

North Carolina Vertical Transfer Student Voices

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Introduction and Project Background

The Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has been exploring community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC). Findings that we have shared in prior reports include:

- Sixty-eight percent (68%) of transfer-intending students surveyed had developed a transfer plan in their first year in a CC, but only 55% had sought transfer advising.¹
- In Fall 2021, only 39% of North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) transfer students to University of North Carolina (UNC) campuses (vertical transfers) followed a primary feeder pattern (i.e., transferring from a CC to the most frequent transfer destination university, often the closest university), and this number has been declining. Thus, the majority of NCCCS to UNC students transfer to a university outside of the most frequent option.²
- Nearly 60% of NCCCS to UNC System transfer students made the transition after earning an associate degree.

- Higher percentages of students transferring from CCs in economically distressed regions of the state transferred with Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees (i.e., those degrees that are more typically associated with workforce preparation rather than vertical transfer) and are thus not taking full advantage of the state's Comprehensive Articulation Agreements (CAA; ICCA), which are geared toward those pursuing an Associate in Arts (AA) or Associate in Science (AS) degree.²
- Eleven of the 16 UNC System campuses enrolled new transfer students from more than 40 different NC CCs in Fall 2021.²
- NC CC advisors help students navigate a complex array of transfer pathways with little uniformity in pre-major requirements across receiving universities.³

These and other preliminary findings have demonstrated the need to better understand the behaviors and experiences of CC vertical transfer students in NC, many of whom are first-generation, low-income, and/or from underrepresented backgrounds. With support from the John M. Belk Endowment and enhanced interest in reaching *myFutureNC*'s goal to have 2 million North Carolinians ages 25-44 with a postsecondary degree or high-quality credential by 2030, we are engaged in a multi-year effort to better understand transfer student experiences using both quantitative and qualitative data. This report will present findings from an analysis of student interviews, discuss the transfer ecosystem in NC, and propose recommendations for policy and practice based on our current and previous findings.

Previous Transfer Research

Nationally, CCs are the access point to higher education for over 6 million students in credit-based programs each year.⁴ However, 80% of students who start at a CC have transfer aspirations, and less than 15% complete a baccalaureate degree within six years.⁵ The vertical transfer process has disproportionately failed marginalized student groups including low-income students and students of color who enroll in CCs at higher rates than their White or more affluent peers.⁶

While efforts such as articulation agreements provide structure for students seeking to transfer, vertical transfer outcomes remain largely static. This is, in part, due to articulation policies that require students to know their intended major and transfer university by the end of their first year to ensure they are selecting the best courses on their paths.⁷ The transfer of credits from CCs to universities often results in "lost credit" or "excess credit," where credits earned at the CC may not count toward a baccalaureate degree.⁸ Achieving a seamless transfer process requires a concerted effort from state and institutional leaders (CCs and baccalaureate granting institutions) to optimize credit mobility and enhance transparency of requirements for students and advisors.

Later in this brief, we will discuss the many assets NC has in place to help students be successful, as well as the associated liabilities that help to identify the state's key opportunities to improve systems for the benefit of CC transfer students.

Current Study and Participants

This project uses a qualitative research design to examine the experiences and perspectives of a diverse sample of pre- and post-transfer students. Using a qualitative approach allowed us to capture the nuances of students' transfer experiences and to understand the transfer process as they experienced it. While this research study reflects some of the rich and vibrant diversity of NC transfer students, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to all transfer student experiences. Rather, the themes that we identified represent trends and patterns that we examined systematically through our analysis.

We recruited pre- and post-transfer students from seven CCs, five private/independent colleges, and six public universities in NC. We worked with institutional agents at CCs and universities to identify transfer and transfer-intending students and e-mailed all eligible students. Participants were then selected from a diverse sample representing a wide range of institutional, educational/programmatic, and demographic characteristics. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 103 students; 58% were on traditional transfer pathways either seeking or having earned an AA or AS, and 42% were AAS degree-seekers or -earners (a less traditional path). Our research questions focused on understanding how students experienced the transfer process (including transfer decisions, information, resources, and advising) and how students' social identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, first-generation college status) informed their transfer journeys. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and completed between April 2021 and July 2022, with two groups: 39 pre-transfer students at community colleges and 64 post-transfer students (including 47 from UNC institutions and 17 from North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities) (Table 1). Over 50% of the participants identified as students of color and 72% identified as first-generation in college (Table 2). Participation by institution ranged from 1-12 participants depending on the response to the recruitment email. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, as the research team engaged in two rounds of coding and multi-step thematic data analysis to ensure the dependability of the findings.

Table 1 — Number of Participant Interviews by Sector

INSTITUTION TYPE	# OF INTERVIEWS
NCCCS	39
NCICU	17
UNC	47
Total	103

Table 2 — Student Demographic Profile

STUDENT IDENTITY	% OF PARTICIPANTS (N=103)
GENDER	
Man	37%
Woman	61%
Non-binary	2%
RACE/ETHNICITY	
African American/Black	21%
Asian/Pacific Islander	9%
Biracial/Multiracial	9%
Hispanic/Latinx/a/o	15%
White	47%
OTHER PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTORS	
First-generation college student	72%
Employed (full-time or part-time)	61%
Percent of traditional-age students (<25)	58%

Table 3 — Participants' Transfer Status and Degree Type

TRANSFER STATUS AND DEGREE TYPE	# OF PARTICIPANTS (N=103)
PRE-TRANSFER (N=39)	
AA/AS-seeking	21
AAS-seeking	16
Not planning to earn a credential before transfer	2
POST-TRANSFER (N=64)	
AA/AS earned	28
AAS earned	27
No credential earned before transfer	9



Findings

Our research points to five key themes that describe how students experience the transfer process. The five key themes that we discuss in this report are:

Credit mobility - pre-transfer optimism/acceptance and post-transfer reality

Transfer navigation - collecting information *ad hoc* and in mostly independent and inconsistent ways

System complexity - students negotiate a complex transfer environment

Exploration with a cost - CC as an environment to experiment with different career interests, despite prolonged time in college

Student identities - social and relational identities influence transfer timelines and trajectories

In the following sections, we summarize how students interact with their institutions and policy through the transfer process.

Finding #1

Credit Mobility: Pre-Transfer Optimism/Acceptance and the Post-Transfer Reality

Pre-transfer students described a positive outlook as they discussed the likelihood that credits earned at the CC would transfer to their eventual baccalaureate transfer destination. Other pre-transfer students accepted and justified credit loss as part of the “*cost of meandering through community college*.” At the post-transfer stage, some students detailed fewer surprises in credit transferability, while others described a more taxing reality of lost or excess credits. Some post-transfer students who experienced these challenges accepted the loss of credits as part of the transfer process and some rationalized it as a “*learning experience*” and a “*learning curve*.” Experiences related to the loss of credit were most salient among AAS degree seekers (pre-transfer) and completers (post-transfer) and were exacerbated by not having a clear direction from early in the CC experience. We also found that some post-transfer students were unable to distinguish between the credits accepted for transfer *and* counted toward their university degree plan (i.e., degree applicable credits) and those credits that transferred *but did not* apply to their baccalaureate degree requirements (i.e., excess credits). Table 4 shows examples of these perspectives of tempered optimism and acceptance from pre-transfer students and coming to terms with some credit loss or excess credits from post-transfer students.

Table 4 — Findings: Credit Mobility

PRE-TRANSFER	POST-TRANSFER
<p>I know that [a] majority of my classes will [transfer] like the math, science, that kind of thing, but the classes that are just kind of, "Oh, well, let's just say women's studies that might not transfer over." So I'm not sure about the little classes, but I know the big top three or four will.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AS</p>	<p>That microbiology class isn't the right equivalent for my major. Now, I have to take microbiology again, out here at [university] ... Due to those, as well as the very limited classes that are offered through the major and the college, is what put me back a year.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AS</p>
<p>I have asked my advisor if the courses are able to transfer to another school and yeah, she said that they are. So hopefully everything works out and yeah, that they accept it.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AAS (Associate Degree Nursing)</p>	<p>I mean, looking back now, there are some things I wish I had done differently, but I try not to regret it and just think of it instead as a learning experience and a learning curve.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, no credential earned</p>
<p>It's going to suck. It really is going to suck to lose most of those credits. But I accept that. It's just the cost of my meandering through community college.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AAS</p>	<p>I know all of my credit hours transferred, but I did have a few classes that were listed as fall through classes, which basically means that they didn't count towards my gen-eds or towards my major program, but they did still count because I had that Associate in Arts. So, all of my gen-eds and everything were waived, and it still gave me the hours.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AA</p>

Finding #2

Transfer Navigation: Collecting Information *Ad-Hoc* in Mostly Independent and Inconsistent Ways

We found wide variability in the resources that students used to learn about the transfer process and the role of institutional agents in helping students navigate the process. Table 5 includes exemplar quotes from students who sought transfer information from the ACA 122 course and advisors, a combination of *ad hoc* sources as needed, and through independent searching online. Currently, AA/AS CC students are encouraged to complete the ACA 122: College Transfer Success course by their second semester at the CC as part of the baccalaureate degree plan. However, many AAS students had not taken it or were unaware of it, since it may not be a part of their curriculum. The ACA 122 course was perceived by many students who completed it to be highly beneficial, however, at different times and in different ways. Students mentioned specific ACA 122 course assignments that advanced their understanding of the transfer process, including advisor interviews, credit transferability planning, building college lists, and career exploration exercises. For some students, completing the course in the first year as recommended by the CAA/ICCA offered important early guidance to understand transfer and transfer options. Yet, some others may not have been ready to make transfer decisions so early in their time in the CC and noted how guidance closer to the time of transfer would have been helpful. This potential conflict speaks to the need for guidance that includes the ACA course in addition to continuous support throughout the pre-transfer journey.

As some students considered past and future sources of information to navigate the transfer process, students exchanged transfer advising for *ad-hoc* sources and independent navigation. For example, pre- and post-transfer students expressed reliance on department/program heads, faculty members (not necessarily faculty advisors), social networks outside of the institution, and websites to navigate the transfer journey at different junctures. The roles of faculty members and department/program heads were pronounced for some post-transfer students at private and independent colleges who made transfer decisions based on faculty recommendations. Students who did seek out transfer advising named “*patience and empathy*” as key attributes of advisors whom they deemed the most helpful throughout the transfer process. Thus, we learned about interactions of community college transfer advisors and university representatives providing timely and accurate pre-transfer advising, but many students we interviewed seemed to subvert the advising process to “go it alone,” even if some of their sources were not credible.

Table 5 — Findings: Transfer Navigation

LEVERAGING ACA 122	ADVISING	AD HOC SOURCING	NAVIGATING INDEPENDENTLY
<p>My ACA 122 class ... has helped me ... to not just learn about the college, the community college, but learn about my plan as I'm going to a four-year university – Pre-transfer, pursuing AA</p>	<p>When you're choosing classes [at the CC], they have a little symbol that indicates that this is a transfer course...I was using that as my only guidebook, but it wasn't exactly the whole thing. My advisor was really helpful, telling me what I needed. – Post-transfer, earned AS</p>	<p>Between my advisor, Google, and going on to [the university's] website and just basically googling what a 2+2 agreement was. – Pre-transfer, pursuing AAS</p>	<p>I'm a bit stubborn and I never used my advisors enough [in community college] and I try to just find information myself. – Post-transfer, no credential earned</p>
<p>By the time I was a sophomore, the ideas of what I wanted to do had just changed completely ... And by the time any of this would've been useful, like picking out a college. It wasn't time for that yet, so I'd forgotten that sort of process. – Post-transfer, pursuing AA</p>	<p>And for me, I never saw the same advisor each time I needed help.... They were helpful, but I never got the, "Hey, we have this information." They did offer it, I think, I remember like, "Well, if you have any information about transferring, we can help you," but that was about it. – Post-transfer, earned AAS (Associate Degree Nursing)</p>	<p>I'm not necessarily considering the transfer [credit] aspect because I didn't think that there was anything different other than just applying to another school. – Pre-transfer, pursuing AS</p>	<p>I use, like I said, the school's website, Google, also YouTube sometimes. I had looked up and followed certain students that were transfer students from community colleges to universities ... I just figure my way through it. – Pre-transfer, pursuing AS</p>

Finding #3

System Complexity: Students Negotiate a Complex Transfer Environment

This study magnifies the complex systems that students navigate throughout their transfer journeys, even for those pursuing the AA or AS transfer degrees. Between course planning for transfer using non-uniform Baccalaureate Degree Plans (BDPs) from multiple institutions and majors, and complex, institution-driven credit articulation, students move through the transfer process in inconsistent ways. Given their understanding of the transfer process, many pre-transfer students projected that the process would be “*difficult, stressful, and daunting.*” Upon similar reflection, some post-transfer students described a “*disconnect more stressful than imagined,*” and one student noted a “disconnect” between pursuing an AAS and plans to transfer. Exemplar quotes from pre- and post-transfer students in Table 6 highlight how students became aware of the complexity of the transfer process and reflected on the many transfer options available to them. While many participants’ experiences across sectors and public and private universities were positive, notably some post-transfer participants who enrolled at private and independent colleges described seamless transitions due to a clear direction toward a particular institution while attending the CC. Some NCICU transfer students described a supportive and “*welcoming*” environment as evidenced by advisors who “*walked them through step-by-step,*” and simplified the process for them. Though this comment was about transfer to a private university, it speaks to the importance of institutional agents at public and private transfer destinations who provide guidance through the point of transition.

Table 6 — Findings: System Complexity

PRE-TRANSFER	POST-TRANSFER
<p>I recently attended a virtual open house for [university] ... she pointed out some specific courses that aren't offered by most community colleges ... And it kind of just set off that light bulb of like, hmm, maybe this won't be as completely seamless as I had previously thought ... doing more research about the different schools has helped me to see how different they are.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AA</p>	<p>Yeah, I think when you start to get into the AAS degrees, I think that's where you're seeing a little bit of that disconnect. You said the general ed and the Associate in Arts and Associate in Science, those are pretty well ironed out, but for the AAS degrees that are maybe not as seasoned, there seems to be some disconnect there.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AAS</p>
<p>If they told me that I was going to get in and that it would be paid for, then yeah, that would be pretty helpful. But I don't think there's really anything that could make it easier. It's just a difficult process, especially because I'm kind of doing it on my own. It's very difficult.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AA</p>	<p>At first, I thought it was going to be really difficult because of the number of options ... I didn't realize how many different universities there were. Well, when you open it up to online school or online college, it opens up a whole new can of worms because that opens up your options to more options as far as what you can do.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AA</p>

Finding #4

Exploration with a Cost: CC as an Environment to Experiment with Different Career Interests Despite Prolonged Time in College

In the absence of a major/career plan, students used the CC as an exploratory playground to identify career interests. Table 7 illustrates perspectives of how students understood that exploration, ranging from the tradeoffs between exploration and efficiency and college affordability, to drawing on networks to determine appropriate exploration, to seeing the need for additional resources aligned with career interests at the CC. Some students regarded the CC as a “*low-stakes*” environment to experiment with career areas. We also found that students leveraged networks to gather information about career pathways and, in doing so, strengthened their plan to transfer.

Post-transfer students described notable differences between the availability of experiential learning opportunities at the baccalaureate-granting institution as compared to the CC. For instance, a post-transfer student at a public university discussed lab opportunities with “*application-based aspects*” that she had “*missed out*” on due to not having entered the university as a first-year student. Other students noted that they wanted to have deeper conversations with advisors to explore career options and to develop connections between their program of study, major, and careers. Other students simply asked for more resources to help them plan for their future careers. In the cases where an advisor or faculty member provided this guidance, students described feeling supported and encouraged in the process.

Table 7 — Findings: Exploration with a Cost

EXPLORATION VS. CREDIT EFFICIENCY	FORMAL AND INFORMAL NETWORKS	CALL FOR INCREASED CAREER-PLANNING RESOURCES & EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING
<p>You get a couple of easier classes, like psychology, stuff like that that really sparks your thinking, they start teaching you how to study, and then they laid out the groundwork. And it also gives you time that's not very expensive to play around ...</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AS</p>	<p>I don't want a whole bunch of associate degrees just sitting there so that's why I talked to our inclusions director, and she had recommended well, if I am going for my bachelor's degree, I would be able to get my foot in the door.</p> <p>–Post-transfer, earned AAS</p>	<p>I didn't quite know what I wanted to do...I actually, initially wanted to become a doctor, but I didn't have any guidance. And [4-year university] is also not the school to go to for pre-med... Even though I asked questions, no one knew how to guide me or knew the answers to my questions and gave me a good track to go down.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned certificate</p>
<p>You don't have to choose a specific thing. You can go broad. Once you go to a four-year, I feel like you have to be more specific about what you want to do. And so I was always like, I want to be a school social worker, well now taking these classes and doing it broader, I might go for a broader four-year degree.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AS</p>	<p>So, getting to talk with different people, different professors and just making those connections. One of my advisors back in high school had said, “Well, have you thought about healthcare administration?” ... but it's a step into the healthcare world. And once you get your foot in the door there, opportunities are endless.</p> <p>– Pre-transfer, pursuing AA</p>	<p>I'm involved in a lab program that I could have become involved in in freshman year of college and there were certain classes that have application-based aspects to them that are only offered at university, so I did miss out on some of those early on in my college career.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AA, AFA</p>

Finding #5

Student Identities: Students' Social and Relational Identities Influence Transfer Timelines and Trajectories

Our study sought to understand the experiences of pre- and post-transfer students within the context of how they identify to examine how these identities inform the transfer process. Although it came as no surprise that participant identities varied greatly given the student diversity at community colleges, we found that social and relational identities influenced student transfer choice sets, transfer timelines, and motivations for earning a baccalaureate degree, as we illustrate through several examples in Table 8. We examined rich student narratives about the impact of race and ethnicity, first-generation college status, immigrant status, rurality, and sexual orientation on student transfer aspirations and experiences. Other self-disclosed identities included those rooted in faith and religion, parent and caretaker responsibilities, economic conditions, age, and varying abilities and disabilities. While some students reflected on the role of identities and how these identities advanced or challenged their transfer journey, many other students did not identify their social identities as salient.

Table 8 — Findings: Student Identities

TRANSFER CHOICE & IDENTITY	TRANSFER PLANS/TIMELINES & IDENTITY
<p>I'm pretty supportive about LGBT, and I'm a part of the LGBT communities. So, when I chose [university] ... They just had really good things to support the community, so that's why I chose [university].</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned Certificate/AE, LGBTQ identifying</p>	<p>Well, when I first started, there was no plan. Then as I got closer to the end, I started thinking, "Well, I'm already on a roll, and I know that getting that four-year degree will really probably help me out more than just staying with this two-year degree." ...so, I think at that point, then I'm like, "Hey, I probably need to just, while I'm doing school, let's start looking at what this can transfer into."</p> <p>–Post-transfer, earned AAS, first-generation college student and adult learner</p>
<p>My mom highly recommended it ... she talked to other Ukrainian moms that their kids went to [university]. So, she says it comes highly recommended from them...It's affordable, close to home. Just everything kind of lined up.</p> <p>– Post-transfer, earned AA, first-generation Ukrainian immigrant</p>	<p>I floundered in school ... and then eventually went back. And [I] went into the associate's science degree and excelled, went to work, excelled some more, went back to school and now I'm excelling again. But, yeah, it's been a very meandering of path for me but now, after having those experience I had, I wanted to have a more solid understanding of where I'm going.</p> <p>–Pre-transfer, pursuing AS, Latino man</p>

Implications and Action Points

Primarily, our findings show that students experience transfer in distinctive ways. Across the 103 interviews we conducted, the paths, experiences, and tools used were remarkably inconsistent, which is attributable to a number of reasons. Some include the varied sources of information about transfer from CC and university advisors, websites, search engines, transfer plans, faculty alumni, transfer courses, social media, and friend and family networks. In addition, students’ myriad choices are driven by their life situations, finances, employment, geography, changing aspirations, university admission requirements, and program delivery, among other drivers. Issues arise in NC as the major-specific curricula of receiving universities have different course requirements, especially when students need to complete specific “pre-major” courses, and there are thousands of potential routes within the state in terms of CC-to-university transfer patterns and major-specific paths to navigate. Thus, students must identify a path in terms of universities of choice and prospective majors before completing the first half of an associate degree.

Based on the student voices captured through this qualitative study, as well as findings from our previous reports mentioned earlier in the brief, we have found that many students are using the considerable resources in the state that have been created by dedicated higher education leaders, staff, and faculty. Table 9 presents these important resources as “transfer assets.” However, the table also includes related liabilities with each, thus demonstrating opportunities to provide students with clearer paths to success. The discussion below describes each set of assets and liabilities.

Table 9 — Transfer Assets and Liabilities in NC

TRANSFER ASSETS	RELATED TRANSFER LIABILITIES
Comprehensive Articulation Agreements	Not inclusive of all degree types (e.g., AAS)
Uniform articulation agreements	Exist for few program areas
Bilateral articulation agreements to support AAS transfer	Difficult to find; many geographically-driven; not tracked by the TAC
Baccalaureate Degree Plans (BDPs)	University-specific; many formatted for full-time; inconsistent names, formats, locations, requirements, accuracy, and access
ACA 122: College Transfer Success	Not consistently taken early; content other than transfer; not always required for AAS students; continued guidance still important
Common Numbering System (CNS)	Not connected to curriculum
Committed institutional, system, and nonprofit actors	No all-inclusive organizing body or integrated data system

Comprehensive Articulation Agreements

The first, and perhaps most important, assets are the Comprehensive Articulation Agreements that exist between the NCCCS and the UNC System (CAA) and signatory universities of the NCICU (ICCA). Both agreements chart a path for AA and AS students by ensuring a basic set of core courses will fit across transfer options with guarantees of junior status and fulfillment of general education courses, with the CAA also guaranteeing admission to a UNC System campus through the Transfer Assured Admissions Policy (TAAP). The statewide agreements, however, are largely focused on the first 30 credit hours and leave many options open for differences in pre-major requirements among receiving universities, making options difficult to navigate. In addition, the primary statewide agreements offer little guidance for the transfer of AAS degrees, although one in six NCCCS to UNC System transfer students had earned an AAS at the time of transfer. Specifically, the CAA states, “The TAC [Transfer Advisory Committee] encourages the development of new bilateral articulation agreements among institutions; however, TAC will not maintain a current inventory of bilateral articulation agreements for AAS degree programs.”⁹

Uniform and Bilateral Articulation Agreements

There are multiple assets that attempt to fill gaps in the statewide CAAs. Although the agreements largely leave the establishment of pre-major pathways up to individual institutions, a number of uniform articulation agreements have been developed to offer students a single pathway to follow that works for multiple universities. Uniform agreements with the UNC System include Early Childhood Education, Engineering, Fine Arts (music, theatre, and visual arts), Teacher Preparation, and Nursing. Agreements with NCICU signatories include psychology and sociology, fine arts (music, theatre, and visual arts), Teacher Preparation, and Nursing. Each of these uniform agreements demonstrates that coalitions of willing campus faculty and system and institutional leaders can come together to develop more universal pathways. The current liability is that compared with the vast array of majors across universities, these agreements represent only a handful of student transfer options.

Other key assets include bilateral articulation agreements that have been developed between partner institutions for specific programs. These many agreements, often to ensure the transfer of credit from AAS programs, demonstrate how partners can come together to offer transfer pathways for more technically oriented associate degrees often aligned with local or state workforce development priorities. The associated liability is that information about these agreements resides on institutional websites; there is not a statewide repository for students and advisors to seek out to learn about options, nor are bilateral agreements necessarily open to students from all community colleges.

Baccalaureate Degree Plans

Baccalaureate Degree Plans (BDPs) offer another key asset for community college students and advisors. Per the statewide articulation agreements, major- and institution-specific BDPs are to be developed by universities to show students how to fulfill university requirements for a particular degree while attending the CC. They can be tremendous resources for students and advisors, but there are certain limitations to their usefulness. Considering that fewer than 40% of students follow the primary transfer feeder pattern, students and their advisors must be knowledgeable of how requirements across universities differ. Also, BDPs can be difficult to access, need regular maintenance by university faculty and staff, are typically formatted for full-time students, and are referred to differently (e.g., BDP, transfer plan) depending on the receiving university.

ACA 122: College Transfer Success and Continued Guidance

Our data show how ACA 122, a course required in the CAA and ICAA for AA and AS students, but not completed by all AAS students, can be a useful asset in helping prospective CC transfers explore their transfer options. We also found, however, that many students do not take it early enough in their time at the CC, despite the explicit recommendation in the comprehensive articulation agreements to take it at the beginning of their program. In addition, some CCs may include non-transfer content in the course, since it is a class that all AA and AS students are expected to complete.

Continued guidance is also critical as seen in the previous section when one of our participants described taking ACA 122 too early. While delaying completion of ACA 122 would result in students missing foundational information about transfer options and paths, we interpret the findings to indicate that following completion of ACA 122, intensive guidance is required as students' near their term of transfer. As our data showed, students received information about transfer in many places, both structured and unstructured. Perhaps one of the most structured would be a co-admission program, where students typically receive guidance from the community college and destination university. This strategy shows promise as another asset for NC; however, few of our participants had any awareness of co-admission programs. An additional component is access to experiential learning opportunities (i.e., internships, undergraduate research, and application-based courses), which may expose students to career and college pathways while decreasing the possibility of credit loss and excess credit upon transfer. Through these opportunities, students collect major and career advice from sources inside and outside of the institution, thus better integrating transfer choices and future careers.

Common Numbering System

In Fall 2022, the UNC System completed the first phase of a statewide implementation of the Common Numbering System (CNS). This tool effectively maps courses between UNC System campuses and will eventually be complete in terms of mapping UNC System courses to NCCCS offerings. This asset marks an important step in terms of transparency for students who transition between campuses. While it is an effective tool, future mapping of courses to curricula, including BDPs, could also enhance its usability for prospective CC-to-university transfer students.

Committed Leadership

As evidenced by the extensive assets discussed above, North Carolina has a strong tradition of improving the transfer ecosystem. Partnerships with and among the NCCCS, UNC System, NCICU, and individual colleges and universities have driven the creation and subsequent revisions of the primary statewide, uniform, and bilateral articulation agreements, and partnerships abound between institutions. There are also countless faculty and staff working tirelessly to educate and advise prospective and current transfer students. In addition, a series of efforts and other partners help to advance the transfer agenda, including the sponsor of this work, the John M. Belk Endowment; *myfutureNC* and their *2 Million by 2030* goal; the Transfer Advisory Committee (TAC) created to oversee the CAA; state system offices and associations; the Teagle Foundation, which has funded efforts between the NCICU and NCCCS to develop innovative uniform agreements; the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education in their convening of a Building Equitable Transfer Pathways Task Force that involves all three higher education sectors in NC and other partners; and institution and state governing boards seeking to develop policy and strategy to ease vertical transfer and promote baccalaureate completion in the state.

Although there seems to be a strong collective will to improve the transfer ecosystem, there are still structural barriers to advancing reform. One is the composition of the current TAC. The TAC is an existing statewide forum to address real-time issues with AA/AS degree transfer involving articulation between the two public systems. Considering the existence of the ICAA and the importance of transfer to NCICU signatory institutions, a regular convening of constituents from all three sectors could yield even greater statewide coordination to the benefit of transfer students. In addition, more complete data sharing among institutions/sectors, both public and private, community colleges and universities would allow for more detailed analyses to understand how students are introduced to transfer, navigate transfer, earn baccalaureate degrees, and engage the workforce.

Recommendations

Based on a combination of the student interviews, as well as our previous work looking at students' transfer enrollment patterns, survey responses, and interviews with community college advisors, we have two primary recommendations. The first is to significantly enhance *transparency* of transfer options. As described above, North Carolina has many of the assets in place to help students and advisors navigate a complex transfer market, but more could be done. For example, rather than students and advisors attempting to steer through the seemingly countless transfer options (institutions and majors) by searching university websites, all transfer options including BDPs, bilateral articulation agreements for AAS transfer, uniform agreements, and admissions requirements for each institution and major could be provided on one single website or "transfer portal." Beyond a list of web-links, the portal could provide options for students to choose in terms of major and destination university in order to see each and every vertical transfer option appropriate for them in the state. Even more sophisticated and useful web-based tools would allow students to load all of their community college classes to see exactly where they stand toward baccalaureate degree options in NC or auto-populate their courses following a secure login. It is critically important to include *all* options for UNC System campuses and NCICU ICCA signatories to capture the entire transfer ecosystem.

The second key principle for reform is *uniformity*. Considering many of the barriers that students face in obtaining complete information about seamless transfer, greater uniformity in transfer requirements could assist students as they independently self-advise or work with an advisor while attending a community college. Also, considering the thousands of transfer pathways followed in the state across institutions and majors, having more consistent curriculum plans across the lower division would prevent lost or excess credit, which is a more efficient pathway to the baccalaureate. While it is unrealistic to believe that BDPs and bilateral agreements could all be made universal for every academic program, the considerable work already done by the NCCCS, UNC System, and NCICU to develop uniform agreements for selected majors shows that these efforts can be expanded for the benefit of students in NC.

Next Steps on Transfer Voices

The Transfer Research Team at Charlotte will continue to explore the vertical transfer process by conducting second interviews in spring 2023 with students who participated in the first round. The second interview will focus on identifying the transfer barriers and ladders, or supports, that students have encountered as they continue to pursue their educational and career goals. In addition, the team is working with selected community colleges to merge their student-level data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement with CC and transfer outcomes.

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