

California public colleges collaborate on fix to broken transfer process

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More than 50 years ago, California's revered Master Plan for Higher Education established public community colleges as a means to educate the state's lower-division students and prepare them for transfer to a higher institution.

Today, the sprawling system of 112 colleges and more than 2.1 million students transfers only about 40 percent of those seeking to continue on to a university where they can finish a bachelor's degree, according to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

The poor transfer rate stems in part from a conundrum of varying requirements and confusing pathways between schools that finally resulted in a 2010 bill, SB 1440, creating the Associate Degree for Transfer. The two-year degree guarantees admission into the California State University system as a junior and sets students up to complete their studies in four years – an increasing challenge at CSU campuses where high enrollment creates heavy demand for mandatory classes.

Both the community college system and CSU have embraced the new associate degree as an opportunity to fix the broken transfer process. But despite progress in implementing the degree program over the past few years, many challenges remain – most notably, actually getting students to participate.

For Joshua Miller, who expects to complete his bachelor's in psychology at California State University, Sacramento, this semester, the new transfer initiative has worked well.

Miller attended Sierra College in Rocklin for three years, working on transfer requirements and an associate degree, so he was able to complete an Associate Degree for Transfer in psychology when it first became available in the 2011-12 academic year.

The transfer degree gave his community college experience “more weight,” Miller said, allowing him to enter the competitive psychology program at Sacramento State as a junior

and secure a spot in popular classes such as cross-cultural psychology, a required course for the major.

“That set me miles ahead from everyone else” who transferred with him, Miller said. He is on track to graduate in two years, as SB 1440 intends, having conducted research with his abnormal-psychology professor and developed an interest in continuing his studies at the graduate level.

The transfer degree is “a small thing if you don’t put the context to it,” he said, “but it really set the stage for me to finish at Sacramento State smoothly.”

There are not many like Miller, however – at least, not yet. Only in its third year of existence, the Associate Degree for Transfer has produced modest results so far.

In 2012-13, community colleges granted 5,365 transfer degrees, equivalent to more than 10 percent of the students who transferred to CSU that year, according to California Community Colleges Vice Chancellor Erik Skinner.

Eric Forbes, assistant vice chancellor of academic affairs at CSU, said the university system has enrolled about 1,100 students so far who have transferred with an Associate Degree for Transfer. At this point, the University of California is not participating in a statewide transfer program.

A recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California showed that student awareness remains limited: More than one-third of student leaders surveyed had not heard of the Associate Degree for Transfer and they predicted their peers knew even less, though nearly half of respondents were interested in the program.

“There’s a whole cultural shift,” said Colleen Moore, a higher-education researcher at Sacramento State who authored the PPIC report. “It’s been hard for colleges to figure out ... when for a particular student this would be the best option.”

“But it has definitely gained momentum,” she added.

The Legislature passed SB 1440 in fall 2010 at the urging of advocates who argued that the transfer process no longer adequately served students: Because of differing requirements at each individual school, a community college student might take dozens more units than necessary before transferring and still have to repeat courses at the university level.

With a focus on transferring, many students also never completed an associate degree at the community college level, leaving them with nothing to show for their work if they didn't finish their bachelor's – a real concern at CSU, where the graduation rate for transfers is 71.6 percent.

While some faculty initially resisted the idea of legislating degrees, the two systems have since come together to establish 1,147 degree pathways from community colleges to CSU campuses, with another 540 in the pipeline.

The pathways are based on model curricula for what are so far the 25 most popular majors among transfers, including sociology, business administration and math. Students complete 60 units at a community college, including general education requirements, electives and some fundamental courses in an area of interest, then finish 60 units of upper-division work in a CSU program deemed “similar” to the associate degree.

Faculty from both systems jointly developed the model curricula, trying to standardize what was expected of students to fully prepare them for CSU while still allowing some flexibility at the campus level.

“It was a little bit of mixing oil and water together,” said Beth Smith, president of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, who took part in curriculum planning meetings.

Adapting to the model curricula has also required concessions. CSU campuses must figure out how to balance SB 1440's strict unit provision with additional graduation requirements they may have, such as a language class or American Institutions, the systemwide U.S. history and civics sequence.

San Jose State University, for example, has already cut down the unit load in some of its most demanding majors, such as engineering fields, in anticipation of model curricula still to be developed.

“That's the tricky part of it,” said Steve Branz, associate dean for curriculum at San Jose State. “Our degree program has to figure out which units are least essential and you don't have to take those.”

Conversations like those perhaps explain why compliance has been a mixed success so far.

Almost all the 23 CSU campuses have recognized at least one pathway between each available Associate Degree for Transfer and the similar major they offer – but many of those majors have multiple concentrations, of which most are still not accessible to transfers.

“You’re so limited to where you can start as a junior,” said Michele Siqueiros, executive director of Campaign for College Opportunity.

The organization, which sponsored SB 1440, has been encouraging schools to expand their offerings so that transfers have “as many options as a native freshman.” Siqueiros points to the example of CSU Long Beach, which has deemed almost every concentration in the 25 majors “similar” to an Associate Degree for Transfer, providing transfer students with 47 degree options.

Implementation has been mixed across the community college system, which is divided into 72 local districts that have more individual control over their operations. Expected to develop a transfer degree equivalent for every associate degree they offer, about 54 schools have more than 10 in place so far.

Many only have a handful. While some of those are small, rural colleges that may have not enough students in a given program to make developing an additional degree worthwhile, the Los Angeles Community College District, which serves more students than any other in the state, averages four transfer degrees across its nine schools.

Skinner, the community college vice chancellor, is optimistic that the system will have full compliance by fall 2015.

“This has been an issue California has been grappling with for 30 years, and we’ve largely managed to crack the nut,” he said. “Our vision is that the Associate Degree for Transfer will become the default pathway” for students transferring to CSU.

To make that vision a reality, the systems have jointly asked Gov. Jerry Brown for \$5 million this year to launch a more aggressive marketing campaign for the transfer degree, aimed not just at community college campuses but also at high school students weighing their options.

“If it doesn’t pay off the way we initially expected, it just means there’s more work we need to do,” Ken O’Donnell, senior director of student engagement at CSU, said of the transfer degree. “It doesn’t mean this wasn’t the right step.”

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