

Executive Summary

JUNE 2018

Navigating Vertical Transfer Online: Access to and Navigability of Information on Community College Websites



Project Aims

Nationally, 80% of first-time community college entrants aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, but only a quarter transfer to a bachelor's-degree-granting institution within 6 years (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). Transfer patterns in Texas mirror those across the nation (THECB, 2014). While there are a variety of explanations for the faulty transfer function, stakeholders in higher education acknowledge the challenges posed by bureaucratic hurdles, complex and opaque information, and inadequate support services to navigate transfer.

Recent research highlights the increasingly important role that online information plays in helping students navigate college (GAO, 2017; Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Margolin, Miller, & Rosenbaum, 2013). This paper examines the online transfer information that colleges offer to students as they navigate the bureaucratic hurdles and coursework that must be traversed in order to achieve important milestones at a community college. We

examined the online transfer information on 20 Texas community college websites. We assessed the ease of access and navigability of the information provided and spoke to key transfer personnel about how they provide transfer information to their students, including questions regarding their interpretation of the ease with which students can find that information through their college's website.

Methodological Approach

We selected 20 community colleges using measures of transfer success based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse to ensure adequate variation based on institutional performance on transfer outcomes. We reviewed the websites of each of the colleges in the sample, coding the ease of access and navigability of transfer information based on a 5-point scale. For example, the highest score of a 5 on the "ease of access" rubric indicates that students can locate the online transfer information easily within their first visit to the college website

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because it is intuitively located and labeled. A score of 1 indicates that most information is unavailable or cannot be found within a few minutes of searching and browsing. We also interviewed 26 transfer-related personnel from 18 colleges in our sample. In one-hour, semi-structured telephone interviews we spoke to staff members about the information offered to students to help them navigate transfer, including how they perceive their college's online transfer information.

Key Findings

Together, each component of our analysis illuminated the logic behind several trends related to barriers in the transfer process due to information constraints and information overload. We highlight where the two methods of inquiry reveal competing narratives between the perceptions of staff and the reality of their online information and interpret the potential impact of those discrepancies. Overall, the following themes emerged:

- Deficient ease of access and navigability of online information. Half of the community colleges in our sample fell below the standards our rubric proposes to ensure that students can locate and understand transfer options and requirements. Many community college staff members acknowledge the difficulty even they have in locating transfer information that is complete and up to date.
- Reliance on university webpages. Of those community colleges who provide online information, the vast majority rely heavily on 4-year institutions to generate, disseminate, and update that information. Community colleges act as curators of online transfer information, linking to the websites of common transfer destinations and/or regional 4-year institutions. When universities fail to update their publicly available information, community college

staff members note that professional networks are often the only means of accessing accurate transfer requirements to offer to students.

- Skepticism over online information as a solution. Many administrators perceived that students do not take advantage of online information, even at colleges that offer very accessible and navigable transfer information. This observation made administrators more likely to note the importance of face-to-face advising as the primary source of transfer information or, at the least, to prompt students to examine online transfer information.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Colleges that provide accessible and navigable transfer information enable all students access to the requirements for transfer. The findings from our website review support Rosenbaum et al.'s (2007) description of a "hidden curriculum" of transfer. Among the colleges in our sample, half failed to meet the highest rating for either ease of access and navigability of online transfer information, which suggests there is quite a bit of work to do to improve the dissemination of transfer information. One of the 20 colleges failed to post any transfer information, and several others offered transfer webpages that were riddled with broken links and out-of-date information. For the most part, personnel who participated in our study recognized the strengths and limitations of their online information, though several felt that online information was not as promising an intervention as face-to-face advising. To assuage concerns regarding inadequacies of online content and improve online transfer information, institutions might use the framework provided by our rubric to guide their assessment of online transfer information provided to students.

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