

# Guiding Vertical Transfer: Perspectives of Community College Advisors

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## About the Project

The majority of students who enter higher education at community colleges across the nation desire to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree.<sup>1</sup> Yet approximately one-third of students transfer to a four-year college or university and less than 15% successfully graduate with a bachelor's degree in six years post-transfer.<sup>2,3</sup> One reason why many transfer students do not successfully transfer from their community college to a four-year college or university is because they are unable to navigate the “transfer maze.”<sup>4</sup>

Many positive steps have been taken to help students navigate transfer in North Carolina. In 2014, the Board of Governors of The University of North Carolina System (UNC System) and the State Board of The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) approved a full revision of their original 1996 Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA).<sup>5</sup> The revised agreement, which had undergone additional improvements in subsequent years, affords students many benefits, including junior transfer with the

completion of an Associate in Arts (AA) or Associate in Science (AS), the meeting of general education requirements, and guaranteed admission—provided other requirements are met—to at least one of the 16 UNC System Campuses. In 2015, signatory institutions of the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) signed a similar agreement<sup>6</sup> with the NCCCS, though without the guarantees of admission.

Central to both agreements is the Universal General Education Transfer Component (UGETC), a 30-credit hour core of general education coursework that counts toward all majors. However, the additional 30 credit hours that comprise an associate degree, which include pre-major requirements, are set by each individual senior university and governed by institution-specific baccalaureate degree plans (BDPs). Despite having a statewide agreement, the lack of uniformity of transfer credit articulation across universities led scholars to categorize North Carolina as an “institution-driven system.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the current agreements may not be as effective as they could be in terms of credit mobility.<sup>8,9</sup>

While the majority of transfer-related research exists on student outcomes and experiences when navigating the intricacies of vertical transfer, little research has been conducted on how community college academic advisors interact with these statewide articulation systems on a day-to-day basis when advising transfer students and the barriers that transfer students may encounter early on in the transfer process.<sup>10</sup> Recent research on North Carolina (NC) has shown that 55% of surveyed students who intend to transfer see an advisor,<sup>11</sup> and many are navigating the transfer process themselves by relying on websites.<sup>12</sup> Thus, institution-driven credit mobility and the evolving nature and location of transfer information can have ripple effects on partner institutions and can prevent students from receiving accurate information and increase the complexity of advising<sup>13</sup> and results in students and advisors having to navigate “thick transfer markets” where many different potential transfer paths exist with a multitude of transfer curriculum requirements.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the experiences of community college academic advisors is important for they can serve as informers for transfer-intending students seeking timely, accurate, and accessible information regarding the transfer process.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, additional research is needed at the regional and local levels to uncover how these statewide policies are interpreted and executed on the ground, as it could impact credit mobility and student transitions.

## Current Study and Participants

This qualitative study includes interviews with 12 community college academic advisors across NC (Table 1). Participants were asked to complete an intake form to determine whether or not they identified as a primary advisor, with 50% or more of their time spent advising students, or a faculty advisor, with 50% or more of their time spent on teaching/research while only a portion of their time is spent advising students.<sup>16</sup> They were also allowed to write in their role on campus if they see did not see themselves as a primary or faculty advisor. Further, the intake form asked participants to state whether or not they have assigned advising caseloads and to identify if their advising structure was centralized with all academic advisors located in a single unit, decentralized where all academic advisors are housed within their respective academic departments, or hybrid where some academic advisors are centrally located in an advising center and the rest are housed in academic departments. Participants were recruited using personal networks and email recruitment over the NC College Transfer Program Association (CTPA) and NC Community College Advising Association (N3C2A) listservs.

The purpose of this study was to understand how community college academic advisors experience the institution-driven articulation system and to identify any needs they have to better support transfer students. After interviews were transcribed, transcripts were coded in two cycles. Open coding was used during the first cycle and axial coding was used during the second cycle so that the researcher could reorganize the data into larger, conceptual categories.<sup>17,18</sup> Throughout the research study, trustworthiness was considered by keeping a research journal, conducting member checks with participants, and by creating an in-depth description of participant experiences and contexts.<sup>19,20,21</sup>

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS**

Pseudonym	Years at Community College	Role on Campus	Assigned Advising Caseload	Advising Model
Liz	9	Primary Advisor	No	Decentralized
Kevin	9	Faculty Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Mark	16	Faculty Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Sarah	10	Administrator with Advisees	Yes	Hybrid
Samuel	3	Primary Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Patrick	6	Faculty Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Lesley	22	Faculty Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Amanda	13	Primary Advisor	Yes	Decentralized
Kimberly	16	New Student Advisor during summer when faculty advisors are not available	No	Decentralized
Lindsey	5	Dean with advisees	No	Hybrid
Erin	10	Primary Advisor	Yes	Hybrid
Sarena	4	Primary Advisor	Yes	Hybrid

# Results

The following sections outline three primary findings detailing how community college academic advisors interact with the institution-driven system (further described in Table 2) along with what needs they have to better support transfer students.

## Theme #1: Student Challenges and Complexities

- Many advisors spoke to the challenging balancing act of supporting both students who knew exactly where they want to transfer and what they want to study and students were unsure of either. Some students lacked a basic understanding of the transfer process.
- Not only were community college advisors faced with advising students through the nuances of the transfer process, they also had to support students with diverse experiences and needs (e.g., adult students, first-generation college students).

## Theme #2: Campus Challenges and Complexities

- There was no common advising model across community colleges. Each model (centralized, decentralized, and hybrid) presented advisors and their administrators with challenges when advising students: faculty advisors are not available during the summer, advising students and teaching a full load is difficult to manage, and it can be hard to keep up with advising duties while teaching and fulfilling other administrative functions.
- ACA 122: College Transfer Success is a course designed to teach students the skills necessary to transfer while also helping them explore transfer options. In theory, the course is an intentional approach to serving students, but several issues emerged: the course looks different across community colleges, academic plans developed in the course are not reviewed by academic advisors on some campuses, ACA instructors may have unmanageable teaching loads, and at some colleges the transfer content has been deemphasized by including other content deemed equally important.

## Theme #3: System Challenges and Complexities

- Due to the different pre-major requirements across receiving universities, advisors are left to rely on university websites to advise students for transfer. They often find information that is out of date and may not be located in a user-friendly place.
- Additionally, advising transfer students at the community college is often a high-stakes game. For example, if a student is advised incorrectly and ultimately takes the wrong math course, that student may end up at the community college longer than intended thus delaying successful transfer.

**TABLE 2: COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADVISOR REFLECTIONS IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

Theme #1: Student challenges and complexities	Theme #2: Campus challenges and complexities	Theme #3: System challenges and complexities
<p>Some students “are pretty focused, they know what they want, they understand, you know, long term career goals. Then we have a large majority of our students are adult students. And a lot of them they just really want a degree, and they are not sure if they definitely want to transfer, and then if they do wanna transfer, they're not sure where they wanna transfer to.”</p> <p>- Sarena</p>	<p>“During the summer when students are going to be registering, getting advised for that first year, a lot of our faculty advisors are not available.”</p> <p>- Patrick</p>	<p>“Every time I go to their [university] website it looks different.” [I] “can find something on their website one day, two days later I go and try to find it in the same spot and it's like, well it was just here.”</p> <p>- Patrick</p>
<p>Advising is difficult “when you have some that have no idea and some that know everything .... if the support is not at home and nobody's talking them through the process then when they come see me, it's like, this is the first time he was talking about it” ... it is more than likely than not that “this is their first college experience, and it could be the first college experience of anybody in their house.”</p> <p>- Amanda</p>	<p>“We only get down in the weeds of advising a few weeks out of the year and we don't keep up with every agreement ... guarantee there's still some faculty members don't know about them. They have been told about them, but they don't remember them from semester to semester.”</p> <p>- Mark</p>	<p>If the student is advised incorrectly for math they are “probably going to be at the school for three years instead of two years, right off the bat.”</p> <p>- Kevin</p>
	<p>“ACA [122] fundamentally could look different at every institution that teaches it.”</p> <p>- Amanda</p>	<p>Specialized programs can “accept the 60 credits. They dump, you know, 30 of them, into some category that doesn't meet a degree requirement...”</p> <p>- Samuel</p>
	<p>Academic plans developed in ACA 122 “are not reviewed by advisors, however, we do tell them to take those plans to their advising sessions.” And some instructors “might teach 200 ACA people a semester”</p> <p>- Mark</p>	<p>“As a system, it seems like it's very segregated with the community colleges and the universities and there's not a lot of overlap.”</p> <p>- Lindsey</p>
	<p>ACA 122 is “chock-full of so much other stuff.”</p> <p>- Kimberly</p>	<p>You “get there and theoretically, you're a junior. You got your associate's degree. You take the classes they want you to take. But you don't have the progression GPA yet. So, you've got to take 12 hours of just stuff.”</p> <p>- Lesley</p>

Five needs emerged from NCCCS academic advisors (see Table 3) crossing areas related to information, access to data, potentially simple updates to the transfer process and policy, more staff and student resources, and additional support for leadership to support changes in community college academic advising organization and administration.

**Need #1: Accurate, consistent, and reliable information.**

Advisors described the need for UNC System partners to develop consistent BDPs, better maintain their transfer admission information so that it could be used correctly, offer quicker response time and one point of contact for academic advisors and transfer-intending students, and to be more transparent when outlining major-specific requirements.

**Need #2: Data needs.**

Some academic advisors expressed a desire to have more access to outcome data related to transfer so that they can design and make informed decisions regarding advising and programmatic offerings.

**Need #3: Improvements to the transfer process and policy.**

This spoke directly to suggestions academic advisors had to improve the statewide pathways, communication, and organizational issues.

**Need #4: Staff and student needs.**

Advisors spoke at length regarding the need for more academic advisors to engage in intentional and proactive advising strategies.

**Need #5: Additional resources.**

Advisors expressed the need for additional resources so that community colleges can not only dedicate more faculty and staff, but also devote time and energy to developing creative solutions to streamlining transfer advising processes on their respective campuses. Additional resources could provide community colleges with opportunities to centralize transfer advising so that students can build rapport with their advisors; integrate more holistic career and academic advising; ensure that all students enroll in ACA 122 their first semester by offering enough sections and centering transfer content; provide continuous training to advisors; and perhaps implement a statewide degree audit system to allow students and advisors to instantly see how their credits would apply to various programs across baccalaureate-granting institutions.

While all needs are critical to the success of advising transfer students, most salient for advisors was the need for accurate, consistent, and reliable transfer information. This crucial at a basic level for the transmission of information, as articulated by Lindsey. She explained: “You have to look it up [...] so the websites have to be accurate and they have to be user friendly and student friendly. Because there's absolutely no way that an advisor could keep track of all that.” It also helps to encourage transparency and supports the transfer process, as articulated by Sarah: “I think really keeping those the transfer plans updated, and transparency is what I need to be able to move forward. And just knowing that is affirming that we're in it for the right reason.” What is evident among all five needs is an awareness that transfer students want intrusive advising and community college academic advisors wish they could meet that demand, but due to reasons beyond their control they are limited in their ability to deliver. Very often, transfer students and their advisors are left to rely on transfer resources, like BDPs, and the success of their advising is dependent on the quality and thoroughness of these resources.



**TABLE 3: NEEDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADVISORS IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

<p><i>Need #1: Accurate, consistent, and reliable information</i></p>	<p>“We made a really good step towards that with the advising toolbox being made available” [and] “now we need to make sure that, one, all the programs are available through the advising toolbox. And two [...] I think the universities do need to review what they have available and see what they're missing ... they need to make sure that all their programs are presented and available with all the correct information.” - Patrick</p>
<p><i>Need #2: Data Needs</i></p>	<p>“maybe more data on like who's transferring ... where students are transferring and how successful they are in transferring.” - Lindsey</p>
<p><i>Need #3: Improvements to the transfer process and policy</i></p>	<p>“I would enjoy having are BDPs for every program, and ... they don't have BDPs for every program. I would also like to see every university have a uniform format of BDPs.” - Mark</p>
<p><i>Need #4: Staff and Student Needs</i></p>	<p>The number one need is a “bigger staff or a secretary” and figuring out how “to do more things for the students to try and get them to engage” on campus. - Liz</p>
<p><i>Need #5: Additional Resources</i></p>	<p>To accomplish their pathways project, department chairs at a suburban community college reviewed “plans at various universities, [...] looked at what universities our [...] students primarily transfer to [and] built our pathways based on that.” Additionally, the team recognized the need for a “maintenance plan” to monitor and make updates to their 33 pathways. - Samuel</p>

## Implications and Considerations

While there has been much progress with credit articulation in NC over time, the community college advisors interviewed in this study point out potential areas for improvement. First, this study uncovers that an institution-driven system of articulation with pre-major requirements set by individual universities is, at times, too siloed to allow community college students and their academic advisors to easily navigate all of the options. Much of this is rooted in the fact that students in the current articulation system are best served by knowing their intended major and receiving university by the end of their first 30 credit hours in the community college. To assist community college academic advisors and the students they serve, the following are recommendations for reform:

- Review practices of ACA 122 to ensure that (1) students complete the course early in their time at the community college, (2) the course maintains its primary focus on transfer preparation, and (3) that instructor/advising loads are appropriate to the level of engagement needed for effective instruction in the course.
- Ensure that the university websites listing BDPs are up to date and that requirements are only changed in predictable and transparent ways so that students can follow a single plan throughout their time at the community college. Ensuring that there is a single repository for up-to-date agreements or a more ambitious singular transfer portal for community college students showing degree options across institutions, would represent a system that empowers advisors to make informed recommendations and students with the transparency to understand their options.
- Strive for more universal pathways into majors across universities. The creation of Uniform Articulation Agreements<sup>22</sup> between the NCCCS and the UNC System and NCICU are excellent steps and show that singular pathways are achievable and advance a more consistent 2+2 vertical transfer experience.

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