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## THE COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THE PATH TO THE BACCALAUREATE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses several aspects of the community college role in providing access to further studies: ways of calculating transfer rates and estimates of the number of students making the transition, incentives for and inhibitors to student transfer as reflected in state policy and institutional practice, and a look to the future of transfer. It emphasizes California, which boasts by far the greatest community college and public university enrollment figures.

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Over 300,000 of the 2.2 million students who begin postsecondary studies each year in a two-year college transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution within four years of original matriculation. Seen from the other direction, at least 40 percent of the students receiving bachelor's degrees each year have some community college credits on their transcripts. Thus the two-year colleges are central players in the path to the baccalaureate.

This paper discusses several aspects of the community college role in providing access to further studies: ways of calculating transfer rates and estimates of the number of students making the transition, incentives for and inhibitors to student transfer as reflected in state policy and institutional practice, and a look to the future of transfer. It emphasizes California, which boasts by far the greatest community college and public university enrollment figures.

## Calculating the Transfer Rate

What proportion of community college matriculants transfer? Historically, there has been little agreement on ways of calculating transfer rates. Definitions vary depending on the point that the analysts want to make. Those wishing to demonstrate that the community colleges depress academic attainment divide the entire community college population into the number transferring and report transfer rates of 4 or 5 percent. Those wishing to applaud the colleges' role in propelling students toward the baccalaureate divide those transferring by the number of full-time entrants who declare transfer intent and attain associate degrees; they find transfer rates of 75 or 80 percent. The situation is reminiscent of the adage that has the guest saying, "No more, thanks. I've had two helpings already," with the host responding, "It was three you had, but who's counting?"

Consider the following: Five students in junior standing at a university are asked about their educational background. The first one explains that he did his first two years in a community college and the university concurrently, that he took all his general education courses in the community college while he was taking courses in the major field in the university. The second replies that he started in the university as a freshman, dropped out to spend his next term in the community college, then came back to the university and has been there ever since. The third says that she took two courses at a community college in the summer after his high school graduation and then matriculated at the university. The fourth studied for one year at a community college ten years earlier and when she decided to come back to school, entered the university as a sophomore. The fifth finished her first two years at the community college and transferred as a junior in mid-year. How many of the five are "transfer students?" *None*, according to some reports; *all*, according to others.

The foregoing describes the inchoate situation that had existed since the community colleges began. Many states, Florida, for example, defined transfer students as those with "at least one quarter hour of credit and whose college of last attendance was a Florida public community college" (Nickens, 1976, p. 3). In Maryland, "transfer refers to any work at another college or university since leaving the community college" (Tschechtelin and others, 1976, p. 25). New York considered "those undergraduates students who were enrolled at a given State University for the first time...but who had attended other colleges or universities prior..." (Annas and Dean, 1976, p. ix). A New Jersey transfer was anyone "who moves from a two-year to a four-year college with one or more credits earned at the sending college..." (Miller, 1976, p.1). The California Postsecondary Education Commission counted as transfers only those students who had earned at least twelve units at a community college prior to entering the University of California or the California State University system.

## Defining Transfer Rates

In an effort to stabilize transfer calculations the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in 1989 began collecting figures from a sample of state agencies and community colleges nationwide, using the definition, *All students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college credit units within four years, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at a public, in-state university or college within four years.* The definition excludes students who have prior college work on their transcripts, those who

take but one or two classes at the community college before leaving, and those who take longer than four years to make the transition. Because of the four-year cutoff and because data from independent universities and out-of-state transfers are not readily available, that definition yields an undercount. Nonetheless, over the years the Center found transfer rates ranging from 21.5 percent to 25.2 percent, with the higher figure appearing for those students who matriculated in 1995.

Figures for the 1995 entrants were corroborated by the National Center for Education Statistics (2000), which found that 43 percent of the students entering two-year institutions in 1995 had left by 1998 while 39 percent were still enrolled at a postsecondary institution, and 18 percent had attained a degree or certificate. The higher transfer rate is due to the fact that the data include students who transferred out of state or to independent universities. In addition, the “still enrolled in postsecondary education” figure includes students who remained at their original institutions as well as those who transferred. Thus, the actual transfer rate is essentially embedded in this figure. The transfer rates would be further inflated if more than four years were allowed before tabulating the transfers. However, since community college matriculants arguably are potential transfers until they either show up at a university or die, the transfer rate calculations can never be fully reflective of student performance.

The transfer rates for community college students can be modified by adding in different types of information. For example, how many entering students aspire to further education? The way that the question is asked is key. When students in degree-credit classes are asked their *primary reason for attending*, the proportion of bachelor’s degree aspirants approximates one-third. According to NCES (1998a), 42 percent of beginning postsecondary students entering public two-year colleges in 1995 aspired to a bachelor’s degree. But a subsequent NCES report indicated that in response to the question, “What is the highest level of education you ever expect to complete?” 71 percent indicated “bachelor’s degree or higher” (Bradburn and Hurst, 2001). And in a more recent study, when students were asked, “If there were no obstacles, what is the highest degree you would like to attain in your life?” 88 percent aspired to bachelor’s or beyond (Hagedorn and Maxwell, 2002). (Considering the way that the latter question was asked, the wonder is that the responses totaled less than 100 percent!)

Interestingly, although the transfer rate in most of the states with comprehensive college systems clusters around the 25 percent national mark, the range between states is from 11 to 40 percent. Some of the reasons for this wide interstate disparity are obviously related to the structure of higher education within a state. Where the two-year colleges are organized as branch campuses of the state university, the transfer rates are high; where they function as technical institutes that emphasize trade and industry programs, the transfer rates are low. Deviations from the norm appear also in states where transfer to independent universities is a prominent feature of the higher education system or where policies related to enrollment have been effected. For example, the state-mandated limitations on college growth eventually elevate the transfer rate because the community colleges tend to react to enrollment caps by cutting the programs that attract adult, part-time students, that is, those least likely to transfer. Transfer rates among colleges in the same state similarly show wide variations, undoubtedly because of local conditions, community demographics, college proximity to a university campus, and employment or economic conditions in the district.

Transfer rates of course are influenced greatly by the tendencies of the universities to accept the community college students. To transfer into the junior year at CSU a student must have a college grade point average of 2.0 or better, be in good standing at the last college attended, and complete at least 30 semester units of general education with a grade of C or better. At the University of California community college students applying for junior level standing "will be given priority admission over all other applicants" if they enrolled at the community college for at least two-terms, "the last college attended was a California community college, and if they have completed at least 30 semester units of UC transferable units" (CPEC, 2002, p. 4). But the marginal students stand little chance of being accepted into a major of their choice; in 1999 the average GPA of transfers to UC was 3.3.

Overall, although the numbers have been increasing, fewer than 60,000 community college students transfer annually to CSU or UC. (The numbers for 1988-1989 were 53,548 and 59,115 for 2000-2001.) In addition, between six and eight thousand community college students transfer annually to independent institutions in California, and the for-profit sector takes a few more. Many others transfer to out-of-state institutions. UC enrolls about 37,000 freshmen annually on a full-time equivalent basis. Just over 12,000 students transfer from California community colleges to UC, most of them at the junior level. Thus the ratio of UC freshmen to community college transfers approximates 3 to 1. This represents a substantial increase from the early 1990s when the freshman to transfer ratio was 4 to 1. Nearly all of this difference is accounted for by the fact that the UC freshman class has expanded little while transfers have increased from 9,972 in 1991-1992 to 12,291 in 2001-2002 (CPEC, On-line Data/Transfer Totals, 2003). Still, CPEC's view of the data showing little change between 1996 and 2001 led them to conclude that, "Declines in transfer to UC and CSU campuses do not appear to be impacted by the advent of the many new State-funded transfer initiatives and policies that have been created." CPEC further speculates that the figures may be showing "some natural, operational ceiling, although one that is lower than policymakers envision" (pp. 11-12).

### **State Policies**

Community colleges are supposed to prepare students for transfer. "The successful progression of students from the lower-division level to completion of the baccalaureate...is a basic tenet of California Higher Education." The transfer process meets the societal demand for access in a cost-effective manner (CPEC, 2002, p.1). Similar phraseology has been written into legislation and regulations governing higher education in states where comprehensive community college systems have been built. Occupational education and transfer-related studies are the top two state priorities.

State officials have several reasons for encouraging transfer. First, the community colleges enroll masses of students who would not otherwise qualify for admission to state universities at the freshman level. And because that group includes high proportions of students of color and those from low-income families, it is politically expedient to keep the university transfer option open.

Second, the community colleges cost less. In 2001-02 the average education and general expenditure per full-time student nationally was under \$7000, one-half the amount spent per FTE by the public four-year colleges and one-third of that spent by

public universities. The states provided just under half the community college funds (tuition and local funds contributed most of the remainder). The public universities received from half again to more than twice as much from the states. As CPEC concluded, transfer “is the most cost-effective strategy the State can employ to provide the necessary space for the anticipated enrollment increases.... The cost savings alone of large numbers of students completing two years of community college education, and then completing their upper division course work at a university, warrants increased attention to the State’s underachieving transfer process” (p. 9).

From the student point of view, the tuition differential makes attending the first two years of a baccalaureate degree program at a community college quite attractive. California is an outlier with community college fees as much as 90 percent lower than those charged in the University of California and some 60 percent lower than those charged in the CSU system. The differential is not as dramatic elsewhere but in all other states community college fees are from 25 to 60 percent of those charged in universities. The national average shows community college fees at about 40 percent of those charged in public four-year colleges.

Third, the community colleges act as the lungs of the higher education system, expanding when the pool of college aspirants exceeds the capacity of university freshman classes to accommodate them, shrinking when that pool grows smaller. Over the past 25 years the number of 18-year-olds in the United States has shown notable changes. In 1979 there were 4.3 million 18-year-olds in the population; by 1992, 3.4 million. By 2008 the number will increase to equal the 1979 figure of 4.3 million.

The number of high school graduates tracks the number of 18-year-olds. In 1979, 71.7 percent of the 4.3 million 18-year-olds yielded 3.1 million high school graduates. In 1992 the high school graduation rate had increased to 73.2 percent, which when placed against the 3.4 million 18-year-olds in the population yielded 2.5 million high school graduates. In 2008 according to NCES estimates, 72 percent of the 4.3 million 18-year-olds will be high school graduates; thus, 3.1 million, equaling the 1979 number. (These figures are of course national averages and mask differences between states with high population growth such as California, Arizona, and Florida and those with low or static rates of growth such as states in the upper Midwest.) The fluctuations are reflected in the median age of community college students, which rises when the number of 18-year-olds falls, as in the 1990s, and drops when the number of 18-year-olds increases, as in the past ten years.

Although over half the students in postsecondary education enroll in community colleges and successful transfer is the only opportunity that those students have to achieve a bachelor’s degree, “If articulation programs are not in place, ...students often fall through the cracks and never complete their education.... Most states still do not have streamlined programs written into legislation” (Education Commission of the States, p. 1). Some mandate that associate and baccalaureate degree-granting institutions are equal partners while others have created committees or commissions to establish procedures for transfer.

The Education Commission of the States reports several types of state programs in place including: legislation or transfer and articulation policy written into law; cooperative agreements formulated on a course-by-course or institution-to-institution basis; transfer data reporting; incentives and rewards, including financial aid and guaranteed transfer of

credit or priority of admission; statewide articulation guides; common curriculum core; and common course numbering. ECS has found that 30 states have some form of legislation, 40 have cooperative agreements, 33 mandate transfer data reporting, 18 provide incentives and rewards, 26 have statewide articulation guides, 23 have common core, and 8, including Florida and Texas among the large population states, have common course numbering.

The legislation takes a variety of forms. Most do little more than to request, require, mandate, or recommend that the community colleges and the public universities in the state develop and maintain articulation agreements and transfer agreements. A few, including Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, and New Mexico, mention that credits transferred from the two-year institutions shall be accepted at full value for degree requirements at the university. Arizona regulations state that students who complete lower division courses with a 2.0 GPA or higher will be admitted to the four-year institutions. Georgia and Illinois say that students who complete the core curriculum are guaranteed full transfer of credit. Colorado and Florida guarantee junior status to community college students who have completed an AA or AS degree. The catch, of course, is that the students are not guaranteed admission to the program or major of their choice. One of the more debilitating characteristics of the state requirements is that common course numbering, a system that has been recommended for decades, has made such little progress.

### **Institutional Factors**

Many of the incentives for and inhibitors to transfer occur at the institutional level. A major inhibitor is that transferring students are not necessarily able to matriculate in any program they choose. The UC campuses have “impacted, selective or highly competitive majors” that require “significant major preparation course work and a higher GPA” (CPEC, p. 7). As an example, at Berkeley “all majors in L & S are competitive.” And the engineering programs at all the campuses that have them are impacted. Furthermore, the biological sciences tend to be oversubscribed along with various other programs such as Psychology and International Relations at Davis, Communication and Economics at Los Angeles, and Computer Sciences at Santa Barbara.

Another systemic problem relates to the number of courses that the community college student may transfer to the university. The great differential in students transferring into CSU as opposed to UC can be traced to that. (But it shows up also in other states, as in the courses accepted by Illinois State University and the University of Illinois.) Overall, in 1998 the liberal arts accounted for 59 percent of the curriculum in California community colleges, higher than the national average of 55 percent, and nearly all of those courses transfer to both CSU and UC (Schuyler, 1999). The difference comes in the acceptability of the other 41 percent of the curriculum, which is comprised of courses in agriculture, business and office skills, marketing, health, technical education, engineering and science technology, trade and industry, personal skills and vocational, education, and criminal justice. Overall CSU accepts 70 percent of the courses in those fields, whereas UC accepts less than 25 percent for credit toward the baccalaureate. The only field in which the UC acceptance rate comes close to that of CSU is in the personal skills area where most of the courses are in physical education. The major reason for the disparity is that CSU has more baccalaureate programs in business and technologies similar to those emphasized in community colleges. A second reason is that UC’s course

scheduling is less compatible with the pattern familiar to community college students; few night classes, for example. The effect is markedly different rates of transfer. And the gap between CSU's and UC's course acceptance rate has widened; the comparable figures in 1991 were 62 percent and 29 percent.

Both at the state and the local level the community colleges support numerous efforts to enhance transfer. California statewide efforts include: Disabled Students Programs and Services, dating from the 1980s; Articulation System Stimulating Interinstitutional Transfer Project, 1985; California Articulation Numbering, 1985; Community College Transfer Centers, 1985; Matriculation, 1986; Puente, 1986; Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum, 1992; Intersegmental Major Preparation Articulated Curriculum, 1999; Partnership for Excellence, 1995. And UC, CSU, and the community colleges have agreed on targets for increased transfer rates.

Every college has its own programs. Helfgot (2001) points out how Cerritos College (California) works with local high schools in establishing and maintaining concurrent enrollment. The college offers classes at the high schools and also invites high school students to take classes on its campus.

The Los Rios Community College District and the University of California at Davis have conducted collaborative efforts to implement transfer-related activities, including a web-based articulation simulation system, transfer centers, the Transfer Opportunity Program, transfer admission agreements, an Early Academic Outreach Program, and the Math, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) Program for non-traditional students (Case, 1999).

Support services to Latino students attending California community colleges are offered through the Puente Project, which is designed to promote successful academic outcomes through accelerated writing instruction, special counseling, and mentoring provided by advanced students and volunteers from the Latino professional and academic community.

These types of programs and numerous others that have been reported are typically successful in promoting transfer for the students who participate in them. However, the numbers are too small to have much effect on the overall transfer ratio. Such programs have been in place for several decades but the major impacts on transfer are both systemic and demographic. Transfer rates are high in states where the community colleges have long been seen as feeders to the university system: Washington, Arizona, Illinois. They are low where the colleges started as technical institutes and have been slow to shed that image: Indiana, Maine, Louisiana. A similar phenomenon holds for individual colleges in the same state, California for example, where transfer rates range from 5 to 38 percent. The colleges with the lower transfer rates are in isolated areas with no proximate university campus. Those with the higher rates are in suburban communities where the community colleges have been seen historically as feeders to the university system.

There's a limit to what community colleges can do. When referring to those students who are "transfer prepared," defined as the number of students system-wide who earned, within a six-year period, 56 transferable units with a minimum GPA of 2.0, the colleges show more than 100,000 so eligible. But putting those figures against the number who are actually transfer shows that just over half the students who are "transfer prepared"

matriculate at CSU or UC. Part of the shortfall may be due to the number of impacted programs but figures on what happens to students who are transfer eligible but who do not appear in the upper division at a California university is not clear.

### **Why Do Transfer Rates Vary?**

Questions about why one college transfers many students while a neighboring institution transfers few have long been asked. Is proximity to a four-year college or university the dominant factor? What are the internal or external forces affecting transfer? What institutional characteristics seem to be important?

A study conducted in 1994-95 (Cohen and Brawer, 1996) sought answers to these questions. The sample of colleges was selected from those that had reported transfer data in previous years. In seven states at least one college had a high transfer rate (above 25%) and one with a low transfer rate (below 15%). The states with colleges well above or below the norm included California, Illinois, New York, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. Most of the colleges selected to participate in the project were relatively close to one another and of course the same intra-state guidelines pertained to both.

Center for the Study of Community Colleges staff members visited the colleges in order to interview staff members and administer surveys. Administrators and a sample of faculty members were surveyed along with a set of student questionnaires that the faculty members distributed to students in selected classes. All the surveys dealt primarily with the relative importance of internal characteristics such as counseling, special programs, transfer centers, or curriculum emphases, and external forces such as articulation agreements, proximity of a university, community perceptions, and the intentions and expectations of entering students, in brief, forces over which the colleges had little direct control.

The administrators were asked how they would rank the five major functions of community colleges as emphasized in their institutions. Preparing students for transfer was seen as the number one function by 45 percent of the administrators in the low transfer colleges and 88 percent in the high transfer institutions, whereas job entry or career upgrade was seen as number one by 41 percent of the administrators in the low transfer institutions and 12 percent in the high transfer colleges. Most administrators felt that these were the proper emphases although many in the high transfer colleges would have preferred seeing remedial and job entry studies achieve more importance.

Extracurricular activities on both types of campuses received little support as influences. Somewhat more support staff and work-study opportunities were available at the low transfer colleges, which also had as many or more honors programs and discipline-oriented clubs. (These two findings belie the notion that on campus work opportunities and special activities for high achieving students are more likely found in high transfer rate colleges.) Similar numbers of articulation agreements with high schools were in place in both types of institutions but more such agreements with universities were present in the high transfer colleges. Although concurrent enrollment was prevalent, considerably more administrators in the high transfer colleges said that students took advantage of such arrangements. In summary, administrators at both high transfer and

low transfer colleges seemed committed to the concept of transfer even though they indicated that they themselves had little direct influence.

Greater differences in perceptions of what affects transfer were discerned from the responses to the faculty survey. Faculty in the low transfer colleges were considerably more likely to say that students gaining knowledge and skills directly applicable to careers was a most important function. Similarly they said that career education and programs that help students obtain jobs should be major emphases. Faculty in high transfer colleges felt that the college emphasized baccalaureate-directed programs and that it was effective in transferring students to universities. They were also considerably more likely to say that academic advising was helpful in preparing students for transfer and that their college had strong relationships with universities in terms of curriculum, articulation, and faculty exchanges.

Student enrollment showed different patterns in the high and low colleges. The low transfer colleges were more likely to have students in industry courses and technical education, whereas in the high transfer colleges enrollments in liberal arts and health fields were considerably higher. The high transfer colleges had slightly greater percentages of their students below the national median age of 24 and slightly higher percentages of female students. Students in the high transfer colleges also were more likely to be attending full-time. Demographically the low transfer colleges enrolled more students of color.

Students' primary reason for attending college followed the curriculum patterns. Whereas 54 percent of the students in low transfer colleges said they were preparing for transfer and 39 percent said they were seeking skills necessary to enter a new occupation, the corresponding figures in high transfer colleges were 63 percent and 29 percent. Students' perceptions followed these patterns: 44 percent of the students in the low transfer colleges said that adult education and preparing students for immediate employment should be the college's major emphases; the corresponding figure for the high transfer colleges was 26 percent. More students in the low transfer colleges saw their institutions as offering opportunities for jobs and future employment but students in the high transfer colleges perceived more opportunities for further education. When students were asked what they plan to be doing three years from the time they responded to the survey, 41 percent of those in low transfer colleges said they would be working in a new job for which they were being prepared and 55 percent of the students in high transfer colleges said they would be enrolled at a senior institution.

Looking at the data overall certain patterns emerge. Staff members at low transfer institutions blame the low transfer rates on several factors: a general education curriculum that is poorly articulated with neighboring universities; a student population that is predominantly low-income and first-generation college going; and staff members own failure to make transfer an institutional priority. They see faculty advising as of marginal value because it has no relation to the faculty members' instructional activities but rather it is something extra that they must do. The faculty members seem to know little about transfer and in fact staff members at both types of institutions had little awareness of the transfer rates at their own colleges. Staff members in the low transfer institutions felt that they were not getting the baccalaureate-bound students from their surrounding high schools. As one pointed out, "The word must be out in the high school: if you expect to get a baccalaureate, go to the nearest university; if you want to take an occupational program, go to the community college."

Perceptions were somewhat different in the high transfer rate institutions. Staff members saw transfer as being comparatively easy because receiving universities are not far away. Faculty were more likely to participate in high school visits and more likely to be familiar with transfer agreements. In one high transfer rate college the transfer center was a central part of college activities but in most, deliberate policies to enhance transfer were not uniform and transfer rates were often seen as the product of historical accident; that is, they were what they had always been.

In general, along with many aspects of college culture and outcomes, transfer rates at individual institutions change little from year to year. They are embedded in institutional histories and circumstances. Colleges draw the same types of students from the same secondary schools year after year. And they send the same proportion of them on to the same universities. Major changes occur only when community demographics undergo massive shifts. Otherwise, extramural factors seem to play little part in enhancing transfer. State policies themselves do not impinge directly on transfer rates; and articulation agreements, helpful to both colleges and receiving institutions, seem to affect transfer rates only marginally.

### **The Future of Transfer**

For the next several years transfer rates will increase because of the aforementioned increase in the number of 18-year-olds, high school graduates, and postsecondary education seekers, and the inability of the universities to expand their freshman classes nearly enough to accommodate that growth. California community colleges are expected to enroll 528,000 additional students between 2000 and 2010. Overall, 714,000 new students will be coming into the California postsecondary system, thus the community colleges will play an even greater role in California's higher education. Elsewhere there will be changes where community college and university systems are undergoing major modifications. As example, the technical institutes in Indiana and Louisiana, which historically have sent exceedingly few students to the universities in those states, have been broadened recently so that they exhibit more of the characteristics of comprehensive community colleges. Maine is also planning such a move. That will increase transfer rates in those states.

On the other hand, Florida community colleges have recently gained authorization from the state legislature to petition to offer bachelor's degrees in certain fields; and several have moved in that direction. The regional accrediting associations have decided that once a community college begins offering bachelor's degrees it must adhere to four-year college standards for purposes of accreditation, thus removing it from the realm of community colleges. This will serve to depress the transfer rate since most colleges that have begun offering bachelor's degrees (St. Petersburg and Miami-Dade in Florida, for example) are those in urban areas that have traditionally sent larger percentages of students to the state's universities and because students will have options to pursue baccalaureate degrees without moving to a university.

The most positive trend for transfer within the community college systems are those where the colleges are making strong articulation agreements with their feeder high schools, organizing dual enrollment programs, and in some cases organizing Middle College High Schools, seamless structures combining grades 11, 12, 13, and 14. This

enables them to attract the more serious baccalaureate-bound students at the beginning of the 11th grade and keep them within the institution until they have progressed through the sophomore year in college. A few such institutions have been developed in New York and several California colleges are exploring that option. Interestingly this parallels the 6-4-4 mode of school organization that was popular in California in the 1930s and 1940s. The universities offering upper division courses on community college campuses, another promising development, has spread as state finances mitigate the possibilities of building entirely new university campuses. The attractiveness of these arrangements is obvious as students can transfer without leaving their familiar surrounding.

Even so, the path to the baccalaureate is not smooth, nor does it follow a single direction. For one thing attendance patterns of students are inconsistent. For at least two decades there has been growth in the number and proportion of students who attend more than one institution simultaneously, who began at a senior institution and stop out to take courses at a two-year college (a phenomenon often called reverse transfer), and in students who start in one institution, stop out for a period of time, and then re-enroll at a different college. Looked at nationally, student transfer might best be viewed as a swirling relationship based on student situational characteristics rather than a linear process in which attendance follows a pattern of lower-division completion at one institution followed by matriculation and subsequent baccalaureate receipt at another. What makes the United States unique in this regard is a virtual national system of credit hours that can be moved to almost any institution, a pattern that enables any student to be a potential transfer. This pattern corresponds to the American belief in open-access, extended opportunity, and life-long learning, all of which suggest that there should be multiple routes toward acquiring college degrees.

Regardless of the inducements for or impediments to transfer, the students who do make the move tend then to fall in line with those who started as freshmen at the senior institution. Their first-year grade point average is often lower but the differences between the groups become less pronounced in the third and fourth term following transfer. By the time the transfers graduate, their GPA and their time to the baccalaureate is approximately the same as those of the native students.

In summation, so much attention has been paid to transfer rates in the past 25 years and so many incentives have been put in place that the wonder is that rates have not increased more than they have. However, although every program to enhance student transfer has its benefits, most of them affect only a small portion of the community college student population. Transfer rates will continue rising because of the demographic characteristics noted and will be given a further boost by the systemic changes that bring community colleges closer to the mainstream of student flow from secondary school toward the baccalaureate.

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