Steppingblocks

Empowering Transfer Students

A guide to aiding transfer students as they navigate their journey from higher education to career.

Steppingblocks
Supporting Transfer Students

Transfer students are a unique and important population within higher education. Transfer students often face additional challenges in completing their degree compared with "traditional" students, and therefore require unique and intentional forms of support. Here at Steppingblocks, we believe that data can be a key resource and way to promote student and institutional success. In this guide, we'll explore transfer students' specific needs and the data-driven tools and strategies schools that can implement to ensure student success.

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Transfer Students at a Glance

Transfer students are a significant population within higher education. Whether they are moving between four-year programs or moving from a community/state college to a four-year university, transfer students have unique needs that higher education institutions must be ready to address.

- In the 2020-2021 academic year, transfer students made up 41% of the US undergraduate population[1]

- Of students who started at a community college in Fall 2015, 80% indicated that they wanted to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. However, only 32% of students actually transferred to a four-year institution within 6 years[1]
  - Of the 32% who transferred, only 49% completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years[1]

- Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, vertical transfers (transfers from 2-year to 4-year colleges) has declined by 14.5%[3]

- Lower-income transfer students to four-year colleges were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within six years than their higher-income peers (42% vs 55%)[1]
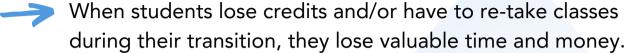
It is especially important to consider the specific needs of transfer students from community and state colleges. Understanding students' intersecting identities and other factors can help institutional leaders provide tailored support to help students succeed.

- 2/3 of public two-year college students work while they're in school[1]

- In the 2015-16 academic year, 67% of dependent undergraduate students whose families made less than $50,000 a year attended public two-year colleges[1]

- Half of all Hispanic and 40% of all Black students in Higher Education are enrolled at community colleges[2]

- 29% of community college students are first-generation college students[2]

- 15% of community college students are single parents[2]

- 29% of community college students have had trouble affording food, and 14% have had trouble affording housing[2]

1. Community College Research Center: "Community College FAQs"
2. Associated Press: "Community colleges are reeling. 'The reckoning is here.'"
3. Higher Ed Dive: "5 Charts breaking down demographic trends in college transfer enrollment"

Why Support Transfer Students?

Transfer students who successfully and efficiently complete their degree save time and money.

→ When students lose credits and/or have to re-take classes during their transition, they lose valuable time and money.

→ The earlier students identify their academic and career interests, the more likely they are to stick with their major and complete their studies on time.

Successfully supporting transfer students means higher graduation rates.

→ Ensuring students know what their requirements are at each institution increases their likelihood for success.

→ Providing students with easy access to resources means giving students the tools they need to succeed.

Transfer students are a large and crucial subset of the national undergraduate population.

→ Transfer students include high numbers of various underrepresented groups. Supporting transfer students means supporting underrepresented students as a whole.

→ Transfer students are a critical piece of the Higher Education ecosystem. Prioritizing transfer student success means prioritizing student success for *all* students.

Who Should Support Transfer Students?

The mission of supporting transfer students should not fall solely to practitioners in admissions or transfer student offices, but rather should be the mission of every faculty and staff member across a higher education institution.

Faculty

Transfer students will need to learn two academic program requirements, and build relationships with faculty over a shorter amount of time than their peers who complete their degree at one college. Faculty should be prepared to support students who are potentially learning new program requirements, learning a new learning management system, engaging with new learning modalities, and navigating a new academic culture.

Career Services

Career services should be considering transfer students in their programming, and ensure that they are prepared to apply their degree to their career goals. Career services should connect with transfer students early and often, and empower them to engage in career development opportunities at all stages of their higher education journey.

Advising

Academic advisors and coaches should be well-versed in their college/university's academic requirements, and should also familiarize themselves with a transfer student's future or previous institution's academic programs. Advisors should help make the transition between academic programs be as seamless as possible.

Orientation

All schools should have some form of a transfer student orientation. This orientation should make sure that students know where to find resources, are introduced to campus culture, and feel warmly welcomed into their new college/university.
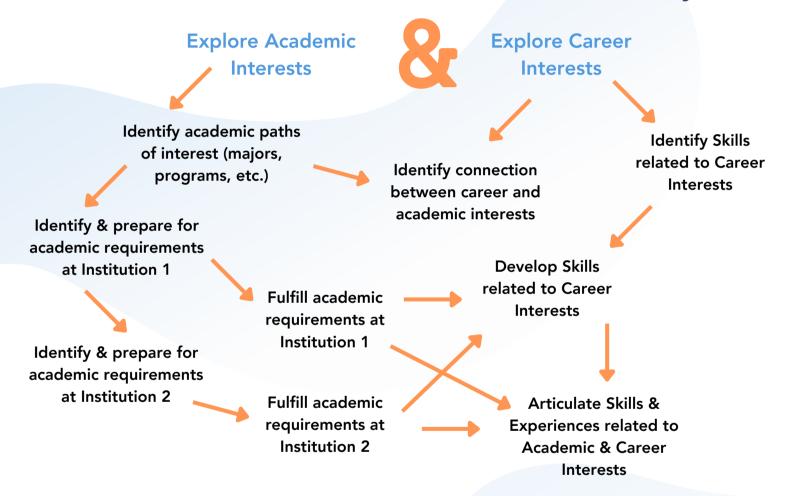
Institutional Research

Any school that engages with transfer students should be conducting regular research to understand the transfer experience. This goes for all departments, but should be of particular interest for institutional research to ensure that transfer students are supported and succeeding.

This is just a handful of campus departments that should be intentionally engaged with transfer students. Other departments include Student Life, Libraries, Athletics, Health Services, Bursar's, Registrar's, Financial Aid, Counseling Centers, Tutoring Centers, and more. It is everyone's responsibility to support transfer students!

Career Readiness & Transfer Students

Things like loss of credits, lack of resources or support, and financial concerns can make it harder for transfer students to succeed. **Higher education institutions can better equip transfer students to achieve their academic and career goals by empowering them to consider and plan for their entire academic and early career journey, not just the immediate next step.**

The Transfer Student Academic & Career Journey

Explore Academic Interests

&

Explore Career Interests

Identify academic paths of interest (majors, programs, etc.)

Identify connection between career and academic interests

Identify Skills related to Career Interests

Identify & prepare for academic requirements at Institution 1

Fulfill academic requirements at Institution 1

Develop Skills related to Career Interests

Identify & prepare for academic requirements at Institution 2

Fulfill academic requirements at Institution 2

Articulate Skills & Experiences related to Academic & Career Interests

Leveraging Data for Student Success

Data is a powerful tool that colleges and universities can use to help students succeed and become career ready. Data allows students to make informed decisions early and often, and potentially saves time and money on their schooling. Helpful data can include:

- Top job titles and skills for their major
- Industry hiring trends
- Top employers for their school's alumni

- Average salaries for their career field of interest
- Most relevant skills for their desired job title
- Common majors for their desired career path

Supporting Transfer Student Needs

Career Exploration

Career exploration is an important part of every student's journey, regardless of what kind of student they are. If a student knows they intend to transfer institutions, it's important for them to be able to identify how and why that transfer will benefit their future career goals, and have an idea of what their interests are. Career Exploration can include:

- Reflecting on their inherent skills, interests, and preferences
- Learning more about different job types and industries

- Exploring employers, job benefits, and salaries
- Networking with professionals in different career fields & asking questions

Both higher education institutions play an important role in supporting transfer students' Career Exploration, and in helping them along their overall journey.

Institution 1 (State or Community College)	Institution 2 (4-Year College/University)
Incorporate career exploration into the curriculum through assignments and classroom discussions (especially through required classes that all students must take)	Incorporate career exploration into the curriculum through assignments and classroom discussions. Since these classes are often offered to traditional first-year students, ensure that entering transfer students have access to these opportunities as well
Incorporate career exploration into 1:1 advising conversations, and connect their career interests to their future academic and transfer plans	Incorporate career exploration into 1:1 advising conversations, and start making a plan for aligning their academic journey with their career interests, as well as how to gain valuable experiences through internships and research

Academic Exploration

Transfer students should engage in meaningful academic exploration to identify what areas of study most interest them, and to identify how their academic interests align with their career goals. Academic exploration can include:

- Reflecting on their previous academic interests and skills
- Learning more about the majors and programs offered at their institution(s)

- Taking classes in different fields to identify their areas of interest
- Creating a plan to link their academic and career interests

Both higher education institutions play an important role in supporting transfer students' Academic Exploration, and in helping them along their overall journey.

Institution 1 (State or Community College)	Institution 2 (4-Year College/University)
Give students the opportunity to try out different courses, majors, and academic programs to see what they like	Help students apply and build upon what they've learned in their previous areas of study to their current areas of study
Encourage students to consider how their academic interests align with possible career paths	Encourage students to make a plan for applying their academic interests to their career goals
Effectively advise students on how they can continue in their academic interests at their transfer institution	Help students retain credit for their previous academic work, and expand on that work at their new institution

Skills & Experiences Articulation

As students progress through their journey in higher education, students should develop skills and gain experiences that are relevant to their academic and career goals. As students develop these skills and experiences, it is important that they can articulate them well to others, especially as they begin to apply for career opportunities after graduation. Examples of skills and experience articulation can include:

- Connecting skills developed in an internship to the requirements in a job description
- Effectively demonstrating skills gained in the classroom on a resume

- Linking a research project to a potential job responsibility in an interview
- Aligning campus leadership experiences to potential career paths

Both higher education institutions play an important role in supporting transfer students' ability to articulate their skills and experiences.

Institution 1 (State or Community College)	Institution 2 (4-Year College/University)
Provide students with meaningful experiences to gain skills, whether in the classroom or through high-impact experiences	Provide students with opportunities to build on their skills and develop new ones, whether in the classroom or through high-impact experiences
Help students articulate their skills in their application materials to their next institution, and connect their developed skills to their career goals	Help students articulate their skills and experiences through career materials such as resumes, interviews, graduate school applications, etc.

Making the Transition

One of the primary challenges that transfer students face is smoothly making the transition between institutions. Colleges/Universities can be hard to navigate, and often require students to know where to go and who to ask. These challenges can include:

- Learning their college/university's advising structure, and knowing who their advisor(s) is
- Knowing the academic requirements for their current and future institution(s)

- Determining whom to ask about financial aid and other student services
- Navigating campus culture and norms at two different higher education institutions

Both higher education institutions play an important role in creating a smooth transition for transfer students.

Institution 1 (State or Community College)	Institution 2 (4-Year College/University)
Ensure adivsors are knowledgeable about academic program requirements at current and future institution	Be transparent about credit requirements, and ease them to ensure students can transfer maximum credits
Develop an orientation process that clearly and effectively explains campus systems to new students	Develop an orientation process that clearly and effectively explains campus systems to transfer students
Check in with students early and often to ensure their confidence and success	Check in with students early and often to ensure their confidence and success

Resources and Contact Information

Check out our other resources for working with Transfer Students:

Advising Transfer Students

Empowering Transfer Students with Digital Career Counselor

DataU: Empowering Transfer Students

General Resources

Steppingblocks Case Studies & Interviews

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Steppingblocks DataU Podcast Series

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Steppingblocks Blog

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Steppingblocks Data Overview

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Partner Success Team

At Steppingblocks, we greatly value the insights and ideas of our stakeholders. We warmly welcome any feedback or suggestions you may have. Whether you have comments or questions, please do not hesitate to contact any member of the Partner Success Team!

Dr. Jacob Bonne | Partner Success Manager
jacob@steppingblocks.com

Brian Waldron | Partner Success Specialist
brian@steppingblocks.com

Amanda Kallach | Partner Success Associate
amanda@steppingblocks.com

Richelle Hurley | Partner Success Associate
richelle@steppingblocks.com

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