENATOR HUGHES highlighted that Idaho requires that credits from a regionally accredited institution must be accepted by the public university system.

CHAIR STEVENS responded that is something that could be considered.

SENATOR HUGHES said it seems that the university would want to help students with two-year degrees from outside the UA system obtain bachelor's degrees.

9:46:36 AM

MIKE COONS, representing self, Palmer, Alaska, said he opposed SB 31 because it does not go far enough. He related that he has an AA in emergency medicine and he found many GER courses were a waste of time because they did not relate to his profession. Noting that SB 31 does not address credits outside of UA, he asked what happens to a person with more than a year of credit who is transferred from Eielson [Air Force Base] to JBER [Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson]. He also asked if the average student

knows how to check on what is transferable prior to taking courses and whether UAA will assure that counselors will be knowledgeable about transferability.

CHAIR STEVENS said his hometown has about 2,500 Coast Guard men and women, some of whom work on degrees while they get stationed at various places. He described transferability as an important issue.

[9:49:58 AM](#)

CHAIR STEVENS closed public testimony and noted there was an indeterminate fiscal note. He held SB 31 in committee.

[9:50:49 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Stevens adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:50 a.m.