

Center for the Study of Community Colleges

Executive Summary: Reforming Transfer and Articulation in California

Four Statewide Solutions for Creating a More Successful and
Seamless Transfer Path to the Baccalaureate

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In February 2009, leaders of California’s public college and university systems announced the formation of a joint task force that would consider substantive reforms to the transfer process and identify ways to increase the number of community college students transferring to the state’s four-year universities. Despite high expectations, as the extent of California’s 2009 budget crisis became clear, Task Force leaders decided to limit their recommendations to a set of modest, low-cost activities to which each system could immediately commit.

This study begins to close the gap between what most college leaders and analysts agree is necessary—systemic reform of California’s transfer and articulation system—and the short-term, immediately feasible recommendations contained in the Task Force’s interim report. Guiding the recommendations contained in this report are three basic principles:

- The transfer pathway(s) must be **transparent** and easy for students, faculty, and advisers to understand.
- In exchange for successfully completing a defined transfer pathway, students must receive a **guarantee** that their courses will automatically transfer and be counted toward general education (GE) and major preparation requirements at public four-year institutions in the state.
- In developing transfer pathways, care must be taken to strike a **balance** between curricular standardization and faculty/institutional autonomy.

Based on information gathered from in-depth, qualitative interviews with all members of the 2009 Transfer Task Force, this report recommends four top-priority statewide solutions for creating a more seamless and successful transfer path to the baccalaureate: 1) transfer associate degrees; 2) descriptor-based articulation; 3) a statewide online academic planning tool; and 4) shared messaging about transfer and financial aid. The report also describes the major challenges in enacting these reforms, as well as possible ways of overcoming them, and outlines next steps for improving transfer in California.

Transfer Associate Degrees

The development of transfer associate degrees, which encompass a common, statewide GE curriculum and specific areas of emphasis that can be applied toward students’ lower-division major preparation, is an effective and efficient way of systemically improving California’s transfer and articulation process, and should be endorsed by policymakers, as well as faculty and administrative leaders at all three of California’s college and university systems. However, if these transfer associate degrees are to be effective, they must guarantee that, upon completion of the degree:

- Students will be granted admission to a public university in the state (and possibly be given priority admission to the campus and major of their choice).
- Courses taken in fulfillment of the transfer associate degree will transfer en bloc to any four-year public university in the state, will satisfy all lower-division GE requirements, and with few exceptions, courses taken in areas of emphasis will be applied as credit toward the major at the receiving institution.

Furthermore, the implementation of transfer associate degrees should not invalidate existing or future course-to-course and campus-to-campus articulation agreements so that specialized, collaborative programs between community colleges and universities can continue to thrive, and so that there are still available pathways to transfer for students who choose not to complete a transfer associate degree.

Descriptor-Based Articulation

Descriptor-based articulation (i.e., the Course Identification Numbering System, known as C-ID) may be an effective way of achieving the goals of common course numbering while avoiding potential pitfalls that might occur in attempts to implement a truly standardized and commonly numbered system. We recommend that the community colleges continue to fund this project, and that faculty and administrative leaders at all three public systems and the private universities strongly encourage their faculty to become involved in developing descriptors and in approving them as the standard for articulation with community college courses. Furthermore, in order to ensure more widespread implementation, we recommend that C-ID incorporate an “opt-out” policy whereby if four or more campuses within a system accept a given C-ID descriptor, then by default all of the campuses would accept it unless they provide an acceptable reason for opting out.

To be most effective, C-ID must be conceptualized as part of a larger statewide initiative such as the development of transfer associate degrees, a truly common GE curriculum, and/or statewide major preparation pathways or areas of emphasis. Going forward, we recommend that C-ID project leaders work closely with those developing such statewide initiatives, and prioritize the development and approval of descriptors in curricular areas at the core of these reforms.

Statewide Online Academic Planning Tool

Upgrading California’s repository for articulation agreements (ASSIST) and linking that application to a statewide online academic planning tool are essential steps in systemically improving California’s transfer and articulation process, and in making that process more transparent and efficient for students, faculty, and advisers. Plans for a Next Generation ASSIST are already underway, and we recommend that the three college and university systems provide full support and funding for this very important project.

However, if Next Generation ASSIST is to achieve its full potential, it must be linked with a statewide online academic planning tool that allows students to chart their progress toward transfer and a degree at any institution in the state. Although all three systems are in the process of developing their own academic planning and degree audit applications, an online tool that includes all California colleges and universities (including both public and private institutions) is essential. A true statewide online academic planning system is particularly important for community college students who may be preparing for transfer to more than one university (or those taking classes at more than one college or university), but it will also be useful to native four-year students who wish to explore how the courses they have taken will fulfill requirements for various majors at their home and other institutions.

Shared Messaging about Transfer and Financial Aid

Inter-segmental efforts to provide shared messages to current and incoming college students about the multiple postsecondary pathways to the baccalaureate, as well as strategies for navigating those pathways, can make California’s transfer and articulation process more transparent, and will help to develop the notion that transfer is a viable and cost-effective path to the baccalaureate. However, these messages would be most effective if they are backed by statewide reforms that provide greater transfer and articulation assurances to students, such as the implementation of transfer associate degrees, and if they include consistent advice about how to best utilize federal and state financial aid to support students throughout their postsecondary careers.

Overcoming Challenges in Enacting These Reforms

California faces numerous challenges in enacting the four statewide transfer and articulation reforms recommended in this report. These challenges, as well as possible ways of overcoming them, can be summarized as follows:

System and Institutional Silos

- Implement discipline-based, inter-segmental faculty commissions that can work to balance greater standardization of lower-division, transferrable courses with respect for faculty and institutional autonomy and curricular quality.

Faculty Autonomy

- Engage faculty as active participants in inter-segmental transfer and articulation reform efforts.
- Provide incentives, such as stipends or changes to promotion/tenure procedures.
- Legislate transfer associate degrees and/or other systemic transfer and articulation reforms, giving faculty the opportunity to make all curricular and articulation decisions as long as they do so in an acceptable amount of time.

Un-Common Academic Calendars

- Engage in cost/benefit analyses of implementing a common academic calendar and inform faculty and staff operating on quarter systems of the benefits of semesters.

Underprepared Community College Students

- Support statewide and inter-segmental implementation of the Early Assessment Program.
- Consider adopting common assessment and placement tools at all California community colleges.

University Capacity

- Consider wider implementation of hybrid and online programs at all California colleges and universities.
- Explore authorizing some community colleges to confer the baccalaureate in certain applied fields and/or encourage UC and CSU faculty to teach upper-division courses on some community college campuses.

The Master Plan and Lack of Statewide Coordination

- Support the implementation of transfer associate degrees.
- Reform or replace the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) to ensure that a statewide coordinating body has the power and authority to lead inter-segmental initiatives.
- Explore authorizing community college baccalaureates in the future to resolve capacity problems.

Lack of Funding

- Demonstrate a serious commitment to implementing systemic transfer and articulation reforms in order to be competitive for federal and philanthropic funding.
- Publicize to legislators and the general public the cost savings and economic benefits that may result from systemic transfer and articulation reform.

Next Steps for California

Since the establishment of the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, California has been at the forefront of progressive higher education policy and practice, and because of its commitment to open access and system fluidity, the state has more than once been recognized as the most successful model for postsecondary education and training in the country. Unfortunately, due to many years of underfunding, a less-relevant Master Plan, competition among systems, and battles over curricular territory, California's system of higher education is no longer recognized as the best or most influential. Indeed, we are witnessing a slow but steady disinvestment in California public education by the federal government and philanthropic foundations, reportedly due to beliefs that the state's problems are too entrenched and that there is not a significant desire—on the part of legislators or educators—to engage in significant systemic reforms.

It is not too late to reverse this trend. Indeed, our current fiscal circumstances provide California with an incredible opportunity to reclaim its title of the best and most accessible higher education system in the country. However, doing so will require: A) acknowledging that we have not and are not living up to the spirit of the Master Plan, which envisioned a clear path to any postsecondary degree or certificate for all California students; and B) making a serious commitment to implementing systemic transfer and articulation reforms, such as transfer associate degrees, that will make the transfer path to the baccalaureate more viable, transparent, and effective for all students.

The first step in this process must be to ensure that any legislation authorizing the development of transfer associate degrees includes a guarantee that if students complete such a degree, they will be admitted to a public university in the state, and their units will satisfy all lower-division GE requirements and be applied toward their major. The second step may be to reconvene the Community College Transfer Task Force or a similar group to oversee the implementation of transfer associate degrees, a statewide online academic planning tool, and/or other systemic reforms. The Task Force must have the power to assemble inter-segmental faculty and staff commissions, and the authority to impose commission objectives and timelines. A primary initial goal of the Task Force might be to help the Inter-Segmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS) and the individual systems' academic senates understand the importance and timeliness of such initiatives, and to ensure their support.

Next Steps for Our Project

The next step for our project is to gather information from other states that can assist California in successfully implementing transfer associate degrees, a statewide online academic planning tool, and/or other statewide transfer and articulation reforms. In the next phase of our project we will visit 3 states that have successfully implemented these initiatives (most likely Florida, Arizona, and Oregon), identify the political processes, actors, and associations that were instrumental in bringing about the reforms, and describe implementation strategies that may be successfully utilized in California. We will also be asking how states funded the development of transfer associate degrees and other statewide reforms, and will be examining the effects of such initiatives on curricular quality and student success. We expect to complete this phase of our project and report back to California legislators and UC, CSU, and CCC leaders by January 2011.

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