Executive Summary

How Political and Ecological Contexts Shape Information-Seeking Behaviors of Transfer-Intending Community College Students

Project Aims
Despite high aspirations to earn a bachelor’s degree, most community college entrants never transfer. Transfer processes are incredibly complex for transfer-intending students, often requiring that they compare several different transfer options, including various majors or prospective universities. In Texas, despite several mandated policies to facilitate smooth transfer, students and advisors are often left to navigate transfer plans and agreements across different colleges and programs in order to understand the requirements for transfer.

To understand how university and community college staff create and maintain transfer rules and norms and how students navigate the transfer landscape, we use the concept of strategic action fields, a theory that captures processes that play out as organizational actors determine “who gets what” in an existing power structure (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 3). We draw on data from interviews with transfer-intending community college students, college administrators, and transfer services personnel at two Texas community college districts, as well as admissions and transfer personnel at public universities throughout the state. We examine the rules for transfer, the roles of various actors in negotiating and supporting the rules, how institutional actors interact with one another and with student actors, and, ultimately, the implications of these political-ecological contexts for transfer-intending students.

Methodological Approach
We used interviews of administrators and staff at community colleges and public universities in Texas, along with longitudinal interviews with transfer-intending students in two community college systems in central Texas. To understand the state and institutional contexts, we interviewed advisors and administrators at the sampled community colleges (n = 12) and admissions staff and administrators at common destination public universities for our sampled community colleges (n = 14). We asked staff about the role that state policies and institutional partnerships play in transfer processes, the structure of transfer services at their institution, the information that students receive about transfer options, and barriers students face in transferring. We also conducted interviews with 57 community college students in fall 2015 and fall 2016, and obtained their transfer status in fall 2017 (two years after the initial interview). We asked students about their educational goals, what information sources they used when learning about transfer, where and how they obtained information about potential destination institutions, and their use of community college support services.
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To examine the organizational nature of postsecondary transfer, our interrelated research questions ask: 1) how institutional actors—community college advisors, administrators, and other transfer-related staff and university recruiters, admissions personnel, and transfer support staff—interact with other actors to create and maintain rules and norms in the field of postsecondary transfer; 2) how students respond to the rules and norms of the field; and 3) how students’ responses correspond with their transfer outcomes. We initially coded the interviews for themes, starting with broad codes developed from the literature then adding in inductive codes in our second round of coding. After coding, we developed matrices and memos to illuminate the broad patterns from the data and develop our main findings.

Key Findings
Our interviews with staff illuminated several rules and norms of the field of institutional transfer. We observed the norm that universities set the standards not only for admission, but for how credits transfer and which information is provided to other actors in the field. Every university can set their own requirements for a given program, where the faculty in a department have power to determine whether and how certain credits count toward a degree. There was also an expectation in the field that students were responsible for seeking information about transfer options and requirements for prospective programs, that community college staff should help students navigate that information, and that university administrators and admissions personnel have to comply with state policies like the core curriculum, but also dictate what counts toward a degree.

Thus, the actors with the most privilege in the field are university administrators and faculty. These actors have a variety of actions available to them and broadly shape the field, setting the standards for admission to certain programs, determining curricula and how credits will transfer, and facilitating (or thwarting) the development of transfer agreements. Actors at the state’s flagship universities hold the greatest advantage, though those with similar positions at less prestigious universities similarly benefit from their position in the field. Community college advisors, the institutional actors who worked most closely with transfer-intending students, typically accepted the field as it was and described students’ role as one where they must inform themselves as much as possible. Many staff in advising and transfer offices at the community colleges were responsible for “organizing and presenting all of the universities’ requirements” for students. But given the array of requirements and variation in programs, they often acknowledged that they could not keep up with this task.

We also examined responses of student actors to the field of postsecondary transfer. With limited power and influence, students are dominated actors in the field, trying to gain advantage. Their primary means of gaining advantage in their role is through gathering information about transfer. We found evidence of four information-seeking approaches students take to navigate transfer: resource curators, system trusters, hesitant advisees, and disconnected students. Resource curation—where students sought information on transfer from a variety of sources and worked to triangulate across gathered information—was the most common approach across our sample. The postsecondary transfer field and the institutional actors that maintain the rules and norms appear to expect resource curation, which requires a great deal of time and energy, of student actors. Indeed, students who pursued information from various actors and sources at their community college, prospective universities, and beyond were most likely to build sufficient information to successfully transfer. Hesitant advisees were the second most common information-gathering type in our sample. Unlike resource curators, hesitant advisees failed to find someone at the institution to confirm or help them sort through transfer information, which sometimes resulted in their inability to identify complete and accurate transfer information. System trusters, on the other hand, put a lot of faith in their advisors. In many cases, they received a transfer or degree plan and adhered to it, but this approach was only successful if their advisor provided accurate information that aligned with their desired university and program. Finally, disconnected students did not seek transfer information to move toward their transfer aspirations and often fell through the cracks, as institutional actors in the field expected students to “opt-in” to receive transfer information by asking advising staff about transfer directly.

Implications for Policy and Practice
By developing a field-level perspective of transfer, we move beyond the organizational perspective focused on the community college as a standalone institution. We interpret students’ actions and behaviors in response to this field, not just a function of individual background and interactions with community college staff. Rather than place responsibility for transfer outcomes on either the student or the community college actors, we interpret their actions in response to a broader set of rules and norms. Our study builds on earlier work on this topic, but by focusing on field-level rules and constraints, we discuss challenges in the broader higher education system to improving transfer pathways and their repercussions for students.

Field-level dynamics are indicative of the political-ecological forces that could further influence how students navigate community college and beyond. The broader postsecondary environment, where public institutions fail to establish and elucidate transfer pathways, creates unique challenges and requires students to curate information from a variety of sources. Higher education reforms that focus only on community colleges may be ineffective at improving baccalaureate attainment if they do not work to disrupt the current rules and norms of the broader postsecondary transfer field.