



California's Systems of Public Higher Education

Streamlining the Community College Transfer Process Could Increase Access to Bachelor's Degrees

Background

Each of the State's three systems of public higher education—the California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC)—plays a critical role in helping Californians earn bachelor's degrees. Over the past several decades, the attainment of a bachelor's degree has become increasingly associated with positive outcomes, including higher income and lower unemployment rates. The Master Plan for Higher Education, published in 1960, serves as a framework to differentiate the three systems and to ensure access to higher education for all Californians. Although the Legislature and the three systems have made efforts in recent years to improve the community college transfer process, further action would make the process easier to navigate for students and increase their opportunity to earn bachelor's degrees.

Key Findings

- The three higher education systems have struggled to meet some transfer-related goals.
 - Only 21 percent of CCC students who began community college from 2017 to 2019 and intended to transfer did so within four years, and transfer rates were even lower for students from certain regions and demographic groups.
 - Most transfer students who reached the point of applying to CSU or UC gained admission to at least one campus, although not necessarily to their preferred campus and major.
 - Certain CSU and UC campuses and majors did not meet a key transfer representation goal of enrolling at least one-third of their new students through transfer.
- The variation in transfer requirements across and within the three systems makes the process difficult for students to navigate.
 - The Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) offers important streamlining benefits to students who want to transfer to CSU, but community colleges may not offer every ADT and CSU campuses may not accept every ADT.
 - UC offers its own transfer options that do not provide the same level of benefits as the ADT.
- The three systems could better facilitate transfer through more effective outreach and support.
 - The community colleges we reviewed had some weaknesses in their processes for helping students transfer, such as not consistently providing students with counseling and education plans.
 - CSU's and UC's outreach efforts could benefit from CCC sharing data on transfer-intending students.

Our Key Recommendations

- The Legislature could take action to expand the ADT's availability for high-unit majors, ensure that students can access standardized information about transfer requirements, and consider appropriating funding for efforts such as aligning CSU and UC requirements.
- CSU and UC should monitor the ratio of community college transfer students to other undergraduates in their systems, campuses, and degree programs to ensure that competitive campuses and majors adequately prioritize transfer students for admission.
- CCC and CSU should monitor their campuses' rationales for not offering or accepting the ADT.
- UC should either widely adopt the ADT model or ensure that its own transfer options emulate the ADT's key benefits for streamlining course requirements.
- CCC should disseminate guidance and increase its monitoring efforts to ensure that community colleges provide effective support and services to transfer-intending students.
- The three systems should share data to help CSU and UC campuses make more targeted outreach efforts to transfer-intending students.

Most Students Who Did Not Transfer Within Four Years of Enrollment Had Not Applied to CSU or UC, and Many Had Earned Few Units

