Improving Community College to Four-Year College Transfer
A Policy Analysis and Student Perspective

Michelle Hodara, Mary Martinez-Wenzl, David Stevens, and Christopher Mazzeo
Education Northwest

American Educational Research Association
Saturday, April 29, 2017
The Problem

- Over 40 percent of first-time undergraduates attend community college (IPEDS)
- Many aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree but few do (BPS)
The Problem is More Pronounced for Latino, Black, & American Indian/Alaska Native Students

- Expected to earn at least a bachelor’s degree
- Transferred to a four-year institution by 2009
- Earned a bachelor’s degree by 2009

Percent of students

- Asian
- White
- Latino
- Black
- American Indian or Alaska Native

Graph showing the percentage of students from different racial backgrounds who expected to earn at least a bachelor’s degree, transferred to a four-year institution by 2009, and earned a bachelor’s degree by 2009.
A focus on credit mobility

Loss of college credits when transferring from one institution to another

Lower likelihood of degree attainment

(Doyle, 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014; Cullinane, 2014)
The Present Study

Our study addresses the following questions:

- What are different policy approaches to credit mobility?
- How and why do community college students lose credit?
Data Collection

Who did we interview?
34 system staff
86 college staff
65 students
Two Types of Credit Loss

- Transfer student
  - does not receive credit for college credits earned at origin institution
  - receives credit for college credits earned at origin institution, but credits count as elective credits rather than major/degree program credits
“We all have to remember that everything transfers, but not everything applies. So simply transferring credit from a two-year to a four-year institution, if it’s academic credit, then almost all of it transfers. It’s almost unheard of for it not to transfer. But the real issue for students is, does it apply to their degree?”

-Texas system official
Transfer policies seek to address credit mobility

**Systemwide major pathway**

- College enrollment
  - General education
  - Lower division premajor
  - Upper division major requirements
  - Graduation

**Systemwide common core**
How is pre-major credit applicability determined?

- State/system
- Individual campuses and/or programs

2+2 Systems
FL, TN, SUNY, GA, CSU

Credit Equivalency Systems
WA, OH, CUNY, UC

Institution-driven Systems
NC, TX, KY
Existing Policies Do Not Address the Common Reasons Students Lose Credit

- Student uncertainty about major and destination institution
- Institutions and advisors lack capacity to provide personalized and knowledgeable support to students interested in transfer early in their career
Community college transfer students end up with excess credits because they:

- Select a liberal arts major
- Take general education before selecting major
- Switch majors
In Institution-Driven Systems, Reasons for Credit Loss are Exacerbated

To know what courses to take, students must select major and destination institution.
“The advice I would give to the freshmen would be [to] know ahead of time what school you plan on committing to. Know that it’s not set in concrete but know that it will be costly if you waver back and forth.”

-Texas community college transfer student
Advising – Too Little and Too Late

Credit loss is also the result of:

- No transfer advising for community college students during orientation or first term
- Directed to online resources to self-advice
- Advisors are “guessing” about which courses students should take
In Institution-Driven Systems, Reasons for Credit Loss are Exacerbated

- Advisors must keep track of pathways for every major at every destination institution
“When you have very customized advising, there’s a lot of room for misinformation. And so much responsibility is left to the advisor to know about, not just the general transfer information, but to know a lot of information about the different requirements for the different disciplines. And advising often gets a bad rap, but we have a very complex system in place, that it’s not surprising that sometimes things that are not beneficial to the student to occur.”

-Texas community college administrator
Considerations Under Any Transfer Policy

- Build the knowledge and capacity of community college advisors and students
- Use data to better understand credit loss and how it affects students, programs, and institutions
Bachelor’s degree aspirations are high, but degree completion is low

- Expected to earn at least a bachelor’s degree: 80% in 1989/90, 70% in 1995/96, 80% in 2003/04
- Transferred to a four-year institution within five years: 20% in 1989/90, 30% in 1995/96, 10% in 2003/04
- Earned a bachelor’s degree within six years: 10% in 1989/90, 20% in 1995/96, 10% in 2003/04