

# Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion

SREB

*Policy Brief*

## Statewide Transfer Policies

Each SREB state has developed policies for the transfer of college courses among its public post-secondary institutions. Some states rely on a variety of bilateral agreements (individual agreements between two institutions of higher education that specify the rules of transfer between those schools) — or a set of identical bilateral agreements that outline acceptable course transfer. These are often confusing for students and institutional staff who must navigate the maze of transfer rules and regulations.

Other states set policy that creates a single, comprehensive, statewide transfer and articulation agreement, which is clearer and less cumbersome. Students, institutions and the state benefit from this kind of policy because it:

1. provides a shorter path to graduation, thus reducing time-to-degree,
2. reduces the cost of the degree for students, and
3. saves state funding associated with excess credit-hours.

Comprehensive, statewide transfer policies enable students to move from one public institution in the state to another with relative ease and understanding — allowing students to know which course will transfer and how credit will be applied toward their declared majors. As part of state work to increase college completion, SREB recommends that states currently relying on individual and institutionally based agreements streamline state policy to create one comprehensive and statewide transfer policy.

Just as important as the structure of transfer policies is their substance — i.e., to what extent the policies enable a student to transfer with full credit toward a bachelor's degree with the maximum number of hours possible, including major-related as well as general education courses. Too often in most states, transfer policies only address a subset of all courses taken in community college by transfer students.

### Key Policy Questions

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This paper — one in SREB’s series on the essential elements of state policy to increase college completion — provides examples of state actions on transfer policies in the SREB region and outlines key elements for developing a comprehensive, statewide policy. The following questions will help policy-makers examine where their state lies with regard to developing such a policy:

- What is the goal or the intended result of your state transfer policy? Are the objectives and outcomes geared toward enabling transfer students to transfer at least a full 60 hours of credit to a senior institution, all of which will count toward the minimum number of hours required for the bachelor’s degree?
  - Does your state have a comprehensive, statewide agreement for transfer policy? Does it apply to all public two- and four-year colleges and universities?
  - Were statewide transfer committees used to create transfer policy, representing public K-12, two- and four-year colleges, technical institutions and governing/coordinating boards?
  - Does the state transfer agreement guarantee admission with junior standing into a four-year college or university for any student who completes an associate of arts or science degree at a two-year college?
  - Does the policy encourage students to reach momentum points toward transfer and/or an associate’s degree?
  - Does the transfer policy ensure that students with an associate’s degree (the core 60 credit-hour, lower-division course work) will be able to complete a baccalaureate degree by taking only the number of credit-hours remaining to meet the total required for the bachelor’s program?
  - Does your state address reverse transfer — either the transfer of students from four-year to two-year colleges, or also now commonly recognized as allowing students to earn an associate’s degree after transferring to a four-year institution by applying credits earned after transfer?
  - Is there a clear, distinct core curriculum of freshman- and sophomore-level general education courses and major prerequisites?
  - How are new courses added into the transfer agreement?
- Is there a clear, concise system for identifying which courses across all institutions qualify for inclusion in the core, lower-division curriculum? Is there a system for clearly identifying courses and course equivalencies?
  - Are institutions required to make transfer guides available to students and advisors? Does state or system policy require counselor networks among two- and four-year institutions to coordinate transfers and advise students?
  - Does state policy require monitoring and auditing systems to review state and institutional compliance with articulation policies, the effectiveness of transfer programs, and success of the transfer policy?
  - Does your state require that all new students declare a major no later than the end of the freshman year (to allow students to plan to take the right major-related course prerequisites as part of a full 60 credit-hour transferrable core curriculum)?

## State Actions on Transfer

Five SREB states — Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana and Tennessee — have passed legislation setting up the foundation for statewide transfer policy. These states have set the highest examples of guaranteed transfer from a state’s two-year college system to four-year institutions. The examples each embody the most necessary elements of a comprehensive, statewide transfer system.

### *Arkansas*

In 2011, Arkansas legislators enacted House Bill 1772 (Act 747), revising and expanding previous policies that created a statewide system for transfer and articulation. Important pieces of the state’s policy include:

*Statewide core curriculum* — Act 747 establishes a common 60 credit-hour core curriculum, made up of 35 credit-hours toward general education that must be offered and accepted by all institutions, with 25 credit-hours toward prerequisites to a major. The act also limits the maximum number of semester credit-hours required for associate’s degrees (60) and bachelor’s degrees (120), with a few exceptions.

*Common course numbering system* — The act requires the establishment of a statewide common course num-

bering system (CCNS) by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education for the lower-division general education courses found within the Arkansas Course Transfer System (ACTS). The CCNS now includes the 35 credit-hour general education core and major program prerequisites in the state minimum core curriculum. By July 1, 2013, every state-supported institution is required to fully participate in the CCNS and list the common course numbers in all course listings, course documents, catalogs, websites, etc.

*Guarantee of transfer* – The statewide transfer agreement was expanded by including major baccalaureate degree programs of study in the state minimum core curriculum. Students are guaranteed transfer of the 60 credit-hour curriculum, automatic junior status at a four-year university and guaranteed comprehensive academic advising. The act also encourages articulation agreements for programs of study not included in the state minimum core curriculum.

## *Florida*

In the early 1990s, Florida enacted a statute (Chapter 1007 Articulation and Access) that revised the state's transfer policy and established a comprehensive, statewide transfer system. Florida's statewide articulation agreement is now fully implemented. The state Board of Education (BoE) and the Board of Governors (BoG) entered into a statewide articulation agreement in 2002; career and technical education programs have statewide articulation plans to associate's but not bachelor's degrees; associate of applied science degree programs may articulate on an individual basis (inter-institutional agreements). Key pieces of the state's policy include:

*Statewide core curriculum* – The legislation identifies 36 semester hours of general education courses and common prerequisite courses (24 semester hours) and course substitutions for all degree programs leading to the baccalaureate degree across all institutions. These common prerequisites are offered and accepted at all state universities and community colleges.

*Common course numbering system* – The BoE and BoG coordinate and maintain a statewide course numbering system for all public postsecondary institutions, participating non-public postsecondary institutions, and secondary institutions participating in dual

enrollment programs. A course designated as lower division may be offered by any community college.

*Guarantee of transfer* – All associate of arts degree recipients are recognized as meeting the requirements for all general education courses and must be granted admission to the upper-division (designated junior status) of a state university. Community college associate of arts graduates receive priority for admission over out-of-state students. Appropriate courses from associate of science degrees also transfer.

## *Kentucky*

The Kentucky Legislature revised existing statewide transfer policy in 2010 with House Bill 160, a bill to create universal transfer of lower-division associate of arts and associate of science course work completed in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) to all other public institutions in the state. Institutions must accept all courses that meet specified learning outcomes for transfer credit for related bachelor's degrees, whether such courses are earned individually or as a block. Key pieces of the state's policy include:

*Statewide core curriculum* – The legislation created a statewide agreement to align KCTCS lower-division associate of arts and associate of science course work to related bachelor's degree programs at all public four-year institutions. Degrees require 33 general education, 15 prerequisite and 12 additional credit-hours.

*Course equivalency system* – The state maintains the Kentucky Course Applicability System, an online transfer planning system that shows students how course work not covered under the statewide agreement will transfer. Students (with the help of transfer advisors, when available) determine if courses taken outside the approved courses potentially will transfer to four-year universities.

*Guarantee of transfer* – House Bill 160 stipulates that: “graduates of approved associate of arts and associate of science degree programs ... shall be granted admission to related upper-division bachelor's degree programs of a state public college or university on the same criteria as those students earning lower-division credits at the university to which the student transferred.” These students also receive priority admission over out-of state students.

## *Louisiana*

With Senate Bill 285, Louisiana passed statewide articulation and transfer legislation in 2009 to replace a bilateral agreement-based matrix system that did not universally transfer credits across community college and university systems. When fully implemented, the legislation will facilitate “seamless transfer of credits” between higher education institutions. Aspects of the policy have been implemented. Key pieces of the state’s policy include:

*Statewide core curriculum* – The Board of Regents (BoR) is developing a core curriculum that will be fully accepted in its entirety and creditable to the baccalaureate degree by all four-year colleges and universities. It is comprised of specified general education courses (39 semester hours) and common degree program prerequisites (21 semester hours).

*Common course numbering system* – The BoR will develop and maintain a common course numbering system that will identify all lower- and upper-division courses by a universal number and title to ease transfer of credit from one institution to another. Lower-division courses (with general education and common prerequisites getting priority) were completed; all remaining undergraduate courses were completed by the 2012-2013 school year.

*Guarantee of transfer* – Every graduate of a community college awarded an associate of arts or science degree approved for transfer to a four-year institution is recognized as meeting all general education and other core curriculum requirements and must be granted admission to the upper division of any

state public four-year college or university. No associate’s degree recipient will be required to take any additional general education courses to fulfill baccalaureate requirements; these students also will receive priority admission over out-of-state students.

## *Tennessee*

State legislators in Tennessee established a statewide transfer system through the Complete College Tennessee Act in 2010. Key pieces of the state’s policy are:

*Statewide core curriculum* – The Complete College Tennessee Act requires a common, transferable 60-hour core for both the Tennessee Board of Regents (Board) and University of Tennessee systems. Satisfactory completion of the common core leads to transfer to baccalaureate admission. It is comprised of specified general education courses (41 semester hours) and common degree program prerequisites (19 semester hours).

*Common course numbering system* – The act also requires the Board to create a common course numbering system. As a result, common course rubrics and numbers were identified for the 41 semester hours of general education credits that can transfer from the 13 two-year colleges to the six universities in the state.

*Guarantee of transfer* – The Board and the University of Tennessee systems collaborated to create 50 “Tennessee Transfer Pathways,” guaranteeing students the transfer of credits from a two-year college to a public university in the state within these designated majors. This allows timely and cost-effective transitioning from a two- to four-year degree. All pathways were effective in fall 2011.

# Essential Elements of State Policy for College Completion: *Statewide Transfer*

An effective statewide transfer policy should result in an equally efficient path to the bachelor's degree for transfer students from a two-year college as for students beginning at a four-year institution — meaning that transfer students can earn a bachelor's degree in the same number of hours as students who attend only one institution. This efficiency moves states toward important educational goals such as increased degree completion, reduced time-to-degree, reduced cost to the student and the state, and a more educated workforce.

The three key elements of a statewide transfer policy include:

## I. Statewide Application

Each state should make the transfer policy statewide and ensure that it applies to all public universities and community colleges.

## II. Statewide Core Curriculum

For each of the most popular majors of bachelor's degree study, each state should develop a common statewide, lower-division (freshman and sophomore) core curriculum for all two-year colleges and universities. The curriculum should consist of 60 credit-hours for an associate's transfer degree. The curriculum also should specify the lower-division courses that will be common statewide for each program major, including general education, major program prerequisites, electives and so on. Public postsecondary institutions and systems should agree on the number of hours to be required for general education, major-related courses, etc., by having discipline faculty from universities and community colleges concur on the specific criteria for courses that will be included in each lower-division component. The

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## Definitions

**Transfer:** The successful acceptance of a student into a postsecondary institution from another postsecondary institution. Transfer can also be a term referring to the transfer of accepted credit-hours between institutions.

**Transfer and articulation agreement:** An agreement outlining the requirements and rules for the transfer of credits between public postsecondary institutions.

**Guaranteed admission:** The guarantee that a transfer student will be admitted to a four-year institution from a two-year college upon completion of certain credit requirements (or, usually, an associate's degree).

**Bilateral agreement:** An agreement between or among specific postsecondary institutions in a state that outlines the rules and regulations associated with student transfer between or among the institutions. Typically, these agreements map out the transfer of a student from a public two-year college to a public or private four-year institution.

**Statewide core curriculum or lower-division curriculum:** A term that defines the common general education and pre-major course requirements within the freshman and sophomore years of college. Usually, this curriculum refers to the requirements of an associate's degree and is typically 60 credit-hours of course work.

**Course numbering:** The course numbers assigned to college courses. These can be assigned by individual institutions or a state can require one common course numbering system for all public institutions.

policy should be clear that university faculty and community colleges should determine the core, lower-division curriculum by major program and ensure the equivalency of courses and their quality. The courses should be reviewed at universities and community colleges to determine those courses meeting the common criteria, and the state should identify those common statewide courses clearly through a common course number or other designation.

### **III. Guaranteed Credit Transfer**

Each state should ensure that when community college students take the core 60 credit-hour lower-division course work, they will be able to complete a baccalaureate degree at any public university by taking only the number of hours remaining to meet the total hours required for a specific bachelor's program. In order to do this, the state can set a common number of hours for all bachelor's degrees statewide (120 hours for most major programs) and associate's degrees (60 hours). The state should provide a guarantee that any and all of the 60 lower-division hours (the statewide core curriculum) will transfer — even if an associate's degree is not earned. Finally, the state should require that all universities enable transfer students (who have declared a major and taken the specified 60 hours) to graduate by completing only the number of hours remaining to meet the total degree credit requirements.

#### *Further Suggestions*

States also can benefit from several other policy actions to increase the ease and understanding of transferring from one institution to another. Additional recommendations to states include:

- Determine the extent of the transfer problem by an independent study of the community college and university transcripts of transfer students who earn bachelor's degrees. Count all credits attempted (except for non-credit remedial courses) in a community college and university study. Include all course credits, even if not applied to the bachelor's degree. Compare the total credits earned on average by transfer students with those earned on average by

non-transfer students. This will help inform the state about important data points to influence efficient policy. A state may find that on average, transfer students take far more credits, take many credits outside their majors, take classes that are currently transferring, or are allowed too many electives, etc.

- Estimate the cost to the state (appropriation support and financial aid) and students (tuition) of the additional hours attempted by transfer students compared with students who began and completed their bachelor's degrees at a university.
- Recognize the absolute importance of students selecting a major no later than the completion of 30 credit-hours so that they can take the appropriate major prerequisites before transfer and prevent unnecessary accrual of credit-hours, saving money for the state and student.
- Observe that this process is about lower-division work and that university faculty have ample opportunity to put their distinctive university and disciplinary marks on students during their junior and senior years.
- Monitor results by tracking student time- and credits-to-degree — both in terms of total hours and number of hours taken in upper-division university work. This will help to ensure that universities are sticking close to the 60 credit-hour maximum for upper-division course work for most majors.
- Include reverse transfer in state policy to assist transfer students in two ways: (1) by awarding associate's degrees to students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution before completing the associate's degree requirements, by applying relevant credits from the four-year institution; and (2) allowing students to transfer easily from a four-year to a two-year institution for the purpose of earning an associate's degree or other career certificate.

This agenda outlines a complete list of elements that should be incorporated into a comprehensive, statewide transfer policy.

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Policy-makers also should consider the benefits of other common features of successful transfer systems. The checklist below highlights six additional components for transfer policy — items that exist in current successful state policies and help ensure meaningful credit transfer from one institution to another with relative ease. Each of the components on this checklist is important and needs to be addressed at the state level, but most can simply be identified in legislation as items that a state's coordinating or governing board must address in rules or regulations. These six additional components — identified first in the SREB report *Clearing Paths to College Degrees: Transfer Policies in SREB States* — act as appropriate benchmarks for states to monitor their ability to ensure ease of transfer for college students:

- ✓ *Statewide transfer committees* oversee transfer policies and practices and include representatives from public K-12 education, two- and four-year colleges, technical institutions and governing board agencies.
  - ✓ *A common course equivalency system* ensures that comparable courses at public two- and four-year colleges in a state have common titles and descriptions or other equivalency designations. Credits for these courses easily transfer.
  - ✓ *Transfer guides* inform students and advisors about the transferability of courses from one institution to another through a public transfer guide and provide details about the remaining degree requirements after transfer credits are applied.
  - ✓ *A transfer counselor network* identifies counselors at two- and four-year colleges and universities to coordinate the transfer of credit and advises students as they enter and leave institutions.
  - ✓ *Appeals procedures* allow a student to appeal an institution's application of credits earned from another institution and request additional review, either from the institutions involved or the state agency.
  - ✓ *Monitoring and auditing systems* establish a way to review state and institutional compliance with articulation policies and the effectiveness of transfer programs. They also track success of transfer policies.
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## Fiscal Implications

Most states will experience low costs in implementing this type of comprehensive, statewide policy for student transfer, depending on the state's current policy position. Additionally, costs to maintain this policy after initial implementation will remain very low. Most costs will be associated with faculty meetings to identify agreeable common courses, as well as with adding transfer counselors for the network.

Any costs associated with streamlining degree paths, reducing credit-hours required for degrees (to 60 for

associate's and 120 for bachelor's degrees), creating a uniform course equivalency system, guaranteeing transfer for all core curriculum (lower-division) credit-hours, and making the course transfer guides public (online), should be mitigated by the savings the state will see in the reduction of state appropriations to institutions for the additional credit-hours that transfer students will no longer take. A nominal cost will result from any state agency study needed to document the depth of the transfer issues in the state.

## Related/Overlapping Policy

In consultation with system and other necessary state-level postsecondary agencies, state policy-makers should require the state higher education agency to identify and resolve any board policies or regulations that conflict with the new, statewide transfer policy. These could include:

- bilateral student transfer agreements between public postsecondary institutions,
- policies that reduce the effectiveness of the elements of the statewide core curriculum (lower-division credit-hour requirements) or a uniform course numbering system,

- degree requirements that exceed the recommended maximum number of credits by 10 percent, and
- barriers to setting a state appeals procedure for students.

In addition, states should adjust any current transfer policy related to the monitoring/auditing of state and institutional compliance to include only measures that will track the success of the new, comprehensive statewide policy — eliminating measures that divert from this goal.

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