June 24, 2021

California Leaves Nearly $100 Million on the Table Annually By Underutilizing Successful Community College Transfer Pathway

By not scaling the Associate Degree for Transfer, Less Than 3% of Community College Students Transfer After 2 Years; Less than half after 6 Years

Los Angeles, CA – Less than 3% of California community college students transfer in two years, 23% in four years, and 40% in six years, according to a report released today by the Campaign for College Opportunity titled, “Chutes or Ladders: Strengthening California Community College Transfer So More Students Earn the Degrees They Seek.”

The report finds that students are up against multiple barriers, including duplicative, ever-changing coursework requirements and a lack of unified, systemwide, transferrable course agreements between colleges and universities. The result is that students accumulate approximately 25 - 31 excess course credits, spending far too much time and money attempting to transfer and earn their bachelor’s degrees. Even after six years, 60% do not transfer at all.

Strengthening implementation of the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) is the proven solution to eliminating these barriers. The ADT pathway, created in 2010 via the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act (SB 1440 Padilla), is a streamlined transfer pathway that provides students with a 60-unit coursework path and guarantees admission to the California State University (CSU) with junior standing. The ADT was created to simplify and streamline transfer and to become the preferred path by which all California Community College students transfer. Over the last ten years, the Associate Degree for Transfer has improved the transfer pathway:

- Students earning ADTs graduate with 6.5 fewer excess credits than students who earned traditional associate degrees, resulting in savings of $10,429,293 in community college fees in the 20019-2020 school year alone.
- More than half of students who transfer to a CSU on a guaranteed ADT pathway are graduating with their bachelor’s degrees in two years, outpacing traditional transfer students.
- The ADT is increasing minoritized students’ college success: More than half (54%) of Latinx students earning associate degrees from the California Community Colleges are earning ADTs.

However, improvements to ADT implementation are needed:

- The ADT pathways remain underutilized. In the 2019 – 2020 school year, 48% of students earn an ADT compared to the 52% of students who earned an AA/AS degree.
• ADT enrollment has increased steadily at the CSU, but not all students with ADTs are on a guaranteed path, meaning they enroll without the benefit of junior standing.

• While the percentage of Black graduates earning ADTs has doubled over the past five years, only 37% of Black community college students who earn associate degrees are awarded ADTs.

• Students earning ADTs still complete excess credits – an average of 84 semester credits at community colleges – despite the typical associate degree requiring 60 semester credits.

• California Community College students intending to transfer often have to make a decision early in their trajectories on whether to apply to the CSU or the UC, instead of both. In California’s K-12 system, high school students can take one curricular pathway (A-G) with different grade point average requirements to be qualified for admission to both systems. By not further aligning the ADT with UC admissions and creating an admission guarantee for ADT earners, the UC is adding to the complexity of transfer.

Through faithful implementation of the ADT, college and state leaders can save California millions. Students earning ADTs in 2019-2020 saved $10,429,293 in community college fees (tuition). But California and its students could save up to $97 million if public colleges and universities commit to ensuring a 60-unit pathway, as the ADT originally intended, and ensure that 80% of transfer-seeking students are on an ADT pathway.

Despite the academic and economic benefits to the students and the state, the ADT pathway remains underutilized. Each of California’s segments of public higher education has a role they are playing in the underutilization of the ADT: California Community Colleges have not made the ADT the primary pathway for students to transfer; impaction at the CSU (when a campus has reached its enrollment capacity and cannot accommodate all the eligible applicants) means ADT students take more than the required 60 units to be competitive enough to get into their campus of choice; and the University of California does not guarantee admission or junior standing to ADT earners, so an ADT student may accumulate more units to be eligible for both the CSU and UC.

California has a unique opportunity to scale the ADT pathway and improve transfer through Assembly Bill 928 (Berman). The bill, currently in the Senate, would create an intersegmental implementation committee to focus on improving transfer outcomes for all students, set a target date for the CSU and UC to establish a singular lower-division general education pathway that meets transfer admission to both institutions, and require community college students be placed on an ADT pathway where one exists for their major (with opt-out options available).

“A deeper commitment to the Associate Degree for Transfer is needed to improve transfer rates, save money, and close racial equity gaps in college success,” said Michele Siqueiros, Campaign for College Opportunity president. “We cannot truly address racial inequity in higher education without eliminating barriers to transfer. Community colleges are the entry point to higher education for the majority of Black and Latinx students in California. We must use proven solutions like the Associate Degree for Transfer to ensure that these students can earn their bachelor’s degrees.”

Read the full report here.
The Campaign for College Opportunity is a California non-profit bipartisan policy and research organization focused on a single mission: to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy. For more information, visit www.CollegeCampaign.org/ Facebook.com/CollegeCampaign or follow @CollegeOpp on Twitter and Instagram.