

Executive Summary: Implementing Statewide Transfer & Articulation Reform

An Analysis of Transfer Associate Degrees in Four States

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In recent years, the federal government and several major philanthropic organizations have focused attention on the need to dramatically increase the number of bachelor's and other postsecondary degrees in order to retain the United States' economic competitiveness in a global marketplace. Improving what is often a complex community college-to-university transfer process, many analysts argue, is key to improving bachelor's degree production. Thus, over the past few years, several states have engaged in systemic transfer and articulation reforms, creating transfer associate degrees that allow students to both earn an associate degree and transfer seamlessly into a state university.

The purpose of this project—which was generously funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Walter S. Johnson Foundations—was to examine the development of transfer associate degrees in four states: Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington. We utilized case study analysis (including site visits, analysis of relevant documents, and roughly 60 in-depth qualitative interviews) in order to describe implementation strategies that may be utilized in states that are currently embarking on or planning for systemic transfer reforms.

Transfer associate degrees can be understood as a grouping of seven curricular and policy-related elements. The first four, listed below, are essential to the creation of significant statewide improvements in transfer and articulation. The final three elements are also important but may be more or less necessary, depending on each state's unique history, policy goals, capacity issues, and the academic cultures and traditions of its institutions.

1. A common general education (GE) package
2. Common lower-division pre-major and early-major pathways
3. A focus on credit applicability
4. Junior status upon transfer
5. Guaranteed and/or priority university admission
6. Associate and/or bachelor's degree credit limits
7. An acceptance policy for upper-division courses

In the pages that follow we summarize the five primary themes that emerged from our data, as well as early positive outcomes and the likely future of transfer associate degrees. We conclude with implications of this study and recommendations for those advocating or developing similar transfer reforms in other states.

Legislative Action as Driver

Legislation plays an important role in systemic transfer and articulation reform, both through initial mandates or threats to create statewide policies and programs, and in applying pressure to employ them in a timely manner. However, if transfer and articulation legislation is to be effectively implemented, it is essential to limit its provisions to broad, statewide expectations, leaving more specific details related to curriculum development and institutional policy to inter-segmental faculty and administrative committees.

Presidential Leadership and Statewide Governance/Coordination

Presidential and/or top-level system leadership and support is critical to the successful implementation of transfer associate degrees. Presidents, in particular, have both symbolic and hierarchical value, allowing them to support and encourage involvement in transfer reforms across the state and among members of their staff. Leadership and support by statewide governing or coordinating boards is also useful in the development of transfer associate degrees, but successful implementation does not depend on the specific *type* of statewide structure in place.

Clear, Ongoing Organizational Structure

A clear and ongoing organizational structure that assigns responsibility for each aspect of the implementation process to the group that is best suited to manage it is critical for developing transfer reforms, dealing with policy and administrative issues as they arise, and ensuring awareness, buy-in, and compliance among members of the higher education community.

The Autonomy/Efficiency Balancing Act

The process of implementing transfer associate degrees essentially boils down to a balancing act between autonomy/freedom and efficiency, student centeredness, and the common good. The four states in our analysis have balanced these values in various ways. For example, basing course equivalency on learning outcomes focused Ohio faculty on the essential competencies required for upper-division study while allowing for variation in how and by whom courses are taught.

Building Trust and Allaying Fears through Faculty-Driven Processes

Facilitating disciplinary conversations among two- and four-year faculty and implementing processes for periodic review of transfer curricula and courses are critical in moving participants past their own institutional or disciplinary silos and creating efficient, student-centered transfer systems.

Early Positive Outcomes

While more information collected over longer periods of time will be needed to make definitive statements about the impact of transfer associate degrees on the efficiency and cost effectiveness of state higher education systems, recent outcomes data from the four states under review suggest that the degrees may indeed lead to greater system efficiency and increased cost savings. Indeed, the following early outcomes are closely aligned with the policy goals and expected benefits of systemic transfer and articulation reform:

1. Greater flexibility and more options for transfer students (AZ, NJ, OH & WA)
2. Improved transfer rates (OH & WA)
3. Transfer students are better prepared for upper-division work (AZ & OH)
4. Improved degree completion (OH & WA)
5. Reductions in time- and credits-to-degree (AZ & WA)
6. Cost savings for students and the state (OH)

The Road Ahead

Based on early positive outcomes, Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington are all looking forward to ways in which they may extend or improve their transfer and articulation systems. These and other states implementing transfer associate degrees will likely face the following challenges in the years ahead:

1. Marketing newly-developed transfer associate degrees to students, parents, faculty, and advisers in order to improve participation rates among community college students.
2. Utilizing technological solutions such as web-based advising and degree planning tools, electronic management systems, and/or electronic transcript delivery systems that can be used by all institutions within a state.
3. Involving K-12 educators in transfer discussions and/or thinking about how college readiness is and should be related to statewide transfer policies.
4. Resolving capacity constraints at certain public universities and within popular degree programs.
5. Maintaining and improving statewide transfer pathways in the current era of reduced funding for public higher education.

Implications & Recommendations

The early positive outcomes described in this report will be especially useful to policymakers and system leaders who are advocating for the development or further implementation of statewide transfer and articulation reforms. Perhaps equally important to those executing the reforms, however, are those findings that identify key aspects of the implementation process itself. To both groups we offer the following recommendations:

- Use legislation to incent or compel the implementation of systemic transfer reforms.
- Ensure leadership and buy-in among college and university presidents, as well as statewide governing or coordinating agencies.
- Implement a clear and ongoing organizational structure.
- Articulate a common goal and shared understanding of why it is important to engage in systemic transfer reform.
- Strive for a balance between autonomy/freedom and efficiency, student centeredness, and the common good.
- Use learning outcomes to determine course equivalency.
- Implement processes for reviewing and revising transfer degrees to ensure relevancy with evolving curricula.
- Market transfer associate degrees to students and advisers early in the implementation process.
- Explore how technology may facilitate systemic transfer and articulation reform.
- Incorporate K-12 educators and/or college-readiness standards into statewide transfer and articulation conversations.
- Use transfer associate degrees to help resolve institutional and programmatic capacity issues.
- Seek alternative funding scenarios for implementing, maintaining, and/or improving transfer associate degrees.
- Continue gathering and publicizing data related to the ability of transfer associate degrees to improve system efficiency, increase postsecondary degree completion, and generate cost savings.