

Streamlining Public Transfer Student Pathways: A Case Study

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What does it mean to shift from a myriad of locally developed institution-specific transfer policies to a statewide, student-centered transfer policy? And how is this being done in a state where the higher education agency plays a coordinating role, and each public community college and university has its own governing board? Today's postsecondary students attend or acquire credits from numerous institutions and programs as they work toward commencement. And just as students have been creatively charting their own paths to achieve their college goals, we in higher education leadership are wrestling with redesigning our systems so that students are not succeeding despite our policies, but because of them. In Oregon, deriving momentum from legislation passed in 2017 (House Bill 2998), our 24 public colleges and universities have joined the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) in an unprecedented level of collaboration to focus on improving transfer pathways to better serve our students.

In the last two years, Oregon faculty, administrators, provosts, counselors, student representatives, agency staff and state elected officials have been working tirelessly in the complex governance terrain of curricular alignment and articulation planning to address structural barriers that students face in the transfer process. Oregon's collaborative work is intended to streamline the transfer process from community colleges to public universities, helping students find their degree path sooner, spend less time and money because they avoid earning excess credit, and ultimately, complete degrees at higher rates. The success of postsecondary transfer agreements also directly affects students who earn college credit during high school, a population accounting for one in three students who graduated from high school in 2015-16. Recent research has also shown accelerated learning credit accounted for 13 percent of public postsecondary credits taken in Oregon 2017-18.

As Oregon has moved deeper into implementing transfer agreements, agency staff have engaged with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) to identify strategies to balance the natural tension between the need for improved student transfer mobility and the essential autonomy that institutions and faculty retain in evaluating and accepting transfer credit, an autonomy that is guarded by NWCCU.

This work arose from the clear needs demonstrated by Oregon students who have faced barriers to transfer for too long. In 2017-18, the bachelor's degree completion rate for students who continued to their junior year was 63 percent for Oregon community college transfer students, falling significantly behind the 82 percent rate for students who entered as freshmen. Transfer students acquire more credits over the course of their degree than first-time freshmen, and for a wide variety of reasons, many credits are not accepted in current articulation agreements to meet either general education or programmatic requirements. We believe improving the breadth and consistency of these agreements statewide can provide more cost-effective transfer pathways for these students.

What has emerged is a growing set of statewide transfer agreements for Oregon, branded as the "[Oregon Transfer Compass](#)", which includes numerous statewide tools and opportunities to improve efficiency in credit transfer between postsecondary institutions. House Bill 2998 specifically directed the

HECC to bring together community colleges and universities to establish transferable foundational curricula of at least 30 credits, now called [Core Transfer Maps](#) (CTMs), to streamline general education transfer. The Core Transfer Maps, completed in late 2018, guide Oregon community college students to groups of eight classes they can opt in to take if they are thinking about transferring to a university in the future. When the full set of eight courses are successfully completed at an Oregon community college, students are guaranteed to transfer all credits to any Oregon public university, and they will count toward that university's core bachelor's degree requirements.

In addition to the development of the Core Transfer Maps, House Bill 2998 also mandated the creation of major-specific transfer agreements, now called [Major Transfer Maps \(MTMs\)](#). Collaboration on MTMs began with majors including biology, business, elementary education, and English literature. The Biology Major Transfer Map is the first MTM to be adopted, and work is being done to make it available to students in the coming year (2019-2020).

We are charting new territory in Oregon for higher education, and we are inspired by the commitment of all our partners to see across our organizational or institutional boundaries a common vision to support transfer students. As we celebrate this recent progress with the Core and Major Transfer Maps, we know that difficult work and challenges lie ahead in implementing these exciting tools and pushing forward with additional major specific agreements. Integrating high school earned college credit and ensuring that students, families, and advisors know how to navigate newly developed articulation agreements is especially important as we launch into student centered transfer policies.

Once fully implemented, the impact of these changes will be significant for Oregonians. In 2017-18, 50 percent of resident bachelor's degree graduates at Oregon public universities were earned by transfer students; 34 percent transferred from Oregon community colleges. The changes we are making in improving our systems will provide better options to the many thousands of students who are on this path.

We invite anyone who is interested in learning from, or sharing, this work to visit the [Transfer Compass web page here](#). Additional materials about the development of the Core Transfer Maps and the implementation on Oregon campuses can be found on our [transfer policy website here](#).

Data Sources:

Higher Education Coordinating Commission, Office of Research and Data (2019), *Statewide Higher Education Snapshots*, 2017-18 data. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Pages/snapshots.aspx>.

Development Service Group, REL Northwest (2017), *Soaring to College: Accelerated learning access, outcomes, and credit transfer in Oregon*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/soaring-to-college.pdf>