

Troubled Transfers:

Removing Barriers for Transfer Students to Improve Outcomes

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Access to higher education can unlock the potential tucked away in the minds of those eager to learn - be it recent high school graduates who are embarking on their career or non-traditional students looking to improve the trajectory of their career paths.

According to the *National Center for Education Statistics*, 13.4 million students enrolled in undergraduate programs this fall are headed to four-year institutions, while the other 3 million are opening their books at two-year institutions. ***Students are choosing community college more often*** — attending a two-year institution offers students flexibility in their course schedule, lowers the cost of a degree, and provides the option to transfer to a four-year institution.

But only one out of five community college students will transfer to a four-year institution.

While many students at community colleges plan on transferring to a four-year university, they are often deterred by the complexities of the process; this leads to a majority of two-year students choosing not to transfer and instead, putting their dreams on hold.

● So, why aren't more students transferring?

Recently the team at Barnes & Noble Education LoudCloud partnered with several community colleges and a four-year public institution in a major metropolitan area to better understand the challenges faced by transfer students, and to help determine what process and policy changes can improve outcomes. As part of the project we conducted qualitative research sessions with 25 students to better understand the challenges they faced during the transfer process.

Getting to graduation is not just about attending class — students need to also understand financial aid options, credit requirements, and so much more. Add in the pressure of picking a new school, a career path, and figuring out how to get there, and it's easy to see how the transfer process can overwhelm students.

Though every student has unique circumstances, our research uncovered some distinct patterns for students who were unable to transfer to a four-year institution. Some students don't explore their transfer options at all, some feel lost in the application process, and some change their minds after they've submitted their applications (often after realizing that many of their credits won't transfer).

One of the students we spoke with expressed that “..the transfer process is too long and too complex to navigate,” which is a sentiment most of the students we spoke with shared.

With all of the nuances that come with transferring, it's often helpful to have guidance from an academic advisor during the process. Unfortunately, advisors are assigned to too many students - often one academic advisor for every 400 students – making it difficult to give individualized attention before, during, and after the transfer application process.

This low advisor to student ratio results in situations where the right information at the right time can be hard to come by for transfer students.

One of the transfer students we spoke with (a 40-year-old woman who transferred credits from Taiwan to a four-year institution — let's call her Samantha) said she felt a lack of clarity throughout the transfer process. Some four-year institutions gave her the runaround. Advisors wouldn't even help her until she had formally applied to the school, costing her time and money.

She also noted it was difficult to find deadline information since it varies from institution to institution, and this information isn't easily found.

John, who is a male in his 50s, agrees with Samantha — he wasn't able to connect with an advisor at the four-year schools of his choice until he had applied and in some instances, he received the information he needed too late. John was frustrated with the ambiguity around which pathways would get him to a degree on time and on budget.

This isn't just a problem for students. Because transfer requirements vary greatly between institutions, colleges, and departments, it's impossible for advisors to know the nuances of every program.

Melissa, who is a Hispanic female in her early 20s, felt that advisors should be able to guide students to the right decisions even if students don't ask the right questions because students often don't know what they don't know.

Unlike advisors, students typically go through the transfer process one time; every student we spoke to said they would approach transferring differently if they were to do it again. Experience can be a great teacher.

Mariana, who is a Hispanic female in her early 20s, said some students who enter community college right out of high school are still in "school mode," they expect their advisors to find the answers to simple things instead of looking for themselves.

The transfer process can become so complicated that it negatively impacts students' primary objective for going to college in the first place, to learn.

🔗 How can we improve processes to increase the transfer rate?

There are three big insights that we uncovered through our research that can help academic institutions better support students through the transfer process:

1. Potential transfer students are positively impacted by high-touch, in-person outreach. While this approach could be expensive, it can be mitigated by using existing students that can connect better with potential students.
2. Potential transfer students who make their transfer decision early in their two-year journey have a greater chance of transfer success than those who delay this decision.
3. Streamlining handoffs between various offices within an institution can play a large role in improving retention and follow-through once a student has applied to transfer to a four-year institution.

These insights shed light on potential solutions that can help more students achieve better learning outcomes.

First, proactively informing students that they have the opportunity to transfer is huge. This has an even larger impact on international and non-traditional students, who are either discouraged by the “sticker shock” of a 4 year degree, or are unaware of the increased career potential that transferring to a 4 year school offers.

Some students are not even aware they can transfer to a four-year institution, let alone understand how to do it. It can be as simple as advisors asking their students “Do you know that you can transfer to a 4 year and have access to better career options” or universities sending emails each semester to students letting them know there is an option to transfer and to reach out if they’re interested.

Advisors can also bring awareness to students through proactive degree planning and helping students to plan earlier for their transfer by discussing academic goals, careers, and how transferring can help turn those dreams into reality.

Additionally, as advisors help students chart their degree plans, it’s crucial for them to tailor the guidance based on the students’ circumstances and to help them narrow down their choices and carefully select their course-work.

One student told us, “If I had clarity on transfer requirements, I would not have taken these courses that cannot be transferred over.”

Having advisors and information that are accessible can also greatly approve a student’s desire and ability to transfer successfully.

Caitlin, an international female student in her early 20s, said she gravitated towards applying for schools where she was able to connect with a person who was able to answer her questions instead of just an inbox or voice-mail recording.

Finally, communication is key at every step of the transfer process, even after a student has submitted their four-year application. The transfer process involves multiple handoffs within various offices of an institution, including the registrar, advising, IT, financial aid and others. Knowing where the transfer application has landed, and who owns the next step, can significantly reduce instances of transfers rejected due to delays.

Understanding what students need is the first step in setting them up for success. By choosing to have open, honest, and frequent conversations about the transfer process and expectations, students will feel more confident deciding to transfer and exploring other areas of academia.

By identifying the areas where transfer students need help, universities can better provide resources and attention to increase the likelihood that a student will initiate and follow-through with the transfer process. As institutions offer more support to students, students will be able to accomplish even more impressive things. It all starts with the commitment to support the unique needs of every student.

🔗 How can we leverage technology to improve transfer rates?

Technology can also play an important role in improving transfer rates. Local community colleges and their four-year peers should collaborate to create longitudinal data warehouses that provides an end-to-end view of a student through his or her transfer journey.

These pan-institution information superhighways will provide total visibility into the student journey.

By combining disparate information from across multiple campuses into one centralized warehouse institutions can provide students and advisors with a clear view into when applications are due and how class selection will impact transfer options.

Additionally by layering in academic and behavioral indicators advisors can identify students who are likely to stumble along their academic journey. This would also provide students with insights into how they are tracking towards their transfer goal and whether they are on track academically to complete their intended course of study.

This centralized data-warehouse would also promote facilitate collaboration between community colleges and 4-year institutions by providing shared case management tools. Ultimately it would even streamline the application process for students.

Academic institutions have historically been hesitant to share student data with other institutions, given the various policy, privacy and security issues that they have to deal with. However, such sharing of data paves the way for significantly better career opportunities for transfer students, and overall better outcomes for the economy, and therefore is worth it.

● An opportunity to improve outcomes for students and institutions

Focusing on providing transfer students with clearer pathways to a bachelor's degree will improve the student experience by reducing time to graduation and improving completion rates. By organizing advisors around student pathways institutions can help build capacity to provide students with more tailored guidance based upon their career path. Additionally, the use of student surveys can help institutions to measure the success of these initiatives and be more responsive to student needs.

Pan-institution data sharing will also help advisors at community college provide students with more definitive answers about which sequence of courses will help them get to their intended degree as quickly as possible. It will also help 4-year institutions as they will ultimately increase their enrollment by helping more students get past the transfer hurdle.

Solving this problem is a win-win for all the stakeholders in education.

“The transfer process is too long and too complex to navigate... I cannot take that much time off from work just to figure out what my next steps are.”

- Non-Traditional Transfer Student



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