



Choosing How to Lead A Transfer Agenda for the 21st Century

Education Commission of the States (ECS)
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This publication shows legislators how they might lead on transfer and articulation. By advancing this agenda, we hope to amplify the role that legislatures play in facilitating degree completion.

- 1. PLAN:** Identify the desired outcomes of a state transfer system and a strategy to achieve those outcomes.
- 2. MANAGE:** Define the legislative role in transfer and structure the relationship with higher education accordingly.
- 3. ASSESS:** Evaluate policy for consistency, transparency and results.
- 4. ADJUST:** Communicate minimum standards and student guarantees for transfer, keeping in mind the state's completion and workforce goals.
- 5. ALIGN:** Explore opportunities to align transfer and articulation guarantees with other completion-related programs, strategies and goals.

Setting the Stage: Ways of Leading

After reading this brief, legislators should be able to do the following:

- Think more strategically about the legislative role in developing state transfer systems
- Explore specific ways to lead on the transfer issue
- Pinpoint specific transfer bottlenecks and related policy considerations.

Before discussing the agenda and policy options, we highlight six types of role-based leadership. The leadership options below complement the transfer agenda by helping legislators choose how they "fit" into the transfer debate. By choosing how to lead and by promoting a statewide transfer vision, legislators can frame transfer as a tool that improves individual and state economic prospects.

Table 1. Six Proactive Legislative Leadership Types

Leadership Type	What's It Look Like?	Limitations	How is Power Wielded?
Arbitrator	Playing referee when disputes arise; negotiating with institutions & systems to achieve minimum transfer guarantees	Mediation often is an intensive, multi-step process that does not guarantee statewide transfer.	Directly: Use threat of legislative action to spur collaboration, compromise.
Coordinator	Aligning transfer policy to completion & workforce goals; working across agencies to develop plan for assessment, adoption of transfer policy	To make a cross-agency plan workable, the legislature must retain its authority to evaluate how institutions implement the plan.	Indirectly: Use resolutions or strategic plans to align policies.
Delegator	Defining roles of postsecondary systems and institutions; letting colleges develop transfer rules after enacting broad framework	Fidelity to the original framework is not assured; punishing noncompliance problematic	Indirectly: Give institutions & systems power to develop policy
Evaluator	Assessing state of current policy — at all levels; ensuring policy implemented as intended	Evaluation enhanced/limited by willingness to act swiftly when policy gaps found	Directly: Use oversight authority to review transfer policy.
Framer	Advertising student guarantees; developing a state transfer message that articulates a vision of transfer outcomes	Without consistent, transparent guarantees, message will not resonate with students, constituents.	Indirectly: Use power to define/refine the official state transfer message.
Policy Adopter	Setting minimum transfer guarantees; creating associate transfer degrees to improve student mobility	Consensus building, collaboration important; comprehensive reform hard to develop	Directly: Use authority to adopt new policies, adapt existing ones.

Common Constituent Responses

The following examples represent student transfer problems: credit expiration, partial transfer of courses from a prior credential and the inconsistencies in how course equivalencies are applied. This section highlights transfer inefficiencies, while the next session describes potential remedies.

The Near Completer: “I attended the State University from 1988-1991. I had to quit because of a family illness. I want to finish my degree in biology, but the university said that none of my credits will transfer because they have expired. I have worked as a lab technician, but none of my experience is considered.”

Policy Question: *Should your state consider a policy that allows students to be assessed for prior learning as a way to earn credit and complete a degree?*

The Returning Adult: “I received a certificate in construction management in 2006. I will get a promotion when I go back for my associate’s degree in the same field. My certificate courses did not transfer to the first year of my associate’s program. Huh? The classes I took for my certificate were also for associate degree students, yet I have to take the same courses again?”

Policy Question: Should your state consider a policy that creates transfer pathways between certificate and associate degree programs?

The ‘Classic’ Transfer Case: “I received an associate’s degree from Gibbville Community College. When I enrolled at Manion University, they told me that only 48 credit hours would be accepted. I’ve lost a whole semester worth of credit, time and money, not to mention that three of my pre-major courses do not even count as core requirements.”

Policy Question: Should your state consider a policy that provides students with a transfer roadmap for their specific program of study?

The Technicality: “I knew that I had to take one calculus, two physics and three radiology courses to transfer my credits. I finished the general education requirements, so I knew those would transfer. The university would not accept three of my pre-major courses. The university does not recognize the courses as equivalent to those in its radiology program, so the courses only count as electives.”

Policy Question: Should your state consider a policy that directs postsecondary systems to ensure courses are equivalent and, therefore, transferable?

Defining the Transfer Universe

When legislatures consider transfer gaps and enact policies to close them, they can adopt student guarantees in one of three ways: by course, by curriculum and by degree. The three forms of student guarantees can be combined in multiple variations to “fit” specific state contexts.

Course-Based Guarantees

A course guarantee is a transfer option that involves the awarding of credit based on institutional review of single courses. Following are a few examples of course guarantees:

- Credit for previous experience
- Course transfer from out-of-state and nonpublic institutions
- Transfer of equivalent or similar courses.

Course guarantees exist in all states, but most policies are created outside the legislature. While course-to-course checks give institutions a greater sense of course quality and autonomy to approve credits, the set of guarantees does not give students a transparent understanding of which courses will transfer.

Curriculum-Based Guarantees

A curriculum guarantee is a transfer option that involves the awarding of blocks of credit based on a legislative or postsecondary system policy. Following are a few examples of curriculum guarantees:

- Transfer of a general education curriculum
- Transfer of lower division, pre-major courses
- Transfer of a sixty-hour lower division block of general education and pre-major courses.

Curriculum guarantees are the second most prevalent transfer type. Legislatures and postsecondary systems are equally likely to produce these guarantees. Two concerns are notable: how standardization affects educational quality and how flexible policy is in reconciling institutional and statewide curricula.

Degree-Based Guarantees

A degree guarantee is a transfer option that involves the awarding of 60 or more hours of credit based on completion of an associate's degree. Since the degree is transferred in full, the following examples describe specific guarantees associated with degree completion:

- Priority/guaranteed admission
- Guarantee that no courses will be repeated.

It is not surprising that the most comprehensive guarantee is the least prevalent transfer type. The amount of consensus and compromise required to create one or more transfer associate degrees may discourage some states from developing them. While the input efforts are high, the ultimate benefit is that students will have complete confidence in making the transfer behavior. By creating the degree guarantee, a state has enhanced its odds of creating a better educated, prepared workforce.

How to Adapt the Agenda to Your State

The five-step framework outlined at the beginning of the brief allows legislators to examine the condition and effectiveness of state transfer policies. Legislatures should identify what role they seek to play and execute a strategy accordingly. All six leadership approaches have merit; legislators just need to choose the role that makes the most sense for their state.

In states where one postsecondary system exists and institutions within the system collaborate well together, the legislative role may involve sustaining compromise and messaging to citizens about transfer opportunities. In other cases, unique state characteristics, such as multiple higher education systems and competing transfer practices, may warrant a more direct role in policymaking.

By highlighting student transfer problems and showcasing ways to lead, we hope to start a dialogue on how to equip legislative leaders for action.

The legislature is an important partner regardless of the type of transfer role chosen for three reasons:

- The legislature has the first right to exercise (or to not exercise) authority over policy.

- The legislature is properly positioned to clarify the role of transfer in state college completion and workforce development strategies.
- The legislature can use transfer policy as a way of ensuring the state receives the greatest possible return on its higher education investment.

This policy brief is the second of several that will examine strategies that legislatures are developing and implementing to improve college completion and workforce development in their states.
