

Five Barriers to Transfer for California Students:



California
Community
Colleges

Why Coordination Is the Path Forward

Transfer has the potential to improve racial equity gains in student higher education access and success and produce the educated workforce that California needs. Yet, today's student transfer journey remains complex due to structural problems that all systems have created. While good work has been done, much more needs to be accomplished to ease students' journeys and strengthen the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) pathway.

To do this, there must be a clear-eyed understanding of how policies and practices within California's public higher education systems have created significant and systemic barriers that impact and complicate students' journeys. That's why the California Community Colleges created "**Five Barriers to Transfer For California Students: Why Coordination Is The Path Forward**" available at www.TransformTransfer.org. The interactive experience leverages the latest data and research on transfer to break down the challenges into five systemic barriers impacting student journeys.

The barriers include:

**Distinct
Systems**

**Varying
Campus
Reqs.**

**Pathway
Complexity**

**Uncertain
Credits**

**Disjointed
Financial
Aid**

1. Distinct Systems

Transfer pathways are not standardized across California's higher education systems. Each system approaches transfer frameworks differently. Facing uncertainties like admission decisions and financial aid, students are unlikely to commit early in their journey to one system and campus path. Needing to prepare for multiple paths can result in excess units, time and cost for students, with transfer students, on average, earning 13 units over the required amount they need to obtain an associate degree.¹

2. Varying Campus Requirements

Transfer pathways are not standardized across campuses within systems. Many ADT students cannot transfer with a guarantee to their local university in a "similar" program of study due to flexibility that enables campuses to select the concentration of their degrees (if at all).

3. Pathway Complexity

Current transfer tools cannot simplify this complex process enough for most students to navigate independently. While multiple transfer tools exist, they are best paired with counselors to help students gain clarity. However, there are not enough counselors to serve the thousands of students each community college serves: The recommended counselor-to-student ratio is 1 to 370, but the statewide average is 1 to 508.²

4. Uncertain Credits

Limiting credit mobility significantly impacts costs for students and the state. Credits that are accepted at one university might not be accepted at another. On average, students are unable to apply 13 credits toward their degree when they transfer.³ Cutting the number of excess credits in half could save the state over \$54 million in fee (tuition) costs alone if applied to 80% of associate degree earners.⁴

5. Disjointed Financial Aid

There is no unified process across systems to help students map out a complete path to a bachelor's degree with financial aid. At community colleges, students must make decisions impacting financial aid — such as courses, pathways and degrees — without knowing which four-year college they may be admitted to. These financial unknowns can be a significant stressor for students already facing a complex transfer journey, leaving them with many unanswered questions.

The Path Forward

Understanding the barriers that students face and how they are truly systemic will allow for crafting solutions that truly address the challenges.

California's higher education partners must do more through enhancing coordination and communication between and among systems to better standardize, simplify and streamline the student transfer process. Change must be made that reduces excess unit accumulation, eliminates repetition of courses and increases the number of students who transfer through the ADT pathway.

When transfer systems are built to truly work for all students across race, ethnicity, region, class and gender, we'll not only meet each system's needs but also improve the economic health of our communities and state, as well as the competitiveness of our workforce, and make upward mobility a wider reality for more of our students.

See “Resources Cited Across ‘Five Barriers to Transfer for California Students: Why Coordination Is the Path Forward’” for a full list of resources and tools cited.

i Source 1: Mejia, Marisol Cuellar, et al. “Strengthening California’s Transfer Pathway.” Public Policy of Institute of California, Aug. 2023. ([LINK](#))

i Source 2: Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. “Consultation Council Task Force on Counseling.” Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2003; Success Center analysis of Chancellor’s Office Management Information System data. ([LINK](#))

i Source 3: U.S. Government Accountability Office. “Higher Education: Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits.” U.S. Government Accountability Office, Aug. 2017; Simone, Sean Anthony. “Transferability of Postsecondary Credit Following Student Transfer or Coenrollment.” National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics; U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 2014. ([LINK](#))

i Source 4: The Campaign for College Opportunity. “Chutes or Ladders? Strengthening California Community College Transfer So More Students Earn the Degrees They Seek.” The Campaign for College Opportunity, June 2021. ([LINK](#))