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## Small liberal arts colleges should align with community colleges for the benefit of both students and themselves (opinion)

Submitted by Sarah Bray on August 7, 2020 - 3:00am

The full ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic for higher education are by no means yet clear, but two predictions seem safe to make. First, the pandemic will put even greater pressure on enrollment at independent liberal arts colleges, and, second, community colleges will see an increase in enrollment. Those two projections make it all the more urgent to achieve better alignment between the two sectors.

Community colleges enroll one-third <sup>[1]</sup> of all undergraduates, double the share <sup>[2]</sup> of undergraduate enrollment at private nonprofit four-year institutions. About 80 percent <sup>[1]</sup> of entering community college students plan to pursue a bachelor's degree, yet only 13 percent <sup>[3]</sup> reach that goal. The path from community colleges to four-year institutions is often fraught with obstacles, and shockingly few community college students are able to transfer into four-year institutions. Among those who do overcome such immense barriers, fewer than one in five <sup>[3]</sup> transfer to a private nonprofit four-year institution.

This is a lost opportunity both for students and institutions. Independent colleges can reaffirm and revitalize their educational missions by admitting a greater share of transfer students from community colleges, an especially promising avenue for small liberal arts colleges <sup>[4]</sup> under threat of closure or merger due to steep declines in enrollment.

Small liberal arts colleges have a crucial opportunity to engage actively in cross-sector alignment with community colleges, for the benefit of their

students and the long-term health of their institutions. Small independent colleges are distinctly qualified to serve transfer students: their size enables them to create a nurturing learning environment where students receive the personal attention that can help them reach their goals. At the same time, community college students bring important benefits to independent colleges in the form of diversity of background and lived experience, enhancing the educational environment for all students.

Efforts to facilitate transfer from community colleges to liberal arts colleges have never been timelier. Yet independent liberal arts colleges historically have had little experience with recruiting community college transfer students. They tend to design curricula, including general education requirements, on the assumption that students will be on their campuses for the full four years. Post-pandemic, private institutions will need to rethink how to attract and support all transfer applicants, especially students transferring from community colleges.

A [new report](#) <sup>[5]</sup> on the untapped potential of transfer pathways into independent colleges by Ithaka S+R, a nonprofit research organization, delineates some promising strategies for tackling the academic, financial and cultural dimensions of transfer. The academic dimension is paramount because it influences the financial and cultural dimensions of transfer. Rethinking academic policies is a crucial first step toward mitigating the problems transfer students face.

Take, for instance, the obstacle of credit loss and excess credit, which can delay graduation or discourage prospective students from attempting to transfer in the first place. Nationwide, students lose roughly half ([43 percent](#) <sup>[6]</sup>) of their earned credit when they transfer -- almost a full semester's worth of uncredited course work per student. That is largely due to academic policies that not only fail to mitigate problems of credit loss or excess credit but exacerbate them. For example, technically "accepted" credits are often processed as electives rather than counted toward the student's desired degree program. Such loss of credits upon transfer constitutes a drain on both time and money for students, making baccalaureate completion much more difficult. Lack of clarity around how credits transfer also blunts the impact of

cultural practices that institutions might adopt to become more transfer-friendly, such as establishing centers on campus dedicated to transfer students.

The Teagle Foundation, which is dedicated to advancing the liberal arts, aims to promote curricular bridge-building between public two-year colleges and private four-year colleges by focusing on the academic obstacles that students face. In most states, independent colleges could revise their academic policies by learning from state models that public institutions are already using. By taking advantage of statewide frameworks for transfer between public institutions, private independent colleges can raise their visibility as a transfer destination in the eyes of community college students.

Even before the pandemic, independent colleges around the country were collaborating to strengthen transfer access to the liberal arts and to provide a competitive alternative to transferring to public four-year institutions. For example, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) has established a [consortiumwide agreement](#) [7] that commits 30 member institutions to accept the general education credits completed by students from any of the 58 community colleges in the state as fulfilling their own general education requirements. The agreement mirrors existing arrangements for acceptance of credit set up with North Carolina's four-year public institutions. NCICU is now building on that first step toward better alignment by launching statewide transfer pathways in sociology and psychology, two high-enrollment liberal arts disciplines that enable transfer aspirants to enter independent colleges with junior status.

Similarly, the New England Board of Higher Education is leading an effort to create the [New England Independent College Transfer Guarantee](#) [8], which includes every community college and more than 40 independent colleges in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Students who complete an associate degree in the liberal arts and meet minimum GPA requirements will be guaranteed entrance into a participating independent college within the same state. The transfer application fee will be waived for all associate degree completers, and a tiered GPA structure will determine additional incentives to

transfer, including guaranteed transfer of associate degree credits (based on prevailing state policies) and access to institutional financial aid.

Promoting transfer pathways between community colleges and independent colleges not only benefits students and institutions; it can also assist burdened state higher education systems. Some states, like [California](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, already struggled with providing sufficient enrollment capacity at public four-year institutions before the pandemic and now face even more severe challenges as pandemic-related declines in state revenue are likely to force budget cuts. Other states, such as North Carolina and Kentucky, have significant rural populations for whom the closest transfer destination to complete the bachelor's degree may be an independent college. At a time when travel is daunting, many students will be reluctant -- or unable -- to attend college far from home. Under these circumstances, small liberal arts colleges are ideally positioned to enroll students beginning their education at nearby community colleges and guide them in their path toward graduation.

The lifelong benefits of a liberal arts baccalaureate must be extended to those who have been historically excluded, namely the large numbers of students of color, first-generation learners and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds for whom community colleges are the gateway to higher education. The innovative solutions underway in North Carolina and New England should point the way toward broadening liberal arts transfer pathways between community colleges and independent colleges. Relationship building across the two-year public and four-year private divide will greatly facilitate serving marginalized students more equitably, as will [listening to transfer students](#) <sup>[10]</sup> who voice their struggles with navigating the pipeline.

Ultimately, community colleges and independent colleges share a unifying ethos: a commitment to helping students learn, grow and thrive. That shared commitment to undergraduate education can form the basis for transfer partnerships that broaden access to the liberal arts, diversify the base of baccalaureate holders in our country, strengthen our economy and protect our democracy.

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**Links**

[1] <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html>

[2] [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_303.70.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_303.70.asp)

[3] <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport13/>

[4] <https://hechingerreport.org/with-enrollment-sliding-liberal-arts-colleges-struggle-to-make-a-case-for-themselves/>

[5] <https://sr.ithaca.org/publications/transfer-pathways-to-independent-colleges>

[6] <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/686530.pdf>

[7] [https://ncicu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ICAA\\_30-campuses\\_updated-10.22.19.pdf](https://ncicu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ICAA_30-campuses_updated-10.22.19.pdf)

[8] <https://nebhe.org/policy-research/grant-consulting-technical-assistance/transfer-initiatives/the-guarantee/>

[9] [https://collegefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Making-Room-for-Success\\_2019Oct.pdf](https://collegefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Making-Room-for-Success_2019Oct.pdf)

[10] <https://hechingerreport.org/why-so-few-students-transfer-from-community-colleges-to-four-year-universities/>

[11] <https://www.insidehighered.com/editorial-tags/liberal-arts>

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