

POLICY BRIEF:  
Texas Would Benefit by Improving  
Its Community College to Bachelor's Transfer System

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February 2013

## OVERVIEW

With 78% of Texas bachelor's degree graduates having previously enrolled in a community college, Texas relies more heavily on two-year institutions to deliver undergraduate education than any other state. Though 81% of Texas community college students examined here are enrolled in transfer programs, only an estimated 20% of them actually transfer, most of them without first earning an associate degree, despite the benefits of doing so.

The process by which Texas community college students transfer to four-year institutions is inefficient and the pathway to a bachelor's degree is not clear for many students. Consequently, students are transferring without first earning an associate degree or even completing the Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)-sanctioned general education core, which is designed to be fully transferrable to state universities. This is an occurrence which suggests that most transfer students do not know that completing the core or an associate degree helps them earn a bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, this is the case despite the fact that taking a fuller set of lower division coursework at a community college is less expensive for the student and the state. Moreover, the majority of students who transfer without earning an associate degree do not complete a bachelor's, meaning they end up with no degree.

Earning an associate degree ensures that they have a marketable credential should they choose to not continue or have to stop out before completing the bachelor's degree. Strengthening pathways to transfer (with the associate degree as an intermediate step to transfer with junior standing in a major) would lead to higher degree completion rates and better returns to students' and taxpayers' investments in Texas public higher education.

This briefing is based on national research on baccalaureate transfer by community college students. It also draws on analysis of data on the educational outcomes (including transfer and bachelor's degree completion) of students in five Texas community colleges or systems that participated in the Gates Foundation-funded Completion by Design (CBD) initiative. These institutions—which include Alamo, Dallas, El Paso, Lone Star, and South Texas—together enroll about a third of all community college students in the state. We present the results from analysis of data from one (anonymous) college, although we found that transfer patterns were very similar across all five institutions.

## FINDINGS

TX relies on community colleges as feeders for baccalaureate programs more than any other state.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, which tracks enrollment in postsecondary institutions nationally, 78% of four-year degree graduates from Texas institutions previously enrolled in a community college.<sup>1</sup> This is the highest of any state. The comparable figure for California (which is also among the highest nationally) is 65%; for Florida, which has strong transfer policies, it is 55%.

Most Texas community college students are enrolled in transfer-oriented programs.

In the five Texas college systems involved in CBD, the majority of students were classified as being in transfer programs in liberal arts and science or business. Very few students were in occupational certificate or degree programs that are not designed to transfer. Figure 1 shows the breakdown by major program area of students at one of the colleges, which is representative of the others. While comparative national data are not available, it does appear that Texas community college students are more likely to be in transfer programs than are students in many other states.<sup>2</sup> So it would appear that transferring to a four-year institution, rather than occupational training, is the primary goal for most degree-seeking Texas community college students.

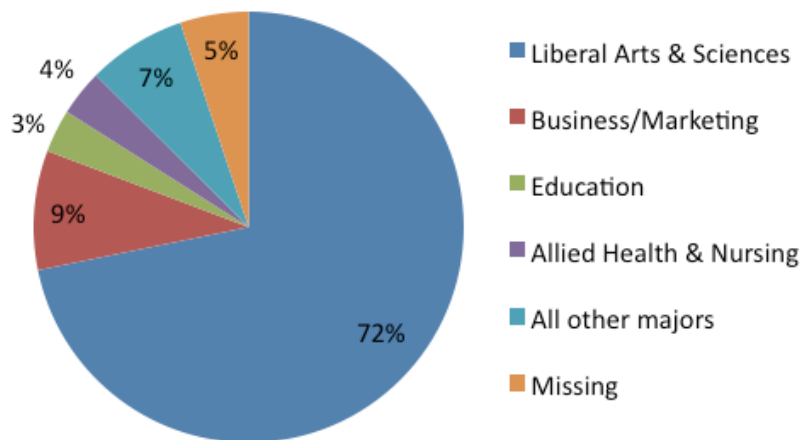


FIGURE 1.  
Declared Majors:  
2005-06 First-time-in-college  
Student Cohort,  
Sample Texas College

Many more community college students transfer than end up earning a degree. Only a small percentage earns an associate degree before they transfer.

Table 1 shows the five-year education outcomes for a cohort of first-time-in-college students in one of the Texas CBD colleges, though the pattern is typical across colleges. About 20% of students who declared a major in liberal arts and sciences or business transferred in to a four-year institution in five years. Only 5% of liberal arts students who transferred and 13% of business students who transferred earned an associate degree before they transferred. Though earning an associate degree benefits students, institutions and employers, few students are doing so, indicating a mismatch of incentives.

TABLE 1.  
Five Year Highest Outcome by Declared Major: 2005-06 First-time-in-college Cohort, Sample Texas College

5-YEAR OUTCOME:	DECLARED MAJOR:				
	Liberal Arts & Sciences	Business/ Marketing	Education	Allied Health/ Nursing	Other Career- Technical
Transferred to 4-year	20%	22%	18%	9%	12%
Earned an associate, no transfer	2%	5%	5%	24%	13%
Earned associate, transferred	1%	3%	3%	5%	1%
Earned bachelor's degree	4%	3%	3%	1%	1%

Twenty percent of liberal arts students who transferred and only 14% of business majors who transferred earned a bachelor's degree in five years.

Very few students complete the TX core—even though public four-year institutions are required to accept the credits.

By Texas statute (TEC §61.821-61.832), the THECB has created a framework for core general education curricula that must be accepted as a block by public four-year institutions toward satisfying general education requirements for a bachelor's degree. The THECB approves proposals from each community college for a defined set of courses to meet the 42-credit framework. Figure 2 shows the number of credits completed by students classified as being in liberal arts and sciences at one of the Completion by Design colleges. Only 4% of these students earned the number of credits required to complete the core. Among students who transferred from the Texas CBD colleges generally, fewer than one in 10 completes the core. As with the associate degree, students appear to be unaware of the value of completing the core at a community college.

## Liberal Arts & Sciences Majors

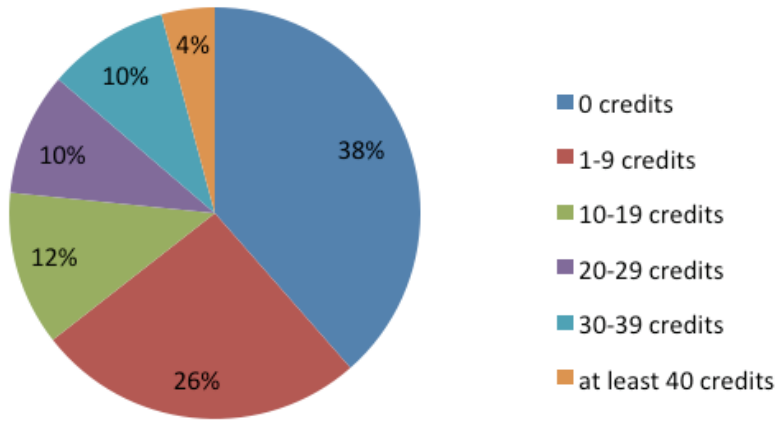


FIGURE 2.  
General Education Core Credits  
Completed by Declared Majors:  
2005-06 First-time-in-college  
Student Cohort,  
Sample Texas College

National research indicates that pathways to transfer are not clear and students are confused and make poor choices.

Research by CCRC, the University of Texas at Austin and others finds that community college students seeking to transfer are often very confused about the process and overwhelmed by the choices of courses and major programs available to them.<sup>3</sup> Though colleges are working to provide more support through improved advising, colleges struggle to help students set goals for college and careers and navigate a path to their goals. Transfer advising and information are available, but studies suggest that relatively few students take advantage of such supports and those who need them the most are least likely to use them.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence presented here points to inefficiencies in the Texas transfer system. There does not seem to be strong alignment between community college offerings and university requirements for junior standing in a major. This is frustrating and costly for students and taxpayers because students are taking courses at higher cost universities that otherwise could have been taken at a community college. Additionally, students may sometimes only be able to transfer their community college credits as electives rather than to satisfy core bachelor's degree requirements in their major field of interest.

Students do not seem to have incentives to earn an associate degree before they transfer, despite the benefits of doing so. This is a problem because many students who transfer without earning an associate degree do not complete a bachelor's and thus end up with no degree. Research indicates that earning an associate degree has a positive return both for the individual in terms of increased lifetime earnings and to the taxpayers in terms of return on public investment in higher education.<sup>4</sup>

In Florida, community college students can only be guaranteed to transfer their credits for junior standing at a state university if they first complete an associate degree. This is likely one reason why Florida community colleges have a relatively high rate of associate degree completion—much higher than colleges in Texas and other states.

Inefficient transfer pathways are a problem in many states, not just Texas. Recently policy makers in other states, including California (for students transferring to a community college to a California State University campus) and Tennessee, have enacted transfer “tuning” policies to strengthen the transfer pathway for community college students and thus increase completion rates and return on investment. The THECB has undertaken similar work in Texas and seen promising results that support continuing and broadening these efforts.

Texas would benefit from strengthening transfer pathways with the associate degree as an intermediate step to transfer with junior standing in a major. This would lead to higher degree completion rates and better returns to students' and taxpayers' investments in Texas public higher education.

## ENDNOTES

1 National Student Clearinghouse, Snapshot Report: Mobility, 2012. <http://www.studentclearinghouse.info/snapshot/docs/SnapshotReport6-TwoYearContributions.pdf>

2 Using the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey of 2003-04, CCRC estimates that among first-time-in-college students nationally who entered higher education through a community college, about 25% declared a liberal arts and sciences or business major in their first year, 38% were in occupational programs (some of which transfer), and 37% were undeclared.

3 Melinda Mechur Karp and Rachel Hare Bork, "They Never Told Me What to Expect, so I Didn't Know What to Do": Defining and Clarifying the Role of a Community College Student," CCRC Working Paper No. 47. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/defining-role-community-college-student.html#.URU8QKXonpU>  
See also, Kay McClenney, *Imagine Success: Engaging Entering Students*. 2008 SENSE Survey Results. Community College Survey of Student Engagement, University of Texas at Austin, 2009.

4 Clive Belfield and Thomas Bailey, *The Economic Benefits of Attending a Community College: A Review of the Evidence*, *Community College Review*, January 2011, vol. 39 no. 1, 46-68.