

The Campaign for

College Opportunity

*The Public Policy
Institute of
California projects
that California will
be short 1 million
college degrees by
the year 2025.
The transfer
function will play
a major role in
closing this gap.*

For further information about the projected educational gap, see the Public Policy Institute of California report, Closing the Gap: Meeting California's Need for College Graduates, at www.ppic.org.

California Community College Transfer: Cutting the Gordian Knot

Mary Gill
April 2009

PURPOSE AND VIEWPOINT

The transfer function is under scrutiny. The legislature is anxious to address transfer and student success, perhaps with greater urgency than ever before. The University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC), have announced a high-level workgroup to tackle the transfer function.

This paper provides one perspective on fixing transfer—from a former CCC statewide dean and legislative policy analyst. It is offered into the mix for consideration as an array of options for those grappling with reform. Transfer degrees, recommended below, are a crucial element of reform; but, a defined transfer-degree curriculum is only one strand in the Gordian knot. The CCCs also need an encompassing structure for student success.

PREMISES

- California's future depends on the CCC system now more than ever in its history. Thousands of stories prove its world-renowned value. Nearly 100,000 students transfer each year. Transfer is not broken; however, the state needs a significant increase in BA degree production and we can do better. Given the times, we must take decisive and smart action to get more from our public investment.
- CCC open-access admission is a crown jewel in California's higher education effort; it should never be diluted. However open opportunity is not diminished by subsequent structure and rules. In fact, appropriate, well-defined structure (in admissions, enrollment management, assessment, placement, advising, and more) can fulfill the promise of open opportunity and access, that is, success. Make sensible rules; see they are followed. This is good.
- California must vigilantly protect both academic freedom and academic excellence. We have a postsecondary system second to none in the world; without freedom and excellence it would wither. The Academic Senates of UC, CSU and the CCC must have inviolate control of academic standards and course content, within an efficient statutory framework of degrees, certificates, and goals.

CONTENTS

This paper sets forth statutory and administrative requirements that would enhance the transfer function. The paper first addresses *articulation*—the coordination of academic content. Transfer degrees are proposed to streamline academic requirements.

The paper then proposes reforms in *transfer*—the rules, services, and mechanisms that support the transfer function. Reforms include formal goal declaration, strengthened matriculation services, formalized faculty advising, registration priorities, improved and expanded advising, transfer centers, and broader opportunities in UC and CSU.

- State-of-the-art information systems offer great potential for efficient delivery of highly individualized support services. Where it makes sense to impose the simplicity of statewide structure in return for well-targeted, efficient, and effective individualized services, we should impose such a structure and invest in cost-effective systemwide solutions.

ARTICULATION REFORMS

A Proposal for Transfer Degrees

- The CCC shall offer AA degrees with specified transfer rights. Degrees shall be offered in general studies and in more common majors at CSU and/or UC. Such degrees shall consist of common general education and common major preparation requirements as determined by the Academic Senates of the UC, CSU, and CCC, and electives as determined by local CCCs and students. Such degrees shall be awarded automatically by a statewide degree audit system, where feasible. A student who satisfies the requirements for such a degree with a set-minimum GPA is guaranteed CSU upper-division admission; a student with a higher set-minimum GPA is guaranteed to be eligible for review for UC upper-division admission, except that a student completing an AA degree in general studies (without specified major preparation) has no rights to upper-division status.
- A UC or CSU (campus, school, or department) may impose lower-division content not included in the agreed-upon transfer degree major-preparation pattern, but only as an after-transfer requirement, with clear notice, without prejudice in the admission decision, and with access to required coursework in a convenient and timely manner. UC and CSU maintain absolute authority over their degree requirements.
- Information on the articulation of all transferable coursework shall be accessible to students through ASSIST (current highly successful three-segment database). The state shall no longer pursue common course numbering of transferable coursework; funding for that project shall be redirected to improve ASSIST.

NOTES & DETAILS

Why Transfer Degrees? The CCC associate degree is already, essentially, a transfer degree; however, the degree requirements are neither common nor clear for transfer students. There are too many local requirements and segmental differences, making it difficult for a student to prepare for a range of options. Furthermore, the state would provide a strong message with a highly visible reform—and message is critical.

Degree Framework — The state should establish CCC transfer degrees consisting of general education, major preparation and electives. Note the plural, *degrees*, because variation in major preparation is crucial for UC/CSU readiness. A single, clear path (for each major) is



possible and beneficial. Completion of such a degree guarantees upper-division standing upon admission to UC or CSU within minimum success standards.

- **Required General Education:** Merge IGETC and CSU Breadth into a single GE pattern, building upon work underway in the Academic Senates of UC, CSU, and CCC. The two patterns are quite close and all elements are already articulated on a wide scale. Significant improvement in clarity and transparency may be achieved with modest compromises (probably 38-40 units of a 60-unit AA degree).
- **Articulated Major Preparation:** Building upon the work of IMPAC and CSU LDTP (projects working toward identification of required lower-division major preparation and the articulation of identified courses), identify the lower-division requirements for majors offered in UC and CSU. Use electronic conferencing (such as the CCC Confer system) to bring academic principals to the table for agreement upon the initial set of major preparation and later to refresh and maintain appropriate requirements through the years ahead (probably 9-12 units of a 60-unit AA degree).
- **Electives:** Allow the remaining units to consist of local CCC requirements for completion of an AA degree and/or additional courses chosen by the student (probably 8-12 units of a 60-unit AA degree).

UC and CSU Rights — The 4-year universities maintain absolute authority over their degree requirements. Both academic freedom and excellence can be improved by allowing UC and CSU to require lower-division major preparation beyond the transfer-degree pattern. Departments can respond to evolving academic content without disrupting transfer criteria. Post-transfer lower-division flexibility creates a win-win situation because CCC students would still benefit from clear, common requirements while pursuing their AA degrees and their admission prospects would not be harmed by failure to find out about and take special coursework. The current statute, which allows a campus of UC or CSU to impose unique courses for admission purposes, creates barriers, confusion, and restricted opportunities.

Undeclared Majors, Changing Majors — Students who complete AA/AS degrees, but who are pursuing a major for which they have not completed articulated major preparation may be admitted to UC or CSU (and should have guarantees within minimum success standards) but may be required to complete the same lower-division major preparation required of native UC and CSU students.

Maximize Student Options — A single transfer path (with a single GE pattern and common set of major requirements) for UC and CSU allows a CCC student to prepare for a range of choices and strive for admission at more than one four-year institution in much the same way that California's A-G requirements prepare high-school students for a range of choices. Students are not normally admitted to UC or CSU until late in their last term in the CCC; the current patchwork of differing requirements narrows student opportunity and presents a needless barrier.

Common Course Numbering and ASSIST — Common numbering is an older, out-dated tool for identifying courses with similar content. The ASSIST database provides such identification without the need for a common number. (A student is able to find a CCC course that is articulated to a UC or CSU course through ASSIST. For example, a student at American River College desires to transfer to Sonoma State University and major in Business Administration. The student can readily identify that the ARC course, BUS 340 - Business Law, is articulated with the SSU course, BUS 225 - Legal Environment of Business, without a common number.) The state funding directed at common numbering should be redirected to improve ASSIST, perhaps as part of a shift of ASSIST responsibility to the CCC System Office.

Common Acceptance of High-School Coursework — College-level work at the high-school level (AP, IB, concurrent enrollment, etc.) should be commonly recognized in the AA/AS degree (upon Academic Senate agreement regarding statewide rules for acceptability). California wastes significant public funding and personal investment with uneven recognition of college-level work undertaken at the high-school level. We spend millions on ensuring access to AP coursework, building IB programs and providing concurrent enrollment, and yet much of this work is wasted when UC or CSU fail to recognize the coursework or provide complex mechanisms for evaluation. It would be beneficial and more efficient to require Academic Senate agreement regarding common statewide rules for acceptability for transfer purposes.

TRANSFER REFORMS

Complementary Student Service Reforms

Goal Declaration — Students applying to, and enrolling in, the CCC system must formally declare their educational goal. One option is an AA/AS degree with the intent to transfer.

The current system is quite informal; thousands of students transfer each year without ever stating transfer as a goal, let alone declaring a major. The stated goal on the application should have meaning and consequence, particularly in regard to enrollment priority in impacted course sections, and should serve as a beneficial student structure, an enrollment management guide, and research tool. The goal system should be reformed for all entering students (whether casual, vocational, basic skills, transfer, or uncertain) to drive targeted advising, assignment to faculty advisors, and registration priorities.

Mandatory Matriculation for Goal-Seeking Students — Students shall go through matriculation, including: transcript evaluation, basic- and advanced-skill assessment, placement based upon assessment and prerequisites (if applicable), information on exploring and pursuing a major, and the development of an online individualized transfer plan.

“Matriculation” is the process by which a student is admitted and enrolled. In many instances it is either voluntary on the part of the student and/or woefully understaffed with long waiting

periods for counseling appointments. California suffers from the lack of structure and many students are lost in their first, critical term.

- ***Transcripts Required:*** High-school transcripts and transcripts from all colleges previously attended should be requested prior to enrollment and be required by the end of the first term.

In many CCCs students are not required to provide transcripts until they apply for a degree; their preparation is not professionally reviewed until the last minute—problems are common, units are wasted, last-minute courses are required. The transcript requirement is a normal operating standard at most institutions of higher education. Unless a student specifically states that he or she is enrolling for casual, hobby, or enrichment purposes (and waives the right to matriculation services), transcripts should be mandatory. The state should support efforts to provide electronic transcripts where feasible (among the various CCCs and from California high schools) and local CCCs should work with students to ease the burden of this requirement by providing assistance where appropriate.

- ***Transcript Evaluation:*** As noted, transcripts are most valuable on an up-front basis. Regular evaluation should be done before enrollment where feasible and as soon as possible thereafter to guide placement and inform the transfer plan. This includes all units at other CCCs as well as evaluation of private and out-of-state coursework. In no case should a goal-declared student be allowed to enroll in a second term without such evaluation to guide course requirements.
- ***Basic- and Advanced-skill Assessment:*** Assessment should be mandatory and efficient in design. There should be a close link with transcript evaluation (e.g., if transferable English composition has already been successfully completed, there is no need to reassess). College-level work completed in high school and results of standardized tests should also substitute for assessment where appropriate (e.g., a student who has completed AP English Literature should not be required to take a reading comprehension test). The long-standing tradition of assessing through multiple measures should continue (as each person may need to prove competency in varying methods), but there should be a single, common first step and then multiple steps offered to those who fail the first step.
- ***Placement Based Upon Assessment and Prerequisites (if applicable):*** Accurate placement safeguards the state investment and provides a greater chance at success. To the extent students are bored or find remedial coursework to be irrelevant, the curriculum should be improved, rather than allowing a student to enroll in a course for which he or she is not prepared.
- ***Information on Exploring and Pursuing a Major:*** Students need early information on career paths and majors with continuing access to advice and career-evaluation instruments. Such information does not have to be provided on a one-on-one basis; creative software and referral to references may be sufficient.

- ***Development of an Online Individualized Transfer Plan:*** The state should fund a transfer-plan website for CCCs with links to ASSIST and UC/CSU data. (The state could also transfer the responsibility for ASSIST to the CCC System Office and build upon it to create an individualized planning service.) The plan would lay out requirements and allow the student to see various options for meeting each requirement and could be individually updated as a student successfully completes an area requirement. A systemwide website should be designed to reduce local advising workload.

Student-success Courses — The state shall fund student-success courses or orientation programs at all CCCs. Many colleges report improvement in transfer through student enrollment in a student-success course early in a student’s CCC career. Students learn the rules and become aware of support. These valuable courses also reduce the need for one-on-one advising.

Open Access to Transfer Path — Regardless of the level of remediation necessary to develop degree-applicable level skills, all students shall have the right to declare their intent eventually to transfer and shall be provided with a plan.

The open door and unlimited opportunity features of the CCCs must be preserved by ensuring that everyone can seek help with their personal goal of a four-year degree. Obviously, some plans will include significant remediation.

Registration Priority — Students matriculated into a transfer path shall have registration priority for transferable courses; students closest to the point of transfer shall have highest priority.

Registration priority is currently within the local purview. The CCCs are experiencing impacted enrollments, over-filled course sections, and reduced course options. A simple statewide rule that provides priority for students matriculated into a transfer path and other goal-declared paths (such as a particular vocational degree or certificate) would protect student access to needed courses and be an efficient mechanism for improving timely rate to transfer.

Faculty Advising — Students shall be assigned to faculty advisors who will meet with them in person at least once per term during office hours. Faculty will only provide an overall road map and general academic information and will receive referral training for all campus services.

Many colleges in the nation assign students to faculty advisors. This personal contact can be of great value. Some CCC faculty resist returning to this function for a variety of reasons: the rules have become too complex and they don’t want to give bad advice, faculty development funds have been severely curtailed, and they fear that faculty might get involved in personal counseling. A simpler transfer path, combined with strict limits on the faculty role (where faculty serve as a supportive referral point) would increase student awareness of campus services and provide students with specialized advice on the academic subjects in which they are interested.

Advising Workforce — CCCs should use existing statutory authority to make better use of paraprofessionals (e.g. transfer advisors, financial aid advisors, evaluators) to increase advising services. The CCCs are encouraged to begin AA-level degrees in transfer, financial aid, and other student services to train the advising workforce.

CCC students frequently bemoan the lack of counselors and long waits for counseling appointments. Counselors—those with MA degrees in counseling—are expensive and ‘on the wrong side’ of the 50% rule, which limits spending on non-instructional functions. The expertise of these highly trained individuals is often wasted as they spend hours explaining UC or CSU requirements, rather than working on personal issues. Paraprofessionals (AA and BA degree-level) could do much of the more routine and bureaucratic advising, leaving the counselors available for the critical services they are trained to provide. Furthermore, CCCs could begin to train their own workforce by offering AA degrees in various student-service areas (and provide good job opportunities in other colleges as well).

Automatic Award of Degrees — The CCC System Office shall build a degree-audit program, search each term for completed AA/AS degrees and notify districts of potential eligibility for an automatic award of degree for district review and discretionary action.

Many students leave CCCs with sufficient coursework for an AA or AS degree but do not go through the hassle of applying for the degree. This lessens the value of the degree and lowers the success rate of degree production in the CCC system. Automatic degrees could be of value and worth the minor investment in a degree-audit program.

60/40 Ratios — UC and CSU maintain *systemwide* 60/40 ratios of upper- to lower-division enrollments to ensure sufficient transfer capacity to meet the state’s needs and promises. The 60/40 goal should be extended to the *campus* and the *major* level.

While UC and CSU maintain *systemwide* 60/40 ratios, the individual campuses may vary and thus limit opportunity. For example, CSU East Bay has a ratio of 65/35 while Cal Poly San Luis Obispo (SLO) has a ratio of 55/45 (fall ’08 unduplicated headcount); Cal Poly SLO is allowed to operate a less robust transfer operation. Data on the local upper- to lower-division ratios are hard to find, however it appears there is considerable unevenness in transfer capacity and opportunity, particularly for the most desirable institutions and majors.

Transfer Centers — All CCCs shall have either a transfer center or specific, highly visible transfer services integrated into a one-stop model. Without such a center it is difficult to organize and provide efficient and effective transfer services.

Improved Accountability Data — The CCC system officially devalues the first 12 units taken by any student by deliberately choosing not to account for students who do not complete at least 12 units in their accountability data related to degrees, certificates, and transfers. The loss of a student in his or her first term is a serious loss for the state and we need to have a handle on these students and work to improve their retention. This flawed accountability standard should be fixed.

Money and Health — This paper is limited to academic policies and services that could enhance transfer. Transfer students (and all students) would be well served by better funding for financial aid programs and financial aid administration and greatly improved health services in CCCs. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper but are, nonetheless, very critical to student success.

STATE BUDGET SHORTFALL & TRANSFER CAPACITY

Public higher education budgets in California have been decimated and capacity is shrinking at all our public community colleges and four year universities. Questions arise: If the CCC cannot provide sufficient course sections and if UC and CSU must accept fewer transfer students, why should we undertake major reforms? Why prepare more students if they have nowhere to go?

These dire conditions are not an excuse for inaction; in fact, such conditions demand reform and creative solutions. First, it is imperative to spend scarce funds more wisely. Students should have a clear path through appropriate coursework with as little wasted time as possible. Upon transfer, students should be able to complete a BA in two years without confusion or missing coursework. The public, the Governor, and the legislature may be more inclined to support visible reform; business as usual does not attract new revenue. Finally, we must move quickly to increase BA production in order to meet the economic challenges facing California. Now is a terrible time to linger on the edge of true reform while waiting for better conditions—we must solve these challenges today.

CAVEATS

No two CCCs are the same in their academic policies or practices. For example, one may collect transcripts from all entering students; others do not collect transcripts until and unless a student applies for a degree. Each of the proposals detailed above may already be in operation at one or more colleges; however, to the author's knowledge the proposals are not currently practiced in all CCCs or required under state law (except where noted).

Many of the reforms proposed above would apply to all goal-directed students (e.g., vocational), not just potential transfer students.

The transfer function is improved by items that cannot be legislated, such as committed leadership and campus-wide buy-in for the critical nature of this function. The CCC system is encouraged to continue to work on these intangibles and to honor the best practices that demonstrate success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Gill has 35 years work experience in student services in California, including professional positions in all segments of California higher education. In 1999 she became the statewide coordinator of financial aid for the CCC system and in 2000 she was appointed the dean of enrollment management for the CCC system, with responsibility for financial aid, transfer, articulation, admission, outreach, and health services. In this capacity she chaired the CAN Board (the now defunct common course numbering program) and served on the boards for IMPAC and ASSIST. She later became the director of state governmental relations and interim vice chancellor of the system. From 2004 to 2007 she served as a principal consultant to the California Assembly Committee on Higher Education. Mary may be contacted at marygill@pacbell.net.