



Western Interstate Commission  
for Higher Education

# Successful Student Transfer: A Key Building Block of the Completion Agenda

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## Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is a public, interstate agency established to promote and facilitate resource sharing, collaboration, and cooperative planning among the Western states and territories and their colleges and universities. Members are:

Alaska	Montana	Utah
Arizona	Nevada	Washington
California	New Mexico	Wyoming
Colorado	North Dakota	U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states*
Hawai'i	Oregon	
Idaho	South Dakota	

WICHE's broad objectives are to:

- Strengthen educational opportunities for students through expanded access to programs.
- Assist policymakers in dealing with higher education and human resource issues through research and analysis.
- Foster cooperative planning, especially that which targets the sharing of resources.

\*The U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states includes three U.S. Pacific territories – American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam – and three freely associated states – Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. They join as a single member, with each territory and state electing individually to participate actively in the commission when it sees fit. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is the first of the group to participate.

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## Successful Student Transfer: A Key Building Block of the Completion Agenda

Increasing global competition in technology and commerce has led many nations, including the United States, to focus on the productivity and output of their higher education institutions. Data from the last few years show that the U.S. is falling behind many developed countries in degree production, and this is particularly true for STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). The reaction to this situation has been for academic leaders to initiate and emphasize strategies that fall under the heading of the “completion agenda,” which seeks ways to increase the proportion of the U.S. population with associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. Two necessary imperatives for the completion agenda are to produce high school graduates that are college ready and to increase the rate at which students advance through higher education to a degree. To achieve the latter, we must address the impact of transfer, finding ways to move it from a stumbling block to a building block of degree completion.

This paper is primarily a result of a two-stage convening, “Transfer Solutions through Cross-Organizational Alignment,” hosted by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) during spring and summer 2014 and sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Higher education leaders from a broad spectrum of postsecondary institutions and organizations gathered to share information and perspectives around some of the complex issues associated with transfer. The paper also draws upon several recent reports to expand upon those discussions. Specifically, it concentrates on providing a high-level overview of today’s transfer marketplace, including its general characteristics and impact on degree completion. It looks at how the Interstate Passport Initiative’s new block transfer framework can streamline the transfer process for lower-division general education, providing benefits to both students and institutions. And, it highlights how the results of the Passport and other state and national initiatives addressing academic quality may help transfer students have coherent learning experiences that ensure their academic progress. It concludes with observations from the convening and a call for action.

### Understanding Today’s Transfer Marketplace

#### The Transfer Student Population: Some Characteristics

One of the complexities of working in the transfer arena is the plethora of definitions for “transfer student.” For the purposes of this paper, we consider transfer students to be those who leave the institution where they first earned some academic credit/recognition and enroll in another institution prior to earning a bachelor’s degree.

**The overall size of the transfer population is significant.** The commonly accepted view of today’s student population is that it is extremely mobile, and data from the National Student Clearinghouse bear that out. Indeed, 33 percent of students entering postsecondary institutions today transfer to at least one additional institution before they either complete their degree or stop attending (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Prevalence of Transfer and Mobility Among All Students in Entry Cohort, Fall 2006**

	Number	Percent
Transferred	923,196	33.1%
Transferred across state lines	249,263	8.9%
Did not transfer	1,869,765	67.0%
Total	2,792,961	100.0%

Source: Hossler, D., Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Ziskin, M., Chen, J., Zerquera, D., & Torres, V. (2012, February). *Transfer and mobility: A national view of pre-degree student movement in postsecondary institutions* (Signature Report No.2), Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, and Dundar, Afet. “The New Transfer Marketplace Student Mobility and Transfer: Patterns and Success Outcomes,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Presentation at the Transfer Solutions through Cross-Organization Alignment Convening, Denver, CO, July 28, 2014.

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**There are multiple patterns of transfer.** Roughly one-third of students who start at non-profit institutions – whether two- or four-year or public or private – transfer out of their institution of origin. According to data compiled by the National Student Clearinghouse, 15 to 20 percent of students who started at for-profit two- or four-year institutions in fall 2006 transferred. Of students who transferred from four-year institutions, about equal numbers transferred to two-year or four-year institutions; of those who transferred from two-year institutions, about 60 percent moved to four-year institutions. Despite the various types of institutions among which students transferred, 45 percent of four-year degrees went to students with previous enrollment in a two-year institution, and about 60 percent of students who transferred from a two-year institution completed a degree at a four-year institution within six years after transferring.

**A sizable, and seldom considered, student population transfers across state lines.** Nationally, approximately 27 percent of students who transfer do so across state lines. This amounted to approximately 44,000 students in the 2006 cohort within WICHE’s 16-member states and territories.) As part of the WICHE Interstate Passport Initiative, data compiled on the WICHE website indicate, in an interactive format, student movement within and across state lines in the WICHE region (see <http://www.wiche.edu/passport/studentTransfers>). This interstate transfer pattern presents complications for collecting data on completion and for developing and implementing practices to improve completion by transfer students.<sup>2</sup>

**Many students who want to transfer do not do so.** Simply looking at the number of students who transfer seriously underestimates the potential pool of transfer students who could potentially become degree completers. More than 81 percent of students who enter two-year institutions intend to complete a degree at a four-year school, but only 21.1 percent transfer within five years and only 11.6 percent complete a four-year degree<sup>3</sup> (see Table 2).

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**Table 2: Transfer Student Population (2004-08) – Students Who Entered Postsecondary Education at a Two-year Institution**

		Percent of students
Entered with intent to complete a degree at a four-year institution		81.40%
Transferred to a four-year institution within five years	All students	21.10%
	Caucasian	23.00%
	African-American	16.00%
	Hispanic/Latino	15.90%
Completed the four-year degree	All students	11.60%
	Caucasian	13.30%
	African-American	6.20%
	Hispanic/Latino	8.20%

Source: *Community College Student Outcomes: 1994–2009*, Web Tables, U.S. Department of Education, November, 2011, NCES 2012-253, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012253.pdf>.

Note: The USDE source tables discriminate among students with selected demographic and enrollment characteristics and display trends in student goals and five- and six-year outcomes using national data from 1990-94, 1996-2001, and 2004-09 for three nationally representative cohorts of students who first enrolled in community colleges.

**Transfer and degree completion rates are lower for underrepresented minorities and students from low socio-economic populations.** The data in Table 2 further illustrate that both transfer to a second institution and degree completion are lower for underrepresented minorities. This is also true for students from low socio-economic populations.<sup>4</sup> Despite ongoing complexity in studies of these subpopulations, arising in part from differing definitions of student populations and of transfer, the consistent conclusion is that failure to transfer is higher for low socio-economic status and underrepresented minority students. A recent analysis of these differences, published in *The Review of Higher Education*,<sup>5</sup> underscores the importance of differences in the institutional environment experienced by different student populations, and also suggests that the single factor with the greatest



differential impact on white compared to underrepresented minority student transfer is advising minority students into non-vocational educational programs.

**Students transfer for many reasons.** Students transfer for a myriad of reasons: lower cost, quicker time to degree, change in program of study, higher quality program or institution, or relocation, to name a few. In some cases, transfer is part of a student’s original plan but in many others it is the result of an organic process that takes him in different directions or exposes him to new opportunities.

In summary, the transfer population is large, consists of many patterns of movement to different types of institutions within states and across state lines, reflects inequitable experiences for underserved and low-income students, and happens for a wide range of personal reasons. As our data analytic programs become more sophisticated, we will be able to expand our understanding even more. Yet, this much is already clear: transfer is a common pathway for today’s degree-seeking students and it requires thinking about policies and procedures in broader, more inclusive ways – inside states and across them.

### Transfer Student Impact on Degree Completion

Given this sketch of the population of students who transfer, what is known about degree completion by transfer students? Table 1 reported that about 9 percent of all students in a 2006 cohort transfer across state lines. In a different cohort, students who cross state lines (Table 3 below) earned a smaller proportion of all degrees and certificates. These observations, although from two different analyses, imply the presence of obstacles to completion that differentially impact students who transfer across state lines.

**Table 3: Completion of Postsecondary Certificates and Degrees Through the Spring of 2013 by First-Time Degree-Seeking Students Who Started Postsecondary Education in Fall 2007**

	Percent of all students	Percent of completers
Completed degree	56.34%	100%
At starting institution	43.15%	76.60%
At a second institution in same state	9.11%	16.20%
At a second institution in different state	3.64%	6.50%
Failed to complete a degree	43.66%	NA

Source: Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Ziskin, M., Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. (2013, December). *Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates-Fall 2007 Cohort* (Signature Report No. 6). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Similarly, Table 2 data showed that underrepresented minority and low-income student populations have low transfer rates and also are less likely to complete a four-year degree. And, according to a report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy, “Among community college students who successfully transfer, slightly more than two-out-of-five earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. However, they are roughly 20 percent less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree in this time period than comparable peers who start at a four-year institution and complete at least two full-time equivalent years of enrollment.”<sup>6</sup>

**Some students who drop out would have been more likely to complete had they started at a two-year institution and transferred to a four-year institution.** A 2014 study conducted by the American Institutes for Research found that “about a third of four-year college drop-outs would have a higher chance of bachelor’s degree completion had they begun college at a two-year institution.”<sup>7</sup> The question arises: To what extent does fear of transferring, and its potentially higher costs due to repeating courses, contribute to students choosing institutions that may not be the best fit for them?

Two areas of concern, then, emerge regarding transfer students and degree completion: 1) students who aspire to transfer but do not, and 2) the longer time to degree and lower rate of degree completion after students transfer.

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Data presented by the National Student Clearinghouse<sup>8</sup> indicate that the following student behaviors at two-year institutions are associated with an increase in degree completion rates after transfer to a four-year institution:

- Full-time enrollment at the two-year institution (15 credits) each term
- Four to six terms at the two-year institution
- Completion of an associate's degree (but almost twice as many transfer without a two-year degree or certificate)
- Immediate transfer to a public four-year institution.

Representatives of institutions participating in the convening reported that transfer students do best if they complete a transfer degree or complete their general education requirements before transferring. It is worth asking, then, why two-thirds of students choose to transfer without first earning a two-year degree or certificate. Three factors were discussed at the convening and also have appeared in recent publications: student confusion about the two-year and the four-year routes to degree completion; the need for inter-institution articulation agreements and not politically mandated articulation policies; and the loss of credits during the transfer process.

**Unclear pathways to degrees hinder student completion.** Convening participants discussed several actions to address student confusion about two- and four-year degree paths. First, both two- and the four-year institutions should consider putting in place more rigorous incentives for and insistence that students enroll in and complete a load of 15 credits per term, which is both the rate needed to complete a degree in four years and, as cited by NSC, an important predictor of transfer student successful degree completion. Insistence on a 15-credit full load is indeed complicated by the definition of a full load as 12 hours for receipt of federal aid, and the need by many students to work outside of school. Second, aggressive advising is needed so that students understand the personal value of general education for the knowledge and skills it imparts, as an investment in their continual learning, and its application to learning in future courses and to employment. Two- and four-year institution faculty should cooperatively construct and advise students into student-centered guided pathways.

The tone of these suggestions is reinforced in the April 2014 Jobs for the Future report, *Driving the Direction of Transfer Pathways Reform*:

In several recent studies, two-year students bemoaned the limited and unclear guidance they received in choosing a field and enrolling in appropriate courses. They noted that navigating the transfer process was complicated by inaccurate, inconsistent, or unavailable information on which courses universities would accept for credit, and whether these credits would apply toward Bachelor's degree and program requirements – or merely as electives. Faced with too many choices and too little guidance, community college students often make uninformed decisions (or drift along making no decisions) that result in wasted credits, tuition money, and time attending courses that do not fulfill their educational goals. In the process, they lessen their chances of earning an Associate's degree, transferring to a four-year institution, or achieving their ultimate goal – a baccalaureate.

When both sending and receiving institutions recognize benefit from students' successful transfer and degree completion, more effective transfer operations are likely to result. For example, students who complete an associate's degree prior to transfer are more likely to complete a four-year degree. Two-year schools benefit by being able to count these degree completions, and four-year schools benefit by accepting students who are more likely to be completers there too. More recently, reverse transfer systems, which allow credits a student earned after transfer to a receiving institution to be applied to the completion of an associate's degree at the sending institution, are benefitting both institutions as well as students.

Certainly, incentives at receiving institutions to promote and accept transfer students are more varied, but on balance, receiving institutions' incentives outweigh the disincentives (see Table 4).

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**Table 4: “Drivers” for Universities to Build Community College Transfer Partnerships**

Dis-incentives	Incentives	More incentives
Competition for lower-division students	Source of students likely to complete	Strategy for increasing lower-division capacity in high demand fields
Costs	Source of non-traditional students	Source of students for geographically isolated institutions
Few accountability demands	Source of traditional college-age students seeking lower-cost route to BA	Strategy for meeting regional labor market/economic development needs (partnerships with business)
Few status rewards	Strategy for growing enrollment while recruiting better-prepared freshmen	
Mission overload		

Source: The New Transfer Marketplace: The Business Case for Regional Universities to Strengthen Community College Transfer Pathways, presentation by Davis Jenkins, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Communication between sending and receiving institutions is necessary to ensure that the degree requirements and pathways are consistent at each institution and are presented clearly to the student. Under traditional campus-to-campus articulation agreements, the complexity of communication increases proportionately with the number of campuses and articulation agreements.

***Inter-institutional articulation agreements vs. externally derived articulation policies may produce more successful results.***

Student transfer structures and processes may result from conversations among institutions or from policies formulated outside of the institutions. A long-standing higher education practice is for institutions to develop articulation agreements that ensure that students who receive and follow effective advising have a clear route from the sending to the receiving institution. The state of Washington, with its large community college system, provides a good example of the latter.

The state’s six-year graduation rate for all transfer students is 74 percent and 83 percent for students who transfer with an associate’s degree. Washington’s Direct Transfer Degree System is based on three principles, outlined below.

- *First, emphasize incentives for both students and institutions.* For students transferring with an associate’s degree, all general education requirements are completed and the degree pathway is clear. Washington constantly works with faculty on degree pathways, developing new ones as needed, revising pathways that need changes, and retiring those that are no longer needed. The student incentive is a straight and clear pathway that can be entered quickly.
- *Second, encourage faculty and administrators to iron out any problems that arise by working together across institutional boundaries.* Washington is one of a number of states that has a joint transfer council with equal representation from the baccalaureate and the community college sectors.
- *Third, start by forming agreements among institutions and sectors, not with state policy.* As described by Jane Sherman, vice provost for Academic Policy and Evaluation, Washington State University, “Everything we’ve done has always started out as an agreement between the sectors involved. It has never been top down. When the commitment is on an institutional level, agreement has been reached and it has held. Our Direct Transfer Agreement Degrees have been operating for over 20 years.”

Consistent with the state of Washington’s experience, two recent reports document the positive impacts of articulation agreements that have been worked out by individual institutions and their partners. The IHEP report cited earlier, *Understanding the Transfer Process*, and a statistical analysis

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from the National Center for Educational Statistics, *Transferability of Postsecondary Credit*,<sup>10</sup> find that increasing contact among faculty, advisors and registrars at individual institutions promotes conversations and understanding that can generate transfer agreements that have a positive impact on students' degree completion. Both documents further report there to be no effect – positive or negative – on transfer from legislatively derived and mandated statewide articulation policies, such as common course numbering. These reports reinforce sentiments expressed by convening participants that transfer student issues benefit by direct cross-sector, inter-institutional initiatives that engage the faculty, registrars and advisors who implement the articulation agreements.

**A loss of credits is a major deterrent to student degree completion.** Even with institutional efforts to produce clarity about the transfer process and inter-institutional articulation agreements that spell out degree requirements and pathways, transfer students still frequently encounter the obstacle of less-than-total transfer of credits for academic work completed at the sending institution. The recent report by Attewell and Monaghan, *The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree*, found that only 58 percent of transfer students are able to bring all or almost all (90 percent or more) of their credits with them; about 14 percent of transfers lose more than 90 percent of their credits; and the remaining 28 percent lose between 10 percent and 89 percent of their credits. The authors conclude that there is an association between the credits that transfer and degree completion:

This widespread loss of credits associated with transfer from a community college to a 4-year institution is consequential: Students who lose credits have significantly lowered chances of graduation .... Students who have all or almost all their credits transferred have an odds of graduation more than 2.5 times greater than students with less than half their credits transferred (the reference category), while students who get between half and 89% of their credits accepted by their 4-year institution have a 74% higher odds. These large effects of credit transfer on degree completion occur after controls have been added for pre-transfer GPA and the number of credits earned at a community college, as well as controls for the selectivity of 4-year institution that the transfer student moved to. They suggest that transferability of credits earned at community colleges is an important factor for subsequent BA attainment.<sup>11</sup>

The loss of credits by transferring students has been examined in more detail by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in its signature report, *Baccalaureate Attainment: A National View of the Postsecondary Outcomes of Students Who Transfer from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions*.<sup>12</sup> Of all students in this analysis, 35 percent transferred at least once. Of these students, 32 percent transferred all of their credits, 40 percent had no credits transfer, and, for the 28 percent for whom some credits transferred, only 33 credits transferred of the 46 earned at the sending institution. This credit loss supports the observations of Attewell and Monaghan and their conclusion that loss of credits at transfer will have a negative impact on degree completion.

The process of identifying transferable courses and credits typically involves conversations among faculty who arrive at agreement on courses that are equivalent on all of the campuses. Tables of equivalent courses are constructed and used by advising offices to assist students interested in transferring. Registrars use the tables to evaluate incoming students' academic records and, with faculty advice as necessary, determine the courses and credits that will transfer. Changes in relevant courses or programs at any participating institution must be communicated to all other institutions in order for faculty, advisors and registrars at each partner institution to evaluate the impact of the changes and make the necessary changes to their course equivalence tables and advising materials. This is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process that is confusing to students.

The function of courses and credits is to affirm that the student has had educational experiences that impart knowledge and skills relevant to an eventual degree. When students transfer, their knowledge and skills should be at a proficiency level appropriate for subsequent success at degree completion. Courses are devices to attain, and the credits are proxies for, proficiency with particular learning outcomes. In the contemporary transfer context, the expectation is that course- and credit based articulation agreements will ensure that incoming students will receive credit only for relevant academic work and will not have to unnecessarily repeat academic work they have already completed. Many of the problems related to transfer, and particularly to loss of credits during transfer, are generated by judgments that a particular course cannot impart the desired educational outcome. An

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alternative to the current transfer framework based on courses and credits is one based on learning outcomes and transfer-level proficiency criteria. Such a transfer paradigm would focus on what the student has actually learned, whether by means of a formal course or by some other educational experience. The Interstate Passport, to be discussed later, is an example of this paradigm shift.

### The Currency of Transfer

For decades, the currency of transfer has been course equivalencies, determined by faculty and/or registrars at receiving institutions after reviewing course descriptions with their associated seat-time-based credit hours. It is a system that was designed in an era when there were fewer institutions, and fewer students transferred – and when they did transfer, it was most likely to a nearby institution. Thus, the amount of institutional recordkeeping was manageable and simpler for students to understand.

This currency also made more sense before the advent of, and enormous growth in, online education in which seat time is not necessarily relevant. And more recently, conceptualizing the credit hour as the only currency diminishes consideration of openly embracing new trends in competency-based education in which students are recognized for what they know and can do, whether they acquired that learning in a traditional classroom or through experiential learning.

The Lumina/Gallup survey report, *America's Call for Higher Education Redesign*,<sup>13</sup> reveals that recognizing competency would make higher education more aligned with public opinion:

- 87 percent of Americans think students should be able to receive college credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom.
- 75 percent would be more likely to enroll in postsecondary education if they could receive credit for what they already know.

Currently, a wave of innovation is rippling across the country as institutions implement competency-based education programs using a variety of approaches. These institutions are responding to the public cry for more transparency about what students know and can do. They are also responding to student demand for more flexibility in learning pathways. Yet, the coin of the realm and the currency of transfer remain courses and credits. Thus, institutions with competency-based programs currently must create crosswalks between the two systems to assist students in their desire to transfer, possibly negating some of the flexibility the students were initially seeking. Convening participants discussed in detail the potential for some institutions, depending upon mission, to transition to competency-based education, and recognized that shifting the focus to more highly integrated curricula and learning outcomes might facilitate the transfer process.

### The Passport: A New Framework for Transfer

The Interstate Passport, a new framework for block transfer of lower-division general education, emerged from concerns within the academic community in the WICHE region that current transfer mechanisms were unacceptably inefficient from a student perspective. The Passport encompasses two unique and essential elements to streamline pathways to graduation: basing articulation agreements on faculty agreed-upon learning outcomes and proficiency criteria, and tracking the academic progress of Passport students after transfer.

### Articulation Based on Learning Outcomes and Proficiency Criteria

The extensive mobility of our nation's students, documented by NSC studies, clearly indicates that it is going to be nearly impossible for individual campuses to develop, support and update a transfer student model based on traditional campus-to-campus articulation agreements if significantly more transfer students are to be better served. In addition to maintaining hundreds of campus-to-campus articulation agreements based on existing student transfer pathways, campuses would also need to communicate each of these pathways to students.

Another complication in the current course-to-course articulation model is even evident in lower division general education where more commonality among institutions could be expected. Yet, campuses vary in their general education strategies. For example, written communication skills may

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be addressed in discrete courses by some campuses while others may employ a “writing across the curriculum” strategy that addresses written communication skills in courses in other disciplines.

In short, while course-by-course articulation agreements for lower-division general education can work well between a small number of institutions, institutions within one system, or between similar institutions, scaling up that approach to address more student transfer pathways, more institutions, and institutions from different systems and states is not practical.

Instead, transfer based on an agreed-upon set of learning outcomes, determined by faculty, can both streamline articulation among a large number of institutions – much as the euro has streamlined commerce and currency among European countries – while focusing on what is academically important. This is the basis of the Passport’s design.

When the Passport framework is completed, it will contain all lower-division general education content areas and transfer as a block among participating institutions. The content areas arise from the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) program, and its Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs), which have been widely adopted by institutions across the nation.

The Passport Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and Transfer-Level Proficiency Criteria are developed by faculty from two-year and four-year institutions in multiple states. Through a collaborative and iterative process, faculty developed the PLOs – *what* a student has learned – and a list of proficiency criteria for each outcome – *evidence of proficiency* of the learning outcome appropriate at the transfer level. Proficiency criteria are the evidence that a student is proficient in a specific learning outcome, and the criteria may be in written form, oral, a portfolio, an assessment – whatever method demonstrates the student’s proficiency. Each campus also identifies the courses and/or other learning opportunities it provides students to achieve the learning outcomes. This becomes their Passport Block. Since each Passport institution has agreed to the same learning outcomes, students who achieve the PLOs at one Passport institution earn a Passport. If they transfer to another Passport institution, their learning will be recognized as having satisfied the receiving institution’s lower-division general education requirements as well. They will not be required to take any of the courses in their new institution’s Passport Block to meet lower-division general education requirements, even if the courses or number of credits are different.

At its core, the Passport is a multistate faculty discussion on the quality of general education utilizing a common framework, which provides the basis for transfer. Rather than asking each campus to develop course-by-course articulation agreements with dozens or hundreds of other campuses, each Passport institution agrees that the PLOs and the transfer-level proficiency criteria are consistent with its own. Further, each ensures that its Passport Block of courses and other educational experiences impart this learning outcome proficiency. Receiving institutions accept the Passport as a block, no longer needing to individually evaluate courses or curricula for articulation from other participating institutions.

### **Ensuring Quality by Tracking Academic Progress of Passport Transfer Students**

The preceding section illustrates one way in which a focus on transfer can facilitate a transition from courses and credits lacking clearly defined competencies to a system of faculty-articulated learning outcomes. Tackling transfer issues can also facilitate steps to ensure that quality is maintained during the push to increased degree completion. Receiving institutions are in need of assurance that transfer students who arrive with a variety of prior learning experiences are proficient with the learning outcomes those experiences are purported to provide. The Passport addresses this issue by requiring Passport institutions to track the academic progress of incoming Passport students for the first two terms following transfer. These data are collected from all Passport receiving institutions, sorted, and distributed to relevant Passport sending institutions.

This tracking element of the Passport determines if the competency-based block of courses in Passport institutions is as effective as the traditional course-based non-Passport articulations – still used by most institutions – in preparing students to attain academic success at the new institution. The use of course grades at the receiving institution is an immediately accessible proxy for evaluating achievement of proficiency with learning outcomes. Passport tracking data can be one component that the institution uses to determine obstacles and inefficiencies – such as poor subsequent student performance – and

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to develop remedies for subsets of or for the entire transfer student population.

It was clear during the discussion of assessment at the convening that direct assessment of learning outcome proficiency may be a more effective way to determine grades. Several participants referred to the use of signature assignments to accomplish this goal. References also were made to the advisability of assessing student proficiency before a student participates in a capstone project or earns a degree because formative assessment is valuable to provide guidance for the student and the faculty. Because Passport tracking results are reported before the student has completed the degree, they provide opportunities for institutions to evaluate and potentially modify the programs and resources they use to support their transfer students.

The Passport initiative redirects the work of the institution toward greater attention to degree completion. The tracking element of the Passport does require additional work in the registrar's office of both the sending and receiving institutions. However, the use of learning outcomes, agreed to by faculty at participating institutions, facilitates the work of the registrars. The Passport Initiative therefore shifts institutional work from clerical examination of course syllabi to reporting the results of indicators of student academic progress and learning. This provides the institution new information on the quality of students' work.

Simply stated, the Passport is aimed at removing the multiple currency exchange model and replacing this with a single currency learning outcomes model as the basis for transfer. This process takes away the idiosyncratic requirements that exist between campuses and replaces these with a common set of learning outcomes for lower-division general education.

### Aligning Academic Quality: A Benefit to Transfer and Completion

The Interstate Passport Initiative directly targets transfer with a focus on both quality and completion. The convening was held, at least in part, to understand the relationships among the Passport and several state, regional, and national initiatives that seek to broadly improve academic quality and completion. Specifically, these included the California State University System's Thematic Pathways, General Education Maps and Markers and the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment. (*See sidebar for these and other quality initiatives.*)

### QUALITY INITIATIVES

- ▶ Tuning USA, a faculty-driven process that identifies what a student should know and be able to do in a chosen discipline when a degree has been earned, has been utilized to help students understand expectations and to facilitate articulation and transfer. <http://tuningusa.org/>
- ▶ Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education. LEAP established and vetted Essential Learning Outcomes, some of which serve as the foundation for the Passport Learning Outcomes. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/>
- ▶ VALUE Rubrics (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education), launched in 2007 by AAC&U, are meta-rubrics designed to be used to assess the LEAP ELOs at an institutional or program level. [http://www.aacu.org/value/project\\_description.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/value/project_description.cfm)
- ▶ The Degree Qualifications Profile, published by Lumina Foundation, is a framework that presents increasingly challenging learning outcomes, inclusive of the entire undergraduate experience, for three levels of degrees – associate, bachelor's, and master's. [http://www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/topics.html?\\_stopic=4#sthash.q3AvxmYs.dpuf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/topics.html?_stopic=4#sthash.q3AvxmYs.dpuf)
- ▶ Quality Collaboratives: Assessing and Reporting Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) Competencies in the Context of Transfer built on prior efforts within the LEAP network of projects to clarify, map, assess, and improve the achievement of learning outcomes and transfer and articulation between two- and four-year institutions by employing the DQP. <http://www.aacu.org/qc/>
- ▶ Thematic Pathways at California State University is a Quality Collaboratives' project seeking to make general education requirements of greater importance to students by offering an interdisciplinary exploration of a big question or "wicked problem" that has no static singular solution. Each exploration is via a unique pathway, and all pathways share general education learning outcomes, progress from cornerstone to capstone, and is populated with cross-disciplinary educational experiences. <https://www.csuchico.edu/ge/students/transitioning.shtml>
- ▶ Interstate Passport Initiative is a new framework for the block transfer of lower division general education based on learning outcomes and transfer-level proficiency. Students who earn the Passport and transfer to another Passport institution receive recognition for meeting its lower division requirements. The Passport institutions agree to track the academic progress of Passport students for use in the institutions' continuous improvement efforts. [www.wiche.edu/passport](http://www.wiche.edu/passport)
- ▶ General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS) is multi-faceted AAC&U project grounded in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes to develop a framework for general education pathways aligned with DQP. It will employ high-impact practices, map key proficiencies and identify tools to assess signature assignments, student projects and the use of e-portfolios. <https://www.aacu.org/gems/index.cfm>
- ▶ The Multi-State Collaborative (MSC) to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment studies the feasibility of scoring transfer and non-transfer student work in written communication and quantitative literacy using a model, based on AAC&U's ELOs and the VALUE Rubrics, for state system learning outcomes assessment after 75 percent of a student's coursework, toward both the associate's and bachelor's degrees, is completed, and will produce a repository of student artifacts for scoring, analysis, and state-level aggregation of scores for benchmarking and reporting assessed student work. [www.sheeo.org/projects/msc-multi-state-collaborative-advance-learning-outcomes-assessment](http://www.sheeo.org/projects/msc-multi-state-collaborative-advance-learning-outcomes-assessment)



**Commonalities.** The four initiatives share the common goal of ensuring that quality is preserved and improved during the current national drive to increase degree completion with a focus on general education and its ability to raise the bar by using the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes as a foundation for learning. They also have in common a stated appreciation of the importance of faculty collaboration, assessments based on authentic student work, and course and programmatic assessment. The focus on general education could be a cause of significant overlap and redundancy, but the unique features of each initiative within this are complementary. CSU's Pathways attempt to use big questions to teach general education from students' entry to completion; the Passport Initiative ensures that students do not have to repeat specific general education work after transfer; the GEMS project defines markers of attainment of general education mastery at all levels of student progress to completion; and the Multi-State Collaborative examines programmatic assessment of three areas of general education.

The initiatives include alignment around learning outcomes since all of the initiatives are based on the LEAP ELOs. CSU's Pathways are in the process of becoming intentional in identifying specific learning outcomes in the pathways; the Passport consulted faculty who used the LEAP ELOs to build the Passport Learning Outcomes for three areas of lower-division general education; GEMS will establish proficiencies with the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) learning outcomes; and the Multi-State Collaborative also uses the ELOs for which it will establish assessments using the VALUE Rubrics (Valid Assessment of Undergraduate Education). Each initiative determines which learning outcomes it will assess. In fact, the more detailed and concrete the learning outcomes and proficiency criteria are, the more other faculty working in other settings might use them. In addition, when they are produced, the GEMS proficiencies and the Multi-State assessments might also be considered for incorporation into the other two initiatives.

**Differences.** Each project also has gaps that one or more of the other projects can help to fill. CSU's Pathways presumably require that faculty teaching the courses will define the assessments used in each Pathway course. The Passport project explicitly states that it is up to the faculty teaching the courses in Passport blocks to decide on the assessments they will use. The Passport is compiling an inventory of the assessments used by the Passport faculty and GEMS is identifying sample assessments appropriate at each level of a student's academic program. These two projects can serve as a reservoir of classroom-level assessments of individual students and as a starting point for discussions leading to increased use of the most effective assessments directed at specific learning outcomes. The Multi-State Collaborative addresses assessment at the program rather than the classroom level, and for selected academic areas. These periodic assessments will be valuable measures of the effectiveness of the daily work in the classroom.

When considering the method and context of assessment, it is useful to distinguish programmatic from classroom assessment. The Passport and the CSU Pathways are concerned with authentic assessment of student artifacts that address specific learning outcomes and that can be accomplished in the classroom for every student. GEMS and the Multi-State Collaborative focus on program assessment, and so involve generating a valid sample of student work and training faculty to use VALUE rubrics to score the artifacts in a manner that results in a high degree of inter-rater reliability. There is alignment between the two initiatives using each type of assessment. The CSU Pathways assess learning outcomes throughout student progress to completion, while the Passport tracks students' progress immediately after transfer. The GEMS project aims at the placement and method of assessment as the student progresses to completion, and the Multi-State Collaborative is developing an assessment repository. The results of these latter two projects could be used by both the CSU Pathways and the Passport.

**Synergies.** Useful data will be generated during or at the completion of each of these projects. The CSU Pathways will record the number of students that complete each of the general education Pathways and their mastery of the CSU general education learning outcomes. The Passport Initiative reports the number of both Passport and non-Passport transfer students among the Passport institutions, and, importantly, the academic success of these students after they transfer to Passport institutions within the same state and across state lines. This provides rich new information on the extent of student transfer and progress to degree completion. GEMS and the Multi-State Collaborative generate information that can be used by general education faculty concerning the proficiencies that students

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When students transfer, their knowledge and skills should be at a proficiency level appropriate for subsequent success at degree completion.

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should attain at particular points as they move to degree completion, and a repository of assessments that can be used to evaluate mastery of the proficiencies. These initiatives produce data unique to the individual initiative that complements and can be conceptually and operationally incorporated into the other projects.

These four initiatives are remarkably complementary in that they all: are concerned with delivering, ensuring and assessing the quality of general education; spring from AAC&U's LEAP ELOs; and address assessment, either in the classroom or programmatically, the results of which can inform the other initiatives. Each initiative will provide unique data and information that can inform and be incorporated into the fabric of higher education. Separately each initiative furnishes value to the national completion agenda. CSU's Pathways seeks to engage more students with deeper understanding of the nature and value of general education as students are prepared for their intended majors. The Passport confronts very directly the repetition of courses that research has identified as the major obstacle to degree completion by transfer students, and does so in a student-centered manner that is readily adaptable to competency-based education and new assessments of student learning. Taken together, GEMS and the Multi-State Collaborative will produce repositories of markers of proficiency achievement and programmatic assessments available and valuable to any who choose to access them. It is clear that the unique and valuable features of each initiative warrant their continuation. It is also clear that every effort should be made to bring together academics, administrators and interested funders to discuss progress, challenges, and ways to introduce all of higher education to the reforms launched by the initiatives.

## Conclusions

This report illuminates today's postsecondary transfer environment by augmenting data and information presented at the convening on the transfer student population and degree completion by transfer students. Given that context, participants' conversations, initiated by presentations on several different projects, returned with some frequency to a handful of broad concepts associated directly or indirectly with transfer, including the following:

- The transfer process can be a driver for maintaining quality within the completion agenda.
- The transfer process can be a vehicle for judicious movement to competency-based education, and, equally, shifting the focus to learning outcomes might facilitate the transfer process.
- There is some level of uncertainty and temerity around incorporating competency-based education into the postsecondary culture.
- Transfer students in particular need aggressive and consistent advising into clear pathways to degree completion, and to understand the necessity and value of general education.
- Classroom faculty must be involved in a real and meaningful manner in efforts to maintain quality and in defining learning outcomes that underlie competency based education.
- Transfer student issues are best dealt with by direct cross-sector, inter-institutional initiatives that engage the faculty, registrars and advisors who implement the articulation agreements.

The convening's conclusion that transfer can impact the quality and quantity of degree completion generated conversations around improving students' successful transfer and subsequent degree completion. Several proposed institutional actions include finding ways to: ensure that transfer pathways to degrees are clear, support transfer students as they adjust to their new institutions, and help transfer students to realize that their degree is within grasp. Done successfully, these activities should improve and reduce transfer students' six-year time-to-degree completion rate, saving them time and money – especially those students who must work and/or who have limited financial means.

But, student behavior before transfer needs much more attention to understand why only 20 percent of students who enter two-year institutions with aspirations to acquire a bachelor's degree transfer to a four-year institution within five years. What happens, exactly, to the majority of students, to that 80 percent who enroll in two-year institutions and do not transfer or earn a degree within a five-year period?

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... we must address the impact of transfer, finding ways to move it from a stumbling block to a building block of degree completion.

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And, how do we best ensure that our increasingly mobile student population has a high quality and coherent learning experience when that involves multiple institutions and states?

Repeatedly, in one form or another, the convening returned to the value of addressing transfer, succinctly expressed by the convening's co-moderator, David Paris, in his summary remarks at the close of the convening:

I am struck by an overlapping sense of the need to focus on outcomes and proficiencies and, in turn, that transfer is central to moving this discussion along.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2011). *Community College Student Outcomes: 1994-2009*, Web Tables. Washington, DC: USDE. Retrieved 8-28-14 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012253.pdf>.

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<sup>5</sup> Crisp, Gloria and Nunez, Anne-Marie (2014). "Understanding the Racial Transfer Gap: Modeling Underrepresented Minority and Nonminority Students' Pathways from Two-to Four-Year Institutions" in *The Review of Higher Education*, 37:3, Spring 2014, pp. 291-320, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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