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

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Community colleges educate one third of American college students, disproportionately enrolling Black, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Of the 80% of community college entrants aiming to transfer “vertically” to a baccalaureate-granting institution, fewer than a third do (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2017). Early theories from sociology argue that community colleges “cool out” or manage student ambitions, diverting those who otherwise would enter a university from earning a baccalaureate (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960). A counterargument describes inadequate structure, where community colleges lack the institutional supports, academic or otherwise, to maintain students’ momentum and keep them on path toward a degree (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Brint, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2007; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Despite recent attention to community college structure, research aimed at understanding why so few community college entrants earn a baccalaureate largely ignores the broader ecological contexts that shape institutional transfer.

Community colleges are part of complex, loosely coupled higher education systems where institutions operate independently and coordination across institutions is difficult (Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986). To facilitate college transfer, institutional staff follow agreed-upon rules and procedures; students must navigate rules and norms to successfully transition from one institution to another. The interactions between community college students, staff, and university personnel are best understood by examining the social order within which the interactions occur.

To illuminate the role of political-ecological contexts in vertical transfer, we leverage the concept of strategic action fields, an organizational theory that focuses on the processes that play
out as actors interact to 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, administrators, and transfer services personnel at two Texas community college districts, as well as administrators, admissions staff, and transfer personnel at public universities throughout the state. We use the interviews with college and university personnel to understand the rules of transfer, the roles of various actors in negotiating and maintaining rules and norms, and the interactions among institutional and student actors. We then examine student responses to the field of postsecondary transfer, where their primary available actions involve gathering transfer information as a means to improve their probability of vertical transfer.

By developing a field-level perspective of transfer, we move beyond the organizational perspective focused on the community college as a stand-alone 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 can 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 to improving transfer pathways at the higher education system level and the repercussions for students.

**Structure and Sorting Processes at the Community College**

Several theories attempt to explain low rates of vertical transfer among community college entrants who aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree. Clark’s (1960) cooling-out hypothesis theorized that community college personnel impede student aspirations for a bachelor’s degree by offering “substitute avenues” for success (i.e., terminal two-year degrees) (p. 574). Brint and Karabel (1989) argued that, through this “management of ambitions,” community colleges serve
as a buffer to protect baccalaureate colleges from an influx of students seeking a degree (p. 7-10). Although these earlier theories proposed that interactions with community college staff diminish students’ educational aspirations, recent research suggests that most community college students’ aspirations actually “hold steady” over time (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Nielsen, 2015). Despite high aspirations, many students never transfer. A recent meta-analysis suggests that entering a community college rather than a baccalaureate-granting institution decreases a student’s probability of earning a bachelor’s degree by 23 percentage points (Schudde & Brown, forthcoming). Structuralist theories of higher education argue that, rather than purposeful diversion by staff, community colleges lack support services, curricular structure, and clear guidance for students in navigating bureaucratic hurdles and dealing with conflicting demands (Bailey et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al. 2007; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

**Institutional Scaffolding and Student Information-Seeking Processes**

Structuralists describe how providing transparent information, student support services, and ongoing assessments of whether students meet college milestones can effectively move students towards their educational goals (Bailey et al., 2015; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Scott-Clayton, 2012; Schudde, Bradley, & Absher, 2018). Without that structure, community college students interested in earning a bachelor’s degree may struggle over how to start the transfer process. It seems there is a “hidden curriculum” of transfer, which includes taken-for-granted knowledge about how to proceed through the transfer process (Allen, Smith, & Meuhleck, 2014; Rosenbaum et al., 2007, p. 63).

Postsecondary staff serve as gatekeepers of vital information, with power over whether, how, and when to provide information relevant to students’ educational goals (Allen et al., 2013; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Person et al., 2006). Transfer-intending students must navigate
requirements at their current college and requirements for their prospective destination institution. When colleges send mixed signals and/or neglect to provide information on transfer options and requirements, students may find it difficult to navigate seemingly shapeless transfer pathways (Schudde et al., 2018). Research suggests that many students need greater support than most community colleges provide in order to effectively navigate transfer (Allen et al., 2014; Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2017; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain, Bernal, Lucero, Herrera, & Solorzano, 2016; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011; Senie, 2016).

Interventions that improve the information available to students may illuminate the hidden curriculum of transfer. Proactive or “intrusive” advising that regularly checks in with students to assess progress, along with clear, up-to-date information about transfer options, could help students overcome informational barriers to transfer (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; GAO, 2017; Schudde et al., 2018; Smith, 2007). Although most college websites offer institutional and program-specific information to students (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Khlaisang, 2017; Margolin et al., 2013), evidence suggests that many colleges do not provide clear or consistent online information about transfer (GAO, 2017; Schudde et al., 2018). Some community colleges offer specialized transfer services, including specific advising, centers, and events, but availability and quality varies (Bailey, Jenkins, Fink, Cullinane, & Schudde, 2016; Hodara, Martinez-Wenzel, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2017). Community college students and advisors cannot rely on four-year colleges to fill the void in transfer-specific advising, as many four-year institutions are reluctant to collaborate (Herrera & Jain, 2013; Logue, 2017) or face similar resource constraints for the provision of student services (GAO, 2017, p. 13).
When community colleges fail to provide adequate or consistent information, students must seek information from several sources, including staff, “trusted others” such as friends and families (Metzger, Flanagin, & Zwarun, 2003, p. 281), and various institutional websites, and determine which sources seem most credible. Friends, classmates, and family members who already navigated college can help students navigate complex information and bureaucratic hurdles, but only if students have this social capital (Rosenbaum et al., 2007).

While the structuralist perspective highlights how community colleges can create and improve support services for students, it fails to examine institutional transfer from a field level, where actors from across multiple organizations, including community college advisors, university admissions personnel, and other staff, interact with each other and with students. Colleges are organizations that “constrain” and “channel” student choice, sorting students into collegiate success (Armstrong & Massé, 2014). But, in the case of institutional transfer, students and transfer-related personnel interact within a much broader context—a complex, loosely coupled higher education system. In many higher education systems, which historically faced less scrutiny and accountability than K-12 systems, institutions are tenuously linked, with individual colleges emphasizing their own autonomy (Logue, 2017; Perna & Finney, 2014). Early work by Meyer and Rowan (1977) illustrated that educational institutions are shaped by external pressures and cultural values. In public higher education, the larger state contexts—and interests of stakeholders—determine colleges’ missions, the programs they offer, how they are funded, and what we expect of them (Dougherty, 1994; Labaree, 1997).

Transfer processes are complicated by these broader higher education structures. Tensions arise as individual colleges seek their own goals and enact their own procedures for transfer with little regard for other institutions and the needs of students (Bailey et al., 2016;
Logue, 2017; Perna & Finney, 2014). Both advisors and students are left to navigate the complicated information structures that exist as a result of intersecting and overlapping institutional priorities. Examining that context and how students and staff interact with each other within this landscape can offer greater insights into the challenges community college students face in attaining their educational goals.

**Postsecondary Transfer as a Strategic Action Field**

To better understand the landscape of transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions, we rely on the concept of *strategic action fields*, which describes how actors develop and enact common understandings about the purpose, rules, and relationships within the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Unlike other institutional theories that also examine meso-level orders in institutional life (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell’s [1983] *organizational fields*, Bourdieu & Wacquant’s [1992] *fields*, Powell et al.’s [2005] *networks*), strategic action fields focus on the processes that play out as a function of determining “who gets what,” where actors within the field make choices based on power, as well as their understanding of other actors’ roles and the perceived rules of the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 3). The theory initially intended to merge institutional theory with theories on social movements, but its focus on actors’ positions, the creation of rules and norms, and the way actors interpret their actions and actions of others allows for broader applications (see, e.g., Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016). In our case, strategic action fields are a useful tool to understand how institutional actors from various levels of the higher education system determine credit transfer policies, admissions standards, and dissemination of transfer information with other actors, as well as the actions students take to procure sufficient information to navigate complex and constantly shifting transfer requirements.
Fligstein and McAdam (2011) outlined four components of strategic action fields: 1) there is generally a shared consensus among actors about what is happening in the field and what is at stake, 2) some actors are more powerful than others and actors are aware of their position relative to others, 3) actors operate under a shared set of rules where they know which “tactics” are available and appropriate for actors in each role, and 4) actors interpret the moves of others from their own perspective (i.e., they frame those actions based on the other actor’s role but also their own position and role) (p. 4).

Unlike prior organizational theories, the theory anticipates that actors in different positions respond differently to events because their perception of opportunities and constraints is framed by their relative position. Actors within a field can take several different roles. *Incumbents* are actors with “disproportionate influence” whose views are reflected in the priorities of the dominating organization within the strategic action field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 5). In contrast, the *dominated* actors have minimal power in the field and the actions available to them are dictated by the rules of the incumbents, though some individuals in less privileged positions take on the role of *challenger*. Challengers are aware of the “dominant logic” of the incumbents, but they also envision an alternative social order (p. 6). They typically comply—albeit reluctantly—with the expectations of their role, but have the potential to take action toward establishing an alternative field. The final role anticipated by the theory, *governance units*, is charged with enforcing “compliance with field rules” and ensuring the “smooth functioning” of the field (p. 6). Governance units are regulatory units within the field, as opposed to government agencies external to the field. Rather than serving as “neutral arbiters of conflicts between incumbents and challengers” (a role sometimes served by government agencies responsible for compliance with legislation), they enforce the field’s rules, preserving
the incumbents’ power (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 6; Goldstone & Useem, 2012). Although roles come with varying levels of advantage, actors within a strategic action field, including less powerful actors, can “learn how to take what the system will give them and improve their positions in the field” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 5).

In this study, strategic action fields help us understand which actors have power and how that shapes interactions between students, transfer staff, and college administrators. We found that university administrators, faculty, and staff hold the most power in the postsecondary transfer field because universities set standards for admission and credit transfer and selectively share information about those standards. Community college advisors and university personnel maintain information on transfer requirements and admissions standards but do not automatically share it with all students. Both community college and university personnel emphasize students’ responsibility to gather and maintain their own information about transfer pathways, establishing a shared set of rules where students are held responsible for navigating complex transfer information but sometimes lack the power to access what they need.

Research Questions

To examine the organizational structure of postsecondary transfer, we asked several interrelated research questions (RQs):

1. How do institutional actors—transfer-relevant staff and administrators at community colleges and public universities—interact with each other to create and maintain rules and norms in the field of postsecondary transfer?

2. How do students respond to the rules and norms of the postsecondary transfer field?
3. What are the consequences of students’ responses to the field—primarily their approach to gathering transfer information? How does their response correspond with transfer success?

**Study Context**

The Texas public higher education system comprises 80 two-year institutions and 39 four-year institutions, including a number of different university and college systems, each with its own chancellors (at the system level), presidents (at the college level), and governing boards, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) (THECB, 2016). There are six university systems and four additional independent public universities (Perna & Finney, 2014). The two-year sector includes a mixture of community college districts and independent community colleges, for a combined total of 50 community colleges with more than 70 campuses (Perna & Finney, 2014).

Given the complex mass of higher education institutions, THECB, a governor-appointed, public agency with regulatory powers, was established in 1955 with the goal of coordinating institutions (Berdahl, 1971). However, its authority does not supersede institutional or system governing boards (p. 18). Historically, institutional leaders in the state emphasized institutional autonomy and demonstrated resistance to some THECB efforts (Berdahl, 1999). The geographic, demographic, and institutional diversity also present challenges, along with a state culture that prioritizes local control (Perna & Finney, 2014). The push and pull among the coordinating board, the legislature, and the individual systems and institutions in Texas creates ongoing tension across institutional sectors and agencies.

To smooth the transfer of credits across institutions, the state has several mandated policies, including the Texas general educational core. The core curriculum stipulates
coursework to develop general knowledge and skills and also aims to ease transfer for students by eliminating course duplication. Although the policy mandates that core credits automatically transfer across Texas’s public postsecondary institutions, the credits do not have to count toward majors, as programs determine their own degree requirements (THECB, 2014). Like 20 other states in the US, Texas relies on informal “bilateral transfer agreements” (agreements between two institutions outlining transfer requirements, also referred to as articulation agreements), leaving students and advisors to navigate specific agreements between colleges and programs (Jenkins, Kadlec, & Votruba, 2014; Root, 2013). These transfer agreements are “encouraged, but not required” by the legislature (THECB, 2014). Ideally, the agreements describe how coursework from the origin college applies toward a degree at the destination institution, but there are no standards or requirements for these agreements. Thus, the availability of a transfer agreement for a particular four-year institution and program depends on which college and program students transfer from, and their quality varies widely (Bailey et al., 2016).

Community college and university personnel are often tasked with organizing, presenting, and directing students to the available transfer agreements and pathways. The decentralized nature of the higher education system and the flexibility of policies, where each institution determines whether (and how) to build transfer partnerships and provide transfer information, places the burden on students and advisors to familiarize themselves with transfer options. Transfer processes are incredibly complex for students who need to compare and contrast several different transfer options, including various majors or prospective universities.

While Texas’s postsecondary context may be unique in its size and history, other states that similarly rely on institution-driven or credit equivalency transfer systems also require students and advising staff to customize student pathways from various transfer guides (Hodara
et al., 2017). In a recent study by Hodara et al. (2017), about two-thirds of states allowed institutional autonomy in how pre-major credits transfer. Even in states that use more transparent “2+2” systems, where two years of lower division coursework should automatically count toward junior standing at a university, institutional actors often still must deliberate over how credits from one college count toward a degree at the destination college (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Hodara et al., 2017, p. 344).

Methods

To explore how institutional and student actors navigate postsecondary transfer in Texas, we draw on data from interviews with students and staff members, along with field notes and documents we collected from the community colleges.

Description of Sites

We focused on two community college systems1—Central Community College and Fernando Community College System—in the same geographic region of Texas. Central Community College (CCC) is a multi-campus community college system in a metropolitan area and surrounding suburbs. At CCC, 30% of students are Hispanic and 7% are Black. Many students at CCC aim to transfer to the local public university, which is among the most selective in the state. CCC provides a variety of resources for students interested in transfer. Students come to the advising office as walk-ins by visiting the front desk of their campus’s student services office. The advising office is open on evenings and Saturdays to provide flexibility to working students. The college also provides transfer information through workshops, a mandatory student success course that teaches study techniques and other “soft skills,” an

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1 To maintain the confidentiality of our sample, we use pseudonyms for the colleges and the students we describe throughout the paper.
optional orientation, and their institutional website, which includes links to all universities that
the college has transfer agreements with and available transfer guides.

Fernando Community College System (FCCS) is a multi-college system where Latinos
comprise the racial majority. We sampled students from two colleges within the system. At the
time of our study, FCCS was moving toward “Guided Pathways”-inspired structural reforms,
grouping majors based on similar pre-requisites and aligning lower division coursework across
related “meta-majors” to ensure coursework aligned with students’ career goals. FCCS also
increased outreach by advisors, requiring automatic emails to students when they reached certain
milestones.

Data

To understand the state and institutional contexts, we interviewed advisors and
administrators at the sampled community colleges (n = 12, including 5 advisors, 4 advising team
leads, and 3 upper-level administrators) and admissions staff and administrators at common
destination public universities for our sampled community colleges (n = 14, including 5
admissions personnel, 4 transfer support staff, and 5 administrators). 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 the barriers students face in transferring. We also collected institutional documents,
including online information about transfer agreements and transfer guides, as well as documents
shared by advisors/administrators during interviews. We attended transfer events when possible
and observed the interactions between staff and students. We relied on this additional evidence to
triangulate interviewees’ responses with institutional practices. The documents and interviews
also offered insight into the transfer pathways and information made available to students,
providing a sense of the broader ecosystem in which transfer processes and policies occur. Combining insights from interviews with staff and observations from the field, we were able to understand the rules and norms of the institutional transfer field and how institutional actors in the field interact with one another (RQ1).

To address RQs 2 and 3, we interviewed 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 recruited students through email, tabling at workshops, and handing out flyers. Our initial sample included students at CCC and FCCS in fall 2015 who intended to transfer in the next 12 months ($n = 100$). We conducted follow-up interviews with students in the sample in fall 2016 ($n = 57$). In this study, we draw on data from the subsample of students with two years of interviews, which offered insights into their long-term strategies for approaching and researching transfer. In our analytic sample, 70% of students identified as women. Sixty percent of students identified as White, 25% Black, 5% American Indian/Alaska Native, 4% Asian, and 7% as another race. The majority of students in the sample—60%—identified as Latino. The mean age was 27, and 65% of the students were first-generation college students. Thirty-five percent of the students had dependent children.

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. All interviews with staff and students were recorded and transcribed, ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, and followed semi-structured interview protocols.
Data Analysis

We coded data in the qualitative software program Dedoose using a hybrid method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), where we first develop deductive codes informed by the literature. Then, during a second round of coding, we created subcategories inductively. Five members of the research team coded all transcripts, after reaching agreement on the application of codes.

We initially coded the staff transcripts for broad themes, including the staff member’s perception of the structure of the public higher education system in the state and of the structure at their institution, institutional partnerships, how they provided information about transfer to students, knowledge and perceptions of state transfer policies, and institutional goals and priorities. Throughout the coding process, we wrote memos and met to discuss emerging findings. Then, to address RQ1, we developed matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994), applying strategic action field theory to the patterns that emerged from our coding. We captured whether institutional actors fit the constructs of “incumbents,” “challengers,” and “governance units” (or fell somewhere in between), examined their perceptions of other actors in the institutional transfer field (i.e., how they described their work with actors from other institutions or with students), and captured how they described the standards and norms that students and staff must follow related to institutional transfer. The matrix and memos written during the analytic process ultimately led to our main findings regarding the roles of institutional actors in the field of community college transfer.

We similarly coded the student transcripts into broad codes about their approach to transfer, access to various resources, and choices in the transfer process. We developed individual student memos that captured the students’ trajectories over the two years of the study. Since students largely make up the “dominated” class of actors, our second and third research
questions were primarily focused on how they responded to the rules of the field and interactions with institutional actors, and the implications of those responses. To address this, we developed a second layer of codes, from theory and inductively, to capture how students responded to the institutional transfer environment, including their “information-gathering approach,” which captured how collected and navigated transfer information, and their “information track,” representing an assessment of whether the students obtained sufficient information to meet their transfer goal. To determine whether they had sufficient information, we relied on documents provided by colleges to examine credit transfer policies and procedures.

**Institutional Actors: Roles, Rules, and Maintaining the Status Quo**

In our first research question, we asked how institutional actors interact with each other and with student actors to create and maintain rules in the institutional transfer field. Our interviews with staff illuminated several rules and norms of the field. We observed the norm that universities set the standards for not just 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 get to dictate what counts toward a degree. Next, we elaborate on the various roles that institutional actors hold and the actions that are available to them based on their position in the field.
**Roles and Actions of Personnel in Privileged Positions in the Field**

The actors with the most privilege in the field are university administrators and faculty. As incumbents, 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. Incumbents 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.

The staff we spoke with described the powerful position of university faculty and administrators in issues of credit transfer and assessing whether credits count toward a degree. One university student-affairs professional explained that decisions for credit transfer toward a major are “delegated to the department heads” because the “department owns the major.” An upper level administrator at FCCS described university faculty as gatekeepers that prevent community college credits from transferring, mostly because of the difficulty in getting faculty to agree to which courses should transfer. In determining how credits transfer, faculty become “very territorial and very passionate,” but that passion was directed toward quality assurance for the perceived integrity of the degree program rather than student success and ensuring that “students can graduate at the end of it all.” University administrators at the state flagships pushed back against state policies when possible, working to maintain their autonomy over curricula. They did not create transfer agreements with other institutions to illuminate pathways toward their degrees, since the state did not mandate but only “encouraged” them (Bailey et al., 2016). Recent efforts from the incumbents to influence state policy included counterproposals to the state coordinating board’s effort to expand Fields of Study (which include additional lower
division coursework that must transfer toward a degree in a specific major) out of concern that the state was working to further standardize lower division coursework.

Many of the less selective universities in the state responded to pressure from the coordinating board and legislature to create transfer agreements across two-year and four-year colleges. But university personnel found ways to go through the motions of creating transfer agreements without actually sacrificing their control over curricula or standards. An administrator at an emerging research university in the state noted that sometimes administrators created transfer agreements that they knew would not improve the process for students as a political act. Doing so gave the appearance of working toward improving the field, when actually, they were cementing current rules and norms. She elaborated that these “sister-city agreements” never “get to the level where they actually impact students.” Instead, the resulting transfer agreement is a gesture of good will, agreeing only that:

We’re gonna be nice to you, you’re gonna be nice to us. We’re gonna obey state laws going back and forth, so … we’ll honor the core curriculum transferability, we’ll accept your students in if they meet our admission requirements. But in truth, there isn’t a lot of meat beyond what’s already expected in those documents. And students never see them. Nor would they understand them if they saw them.

Going beyond these general sister-city agreements was difficult, as it required the collaboration of faculty incumbents. Several administrators also noted the difficulty of building program-to-program transfer agreements—the kind that are necessary to provide students with clear and coherent transfer guides—describing how the faculty are territorial about their courses (protecting their own interests) and the process involves a “swirling around of some emotion and
some frustrations.” Ultimately, that contributed to an environment with fewer program-to-
program transfer agreements than we would expect in a field prioritizing student needs.

The next position of privilege is that of the governance units, comprised mainly of
admissions personnel at the universities. Again, selective universities hold the most power, but
even admissions representatives at less selective universities—charged with enforcing their
university’s standards—typically have more power than personnel at community colleges. An
administrator in the admissions department at one of the flagship universities described their
process of providing transfer information without ever offering a “guaranteed form of
admission.” They purposefully offered students “self-guiding tools” in the forms of transfer
guides by major. Rather than create transfer agreements, they framed the approach of providing
transfer guides (which broadly outline the lower division coursework that can count toward each
major) as making it “more simple” for students. Another admissions administrator further
justified this approach, arguing that there is “absolutely no way that a student following the guide
could take courses that they don't need” with the caveat that the course work “will be good
[here],” but not for “programs not aligned directly with ours.” This pressures students to decide
early on to follow the transfer guide of the selective university over other potential destinations.
For many students, this would not be a practical choice, given the low rates of admission.
Through establishing these norms, the flagships reinforced their role in the field. Community
colleges that want to lower the burden on students can align their curricula with the most
selective universities in the state, otherwise they run the risk that the incumbent faculty will
refuse to recognize credits from coursework that does not align to their curricula.
Roles and Actions of Personnel in Dominated Positions in the Field

In their outline of strategic action fields, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) did not give much attention to the varied roles of the dominated actors, other than acknowledging that some dominated actors—deemed “challengers”—envision an alternative to the social order and either begrudgingly enact their role in the field or eventually take steps to change the social order. In the field of institutional transfer, community college staff hold more power than student actors but often failed to question the status quo of the field. We describe institutional actors who continued to support the status quo while also helping student actors in their quest for transfer information (and thus power, as we describe below) as implementers. The bulk of community college advising staff seemed to hold this role, while a handful of community college and university actors served as challengers.

The staff who worked most closely with transfer-intending community college students—often general community college advisors or transfer-specific advisors—often were cogs in the system. They typically accepted the field as it was and described students’ role as one where they must inform themselves as much as possible. It is the “advisor’s job” to “remind and promote” students about “transfer opportunities.” But staff acknowledged that if students did not ask about transfer directly, they would not receive information. One advising team leader at FCCS explained how students must “research, research, research” to identify a program or set of programs most appropriate to them, then perform more research on “the tuition, the program, how many transfer credits they allow.” But she acknowledged that a lot of the information posted publicly was flawed, and, as a result, encouraged students to meet with representatives from universities “because that person is going to have the most knowledge.” At the same time, other implementers described the challenges students faced in getting university staff to meet with
them, as some universities had norms of “not advising non-students” and would send all inquiries back to general admissions recruiters who often could not tell students how credits would count toward a given degree. Community college advisors often viewed themselves as the arbiter between the student and the information made available to them, where many staff in advising and transfer offices at the community colleges were responsible for “organizing and presenting all of the universities’ requirements.” But given the array of requirements and variation in programs, they often acknowledged that they could not keep up with this task. One advising team lead acknowledged the difficulty of transfer advising in this environment, lamenting that community college advisors are “expected to know everything about every [university] and really that’s impossible.”

We found that many advisors, though well-intending, placed the responsibility of navigating transfer on students, sharing anecdotes of students who accumulate credits that may not count toward transfer as a result of “self-guidance” (i.e., not regularly seeing an advisor). An advisor at FCCS explained “a lot of them come in” and “they have not educated themselves on education,” often unaware of the various transfer options and how to compare those options. Although many advisors acknowledged the complexity of the transfer landscape, including the number of transfer pathways (hundreds of combinations of universities and majors to choose from) and the holes in publicly posted information about transfer (including the lack of transfer guides in many majors), several believed that their college’s transfer resources were not problematic. Instead, they believed that students were not taking advantage of the information available.

The challengers were most often administrators at the community colleges, who voiced concerns over challenges students faced in transferring credits and the history of efforts (by the
state or institutions) to overcome transfer issues. Administrators at both the community college systems we studied worked to build a collaborative partnership across community colleges and universities in the region. The efforts aimed to get all of the public institutions in the geographic region to agree to build transfer agreements, publicly post information for students, and adhere to the state’s common course numbering system. They described a field where students were often disappointed to find credits they believed should transfer did not count toward a degree and struggled to navigate misaligned degree requirements across universities. When we spoke to two administrators at CCC, they thought the collaborative “held a lot of promise” to “build curricula that are indeed aligned” and ensure fewer community college students would lose credits during transfer. At the same time, one of them acknowledged university administrators’ opposition to using a common course numbering system, noting “I don’t know if the will is there” and that “it’s going to take legislative action.” Ultimately, the regional collaborative she described has not yet achieved its stated vision.

Occasionally, student affairs administrators at less selective universities also served as challengers, actively working with leaders at community colleges to develop more transparent information for students and envisioning policy changes, like mandating common course numbers to make it easier for students to understand how lower division coursework aligned across institutions. Although the challengers often wanted to see an improvement in students’ position, most of their actions focused on providing more information to students, which merely maintained the status quo. Sometimes the type of information they shared went beyond the run-of-the-mill approach. For example, one recruiter at a regional comprehensive university described how she advised students to have their transcript marked to say “core complete” after realizing that her university did not always count all of their core credits as they transferred and
told them how to appeal the university’s credit transfer decisions. She did so to provide students with a way to push back against what she perceived as unfair practices of credit transfer. However, the coordinating board reports incredibly low rates of appeals (often getting none in any given year), so this information may not actually improve students’ probability of transfer success.

**Student Actors’ Responses to the Transfer Field: Information-Gathering Approaches**

Our second research question concerned the response of student actors to the field of postsecondary transfer. As actors with limited power and influence, students are dominated in the field. They do not have potential actions available to them to challenge the status quo, but instead try to gain advantage by learning the rules and investing time and energy into gathering information about transfer. We find that students collected information from a variety of sources, including staff at their college and prospective colleges. They also had to strategize to identify accurate transfer information among inconsistent materials and advice. In this section, we define and describe the information-seeking approaches used by transfer-intending community college students and whether and how those approaches ultimately steered them toward transfer. We found evidence of four information-seeking approaches students took in response to their dominated role in the transfer field: *resource curators, system trusters, hesitant advisees*, and *disconnected students*.

**Resource Curators.** 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 (about 60 percent of our sample, \( n = 34 \)). Upon gathering information from various sources, including community college staff and faculty,
university admissions staff, friends and family, and institutional websites, resource curators worked to synthesize information and identify which information they deemed most trustworthy.

Most resource curators were generally trusting of advising staff and received at least some information from their community college advisors. However, they described the need to “be strategic” about vetting transfer information, often in response to receiving misinformation from advising staff. Sam, a first-generation college student who aimed to earn a bachelor’s degree in engineering, described the advising staff at CCC as “hit or miss.” At one point, he requested information for electrical engineering transfer guides, but was given a general engineering plan, which would place him into unnecessary courses like chemistry. Like Sam, other resource curators noticed that advising staff sometimes offered “cookie cutter” transfer plans for broad majors rather than specific programs of interest. Bridget, an older student at FCCS, noticed that her initial advisor did not focus on efficiency or customize advice for her transfer goals. The adviser had not mentioned that Bridget could save “a whole semester of tuition at a four-year university” by taking classes at the community college that the prospective university would count as equivalents. She concluded: “You have to be proactive on your own and seek out the information, rather than just waiting for someone to spoon-feed you.”

In Bridget’s case, she carefully studied materials from several universities’ websites, attended information sessions and “campus days” to get information directly from university representatives, and relied on her preferred advisor who “not only answered questions, but offered suggestions.” Likewise, Sam decided that “triangulation” was necessary to identify accurate transfer information. He found the resources he needed, including specific engineering transfer guides and admission requirements, on the university’s website. Armed with that information, he checked with CCC advisors and university admissions staff to confirm he was on
track as he took his coursework. Rather than rely on any one staff member, he paid close attention to information he “heard from more than one source”—an indication that the information was accurate. No matter the primary sources of information, successful resource curators were those who found a way to analyze the information they gathered to identify common themes or “correct” information as a means of avoiding costly missteps. In this way, resource curators, despite their limited power, sought to use the resources available to them to improve their positions in the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011).

**Hesitant Advisees.** The second most common information-gathering approach ($n = 12$) had some similarities to the resource curators, as the students worked to find their own information about transfer procedures and requirements. Unlike resource curators, “hesitant advisees” failed to find an institutional actor at their college to help them sort through transfer information. Some students were passive, where their avoidance was driven by lack of clarity in their plans and the roles that staff play ($n = 5$). Others actively avoided advisors, often in response to previous lackluster or negative experiences ($n = 7$).

Among those demonstrating passive avoidance, students decided not to visit advising staff because of uncertainty about when or why they should see an advisor or external barriers to scheduling an appointment. Several were unsure of when they planned to transfer or what major to pursue. The lack of certainty contributed to perpetually deciding not to visit advisors—they felt unprepared to ask for advice. When asked if he talked to any advisors about transfer, Tony, a FCCS student, said: “Honestly, no. I haven't talked to anybody” at his college other than some peers who had never transferred. He explained, like several other hesitant advisees, that he wanted to be ready to list his goals and questions before he visited an advisor about transfer. For other students, external factors kept them off of campus, making it difficult to visit with an
advisor. One student took all of her classes online. Although she acknowledged that she needed to visit the advising office to talk to someone about her transfer goals, she struggled to find the time because she was never on campus. Some students noted that full-time work or other time constraints made it difficult to attend drop-in advising.

Other hesitant advisees actively avoided advisors, typically in response to a prior bad experience with advising staff. Each of these students noted an encounter that led them to receive incorrect transfer information. One student, Steven, explained that the counselors at CCC “don’t really know what they are talking about,” offering advice that was too broad to be helpful. He now only visits an advisor when “it is critical,” like if he needs an advising bar (a restriction on his record that prevents registration) removed. Instead, to get information about transferring, Steven turned to faculty, friends, coworkers, and customers at the grocery stores where he worked, which is close in proximity to the university he wants to attend. Other students voiced frustrations over incorrect and inconsistent advice from advisers, where they eventually realized they received inaccurate information. Mona, a student at FCCS, explained that in her first semester of college, she visited her assigned advisor and told them which degree she wanted to earn. She followed the degree plan they gave her and “ended up taking a couple courses that [she] didn't need for that program.” She explained that, after that, she “learned about finding the plans online” and decided, "I don't need you anymore, and I can do this myself... I want to know what I'm doing.” Compared with their experience self-guiding through transfer information, hesitant advisees concluded that visiting advisors “just didn't seem as effective.”

Actors in a strategic action field operate under a shared set of rules where they know which “tactics” are “possible” and “legitimate” for actors based on their roles (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). In the case of the hesitant advisees, they viewed the advisor’s role as providing
accurate information. When it became clear that not all advisors used the tactics that students perceived as legitimate or appropriate, i.e., providing tailored and accurate advice based on students’ interests to efficiently guide them, these students decided to no longer interact with these actors, turning instead to institutional websites or, occasionally, university recruiters.

**System Trusters.** Student actors could also take actions to fully comply with the advice of community college advisors without consulting other resources \((n = 7)\). System trusters, unlike the hesitant advisees, put a lot of faith in advising staff. In many cases, they received a transfer or degree plan and adhered to it, sometimes despite their own uncertainty.

Trusters had great faith that the community college staff and resources would guide them through the transfer process. In other words, they had clear expectations of the roles advisers should play, and did not seem to encounter advisers that violated these norms. Carmen, a first-generation college student and mother of two children, visited the counseling department at CCC and believed the staff were “really good about helping you decide where to go.” She elaborated, “I go with them because they’ve got my information… I think they’ll be able to help me find the best school for me.” Carmen relied on the information provided by the CCC advising staff and did not do any additional research on her own. Other students similarly followed the plan laid out by their advisers. Hannah, an FCCS student who wanted to transfer in business, said that her advisor typically provided the information she requested, such as transfer guides and information for different universities—“she gave me what I asked for.” Although she was satisfied with her advisor, she also realized that her advisor never provided additional insights; Hannah pondered whether she should be getting more from the experience.

Other system trusters noted that their conversations with their advisors typically did not include a discussion of their overall career goals, which may mean that the information provided
was not tailored to their long-term goals, but rather to their immediate inquiry. Given their faith in advisors, trusters may be at risk of receiving misinformation if the advisors rely on out-of-date information or transfer plans. Students we classified as trusters did not consult other sources about their options—their information was almost entirely shaped by advising staff. Even though the advisors we spoke to were well-intentioned and generally took a student-centered approach, they also described a context with constantly changing policies, admission standards, and procedures that made it difficult to keep up with new information. Trusters relied on and trusted the status quo and a shared set of rules as they navigated transfer. This approach yielded even greater power and authority to their advisors, who work in service of existing norms and values that focus more on preserving university authority than student access and success. In this sense, it is not clear whether trusters were truly aware of their position, their lack of power, relative to advisors or other institutional actors.

**Disconnected Students.** The final role for student actors was often occupied by students who lacked clear goals for transfer, either in major or destination institution, and did not seek additional information to make their goals more concrete or move toward their transfer aspirations. While students using other information-gathering approaches sometimes also lacked clarity in their goals, disconnected students seemed to haphazardly receive information from staff or peers without pursuing information on their own. Rather than seek to learn the “rules of the game” in order to navigate transfer, these students largely seemed unaware of the transfer field or their position in the field. Only 7% of students in our sample fit this profile \((n = 4)\).

Disconnected students often changed their mind about their major or transfer institution without researching transfer options and were easily swayed by information that came their way. Gina, for example, entered FCCS in a collision technology certificate program but wanted to
transfer to a four-year institution in a different major. She was uncertain about her preferred field of study, torn between kinesiology or music education—neither of which aligned with her current (and still accruing) credits in collision technology. Her most frequent staff interaction at FCCS occurred with a program advisor within the collision technology program who recommended focusing on the certificate program, which was not eligible for transfer (technical credits cannot transfer to an academic baccalaureate in Texas) and did not overlap with her preferred majors. Gina did not sign up to visit an advisor or look for transfer guides or degree plans in her desired majors. At the same time, no one at her institution reached out to her to encourage a visit to the advising office, despite the misalignment between her program and her stated goals. Another student, Benito, described how he learned about options to transfer into a bachelor’s program in applied science from a recruiter from a local university visiting his campus. Although he became interested a transfer pathway, he had no information about how the program aligned with his current program. Operating from only the initial information from the recruiter, he felt overwhelmed about figuring out the details. No community college actors brought up transfer options with him. He ultimately decided it “[felt] like too much right now” to attempt to transfer.

Disconnected students, because they were often not clear on their goals, were persuaded by information, but it could lead them down varying paths that did not lead to transfer. Given their dominated positions, the only way student actors could gain power was through information—learning the rules of the field.Disconnected students were largely unaware of how postsecondary transfer worked, including the roles of institutional actors and rules for credit transfer. They were unable to strategically navigate the transfer process on their own and, due to
the shared understanding that it was the student’s responsibility to gather transfer information, no institutional actors reached out to help them.

**Information is Power? Student Actors’ Information-Gathering Approaches and Their Transfer Outcomes**

Given the different information-gathering approaches of student actors, we examined the consequences of these actions for students in terms of both the quality of transfer information they gathered and whether they transferred. We identified three “tracks” that represented the quality of students’ transfer information: sufficiently informed; informed but misaligned with goals; and under-informed.\(^2\) Students who were sufficiently informed \((n = 38)\) were those who accrued relevant information aligned to their goals; they were aware of the options available to fulfill those goals and found actionable information without glaring inconsistencies or misinformation. Students who were informed but misguided \((n = 23)\) were those that also accrued information related to their transfer goals, but it included clear inconsistencies or inaccuracies that they had not noticed or resolved (e.g. following a transfer guide for a general engineering associate degree when the goal was to transfer into an electrical engineering bachelor’s program). Finally, students who were under-informed \((n = 7)\) lacked sufficient information to achieve transfer goals; they did not have a transfer guide and had no information related to transferring into a desired major program or university.

In Figure 1, we illustrate how students’ information-gathering approaches sort students toward certain information tracks and transfer outcomes. The diagram shows the flow of students from information-gathering approach (the leftmost nodes) to information track (the middle

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\(^2\) We originally anticipated that some students might be “over-informed” and overwhelmed by the volume of information gathered, but came to realize that the rules and norms of the field required students to gather and curate a high volume of information. Gathering “excess” information seemed necessary.
nodes) to whether they transferred by the latest follow-up, which occurred in the third academic year of the study (the rightmost nodes). The gray area represents the number of students in a given category; thus, a thicker gray pathway indicates more students in that category (e.g., resource curator takes up more space on the leftmost side of the diagram than the other approaches).

\[\text{Figure 1. Information-gathering approach, informational quality, and transfer outcomes}\]

\textit{Notes.} Figure 1 shows the number of student actors using each information-gathering approach (the leftmost nodes) and the flow of students, from those approaches, into information track (the middle nodes) and vertical transfer (the rightmost nodes indicate whether they transferred by the fall of their third academic year in the study). The gray area represents the number of students in a given category; thus, a thicker gray pathway indicates more students in that category.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Sufficiency of information.} Among resource curators, most—79%—ended up sufficiently informed. Due to competing requirements across degree programs at a given community college and various universities, collecting information from multiple sources appeared vital to being well-informed to pursue transfer goals. Resource curators appeared to
gain advantage in the transfer field, working within the constraints of their weaker role. Yet, even these students were not guaranteed success. The remainder of resource curators—21%—were informed but misguided. Because the norms in the field placed the burden on student actors to identify correct transfer information and weed out misinformation, even student actors who invested time and energy into resource curation sometimes missed key insights or found themselves unable to identify the correct transfer plan to guide them toward their goals.

Hesitant advisees—who often gathered information but did so without the use of community college advising staff—were dispersed across all three potential information tracks. Over half—58%—of the hesitant advisees identified sufficient information to achieve their transfer goals through self-advising. The remaining hesitant students were primarily under-informed (33%) and one student was informed but misguided. Hesitant advisees were most successful when they found actors to rely on within the field (often university admissions staff), rather than only external actors. Hesitant advisees who ended up under-informed or informed but misguided failed to identify trustworthy and useful sources of transfer information. They largely relied on non-institutional actors (people outside of the field), but struggled to gather accurate transfer information because institutional actors are more familiar with the field’s rules and norms.

System trusters typically followed the steps laid out by their advisor. If the advisor was familiar with the student’s specific goal and well-versed in various transfer pathways, the student could receive sufficient information to transfer. This was the case for four of our seven trusters. The remainder were under-informed ($n = 2$) and informed but misguided ($n = 1$). Because they exerted less agency in the process than resource curators and hesitant advisees, trusters risked being under-informed if their advisors place them on a degree plan that did not align with their
aspired major and degree; they were often unsure of which plan they were on. Trusters were also less likely to check requirements against college websites or reach out to four-year staff, often failing to triangulate across sources. One student explained to us that she “pretty much accomplished everything” on her degree plan, but as we probed it became clear that she was following a degree plan that did not align with her desired program for transfer. Despite her confidence in the plan her advisor gave her (which was for a technical associate degree, not for transfer in an academic program), the bulk of the credits would not transfer. Even among trusters who appeared sufficiently informed, they had little interaction with their desired transfer destinations. This put them at greater risk for credit loss if their advisors’ guidance did not align with the university’s recommendations, as university staff have power over whether to accept coursework.

Disconnected students—those who were somewhat unsure of their transfer goals and less assertive in their manner of collecting transfer information—were equally likely to end up under-informed or informed but misguided. As these students received information from different sources for various goals or institutions, they often ended up with insufficient information for any potential pathway, given their lack of connection to a clear pathway or adequate advising. These students were unable to learn the rules of the field because they were disconnected from institutional actors who wield the most power, and often did not learn the rules of the field until it was too late. In these cases, students sometimes placed the blame on themselves for failing to gather information sooner.

**Transfer outcomes.** The quality of transfer information appears to be related to whether students transferred by the third year of the study. Among those who were not sufficiently informed \((n = 19)\), one fifth of students transferred \((n = 4)\). All four students who seemed to lack
sufficient information to transfer were resource curators or hesitant advisees who collected a lot of transfer information but struggled to make sense of it. They managed to achieve their transfer goal, but faced some consequences of misinformation, including loss of credits at transfer. In comparison, among the sufficiently informed students ($n = 38$), over half transferred by their third academic year in the study ($n = 20$). That still means that 18 students who appeared sufficiently informed have yet to transfer. Even students who, aware of their position in the field, strategically took action to gain more power were subject to failure. The postsecondary transfer field, where the norm is that universities set their own standards for admission and rules regarding which credits transfer, prioritizes the autonomy of the most powerful actors—university administrators—over the transparency of information for and success of student actors.

**Discussion**

In this study, we interviewed Texas community college and university staff to examine their shared rules and norms relating to institutional transfer and how various institutional actors interact to produce, enforce, comply with, and challenge those rules and norms. We also followed transfer-intending community college students over three years, observing how they gathered information about transfer and how their interactions with staff at their own college and prospective institutions shaped their approach and transfer success. Drawing on the concept of strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011), we argue that the challenges of community college transfer are best understood through examining the power dynamics of various actors, including institutional and student actors, why they hold their position in the field, and what actions are available to different actors based on their position. We find that university actors hold the greatest advantage as incumbents and governance units, given their authority to
determine admissions and which courses count toward a bachelor’s degree. Transfer-intending community college students hold the least power. Community college staff are typically dominated within the field, often enacting the rules of the broader field (implementers) or occasionally questioning dominant practices and norms but reluctantly reinforcing the status quo (challengers). Despite the shared understanding in the field that many community college students aim to transfer to a university, the general purpose of the institutional transfer field is not to facilitate transfer, but rather to maintain the standards set by the universities.

In the field, student actors hold the weakest position. They are expected—by all actors in all positions—to gather, manage, and interpret transfer information. These actions are their primary means of gaining advantage over other student actors in order to successfully transfer. The students who appeared to gain the greatest advantage were those who actively “curated” resources and information about transfer, seeking multiple sources rather than relying solely on the advising staff at their college. This group was the largest our sample, countering common assumptions that many community college students wander aimlessly. Many students and staff shared that the structure of the higher education system required resource curation because institutions are inconsistent in providing clear transfer information.

Our results suggest that even students with clear transfer goals faced barriers to identifying a clear transfer pathway. Some students who gathered transfer information were sometimes misled by available resources—they were provided the wrong transfer guide or received conflicting information from various staff. They struggled to make sense of the transfer field and failed to gain sufficient information to steer them toward transfer. Just as concerning: many students who gathered sufficient information still had not transferred by their third year despite intentions to transfer by the second year of the study. Although gathering and curating
“sufficient information” improved students’ probability of transfer, about 45% of students with sufficient information failed to transfer. External life events—such as the sudden need to work for pay full-time or pressing family obligations—thwarted some students plans, but several others were left striving to meet the admissions standards of their preferred transfer destination, struggling to concurrently reach the requirements for an associate degree plan and transfer plan, or disappointed by rejection from a flagship university, especially when then they based their course-taking decisions on that institution’s transfer guide.

Some students failed to perform expected actions of their position, such as the hesitant advisees and the disconnected students. These students were unclear of the rules and norms of the field, which left them more susceptible to being mis- or under-informed. There was a shared expectation that the role of student actors required information-gathering to gain advantage. No institutional actors reached out to confirm if the students were performing those actions. In fact, several community college personnel noted that students must “opt in” to receiving advising about transfer.

In a field where university actors have the power to produce their own rules and standards and to determine whether and how to share that information, finding and vetting transfer information was at times so difficult that community college actors were unsure if they had the most accurate information to provide students. Therefore, both community college advisors and students occupied weak positions, with difficulty performing their anticipated actions. Because staff at community colleges felt unable to keep up with changes to degree plans and transfer policies at each potential destination university, the understanding among community college and university personnel was that students could not rely on advising sessions alone to be sufficiently informed about transfer.
Although most community college personnel took on the role of implementing existing rules and norms, viewing their role as supporting student actors as they conformed to the expectation of information gathering, some community college administrators envisioned alternative social orders that could be more student-friendly. Ultimately, even community college administrators who saw the possibility for alternative social orders, like regional collaborations to facilitate better transfer agreements, reinforced the status quo when university administrators failed to enact the new social order. Despite the community colleges efforts toward improved transfer advising, many students experienced incorrect or confusing messages about transfer requirements from advising staff. In the end, it is student actors who face consequences when the information they receive leads them astray.

Implications for Policy and Future Inquiry

While our results offer some support for extant research evidence illustrating structural issues within community colleges and its role in discouraging students from meeting their educational aspirations, our findings offer insights into how broader higher education contexts complicate students’ ability to navigate postsecondary transfer. Community colleges and public universities operate independently with little collaboration or alignment, in part because the dominant players in the field—university administrators and faculty—emphasize the autonomy of their institution over the ease of transfer between institutions. The existing social order produces widespread challenges for transfer-intending students, where they have to gather information from various players to gain sufficient guidance and are often forced to privilege some transfer pathways over others without complete and accurate information.

With the recent emphasis placed on guided pathways and other interventions to develop clear curricular structures at community colleges, 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. The guided pathways movement, which focuses largely on community colleges, may be ineffective at improving baccalaureate attainment if it adheres to the current rules and norms of the incumbents and governance units at the universities.

Fligstein and McAdam (2011) acknowledged that fields are constantly shifting and unsettled: the positions, shared meanings, and rules can break down. It is possible that reforms to higher education could shift the current field—the guided pathways movement at least partially aims to disrupt the status quo. If only community colleges undergo reform, however, then the most powerful players in the postsecondary transfer field—the implementers at universities—are still playing under the original rules. It leaves the intermediaries like the community college advisors and administrators and the weakest actors, the students, in the same position as before. Students will still struggle to understand various pieces of information, their only means of navigating from their current institution to their desired institution.

Our work suggests that creating more streamlined transfer pathways for students would require a shift in social order. We suspect that such a change could be induced governmental intervention, where university actors are compelled to perform different actions than those that support to the status quo, such as developing and enacting shared curricula for lower division coursework by broad major fields. Goldstone and Useem (2012) argued that sometimes incumbents launch social change instead of challengers—in this case, that would happen if we saw more universities pushing for reforms. This is happening at some universities, but often only those that rely heavily on transfer students to keep their enrollment numbers up.
Our findings have important implications for research. First, the way the literature describes community college students often suggests that they are unsure of what they want to do—the higher education literature sometimes suggests much of the advising struggle is in advising students with unclear goals (e.g., implementing more structure and enforcing earlier major decisions with guided pathways). Yet, in our sample, even students with clear goals found it difficult to locate the information they needed to find a clear transfer pathway. Additionally, although the existing sociological literature previously hypothesized that staff purposefully “cool-out” and discourage student intentions (Brint & Karabel, 1988; Clark, 1960) or faced heavy demands and resource constraints that limited their ability to structure students’ educational experience (Rosenbaum et al., 2006), prior literature does not highlight, to our knowledge, how and why college personnel share misinformation with community college students. Our results suggest a more nuanced story than the structural argument. By considering the relative power of actors in the field, we see that community college staff themselves struggle to navigate the complex transfer information, which is shaped by more powerful university actors. In their attempt to manage the information, they sometimes provide inaccurate and incomplete advice to students. Only students who amass large volumes of transfer information and determine how to digest and curate it become sufficiently informed to attain their goals. Ultimately, a transfer field which enacts the priorities and rules of university actors serves to disadvantage transfer-intending community college students, placing the burden on them to navigate not only bureaucratic hurdles at their own institutions but at many others as well. These political and ecological contexts are likely responsible, at least partially, for the low attainment of transfer goals for community college entrants.
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