

# Transfer and Applicability of Credit

CALL TO ACTION



Anticipating a larger than ever wave of students transferring across higher education institutions due to COVID-19 and the economic recession, a diverse group of policy, advocacy, research and institutional membership organizations present the below call to action to policymakers and higher education leaders to improve transfer policies. Highlighting the racial justice implications at stake, they emphasize the urgency of taking action to address practices and policies that result in credit loss.

The signatories are all members of the Scaling Partners Network convened by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The organizations work together under the principle that greater connection and coordinated action will enable the higher education field to scale innovations faster, more efficiently and with deeper impact.



SCALING  
PARTNERS  
NETWORK

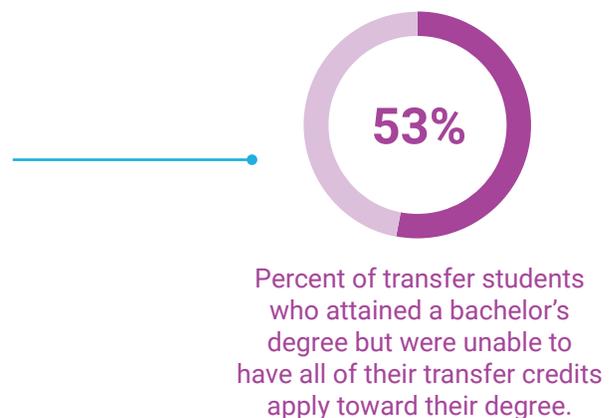
# CALL TO ACTION

---

**Whereas**, several significant dynamics are likely to cause more students to transfer across higher education institutions – in multiple directions, within and across the two- and four-year sectors – over the coming years than ever before. Among them:

- **COVID-19** is causing many students to choose different pathways to obtain a college degree. Uncertain about whether in-person instruction will be possible, many new college students are reluctant to start their college journey where they had originally planned. Similarly, returning students are choosing to take time off or are continuing their studies at more affordable colleges or closer to home.
- The **economic recession** will lead displaced workers to return to higher education for further skills training. Many will bring with them credits earned in college, skills learned on the job, certifications that have workplace value without college credit and – for some – skills from military service.
- The national movements toward providing **two free years of college** and increasing dual enrollment for high school students could lead many more students to arrive in college with credits earned in community college. Four-year colleges and universities are faced with the need to dramatically increase acceptance and applicability of credits earned at community colleges toward baccalaureate degree requirements.
- Student and family concerns about the **rising cost of higher education and increasing student debt** are likely to increase as state budgets and personal incomes are constrained in the current environment. This may cause more students to begin at lower-cost community colleges and to “swirl” once they begin college, starting and stopping to address fiscal realities and concerns.
- The unprecedented number of **college closures, mergers, realignments and budget cuts** will cause students to seek alternative options because the institution they originally attended no longer exists or has ceased to offer a desired program, extracurricular activity or support services.

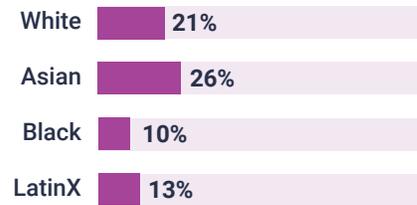
**Whereas**, with increased transfer comes an imperative to resolve longstanding challenges in credit mobility and applicability. Currently, 50% of bachelor’s degree graduates attended at least two institutions before attaining a bachelor’s degree.<sup>1</sup> Too many students lose too many credits when they move from one higher education institution to another. Fifty-three percent of transfer students who attained a bachelor’s degree were unable to have all of their transfer credits apply toward their degree.<sup>2</sup> Repeatedly, students are asked to prove what they have learned even when they come with transcripts documenting successful course completion and/or nontraditional coursework. That practice is no longer acceptable. **The time has come for institutions to design systems to apply maximum credit in transfer and to lower artificial barriers to the creation of seamless pathways.**



**Whereas**, at the same time, our nation is grappling with its history of racial injustice. **Calls for systemic change demand a hard look at practices and policies in higher education that continue to produce inequitable student outcomes by race and ethnicity. Among those that contribute most to inequity in postsecondary outcomes are transfer policies and practices.** Because they are most likely to begin in community college, Black, LatinX and Indigenous students are hardest hit by practices and policies that result in credit loss when they transfer (or contemplate doing so).

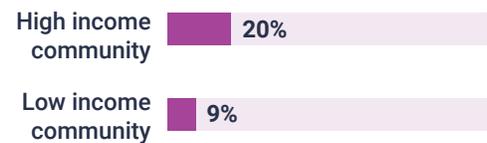
- Black (41%), LatinX (35%) and Indigenous (36%) students are more likely to transfer than White students (33%), including transferring within the same level of institutions.
- While 21% of White and 26% of Asian community college students who begin at a two-year public institution go on to graduate from a four-year institution within six years, the rates for Black and LatinX students are 10% and 13%, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

College students who begin at a two-year public institution and go on to graduate from a four-year institution within six years



Whereas, transfer student outcomes are deeply inequitable by income as well. Forty-eight percent of students from low-income communities and 22% of students from high-income communities started at a community college. Given the broken transfer system, it should come as no surprise that those same populations are least likely to have a bachelor's degree. The six-year bachelor completion rate for students starting at a community college is 20% for students from higher-income communities and only 9% for students from lower-income communities.<sup>4</sup> Challenges with transfers in the higher education systems are primary drivers of serious inequities and injustices by income, race and ethnicity.

The six-year bachelor completion rate for students starting at a community college



**Whereas**, the health, education and workforce impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected low-income communities and Black, LatinX and Indigenous populations. We cannot allow transfer to exacerbate this national crisis.

**Therefore, everyone engaged in delivering and setting policies for higher education should aspire to 100% of students' credits applying to a credential when they transfer.** For that to happen, everyone engaged in higher education must collaborate to make meaningful progress on students' ability to transfer credits applied to the students' programs of study.

**Therefore**, now is the time to take action on applicability of credits into degree programs for all types of learning documentation that students bring to the receiving institution. Approaching the process with integrity, flexibility and understanding of what is in students' best interest is paramount.

**To ensure we are ready for the coming wave of student mobility, policymakers and higher education leaders must be laser focused on dismantling barriers to the applicability of all credits and verified learning.** Only with bold, focused and principled leadership on this issue will equitable outcomes be achieved for students. It is essential to higher education's long-term sustainability and students' futures that every stakeholder move beyond business as usual and reject the status quo. State and institutional policies and practices should recognize that traditional inequities are exacerbated in the current pandemic crisis. We are focused on closing equity gaps that have taken on increased urgency as the health, education and workforce impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected low-income communities and Black, LatinX and Indigenous populations.

**Therefore**, Scaling Partners Network members have identified essential transfer actions informed by research and exemplary credit applicability practices.

# POLICY LEADERS

---

- Publicly state that transfer is a priority, including for flagship institutions, and that the status quo will not be tolerated.
- Interrogate policies related to transfer with a racial equity lens, including those related to:
  - » Allocation of financial aid to transfer students
  - » Foundational structural policies, such as common course numbering systems
  - » Policies on credit mobility and applicability, such as block transfer of core curriculum and/or associate degrees
  - » Tuition policies and price guarantees
  - » State funding policies that reward transfer and completion
  - » Quality of information and advising resources available to support transfer students
  - » Admission of transfers to institutions and to impacted majors relative to other students
- Design state aid to be portable when students transfer.
- Ensure that college credits earned by high school students participating in quality dual or concurrent enrollment programs transfer across institutions by explicitly including dual and concurrent enrollment students in institutional, system and state transfer policies.
- Disaggregate, analyze and distribute regularly to institutional leaders data to understand current outcomes of students who transfer, including time and credits to degree as well as outcomes for those who aspire to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree.
- Incentivize institutions to develop, scale and sustain programs that promote collaboration between institutions, such as robust dual admissions agreements that clearly map student pathways; build sense of belonging for transfer students; and guarantee applicability of credit upon transfer.
- Incentivize student tuition price and time-to-degree guarantee programs for transfer students and equal treatment of transfer student for institutional aid.

# HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

---

## Prioritize Transfer

---

- Communicate to your community through your mission statement, strategic plan, COVID-19 response plan and organizational convenings that the success of transfer students and improved credit transfer and credit applicability are critical to the future of the institution, state and nation.
- Disaggregate (by at least income, race and ethnicity, age and gender), analyze and distribute regularly to institutional leaders data from both sending and receiving institutions to community colleges to understand current outcomes of students who transfer (time and credits to degree) as well as those who aspire to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree.
- Communicate clearly across the institution that courses completed under an alternative grading basis (e.g., pass/no pass) due to COVID-19 should be accepted for transfer admissions and applied to general education or program-specific requirements.
- Repeatedly tell the story of transfer students, including those who have succeeded and those who are frustrated by current credit mobility and applicability practices.
- Develop tuition price guarantees and scholarships for transfer students that replicate similar-situation students who began at your institution in their first year.

## **Create Clear Pathways for Students**

---

- Develop and formalize robust dual-admissions agreements that clearly map student pathways, build a sense of belonging for transfer students and guarantee applicability of credits upon transfer.
- Support full- and part-time faculty and staff in understanding transfer students' diverse experiences and the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for them.
- Ensure that decision-making regarding credit mobility and applicability for individual students is swift and definitive.
- Ensure that degree program requirements and transfer equivalency technology tools are easy to use, up to date and highly visible to students to make it easy for them to understand transferability and degree applicability (e.g., Arizona State University and North Carolina).
- Expand prior learning assessments and credit by examination policies and ensure that those policies and processes are easy for students and advisors to find and understand.
- Participate and expand mega-articulation agreements such as the Interstate Passport program established at WICHE, which enables block transfer across state lines of lower-division general education attainment based on an agreed-upon set of learning outcomes and proficiency criteria instead of on specific courses and credits.
- Examine institutional residency requirements to reduce barriers to degree completion.

# SCALING PARTNERS NETWORK SIGNATORIES

---

Achieving the Dream (ATD)  
American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)  
American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)  
American Institutes for Research (AIR)  
Aspen Institute College Excellence Program  
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)  
Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin  
Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT)  
Complete College America (CCA)  
Excelencia in Education  
Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce  
HCM Strategists  
Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)  
JFF  
JKW Consulting  
Miami Dade College  
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education  
National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)  
New America  
Paul Quinn College  
SOVA  
University Innovation Alliance (UIA)  
VentureWell  
WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET)  
Young Invincibles (YI)

# ENDNOTES

---

- 1 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2018). *Completing College, A National View of Student Completion Rates—Fall 2012 Cohort*. Retrieved from [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC004\\_Signature-Report\\_V9\\_12DEC18.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC004_Signature-Report_V9_12DEC18.pdf)
- 2 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002* (public-use data), 2014.
- 3 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2018). *Completing College, A National View of Student Completion Rates—Fall 2012 Cohort*. Retrieved from [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC004\\_Signature-Report\\_V9\\_12DEC18.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC004_Signature-Report_V9_12DEC18.pdf)
- 4 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2019). *Tracking Transfer. 2019 Update for the Fall 2012 Cohort*. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/tracking-transfer/>; Jenkins, D. and Fink, J.E. (2016). *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, and National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.