

TRANSFERRING SUCCESS

Structuring community college transfer to support upward economic mobility

A report to the
ECMC Foundation

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MDC brings together foundations, nonprofits, and leaders from government, business and the grassroots to illuminate data that highlight deeply rooted Southern challenges and help them find systemic, community solutions. Our approach, developed over 50 years, uses research, consensus-building, and programs that connect education, employment, and economic security to help communities foster prosperity by creating an “Infrastructure of Opportunity”— the aligned systems and supports that can boost everyone, particularly those who’ve been left behind, to higher rungs on the economic ladder.

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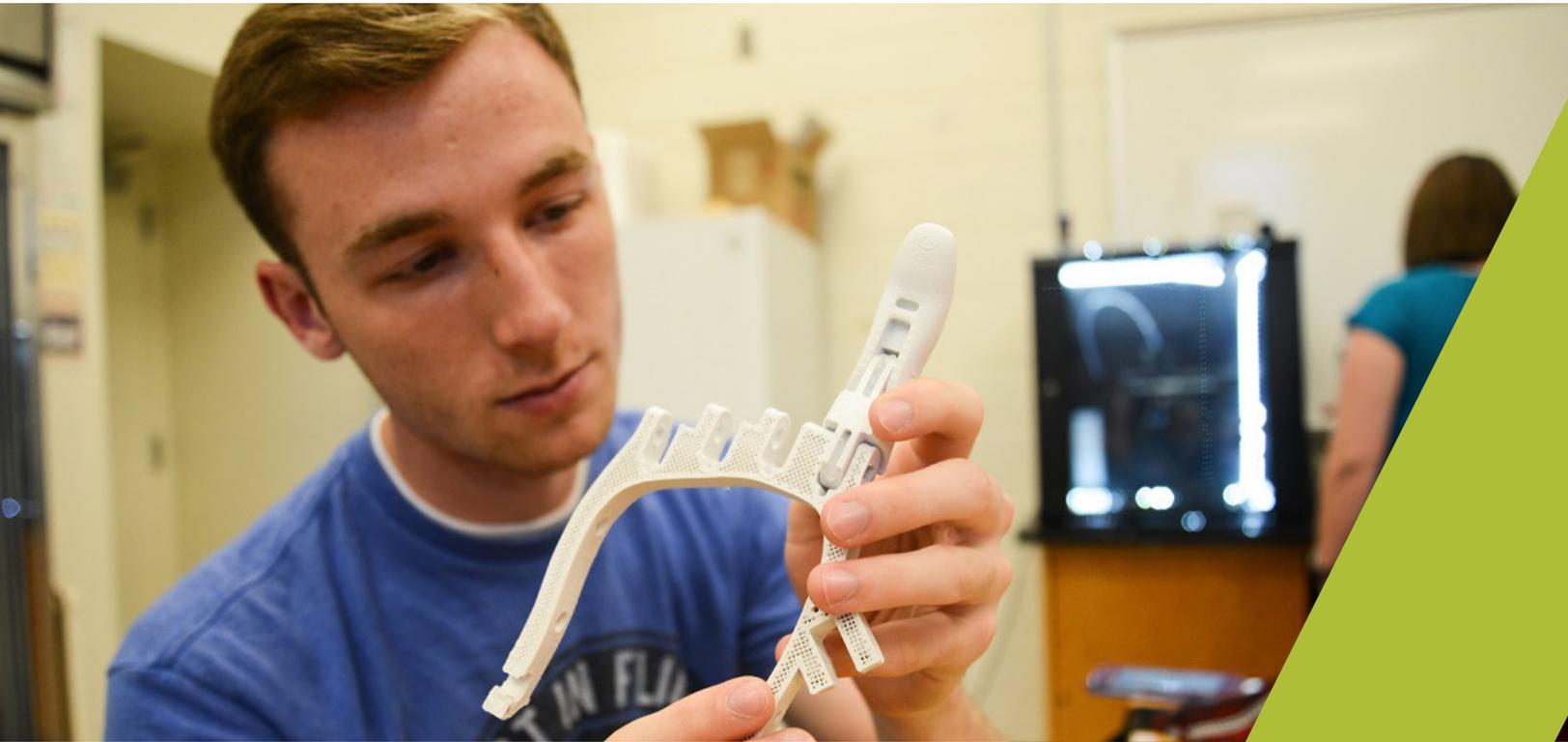
MDC thanks all of the colleges for providing the photographs used in this report.

Note: a related literature review and descriptions of the focus groups and survey referenced in this report can be downloaded from MDC’s website, www.mdcinc.org.

Executive Summary

Higher education is a cornerstone of civic and personal advancement in the United States, promising connections with knowledge, skills, and networks that can lead to high-paying work. This system boasts—but does not always deliver—equal opportunity to rise out of poverty and build economic security.

On an ideal pathway to upward economic mobility, individuals complete foundational education, advance to an institution of higher education to receive a credential, and enter the workforce with potential for advancement and living wages, with strong support networks, quality educational opportunities, and exposure to relevant work all along the path.



However, across the country, states are struggling to reach goals for bachelor's degree completion and to improve stalled upward economic mobility, especially for those born into poverty. The problem is particularly stark in the South, MDC's focus region, where educational attainment lags national averages, income inequality is highest, and the odds of economic mobility are lowest. Even in the most prosperous Southern cities, the chances that a child born into a low-income family will make it to a middle or high income as an adult are alarmingly low. Across the region, there is a less than 6 percent chance that someone born to parents at the lowest income level will be among the top earners as an adult — an intergenerational mobility problem. Postsecondary credential attainment can be a liberating force: A Pew Charitable Trusts study found that only 10 percent of adults born into poverty who subsequently complete a four-year degree remained in that lowest-income bracket as adults; 47 percent of those without the degree remained there as adults.¹ Strengthening degree completion is one actionable way to confront intergenerational economic *immobility*.

Exploring Transfer Success in the South

Community colleges, which often serve a higher proportion of students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and women, can be launching pad institutions that change the educational and economic trajectory for individuals and families, awarding credentials that can lead to better paying jobs or form the foundation for additional credentials. These credentials may provide some protection from turmoil in the current economy.

¹ "Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations," Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2012.

Recent research indicates, however, that ensuring successful student transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment following transfer remains a challenge for both two-year and four-year institutions across the United States. And educational and economic pathways, especially in the South, are fraught with constraints on social networks and historical discrimination that diminish the power of credentials for people of color. In *Tracking Transfer*, Davis Jenkins and John Fink of the Community College Research Center (CCRC) examined a set of metrics for measuring how effectively institutions support transfer from two-year to four-year students. Only five Southern states (FL, MS, TN, TX, VA) were above the national average when it came to successful transfer, and only Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia exceeded the national average for transfer-out and subsequent bachelor’s completion.²

Higher education institutions—the implementer of state policies and the site of student experiences—can smooth or obscure a student’s transfer path. Beginning with recent national research, we examined transfer practices and experiences at four Southern community colleges, observing how institutional practices, federal and state policies, and student mindset and behavior affect transfer students. We visited four colleges in three states:

- Durham Technical Community College, Durham, NC
- El Paso Community College, El Paso, TX
- Fayetteville Technical Community College, Fayetteville, NC
- Valencia College, Orlando, FL

These colleges are located in states that are above or near the national average, according to CCRC’s *Tracking Transfer* metrics, and have governance structures that allowed us to compare institutional practice in centralized and decentralized systems. The colleges’ home communities also represent the challenge of upward economic mobility across the region, with significant economic mobility “stickiness” in the lowest-income quintiles, suggesting that children born in low-income families are likely to remain there as adults.



The Odds of Upward Economic Mobility

	Durham	El Paso	Fayetteville	Orlando
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who end up in upper-income quintile	5.0%	8.6%	3.8%	5.8%
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who end up in middle-income quintile	26.7%	37.7%	25.9%	30.6%
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who remain in the bottom-income quintile	38.5%	23.2%	39.3%	31.5%

Source: *Equality of Opportunity Project (2014)*.

Recommendations

Strong transfer supports are critical for Southern institutions, since chances for upward economic mobility increase with higher levels of educational attainment. We must ensure that those who aspire to the four-year degree have everything they need to be successful. Exploring transfer-related practice at these four colleges revealed that a transfer-supportive culture within both the community college and four-year partner is important for transfer success. That culture is shaped by how colleges communicate practice and expectations, how they cooperate with transfer partners, and how they structure the student experience as it relates to access, persistence, and completion.

In the following pages, we present the following lessons for philanthropic investors, policymakers, and practitioners as they consider their own influence on institutional practices that propel (or inhibit) students’ progress towards successful transfer and bachelor’s degree completion.

1. **Frame transfer success as a tool for upward economic mobility.** Gather the data about low-income students’ odds for upward economic mobility and use these data to make the case for improving transfer pathways. Applying the equity lens—who is getting ahead and how—to transfer outcomes could shift resource allocation.

² Davis Jenkins and John Fink, “Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor’s Degrees,” Community College Research Center, January 2016.

Strong transfer supports are critical for Southern institutions, since chances for upward economic mobility increase with higher levels of educational attainment.

- 2. Have a clear transfer message and stay on message.** Provide professional development about the transfer process that includes cross-training of all departments that play a part, no matter how small. Everyone on campus can learn the mindset, habits, and practices required to speak the language of successful transfer. The transfer process will always be complex, but having a student-centered orientation that encourages proactive responses can ensure that fewer students miss crucial steps that may cause critical delays.
- 3. Foster collegueship across two-year and four-year institutions through planning together, making decisions together, and learning together.** Face-to-face and shared professional development for faculty and advisors of two- and four-year institutions improves information sharing and establishes relationships that can help students facilitate relationships of their own. A two-way street for faculty becomes a smoother street for students. Where possible, take advantage of proximity to two- and four-year partners for this faculty and staff collaboration and campus visits for students to reduce anxiety and increase likelihood of getting the most up-to-date information about four-year expectations and requirements.
- 4. Involve students in the design of transfer pathways and supports.** Ask the people who use the system how it really works—it may reveal surprising glitches or work-arounds that ought to become standard practice. Students can be key ambassadors for transfer programs at both the two- and four-year institutions and become passionate advocates for the increased resources that may be necessary to expand effective programs.
- 5. Consider students' external experiences when designing internal transfer policies and programs.** Evaluate how policies and practices—everything from course maps to class schedules to lab requirements—may present barriers to students' enrollment decisions, taking care to consider external family and employment obligations.

- 6. Measure what matters for your institution and your students.** The complex nature of student transfer requires innovation in how transfer success is measured. Consider indicators that take into account where students start with respect to academic factors and economic characteristics and how they progress over time.

Supporting successful transfer from a community college to a four-year institution—with subsequent completion—is one strategy that communities can deploy to improve upward economic mobility. Strengthening existing institutions to work more effectively is particularly important in regions of the country, like the South, where the odds of moving up are disproportionately low for children born into low-income households.

The community colleges featured here demonstrate the importance and possibility of building an aspirational culture of transfer success, committing to clear and consistent communication, and nurturing cross-institutional cooperation that inspires behaviors—from institutions and students—that are correlated with credential completion.

If increased educational attainment is one key factor in improving upward economic mobility and long-term economic security, it is imperative that low-income students, in particular, are supported in their efforts to earn the credentials and build the networks they need to make the most of their educational experiences.

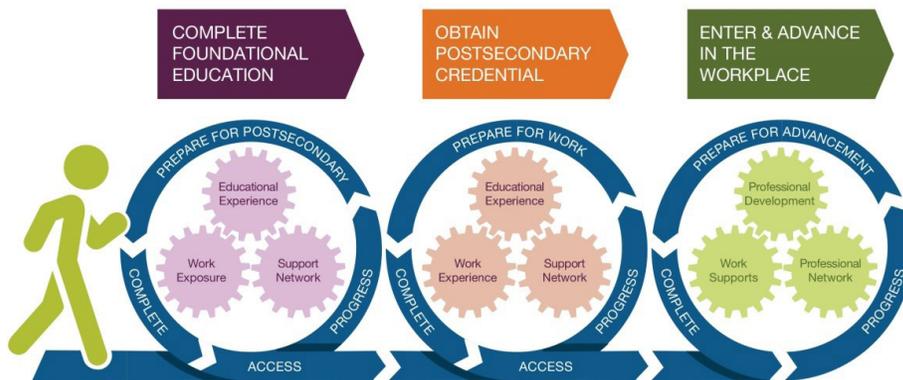


Introduction

Higher education is a cornerstone of civic and personal advancement in the United States, promising connections with knowledge, skills, and networks that can lead to high-paying work. This system boasts—but does not always deliver—equal opportunity to rise out of poverty and build economic security.

On an ideal pathway to upward economic mobility, individuals complete foundational education, advance to an institution of higher education to receive a credential, and enter the workforce with potential for advancement and living wages, with strong support networks, quality educational opportunities, and exposure to relevant work all along the path:

Pathway to Upward Economic Mobility



Across the country, however, states are struggling to reach goals for bachelor's degree completion and to improve stalled upward economic mobility, especially for those born into poverty. The problem is particularly stark in the South, MDC's focus region, where educational attainment lags national averages, income inequality is highest, and the odds of economic mobility are lowest.

Even in the most prosperous Southern cities, the chances that a child born into a low-income family will make it to a middle or high income as an adult are alarmingly low. Across the region, there is a less than 6 percent chance that someone born to parents at the lowest income level will be among the top earners as an adult: an intergenerational mobility problem. Take, for example, cities like Raleigh, NC—a place not unlike its other Southern neighbors—where those born at the bottom of the economic ladder have a 39 percent chance of staying there as adults and only a 27 percent chance of ending up in the middle or upper-middle quintiles.³

However, the chances of being stuck in the lowest income bracket decrease with a postsecondary credential. The Pew Charitable Trusts found that only 10 percent of adults born into poverty who subsequently complete a four-year degree remained in that lowest income bracket as adults; 47 percent of those without the degree remained there as adults.⁴ While rising to middle- or upper-income quintiles still remains a challenge for those born to parents with low incomes—even after attaining a credential—strengthening degree completion is one actionable way to confront intergenerational economic *immobility*.

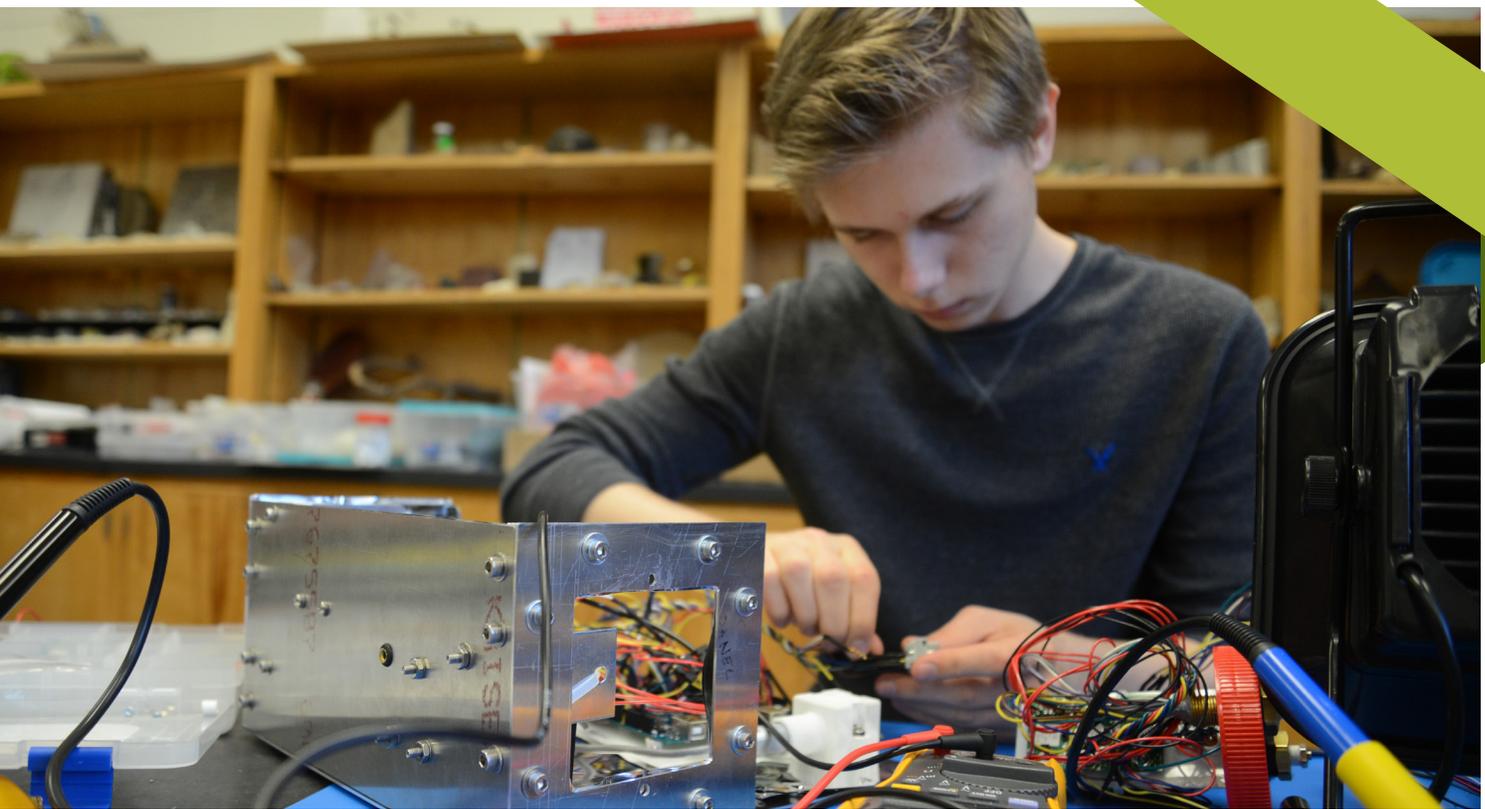
Exploring Transfer Success in the South

Community colleges have long been important institutions for strengthening postsecondary attainment, awarding credentials that can lead to better-paying jobs or form the foundation for additional credentials, including a bachelor's degree. As documented in a 2009 study from The Pew Charitable Trusts, community colleges often serve a higher proportion of students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and women—all populations least likely to be upwardly mobile in the United States.⁵

³ "Equality of Opportunity Project." <http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/>

⁴ "Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations," Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2012.

⁵ Diana Furchtgott-Roth, Louis Jacobson, and Christine Mokher, "Strengthening Community Colleges' Influence on Economic Mobility," Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009.



While education is not a panacea for improving upward economic mobility, affordable credentials available at community colleges, especially when they lead to jobs with family-sustaining wages, opportunities for career advancement, and access to supportive networks, are critical to any strategy for improving economic security broadly. These credentials may provide some protection from turmoil in the current economy and have become a widespread—if conflicted—signaling mechanism for employers regarding a potential worker’s fit and skill.⁶

Educational and economic pathways, especially in the South, are fraught with constraints on social networks and historical discrimination that diminish the power of credentials for people of color. Despite these challenges, with lower tuition costs and, ideally, an accessible pathway to a bachelor’s degree via transfer to a four-year university, community colleges can still be launching-pad institutions that change the education and economic trajectory for individuals and families. Given the number of low-income students and students of color enrolled at these institutions, community colleges can be a critical part of an effort to expand economic opportunity and security in our region and nation—if matched with efforts to improve job quality and eliminate discrimination in education and labor markets.

Recent research indicates, however, that ensuring successful student transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment following transfer remains a challenge for both two-year and four-year institutions across the United States. In *Tracking Transfer*, Davis Jenkins and John Fink of the Community College Research Center (CCRC) examined a set of metrics for measuring how effectively institutions support transfer from two-year to four-year students. They calculated these metrics for a large cohort of degree-seekers using National Student Clearinghouse data, determining state-level outcomes for students that transfer out, those that transfer with awards, those that transfer out *and* subsequently complete a bachelor’s degree, and the bachelor’s completion rate for students who transfer into any four-year institution. Only five Southern states (Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia) were above the national average for transfer-out rate and only four (Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) exceeded the national average for transfer-out with subsequent bachelor’s completion.⁷

⁶ See discussion in Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*, the New Press, 2017.

⁷ Davis Jenkins and John Fink, “Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor’s Degrees,” Community College Research Center, January 2016.

Much attention has been paid to state policies and student experience (both critical, of course) that could improve these outcomes, but less on the role of the institutions—the implementer of state policies and the site of student experiences. Given the widespread challenge to increase transfer success and bachelor’s degree completion rates, understanding how institutional practices clarify or obscure a student’s transfer path is key.

In *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges*, researchers from CCRC and the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program lay out key strategies to improve transfer outcomes at the institutional level: make transfer student success a priority, create clear programmatic pathways, and provide tailored advising for transfer students.⁸

Embracing these strategies requires leadership, attention to culture, and an understanding of how internal college systems intersect with external systems that students must navigate (from employment to child care to transportation) at the same time they are navigating academics. Furthermore, these institutions and systems are situated in historical and policy environments that influence everything from campus governance to funding. It is important that all partners understand the pathway—and know where it is well aligned and where there are gaps—in order to make good decisions about how to increase successful transfer.

Beginning with the *Playbook* recommendations and a survey of other recent research, we examined transfer practices and experiences at four Southern community colleges, observing how institutional practices, federal and state policies, and student mindset and behavior affect transfer students. We visited four colleges in three states:

- Durham Technical Community College, Durham, NC
- El Paso Community College, El Paso, TX
- Fayetteville Technical Community College, Fayetteville, NC
- Valencia College, Orlando, FL

Table 1: Institutional Characteristics of Participating Colleges (2015-16)

	Durham Tech	El Paso CC	Fayetteville Tech	Valencia College
Enrollment (curriculum and/or credit seeking) 2015-16	5,118	28,764	11,546	60,883
Student Race/Ethnicity (%White/Black/Hispanic/ Other)	34/40/14/12	8/2/85/5	40/38/10/12	29/17/34/20
Student Gender M/F (%)	40/60	44/56	45/55	45/55
Full-time/Part-time Enrollment (%)	28/72	30/70	41.3/58.7	37/63
Faculty (FT/PT)	118/391	421/756	300/507	535/1182
Year-to-Year Retention Rate (FT/PT %)	60/41	64/50	49/32	Not reported
Overall Graduation Rate (full-time, first-time degree seeking) (%)	10	13	12	44
Tuition and Fees (\$/year)	1,840	2,746	2,394	2,474
Books and Supplies (\$/year)	1,300	1,047	1,750	1,266

Source: College reporting and <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

All three states had rates of students transferring and subsequently completing a bachelor’s degree that were above or near the national average, according to CCRC’s *Tracking Transfer* metrics. The higher education governance structures in these states also allowed us to compare institutional practice in more centralized systems (Florida, North Carolina) with a decentralized system (Texas). Each of the institutions are at different points on the transfer policy implementation spectrum—with El Paso and Valencia representing institutions with long-term relationships with a four-year partner, and the North Carolina institutions responding to new legislation related to articulation and transfer.

Community colleges have long been important institutions for strengthening postsecondary attainment, awarding credentials that can lead to better-paying jobs or form the foundation for additional credentials, including a bachelor’s degree.

⁸ Joshua Wyner et al., “The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges,” The Aspen Institute, 2016.

The colleges' home communities also represent the challenge of upward economic mobility across the region, with varying levels of educational attainment, median income at or below the national average, and significant economic mobility "stickiness" in the lowest income quintiles, suggesting that children born in low-income families are likely to remain there as adults.

Table 2: A Snapshot of Educational Attainment and Economic Security and Mobility

	Durham	El Paso	Fayetteville	Orlando
Percent of adults 25-34 w/ at least a two-year credential	59%	34%	34%	51%
Median Household Income National average: \$53,889	\$50,420	\$42,772	\$43,630	\$42,318
MIT Living Wage Annual Income for one adult & one child National average: \$15.84	\$23.19	\$21.44	\$22.52	\$24.07
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who end up in upper income quintile	5.0%	8.6%	3.8%	5.8%
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who end up in middle income quintile	26.7%	37.7%	25.9%	30.6%
Percent of children with parents making \$16K who remain in the bottom income quintile	38.5%	23.2%	39.3%	31.5%

Sources: MIT Living Wage Calculator (2016), American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2011-2015), and Equality of Opportunity Project (2014).

Strong transfer supports are critical for Southern institutions, since chances for upward economic mobility increase with higher levels of educational attainment; we must ensure that those who aspire to the four-year degree have everything they need to be successful. To learn how these four colleges were organizing their institutions to support successful transfer, we conducted interviews and focus groups with college administrators, faculty, staff, and students; reviewed colleges' print and online resources; and reviewed state articulation agreements and transfer-related policies. An online survey of advising staff at all four colleges provided additional information about advising models and practices. We examined institutional structure and policy, faculty and staff practice, and transfer student experiences at the colleges, uncovering lessons for philanthropic investors, policymakers, and practitioners to better understand their own influence in strengthening (or inhibiting) institutional practices that propel students toward successful transfer and bachelor's degree completion.

We organized our learnings around four themes:

- 1. Culture:** A transfer-supportive culture within both the community college and four-year partner is important for transfer success. Culture shapes and is shaped by institutional practices and is evident in student and leader mindsets regarding transfer.
- 2. Communication:** Establishing and following accessible modes of communication to clearly and accurately share knowledge with students about the transfer process, as well as other experiences and factors important to academic success, influence transfer outcomes.
- 3. Cooperation:** Cooperation between community colleges and four-year institutions (including institutional and state articulation agreements) is important for transfer success.
- 4. Structure of Student Experience:** Full-time enrollment, consecutive semester attendance, and associate's degree completion are positively associated with transfer success and bachelor's degree attainment. Therefore, institutions' levels of responsiveness to factors that influence students' enrollment and degree completion decisions, evident in student support efforts, also matter to transfer success.

Findings

Culture. Communication. Cooperation. Structure of student experience. These four themes provide a framework for strengthening student transfer outcomes that can be a foundation for improving students' economic security and upward mobility.

Institutional culture is both a force and a product of a colleges' approach to student success; it shapes practices and is reinforced by those practices. It influences communication, cooperation, and student experience—all drivers that can improve or impede student progress. When students have the information they need when they need it, when programs and policies are coordinated with four-year partners, and when there are incentives for actions associated with successful transfer outcomes, institutions demonstrate their dedication to transfer success, fostering a culture that encourages students on a path of continued educational attainment and, ideally, economic security.

Transfer-Supportive Culture

The power to create culture

We define “culture” as the values, attitudes, and behaviors within a college, enacted by administrators, faculty, and students alike. Those values, attitudes, and behaviors may be explicit in strategic plans and implicit in day-to-day interactions. A college's transfer culture also may be influenced by policy, such as state-level articulation agreements and four-year university programmatic requirements. Interviews at the four community colleges indicate that institutions have the power to create an institutional culture that promotes successful transfer. Students' sense of possibility, agency, and efficacy are shaped by their experiences on and off campus; indeed, they expressed a need for colleges to create an environment that makes transfer processes, programming, and resources transparent. These perceptions are important to consider when trying to establish a transfer culture that sets students up for both educational and economic success.

The policies, programs, and practices that institutions assume are leading to one kind of behavior may, in fact, be generating an entirely different response. At the four colleges we visited, leaders' attitudes about students' aspirations and their sense of their ability to influence student behavior and state or institutional policies, shaped the structure and implementation of transfer-related practices. We heard a wide range of perspectives about what college culture should be, how well student and college expectations align, and ways that policy promotes or constrains available options.

Addressing aspirations

A stark contrast exists in some cases between student and leader perceptions of needs and responsibility related to successful transfer. One participant in a focus group of faculty and administrators said, “Students want more *support*, but the institution wants to help students *grow*” [emphasis added]. These focus group participants expressed concerns about students who “wait until the last minute” or misunderstand the required steps (and related financial aid procedures). Advisors want to advise students based on both what they *need* and what they're *interested in*. Early engagement in the transfer conversation—and with four-year universities—is critical to making supportive connections that empower students to plan for the long-term. One college leader said, “If they can make connections earlier, they [students] might see [community college] as being a valuable middle-step between high school and a four-year institution, rather than thinking that they're settling for [community college] and therefore being less likely to successfully transfer.”

There is a related tension between student aspirations and policy constraints. For example, Durham Tech leaders noted policies that limit the number of credits students can take in order to ensure credit transfer, meaning they must make the transfer decision early. (North Carolina's revised 2014 Comprehensive Articulation Agreements—the CAA—is intended to help students interested in transfer select their destination institution within their first 30 credit hours. Some reported that the reshaping of the CAA courses has caused numbers in elective classes to dwindle, and as a result those courses become unavailable.) While some of the North Carolina leaders interviewed acknowledge that it's a good thing students are encouraged to think seriously and early on about what they want to do, others lamented the limited opportunities for exploration. Another participant found it problematic that there is an expectation that students starting at community colleges get right down to business with rigid curricula: “It is fundamentally, I think, a question of privilege.”

At Valencia, deliberate creation of transfer culture takes the shape of pilot testing programming for transfer students. Staff and faculty purposefully connect and communicate with representatives from K-12 and four-year partners, and include students in these discussions about pathways and possibilities. The college is committed



to including faculty in decision-making and evaluating any policy or program for effectiveness prior to full implementation. The process of best practices development may take a bit longer, but as one Valencia focus group participant put it, “We may take a little longer to do it, but it’s because we’re trying to anticipate any snag or problem.” This is reflected in the faculty-led CARE commitment: continuous assessment and responsible engagement, even using a Constituent Relationship Management software that keeps track of student data, connections made, and communications. Paying attention to aspirations—and building-in structures that identify and remove barriers—can contribute to a college culture that keeps students focused on a longer-term goal: not *just* the semester, but credential completion and connection to what comes after community college—whether that’s additional postsecondary study or employment.

Institutionalizing care

A culture of care and concern for students’ progress was evident—and clearly important to success—at all four campuses, though expressed in different ways. For example, El Paso Community College (EPCC) hosts a “noche de familia,” an event that engages family members in the advising process to start conversations about what being in college means for their spouse, son, or daughter. At Fayetteville Tech, after realizing that some students were still without textbooks several weeks into the semester, the college began posting free material online for some courses so students didn’t fall behind. Through efforts to make students welcome on campus and to simplify the process and path, institutions demonstrate awareness of student needs and attention to their aspirations for educational and economic achievement.

Communication with Students

Structure is not enough; implementation matters

As the education landscape changes, so do the options for how students receive, digest, and act on information. The transfer process is complex, with multiple degree paths and nearly endless destination options that make it impossible to navigate without any delays or hiccups. However, institutions can organize and deliver transfer information that helps students feel more confident about the process and, at the very least, provide clear guidance on where to begin and get support along the way. At the four colleges, content, structure, and delivery made a big difference to students, especially those who were new to navigating higher education institutions.

Colleges we visited tackled the challenge to improve clarity, accuracy, accessibility, and timeliness by providing centralized, physical locations for information delivery, as well as using web-based resources and one-time programming events:

- **Transfer Centers.** Valencia’s Answer Center is a “one-stop shop” for everything students need, with eight full-time employees, four part-time employees, and student ambassadors. As one student saw it: “They’re not just about ‘this is what you need to do, good luck.’ They actually help the student find the answers.” At the Durham Tech transfer center, students can meet with representatives from four-year institutions, attend degree-specific information sessions, learn about transfer-related support programs, and get help with college and scholarship applications. The center also conducts training for transfer and program advisors and maintains course selection guides. El Paso’s transfer center provides applications, catalogs, and other materials and an internet connection, as well as appointments with four-year university representatives to assist students with on-site admissions and general questions about the transfer process.
- **Online Access.** All four colleges offer web-based advising tools. Strategies like this help students plan the pace, intensity, and completion time of their studies. Both North Carolina colleges—Durham Tech and Fayetteville Tech—use a similar system, though each implements it to a different degree. When fully operational, the system can provide real-time course audit information, which could eliminate having students’ learn about missing requirements without time to rectify the situation before their desired graduation date. (Durham Tech users appreciated the ease of setting up appointments for advising, but found that changes in state-wide transfer policy resulted in confusion when students didn’t have an advisor to clarify frequent program changes.) Valencia will soon deploy Constituent Relationship Management software that will help them track factors that indicate risk for non-completion and can be tailored for different students. This will allow advisors to intervene early on rather than react later.
- **Events.** El Paso Community College takes transfer advising out of the office via transfer fairs. The fairs, which are held every semester, bring together four-year college representatives—with up to 30 universities represented. At times, students are admitted and advised on the spot, which is something that students find beneficial; as one leadership group participant said, “It’s hard with the time constraint to do everything in one day, but we’ve made it possible.” In an effort to make this programming more accessible, EPCC now hosts mini-transfer fairs on all campuses in the district.

Most faculty and staff surveyed (77 percent) agreed that advisers at their college use resources provided by the college to track students’ transfer progress; 70 percent of this group agreed that students were taking advantage of these resources.

A culture of care and concern for students’ progress was evident—and clearly important to success—at all four campuses, though expressed in different ways.



Consistent information across multiple access points—with some built in redundancy—and access to four-year connections right on the community college campus can keep students on the path to degree completion, as well as expose them to a wide range of options for further education or employment, acquiring skills, experiences, and relationships they need for long-term success and economic security.

The challenge of just-in-time communication

Student success courses. Students, administrators, and faculty all expressed frustration with not having the right information at the right time to prepare for transfer, organize financial aid appropriately, and make wise decisions about course selection. One way that colleges addressed this timing issue was via student success courses. When mandatory and taken early in a student's studies, these courses can be particularly useful to build a foundation for successful transfer. Student experiences at Valencia, however, illustrate the complexities of getting the right information to students when they are ready to consider and act on it. One student said that, while the success course included transfer information, he didn't care about it until he had to make decisions about transfer. But another Valencia student felt the transfer information in the course was critical to ending a habit of changing majors, as he had done at his previous college. While it may seem like an impossible game to win, it's important that institutions continue to offer—and repeat—the critical pieces of the process, since such decisions will affect students' progress through the institution *and* decisions about their post-college plans. For example, the Valencia course includes activities that require students to interview people who are working in their chosen field; for one student, that activity helped a "light bulb go off" and changed how she felt about wanting to be a doctor.

The question of who takes the success course and when is another that can affect relevance and effectiveness. In 2009, Durham Tech made the student success course mandatory for all students to ensure all students get the same information about transfer options at the college. At Fayetteville Tech, students can take the student success course at any point in their studies, but are encouraged to do so during their first semester. The course is mainly offered and taken online, with just 10 percent of the course offerings in person. Students in the Fayetteville Tech focus groups felt the course would be most beneficial if they were *required* to take it in the first semester, given the topics covered.

Departmental resources. The primary way students get information about transfer is through advising and related campus departments. In our survey of advising faculty and staff, more than 75 percent of respondents reported conversations with students about transfer plans at least once a month, and sometimes with even more regularity. Given the range of caseloads at the four colleges—fewer than 50 to over 200—that's a lot of conversations. And while there may be many sources for advising and transfer support, not all of them are equally helpful. At least half of the faculty and staff who completed the advising survey agreed that students see the following as useful transfer resources: advising centers, counselors, faculty advisors, and first-year experience programming. However, less than 40 percent named financial aid, registration, and admissions as departments that students view as helpful sources for transfer information. While these aren't responsible

for providing comprehensive transfer information, they *are* critical to making the process efficient and easy to navigate. This suggests that there are opportunities to improve alignment, information sharing, and considerations about where and how students interact with different departments as they plan for transfer.

Durham Tech also created course selection guides, and faculty and staff advisors have gone through professional development to understand how to interpret the guides and give clear and accurate information to students. The guides are intended to simplify a student's decision-making process and ensure a path to a credential that is efficient and cost-effective. However, if students decide to change their major, the transition to another course selection guide can result in confusion and delays.

Advising: the intersection of culture and practice

Advising practice is where expectations, policies, and relationships converge to support transfer success. Advising interactions can contribute to how students perceive the fit with college study in general and with an institution in particular, and where they can be inspired or stymied in their aspirations for completion, transfer, and career. Community college enrollment may be their first experience with a large institution or bureaucracy on their own; thus, college could become a place where they learn effective strategies for navigating—or they could lose faith in institutions aimed at helping them.

The enactment of transfer culture through advising practice can have significant implications for students. We explored this at each college and found that the basic components of advising were similar at each:

- Advisors are assigned early in enrollment process.
- Course offerings provide transfer information and guidance.
- Web-based software tracks course credit and progress.
- Program maps offer course recommendations.
- Transfer programming with additional guidance and connection to specific four-year partners (sometimes for a limited number of enrolled or eligible students).
- State and/or institutional policies define transferrable credits and related practices.

Each college, however, approached advising and development of an advising culture differently, prioritizing different elements of the process. These variations affect students' experiences and could have implications for student outcomes. We categorized the approaches across the four colleges this way: prescriptive, responsive, and anticipatory.

Prescriptive. Faculty and staff at Fayetteville Tech say advising works if a student actually goes to see an advisor, but many don't. Sometimes students "self-advise" and select courses that aren't applicable or avoid general education requirements, specializing too soon. This has led college leaders to attempt a more prescriptive advising approach. Typical of most community colleges, Fayetteville Tech's advising begins with a requirement to meet with an advisor during the admissions process to select an AA or AS degree and offer guidance on course selection. (After the first semester, students have a faculty advisor to keep them on track.) Fayetteville Tech uses a Blackboard™ site to keep advisors informed, and students use the online WebAdvisor to track goals and perform degree audits. This advising approach is institutionally driven; and while the college endeavors to get the right information early to students to avoid missteps, it may leave some students with backtracking to do if they aren't actively engaged in the process early on.

Responsive. Similar to Fayetteville Tech, Durham Tech and El Paso Community College ensure connection to an advisor early on, then use a variety of structures and interactions in order to reinforce information and respond to student needs as they arise. At Durham Tech, most students transition to a faculty/staff advisor within their program in the first semester. The transfer center then becomes the hub of information for students who intend to transfer and place they can meet with program advisors who are content experts. El Paso prevents some students from registering until they meet with an advisor. That includes first-time-in-college students and those who are deemed "not college ready" on the state assessment test, the Texas Success Initiative assessment, or TSI. In addition to a transfer center, El Paso "[plants] seeds" for college transfer by sharing relevant information through programs like TRIO, Upward Bound, a financial literacy program, and the preparation program for developmental education students. The counseling staff has embraced more holistic advising practices. One leadership focus group participant shared that advisors are intentionally asking questions like: "How can I help this student? Are they working? How dedicated are they? Do they have family support? All these factors that influence their decisions." Both El Paso and Durham Tech provide different venues and opportunities for students to access information about transfer and have built in many ways to respond to student inquiry and need. However, if students are unsure whom and when to ask their questions or get conflicting information, they may find themselves on a path that leads to misspent time and money on nontransferable credits or missing out on opportunities to enhance their experience at the college and their destination institution.

Anticipatory. Valencia College has piloted new practices after seeing a dramatic shift in how many students sought advising help after orientation. Less than 10 percent of students had been coming to advising. In response, the college began piloting mandatory advising prior to the completion of 30 credit hours. It is organized around three strategic touch points, anticipating when students will need key information and motivation: 1) orientation, 2) before spring term registration, and 3) before summer term registration, when a hold is placed on students' records until various assignments, such as an education plan and emails to advisors, are completed.

There also are plans for additional student/advisor activities at 15, 30, and 45 credit hours. As one leadership focus group participant described it, “At each mile-marker, they’ll have a specific set of strategies, activities, and events that students and faculty will work on together to strengthen transfer and advising.” As an added safeguard, Valencia will require students to accrue a certain amount of points through completion of learning assessments, also near the 30-credit-hour mark “just so students can’t say ‘nobody told me.’” As the college employs this new approach, there will be much to learn about how students embrace and abide by the new requirements.

Student experiences with advising varied across and within institutions. There was a sense that training and knowledge were not consistent across advising staff. Students at all institutions expressed frustration that some advisors seemed to know more than others about what courses would transfer and that knowledge varied based on the transfer destination. In some cases, this resulted in confusion about credit transfer and taking unnecessary courses. One student said,

“It’s also stressful—the transferring part—because of the prerequisites, having to figure out which courses to take so you’re not wasting time. That was my problem. My advisor was telling me I need to take X classes but I was looking at it and I didn’t think I needed to take those classes. So, I was taking classes I didn’t need. It was a waste of time. Specific schools want different classes for the same majors. I’m not even eligible to apply without these specific classes.”

Others felt that institutional focus on particular programs—like nursing and engineering—meant that those in other disciplines were “on the backburner” when it came to finding an advisor. Some students seek their advising based on preexisting relationships. Rather than going to advisors, some students in the El Paso focus group, for example, sought out advice from faculty members from their chosen field who had connections in that field or at the desired transfer institution. While this shows an important level of trust, it also introduces risk of receiving out-of-date information and is reliant on students having connections with the “right” people.

Acknowledging the expectation that students will be proactive, another student said they don’t have time to be proactive and then, again, unknowingly take classes they don’t need. One student said, “It was a waste of my time and money, but it was basically my fault because I didn’t have the time to go speak to an advisor.” Other students reported positive experiences. One El Paso student said, “The more questions you have for advisors [the better] ... they’re very knowledgeable. They’ll go through the website with me, give me handouts. You just have to take the time to sit there and listen to them.” In the end, students desired “clear-cut” guidelines to avoid misinterpretation and up-to-date program maps to ensure they were planning for the right path. These student experiences reinforce the need for clear pathways and connections to career aspirations, multiple sources of consistent information, and supports that help them maintain momentum, while still demanding accountability.



Cooperation Between Institutions

Formal policy isn’t enough. Relationships matter.

Articulation. Cooperation between community colleges and their four-year partners is an essential component of transfer success. State articulation agreements (SARs) signal that transfer is a priority and, while they are not the primary force shaping the specific practices that facilitate transfer success, they do lay the groundwork for institution-to-institution agreements that do. State-level agreements can formalize conventions, such as common course numbering, which require that institutions at a minimum work together to align their curricula. (See sidebar on page 17 for additional detail.) And while these agreements are important, application and implementation of those policies are what matter most for students. Whether these articulation agreements lead to improvements in transfer success relies, in part, on the degree to which faculty and administrators engage in cross-institution collaboration. As one administrator at Durham Tech said, “...SARs are not as useful as inter-institutional agreements, but they are good policy statements that transfer is important and there are efforts to facilitate this... The best articulation agreements are between institutions. Closer relationships encourage better (and quicker) communication about changes in transfer agreements.” For example, Valencia College committees have spent time intentionally negotiating specific program course transfer requirements with the University of Central Florida (UCF) to avoid situations where a course may be accepted in one department but not another. All of Valencia College advisors go to UCF’s advisor training to keep up with changes in programs.

These agreements can encourage student behaviors that are correlated with completion. For example, as noted earlier, North Carolina’s Comprehensive Articulation Agreement requires students to identify a transfer destination within their first 30 credit hours. In Florida, students who attain an associate’s degree at a community college are guaranteed admission to a four-year institution in the state. (However, they are not guaranteed admission to their particular program of interest.) Leaders at Valencia College said, because of this guarantee, most students remain at Valencia until they have attained their associate’s degree; they also noted a disadvantage transferring without the degree: admissions criteria at the four-year institution may be harsher

and some scholarships may not be available to transfer students without a prior degree. Valencia advisors ensure students know about the agreement and help them plan accordingly if they intend to take advantage of the block general education transfer. (For example, many students do not realize that even as they complete the associate's degree, they also must apply to a four-year institution—admission is guaranteed, but not automatic.) Early intervention from an advisor ensures students can take full advantage of opportunities and get the support they need to plan their college experience in the way that's right for them.

These credit-related policies also have implications for financial aid, since federal grant limits make it important that two-year and four-year institutions align credits offered and accepted so students choose the right courses in a timely manner, optimizing their financial aid. Alignment is important for students' long-term planning. Institutions also can make financial aid modifications to support students in the midst of their studies. Fayetteville Tech recently changed the sequencing of financial aid distribution: rather than delivering it as a lump sum, the college makes three disbursements over the course of the semester. Since implementing this approach, the college has seen more students return after their initial semester.

Structured relationships. All four of the colleges offer structured programs that provide a direct link to a four-year partner institution, though awareness, access, and implementation vary. At El Paso, 2+2 degrees were created almost a decade ago. One EPCC leadership group participant shared that the college is motivated to implement 2+2 degrees to make transfer easier, but the challenge comes in the implementation of agreements. Each degree plan must be accepted in whole by both El Paso and the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP), ensuring course acceptance by the departments and the university. (EPCC also has a close relationship with secondary schools; see sidebar on pag 18 for details.) The Carolina Student Transfer Excellence Program (C-STEP), available at Durham Tech and Fayetteville Tech, guarantees admission to the University of North Carolina at



Chapel Hill for students who complete all requirements. C-STEP encourages transfer and creates a culture of accountability between C-STEP students, their peers, and their advisors. For example, C-STEP students at Fayetteville Tech are required to see their C-STEP advisor every week. This advisor guides students through career development and reviews program requirements at the college and UNC. Advisors from UNC-Chapel Hill visit at least once a semester to review students' course selection and talk about majors. The Fayetteville Tech advisor takes student groups to Chapel Hill twice a month to get familiar with the campus and meet with department heads and financial aid representatives.

Eagle Connect is a transfer program partnership between Durham Tech and North Carolina Central University (NCCU), a local HBCU. Eagle Connect is for students who want to attend NCCU but lack some of the enrollment qualifications. Eagle Connect participation allows them to enroll as non-matriculating students at NCCU; they live on NCCU campus and have the option of participating in social and academic activities on campus. If they complete the program, which includes additional advising support and mentoring, they transfer to NCCU as matriculating students with 30-40 credits. Seventy-five percent of Eagle-Connect students to date are first-generation college students.

Valencia College has a partnership with the University of Central Florida called DirectConnect to UCF. Completion of the program guarantees Valencia graduates admission to UCF, as well as preferential admission to specific bachelor's programs and joint advising from both institutions, with UCF staff on-site at Valencia to assist with admissions, financial aid, and academic support. In 2012, DirectConnect was selected by Excelencia in Education as the nation's top program for increasing academic opportunities and success for Latino students at the associate level.

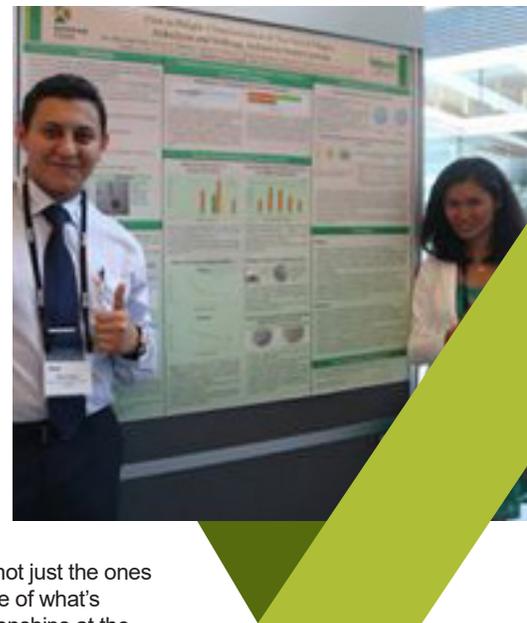
This kind of programming exemplifies how formal college to university connections can pave the way for informal departmental and faculty connections (or vice versa), and that generates better connections for students, smoothing their transfer path, guiding them through a complicated system, and establishing networks for what comes after community college *and* after the university.

Planning and presence strengthen policy, program, practice

One way to implement state- and institution-level articulation agreements is through the design and use of program maps, used by advisors and students, describing courses, credit hours, and recommended progression for specific degree programs. For states where a common course numbering system is not used across the community college and university systems, these guides will, in some cases, help students understand which courses at the community college are comparable to the courses at neighboring four-year institutions. The key determinants of a successful program map are consistent cross-institution relationships and decision-making within specific degree programs. All sites engage in some degree of collaboration with their four-year partners, but the extent to which they co-develop the maps, the regularity of their meetings, and the technology used to communicate and coordinate varies as did the physical proximity of the institutions.

El Paso Community College administrators reported strong relationships with its counterparts at the University of Texas at El Paso, owing in large part to the two institutions' relative isolation from other higher education institutions. Both students and faculty move within these institutions; many EPCC faculty have previously worked at UTEP. An "articulation committee" composed of deans, faculty members, and other members meet annually to review changes in degree plans. Focus group participants cited the strength of these relationships as both a benefit and a challenge for transfer success. On the one hand, this closeness facilitates better communication at the department level; on the other hand, some UTEP faculty have reservations about the quality and rigor of some EPCC courses, which complicates the alignment process.

Valencia College also has strong relationships with its primary four-year partner, the University of Central Florida, facilitated by weekly, in-person work between the two institutions. Similar to EPCC, much of the transferability of courses is done at the department level. There are annual meetings, like an advising workshop hosted by UCF for all its partner institutions and a review and discussion about DirectConnect. Comments from focus group members about the structure and purpose of these meetings highlight the high level of commitment both institutions have to transfer success: "Advisors from UCF come and talk to a lot of the advisors at Valencia on Friday mornings in Valencia meetings (e.g., College of Medicine, College of Business Administration). They're talking to general advisors across the board so that all advisors—not just the ones in specific programs—are kept up to date. They get informed about all the programs so they're aware of what's going on." Planning, proximity, and presence: these examples show the importance of building relationships at the institutional and personal level that ensure sustainability over time and connection for students at the right time.



Structures of Student Experience

Research indicates that enrolling full-time,⁹ attending consecutive semesters,¹⁰ and completing the associate's degree before transfer¹¹ are correlated with higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment. Leaders at all four institutions expressed support for these enrollment and completion behaviors. At the same time, their students elevated challenges, both personal and institutional, to emulating this ideal approach. Faced with a wide range of student circumstances, administrators, faculty, staff, and students all find ways to address enrollment, completion, and non-academic barriers.

Removing enrollment and completion barriers

At all four colleges, we learned how articulation agreements, financial aid policies, and federal regulations affect students' academic planning. Federal policies and programs can both hinder or help. At Fayetteville Tech, 20 percent of the student population is former military or military family members, owing to its proximity to Fort Bragg, a large U.S. Army base. The transient nature of service members' duty makes consecutive course enrollment particularly difficult. That is compounded by federal policies about degree attainment: for any student to attain an associate's degree at a given community college, they must accumulate at least 25 percent of their credit hours at that particular institution. For military students, who are likely to move from institution to institution within the course of their academic trajectory, associate's degree attainment is sometimes elusive, despite having earned more than enough credit hours from—and invested significant financial resources in—all institutions attended.

The best articulation agreements are between institutions.

⁹ R.S. Hutton, "Modeling Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates of North Carolina Community College Transfer Students Using a Discrete-Time Survival Analysis," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015.

¹⁰ Clifford Adelman, "Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment," U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

¹¹ Peter M. Crosta and Elizabeth M. Kopko, "Should Community College Students Earn an Associate Degree Before Transferring to a Four-Year Institution?" Community College Research Center, April 2014.



Other federal programs can influence student experiences in a positive way, particularly when it comes to degree completion. El Paso noted the performance measures and eligibility requirements related to the TRIO program. El Paso gets credit for student success if students in the program receive their associate's degree within three to four years. If students go through the program and transfer before attaining the associate's degree, they are not counted by the federal grant's standard for success. In effect, the federal funding provides an incentive for the college to encourage their students to attain the associate's degree.

Reverse transfer has been highly effective in increasing the rate of associate's degree completion. Through this process, students can be awarded an associate's degree even after they have transferred to the four-year institution without the degree; the four-year institution sends students' transcripts back to the sending institution and, if students have completed the required credits, they are awarded the associate's degree. This also may be a wise financial decision for students, since wages for jobs requiring an associate's degree are typically higher than those without. This is an opportunity to increase earning potential even before the bachelor's degree is complete.

Removing non-academic barriers

Our interviews demonstrated that student choices are influenced not just by what policy dictates, but by students' circumstances outside of the classroom and campus environment. Limited resources create issues in and out of the classroom. One student said, "I take the bus and it takes about an hour, [which means] I spend more time on the bus than I spend [in] class." When asked what they would do to strengthen student transfer if all limitations were removed, one Durham Tech leadership group participant responded: "I would give students a lot more money and considerably fewer responsibilities at home. I think that's one of the biggest things that keeps students from transferring, is the stuff outside these buildings." Many students indicated that financial stability is a chief concern for them. One Fayetteville Tech student said, "I mean, you go to school to get an education, with better education you make more money, but how can you reach that point if you're drowned in debt before you can do anything?"

Since students come to the community college with many external demands and constraints, institutions can and should find ways to enable students to structure their academic experiences in ways that come as close to the ideal—full-time enrollment, continuous enrollment, and degree completion before transfer—as possible. For example, Valencia found students are more likely to complete the associate's degree if they have completed 15 credit hours. Thus, they have implemented strategies to advance persistence within the first two semesters of a students' study.

Leaders at El Paso Community College noticed many students performed well their first year, then struggled in their second, becoming discouraged and reducing their attendance to part-time—an approach that negatively correlates with successful transfer. The college now requires first-time-in-college students and those deemed not-college-ready by the state placement test to meet with an advisor, who can assess the students' work or family responsibilities and how the institution can support them. Given the benefit of receiving the associate's degree (rather than simply earning more than 60 credit hours), Durham Tech focuses on ensuring that all students are working towards a credential, whether associate's degree or bachelor's degree. In these ways, institutions can be attentive to what works best for their students and actively address obstacles that keep students from structuring their college experience in a way that advances them toward successful transfer.

We also heard that work and financial constraints create obstacles to full-time enrollment and attendance. Across the colleges, student focus groups discussed the strains of attending school, whether full-time or part-time, and working. Forty out of 48 students interviewed attended school full-time, and of those 40 students, three worked full-time jobs and 20 worked part-time. The students described how their studies and work hours required a

Articulation Agreements: Similarities and Differences

Florida and North Carolina state articulation agreements are similar in that a student must have 60 or 61 credit hours established for both an associate's degree and transfer to four-year institutions in each state. North Carolina's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) requires that core general education requirements comprise 30 credit hours—the Universal General Education Transfer Component. Florida's Rule 6A 10.024 has a general education curriculum core comprising 36 semester credit hours. North Carolina's CAA recommends that students "should" choose a transfer major prior to completing 30 credit hours, however, Florida's articulation agreement requires that each student in an associate in arts program indicates a baccalaureate degree program at an institution of interest by the time the student earns 30 credit hours.

Texas and Florida both have common course numbering systems shared by both two-year and four-year institutions. However, not all Texas universities use the Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS) or the Academic Course Guide Manual (ACGM), which is the listing of courses that are fully transferable. North Carolina does not have a shared common course numbering system for community colleges and universities.

constant balancing act, particularly for those working off campus. For these students, there are times when both work and school can become intense, but neither sphere is cognizant of the other, making prioritization difficult. On the other hand, students who are able to take advantage of work-study describe the ease of working in the same place where they study. According to these students, their employers understand the demands and the priority of academic studies, and fellow student workers are often supportive and willing to take on some of their work load so that students can study.

One student suggested that broader access to work-study with higher wages and more stable hours would mean taking out fewer loans. Many of the students we spoke with at Valencia held work-study positions on campus and noted that working on campus positioned them to learn more about the resources the campus had to offer. Nevertheless, working any job outside of school work was described by students as being a delicate challenge. Leaders at institutions recognize that work and school are often at odds, manifested in students who “swirl”—come in and out of the institution nonconsecutively over the course of several semesters without attaining a credential. In some cases, they explain it as a function of the local economy; when there are more job prospects, students are more likely to halt their studies for full-time employment.

This kind of “swirl” raises challenges for institutions as they attempt to track student success, and it creates the appearance that institutions have high drop-out rates and low degree attainment rates. This is a challenge for Fayetteville Tech, in particular, given its large military population. For this subset of students, their obligations—or those of a military spouse—make full-time enrollment problematic, and the unpredictability of moving to another base makes it difficult for students to plan their academic future. In these ways, work demands make it difficult for students to stay on the academic path they might otherwise like to follow.

Students we interviewed expressed concern about the financial toll of pursuing a post-secondary degree, even though they recognized the ultimate labor market benefit of having a higher education credential. To lessen students’ concerns about finances and the pressure they feel to work as many hours as possible while they’re in school, the institutions we visited are taking steps to help students be more financially empowered and less burdened by financial obstacles while at the institution. For example, one college is taking steps to strengthen its financial literacy program, so students can structure their studies based on their financial aid coverage. Leaders across colleges are aware of barriers caused by costly materials, so one school is working with its library to make more course readings available online for free, while another offers students a free semester-long rental service for calculators and laptops.

Financial aid offices have a major role to play in helping students make financial decisions, though student focus groups revealed that financial aid offices were often seen as inefficient or unhelpful, sometimes due to miscommunications that resulted in delays in overall completion time. At Valencia College, a scholarship model demonstrates a useful way to support students struggling financially. The Valencia Foundation allows students to complete one application, then it matches students with scholarships as they are eligible. Students in Valencia focus groups shared that receiving scholarships through the Foundation lessened the pressure to work as intensely at their jobs outside the school. Additionally, the Foundation has a one-time, SOS fund that is available to students with an emergency that would keep them from continuing their studies. The average award is between \$300 and \$350. Funds can be approved even on the request day. The college intervenes with support when students may be at risk of dropping out or decreasing their intensity of study.

Allocating scarce resources to support students effectively requires that colleges understand what is unique about their students’ patterns of enrollment, attendance, and completion, as well as their obligations outside of the campus. Federal expectations for measuring and reporting successful degree completion and transfer-out rates have set one standard—the overall graduation rate, known as the “Student Right to Know” or IPEDS graduation rate. It tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students and complete a degree or other award within 150 percent of “normal time” for completing the program in which they are enrolled. The four colleges represented here also report a transfer-out rate, noted in the introduction as the percentage of the full-time, first-time students who transferred to another institution. These figures present a limited picture of an institution’s success, given that many community college students do not attend full-time. Colleges could gain a better understanding of how their institutional processes and policies are promoting or hindering transfer by augmenting these measures with others that expand the institutional view of student progress. Measures like persistence to graduation in credit-hours-per-year increments (e.g. 15 credits/2 years, 30 credits/3 years, 45 credits/4 years), for instance, could help colleges better understand when, where, and why students are dropping or stopping school before completing a two-year degree.

Structuring Secondary School Relationships

EPCC has an extensive relationship with their high schools as well. As part of the College Readiness Consortium, high school counselors and administrative staff are invited to attend meetings with both EPCC and UTEP and work closely to host sessions at the high schools for FAFSA completion application assistance and course placement testing. The Consortium also has been instrumental in developing extensive early college and dual enrollment programs in El Paso. There are nine early college colleges, with three more slated to open in the fall of 2017 and El Paso offers dual credit at 57 high schools. One focus group participant noted, “Our high school counselors have become an extension of our college counselors. Because they really have to guide their students into not only navigating their independent school district rules and policies, but also be well aware of the rules and regulations at a postsecondary institution.”

Allocating scarce resources to effectively support and encourage completion and successful transfer requires that colleges understand what is unique about their students’ patterns of enrollment, attendance, and completion, as well as an their obligations outside of the campus.

Recommendations

We recommend that investors, policymakers, and practitioners consider the following as they allocate their time and resources to strategies for increasing successful transfer.

#1 RECOMMENDATION

Frame transfer success as a tool for upward economic mobility.

Gather the data about your low-income students' odds for upward economic mobility and use these data to make the case for improving transfer pathways. Applying the equity lens—who is getting ahead and how—to your transfer outcomes may shift how you allocate resources and support services to address challenges related to completion *and* longer-term economic security outcomes for students.

#2 RECOMMENDATION

Have a clear transfer message and stay on message.

Provide professional development about the transfer process that includes cross-training of *all* departments that play a part, no matter how small. Create, share, and practice using common language and responses to common questions, and grant permission for someone to say, “I don’t know the answer to that, but I can help you find the right person,” with a process for a “warm handoff” to the best information source. Everyone on campus can learn the mindset, habits, and practices required to speak the language of successful transfer. This can be facilitated by co-location of relevant departments and staff. Consider at what point the information is delivered for the first time (i.e. a first-year, mandatory student success course) and how it can be reinforced (i.e., course syllabi and advising materials). The transfer process will always be complex since it involves multiple institutions, sometimes across state lines, and always affected by state policies. But having a student-centered orientation that encourages proactive responses—from administrators, faculty, *and* students—can ensure that fewer students miss crucial steps that may cause critical delays or wasted time or money.

#3 RECOMMENDATION

Foster collegiality across two-year and four-year institutions through planning together, making decisions together, and learning together.

Face-to-face and shared professional development for faculty and advisors of two- and four-year institutions improve information sharing and establish relationships that can help *students* facilitate relationships. When articulation agreements and common course numbering become tools used cross-institutionally by colleagues to agree on transfer of credits, their power and applicability increase. A two-way street for faculty becomes a smoother two-way street for students. Where possible, take advantage of proximity to two- and four-year partners for this faculty and staff collaboration *and* campus visits for students to reduce anxiety and increase likelihood of getting the most up-to-date information about four-year expectations and requirements.

#4 RECOMMENDATION

Involve students in the design of transfer pathways and supports.

Ask the people who use the system how it really works—you may discover surprising glitches or work-arounds that ought to become standard practice. Students also can be key ambassadors for transfer programs at both the two- and four-year institutions and could even join you as passionate advocates for the increased resources that may be necessary to expand services that work but are currently only available to a limited number of students.

#5 RECOMMENDATION

Consider students' external experiences when designing internal transfer policies and programs.

Evaluate how policies and practices—everything from course maps to class schedules to lab requirements—may present barriers to students' enrollment decisions, especially when *they* may be considering everything from work schedules to transportation to child care. Financial aid policies, in particular, are important,

especially when misunderstandings can lead to dropped classes and longer graduation timelines. Institution leaders can implement policies, practices, and programs that address student challenges and make it possible for students to structure their academic experiences in ways that enable them to continue on a path to transfer and, ultimately, bachelor's degree completion.

#6 RECOMMENDATION

Measure what matters for your institution and your students.

Measure what matters for your institution and your students. The complex nature of student transfer requires community colleges and universities to be innovative in the way that transfer success is measured. Thoughtfully consider how you can measure transfer success based on where students start with respect to academic factors and economic characteristics and how they progress over time. While measurement of transfer success using three-year and six-year graduation rates provides state and federal entities with one milestone, this limited snapshot does not provide a full picture of the adaptive and evolutionary nature of the transfer process for students who work while going to school and/or come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Supporting successful transfer from a community college to a four-year institution—with subsequent completion—is one strategy that communities can deploy to improve upward economic mobility. Strengthening existing institutions to work more effectively is particularly important in regions of the country, like the South, where the odds of moving up are disproportionately low for children born in low-income households.

The community colleges featured here demonstrate the importance and possibility of building an aspirational culture of transfer success, committing to clear and consistent communication, and nurturing cross-institutional cooperation that inspires behaviors—from institutions and students—that are correlated with credential completion.

If increased educational attainment is one key factor in improving upward economic mobility and long-term economic security, it is imperative that low-income students, in particular, are supported in their efforts to earn the credentials and build the networks they need to make the most of their educational experiences.



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