This chapter discusses the policy impetuses behind statewide pathways that simultaneously lead to an associate degree and transfer with junior status to a four-year college or university, then outlines the elements of effective transfer associate degrees.

Elements of Effective Transfer Associate Degrees

Carrie B. Kisker, Richard L. Wagoner, Arthur M. Cohen

In recent years, a convergence of several forces—increased legislative involvement in higher education, governmental and philanthropic pressure to increase postsecondary degree and certificate production, demands for a highly trained workforce, and fiscal belt-tightening at colleges and universities across America—has resulted in efforts to significantly reform community college-to-university transfer and articulation processes. One increasingly popular method of reform is the implementation of transfer associate degrees: statewide pathways or degree programs that allow students to both earn an associate degree from a community college and transfer seamlessly into a state university with junior status. (Note: These degrees are known by different names in different states, but for the purposes of clarity, we refer to all of them as transfer associate degrees.)

The reasons for implementing transfer associate degrees are myriad. From an efficiency standpoint, states view these transfer pathways as vehicles for aligning lower-division general education and premajor curricula across two- and four-year institutions, thereby reducing course overlap and the need to repeat similar courses after transferring. In addition, there is emerging evidence that transfer associate degrees better prepare community college students for upper-division work, and that students transferring with such degrees are more likely to persist at a university, complete a greater number of credit hours, and pass more courses (Hezel Associates, 2007; Kisker, Wagoner, and Cohen, 2011; Mustafa, Glenn, and Compton, 2010). Furthermore, recent data show that transfer associate degrees in
Arizona and Washington have resulted in significant reductions in the amount of time and number of credits earned en route to a bachelor’s degree (Hezel Associates, 2007; Stern, Pitman, and Pavelchek, 2009).

These efficiency gains, many argue, lead directly to cost savings for both states and students. And indeed, a recent report from the Ohio Board of Regents indicates that the state’s transfer reform activities save $20 million annually, and that roughly one-third of those cost savings are attributable to transfer associate degrees (Mustafa, Glenn, and Compton, 2010).

Furthermore, the gains in efficiency allow for more students to enter and succeed in public postsecondary systems. As California’s Campaign for College Opportunity (2012) recently reported, the implementation of that state’s landmark transfer associate degree legislation has made it possible for 53,000 additional students to be served in the California Community Colleges and California State University systems.

Transfer associate degrees are also desirable from a student’s standpoint. They provide recipients with greater flexibility and more options in transfer, as these degrees are based on general education packages and lower-division major pathways that are common across a state’s community colleges and public universities. Students earning transfer associate degrees are assured that their credits will transfer and apply at multiple institutions—a benefit that is especially important for those students who are more interested in transferring to a specific degree program than to a particular university. Greater flexibility for transfer students also benefits states experiencing enrollment constraints within certain institutions or degree programs.

Finally, transfer associate degrees are viewed by lawmakers and system leaders as key to increasing the number of community college-to-university transfers, as well as boosting the number of bachelor’s and other postsecondary degrees awarded annually. This outcome fits nicely within the completion agenda set by the Obama administration and pushed in large part by several major philanthropic organizations. Although most of the states that have implemented transfer associate degrees have done so relatively recently, reports from Washington and Ohio show that transfer associate degrees have had a positive effect on transfer rates, and that the implementation of these degrees has spurred greater degree completion at both the associate and bachelor’s degree levels (Mustafa, Glenn, and Compton, 2010; Stern, Pitman, and Pavelchek, 2009; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006).

Of course, transfer associate degrees are not a panacea, and the individual and institutional challenges that have kept transfer rates hovering around 25 percent nationally for the past 30 years (Szelenyi, 2002) will not be eliminated by this reform strategy. Indeed, some argue that these degrees and similar reforms to statewide articulation policies are more likely to facilitate the transfer process by preventing the loss of credits and improving time to degree than they are to improve the number or percentage of
students who transfer. As Roska and Keith (2008) argue, the main purpose of articulation reforms “is to ease the process for students who have already decided to transfer,” not to encourage more students to do so (p. 237, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, transfer associate degrees are far from easy to implement (as later chapters in this volume will attest), and are not always supported by faculty who may resist what they see as an encroachment on their academic freedom and curricular autonomy. Transfer and articulation officers, advisors, and registrars also may resist the implementation of transfer associate degrees, as these pathways fundamentally change the way that community college students should be advised and often run counter to long-standing local priority and other articulation arrangements. Despite these challenges, transfer associate degrees have been or are being implemented in many states, including Arizona, California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington. Other states—Texas, for example—have created some but not all components of the degrees.

This chapter draws from a report we published in April 2011 titled “Implementing Statewide Transfer & Articulation Reform: An Analysis of Transfer Associate Degrees in Four States” (Kisker, Wagoner, and Cohen, 2011). The purpose of that project—which was generously funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Walter S. Johnson Foundations—was to examine the political processes, actors, and associations involved in systemic transfer and articulation reforms in four states (Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington) in order to describe implementation strategies that may be successfully utilized in states that are currently embarking on or planning for similar reforms. Our analysis of the elements of effective transfer associate degrees, presented in the following pages, emerged from site visits, examination of relevant documents, and roughly 60 in-depth qualitative interviews with policymakers, system leaders, college presidents and key administrators, faculty, and others involved in implementing transfer associate degrees in the four states under review.

### Elements of Effective Transfer Associate Degrees

Transfer associate degrees can be understood as a grouping of seven curricular and policy-related elements: (1) a common general education (GE) package; (2) common lower-division premajor and early-major pathways; (3) a focus on credit applicability; (4) junior status upon transfer; (5) guaranteed and/or priority university admission; (6) associate and/or bachelor’s degree credit limits; and (7) an acceptance policy for upper-division courses. The first four elements, with one exception, were implemented in all four states included in our 2011 study, and we believe that they are essential to the creation of significant statewide improvements in transfer and articulation. The final three elements are also important but may be more or less necessary, depending on each state’s unique history, policy...
goals, capacity issues, and the academic cultures and traditions of its institutions.

A Common General Education Pattern. All four of the states included in our 2011 analysis and several others throughout the nation, including Louisiana (whose transfer associate degrees are discussed further in Chapter Four), have created general education (GE) packages or modules that are common across the state’s community colleges, and that transfer en bloc to the public universities. These GE packages are accepted in lieu of the receiving institution’s own GE pattern, providing students with a set of GE classes that is portable anywhere in the state. A common GE package is the foundation upon which transfer associate degrees are built, and is key to achieving statewide gains in efficiency and cost savings.

Common Lower-Division Premajor and Early-Major Pathways. Although New Jersey has yet to incorporate common lower-division premajor and early-major pathways into its statewide transfer policy, Arizona, Ohio, and Washington have all developed these sequences in various disciplines, and California has done so for at least 25 majors. Because common lower-division major pathways are guaranteed to apply toward the major at receiving universities, they are widely viewed as key to reducing excess credits and improving time-to-degree among transfer students. They also provide students with greater flexibility to transfer anywhere in the state within their program of study; this is especially important in popular or overenrolled programs. Ohio has developed a process for determining course equivalency based on adherence to specified learning outcomes that has allowed that state to develop pre- or early-major pathways in 40 academic disciplines, as well as 17 career-technical areas. Ohio’s approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

A Focus on Credit Applicability. For transfer associate degrees to be successful in improving system efficiency, achieving cost savings, and creating greater flexibility and options for transfer students, policymakers and educators implementing the degrees must move beyond consideration of course transferability and focus instead on how credits will apply to specific academic and degree requirements at receiving institutions. This is especially important when developing those courses or sequences that will apply toward a student’s major. Ideally, two- and four-year faculty can work together to agree upon common lower-division pathways that can transfer and apply seamlessly at all public universities in a state. In practice, however, enacting common lower-division sequences, especially in the major, can run counter to long-held traditions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. While the latter does not preclude the former, honoring the values of autonomy and freedom, as well as those of efficiency, student centeredness, and the common good, requires a delicate balancing act.

Junior Status upon Transfer. The assumption that transfer associate degrees will apply toward a student’s program of study at receiving universities leads directly to the requirement, in place in all four states we
examined, that students transferring with these degrees be automatically granted junior status, with all of the rights and privileges such status typically entails (for example, priority registration over lower-division students). Furthermore, these students should be considered for scholarships and/or acceptance into specific degree programs on the same basis as native university students. Automatic conferral of junior status upon transfer leads to greater efficiency and cost savings by incenting students to complete the full lower-division curriculum at a community college and by helping to ensure that—barring changes in major—students can complete a baccalaureate in the standard amount of time and credits.

**Guaranteed and/or Priority University Admission.** Guaranteed and/or priority university admission for students with transfer associate degrees removes incentives for students to transfer prior to earning an associate degree (which is, from a state policy perspective, a less efficient transfer pattern), and instead rewards degree completion. Furthermore, such policies ensure that students are well prepared for upper-division study in their major. Most states with a guaranteed admissions policy—Arizona, Ohio, and Washington, for example—certify that transfer associate degree holders with at least a 2.0 grade point average will be granted admission somewhere within the state, but not necessarily to any particular university or degree program, allowing institutions to set their own admissions standards. Transfer associate degree recipients in Ohio also receive priority admission over out-of-state associate degree graduates and transfer students, and Washington gives students with transfer associate degrees priority consideration over nondegreeed transfers.

**Associate and/or Bachelor’s Degree Credit Limits.** Many states with transfer associate degrees have instituted limits on the number of units that can be counted toward a transfer associate degree, and several also limit the number of credits in a bachelor’s degree. For example, New Jersey’s Comprehensive State-Wide Transfer Agreement states that transfer associate degree recipients will have completed exactly half of the units required for a bachelor’s degree, and that universities must graduate transfer students within the same number of upper-division units. Similarly, transfer associate degrees in Arizona can include one-half of bachelor’s degree requirements (typically 120 semester credits) plus one course, and in California, the state universities are prohibited from requiring transfer students to take more than 60 units to complete a 120-unit bachelor’s degree. These credit-limit policies help to reduce course overlap and improve time-to-degree among transfer students.

**Acceptance Policy for Upper-Division Courses.** Some states have also written policies regarding the transferability and applicability of upper-division coursework into their statewide transfer policies, although the intent of these policies varies widely among the four states we examined for our 2011 report. For example, the Ohio Articulation and Transfer Policy (Ohio Board of Regents, 2010) affirms that if a course completed as part of
the lower-division curriculum at the sending institution (typically a community college) is deemed equivalent to an upper-division course at the receiving institution, it will be counted as upper-division credit. By contrast, New Jersey’s policy states that, “by definition, 300- and 400-level courses at four-year institutions have no course equivalents at the community colleges” (New Jersey Presidents’ Council, 2008).

Policies regarding the acceptance of upper-division courses may help to reduce course overlap, improve time- and credits-to-degree among transfer students, and improve system efficiency, but unless they are implemented cautiously, with significant input and guidance from disciplinary faculty, they may go too far toward standardizing degree requirements, and in the process reduce institutions’ ability to provide unique and cutting-edge academic programs. Nonetheless, these policies may be especially useful and even necessary in states struggling with university capacity issues and/or those where a significant number of students do not live in geographic proximity to a four-year university.

While we believe that transfer associate degrees should contain all or many of the elements described in the preceding paragraphs if they are to be most effective in accomplishing the statewide policy objectives of greater system efficiency, improved flexibility and options for students, increased transfer and degree completion, and cost savings for students and states, there is much room for these elements to be interpreted and implemented in ways that support each state’s unique history, policy goals, and academic cultures and traditions. Chapters Three through Eight in this volume further explore the ways in which elements of transfer associate degrees have been put into practice in various states across the nation. In addition, systemic transfer reforms will not be a panacea for all the challenges community college students face in preparing for and succeeding after transfer. Transfer associate degrees must be coupled with continued support for students, who often know very little about transfer pathways, proper course sequences, and expectations for college-level work. As additional states implement transfer associate degrees, and as the results of these reforms are evaluated over time, we will have stronger evidence with which to judge how effectively these degrees meet their stated policy objectives, and more information to share about how various elements of the degrees may be adopted or adapted in other regions or at other points in the education pipeline.

References


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CARRIE B. KISKER is an education research and policy consultant in Los Angeles, California, as well as a director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges.

RICHARD L. WAGONER is assistant professor of higher education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges.

ARTHUR M. COHEN is emeritus professor of higher education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and founder of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges.