

PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

Accelerating action to close the graduation gap

Policy Brief: Transfer

Serving Today's Transfer Student

Our institutions of higher education were originally designed to serve students, predominately white and affluent, who matriculate into college immediately after high school, attend full time, and stay at the same institution through degree completion. However, most students attending our postsecondary institutions do not fit this profile. Low-income students, adult returning students, and students of color make up a significant proportion of the population pursuing a postsecondary degree. Further, according to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), of all students entering higher education in 2011, 38% transferred at least once between 2011 and 2017, and in Illinois, more than half of transfer students attended three or more institutions.¹

Illinois has responded to changing student demographics and trends, in part, by formalizing a robust transfer system in state policy. As a result, Illinois is now the leader in bachelor's degree completion for students who begin at a community college.² Of those who started at a community college in Illinois in 2010, 19% earned a bachelor's degree in six years, nearly 6% higher than the national average.³ Moreover, relative to other states, Illinois has a high proportion of community college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree granting institution.⁴ As we celebrate our state's leadership and our students' attainment, we should build on our success and look for opportunities to grow and advance equity.

With its well-functioning transfer system Illinois can promote equity at a lower cost to students and the State, and with less necessary systemic change than most solutions, by increasing the number of students who transfer. Currently, less than 35% of degree-seeking community college students in Illinois transfer to a bachelor's degree-granting institution.⁵ Moreover, because on-time transfer and course-transfer rates are intrinsically tied to overall college costs, the State can improve overall college affordability by optimizing course-by-course transfer. Minority students have the most to gain from improvements in transfer-out and course acceptance rates, as 46% of African-American and 55% of Latino students begin their postsecondary career in community college.⁶

For Illinois to continue to make progress as a leader in transfer student degree completion, and to increase equity in transfer student outcomes, our current policies need to be examined to explore how the landscape can better support all bachelor's degree-seeking community college students.

1 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Signature Report 15: Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions," 2018.

2 IBHE Bulletin. September 7, 2018. Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://www.ibhe.org/IBHEBulletin/180907.PDF>

3 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Signature Report 13: Tracking Transfer: Measures of Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students to Complete Bachelor's Degrees," 2018.

4 IBHE Bulletin. September 7, 2018. Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://www.ibhe.org/IBHEBulletin/180907.PDF>

5 Jenkins, David. "Redesigning College for Student Success: A Clearer Path." Presentation, College and Career Access, Persistence and Success, Chicago, July 25, 2017.

6 Illinois Board of Higher Education, "Underrepresented Groups in Illinois Higher Education, 2016 Annual Report," (2017).



This policy brief provides an overview of Illinois’ transfer policies, including (1) the Illinois Articulation Initiative Act, (2) the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, and (3) Senate Bill 2354, a new bill passed by the General Assembly in 2018 focused on the reverse transfer of credit. Each policy overview includes recommendations designed to improve the transfer student pipeline and equity in transfer outcomes.

Introduction

As far back as 1970, Illinois recognized that transfer students needed clear pathways between two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions, and that earned credits should transfer with them. In 1970, through the Community College Compact Agreement (Compact), the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) formalized the belief that two-year and four-year institutions are partners in the delivery of postsecondary education. In that spirit, IBHE recommended that all public four-year institutions guarantee junior status to any incoming transfer student who completed an associate degree.⁷ While there is still no guarantee of junior status for all associate degree holding transfer students in Illinois, many of the state policies that followed—including the three outlined here—support strong institutional partnership.

⁷ Illinois Board of Higher Education, “Illinois Transfer and Articulation Initiatives Annual Report 2016-2017,” (2017).

Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) Act

Transferable Core of Lower-Division Courses

In the early 1990s, over twenty years after introducing the Compact, IBHE conducted an evaluation of the state's transfer systems. It found that a disproportionately low number of traditionally underrepresented students were transferring to four-year institutions and an even lower percentage were earning bachelor's degrees.⁸ Further, it found that those students who did successfully transfer were taking significantly longer to graduate and often graduated with excess credits.⁹

Accordingly, in 1993, IBHE, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and Illinois' transfer coordinators launched the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). Designed to enhance the Compact and decrease time to degree for transfer students, the IAI facilitated the creation of the General Education Core Curriculum (GECC), a package of courses that IAI participating institutions must accept in lieu of their own lower-division course requirements. In practice, this means that community college students who do not know their intended transfer institution or degree program can complete the GECC package and will not have to take additional lower-level courses at their transfer institution, though there are some exceptions.¹⁰

Until 2017, participation in the IAI was voluntary. However, with the passage of the Illinois Articulation Initiative Act (PA 099-0636), effective January 1, 2017, all public institutions must fully participate in the IAI. Full participation requires institutions to submit and review courses for statewide transfer and to maintain a complete IAI GECC package. By formalizing the IAI in statute, the state reiterated its commitment to supporting transfer students and created a new mechanism for policymakers to enhance existing transfer systems.

⁸ The Illinois Board of Higher Education defines underrepresented students as “a citizen or resident alien who identifies as African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian-American, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native, or an individual with a disability.” (Illinois Board of Higher Education, “Underrepresented Groups in Illinois Higher Education.”); Jane Sack, “Is IAI Improving Transfer?,” University of Illinois Update on Research and Leadership, Fall 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ While many private colleges and universities in Illinois voluntarily participate in IAI, they have the ability to require additional general education courses if they are specific to their institutional mission and values. Many times, these courses can be incorporated into the selection of GECC courses to prepare for transfer, but that requires the student to know which university they intend to transfer. In general, the IAI GECC is best suited for students who do not know which university they wish to transfer to, or what degree they intend to pursue.

Limitations of the IAI

While the IAI seems to work well for students who earn certain associate degrees prior to transfer and has been a model for other states, it is not without limitations.

Not all associate degrees transfer

Many associate degree programs offered by Illinois' community colleges do not meet the IAI requirements, and therefore, do not transfer as an IAI package. In terms of the IAI, only the Associate of Arts (A.A.) and Associate of Science (A.S.) degrees are transferable associate degrees. Other degrees and certificates, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) credentials and Associate of General Studies (A.G.S.) and Associate of Fine Arts (A.F.A.) degrees are not part of the state's IAI agreements and therefore do not hold the same guarantee of transfer credit.

In 2017, nearly two-thirds of the degrees and certificates earned in Illinois were in CTE programs.¹¹ Nearly twice as many minority graduates completed CTE degrees and certificates compared to baccalaureate/transfer degrees.¹² Since CTE programs—including the Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.)—remain popular among Illinois community college students, including students of color, to improve equity in on-time bachelor degree completion, colleges must advise students that absent an articulation agreement between the college and university, A.A.S. degrees and other CTE credentials may not count toward bachelor's degree completion and may increase total time to degree.¹³

Moreover, many of the associate degree programs have similar names that, without explanation from an academic advisor, can be confusing. The risk is that students who are not familiar with the nuances of the different degree programs can easily find themselves in the wrong program. For example, a student enrolled at the City Colleges of Chicago wishing to work with young children could choose Child Development: Early Childhood Education, an A.A. degree and part of the IAI, or Child Development: Pre-School Education, an A.A.S. degree and not part of the IAI. Some colleges and universities have created transfer articulation agreements for these and other non-IAI degree programs, but not all.

Most students do not complete an associate degree prior to transfer

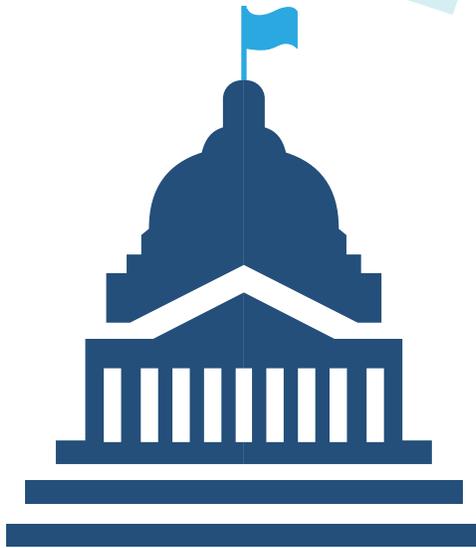
The IAI was designed to serve students who have completed or are near completion of an associate degree or a GECC package; however, research by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) shows that nationally, only 29% of community college students transfer with an associate degree.¹⁴ While the percentage is slightly higher for Illinois, still, the vast majority of Illinois' community college students transfer without a degree, and if they haven't completed a GECC package, they may not be served by our state's transfer policies.

¹¹ Illinois Community College Board, "Student Enrollments and Completions in the Illinois Community College System: Fiscal Year 2017," (2017).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In 2017, CTE programs made up over 25% of all credit enrollments (Ibid).

¹⁴ Jenkins, David. "Redesigning College for Student Success: A Clearer Path." Presentation, College and Career Access, Persistence and Success, Chicago, July 25, 2017.



Illinois Articulation Initiative

Recommendations for Policymakers, Students, and Practitioners

Policymakers should continue to fund current transfer systems that are working well for students, including the IAI, and provide additional and targeted resources to institutions to build on and enhance existing transfer systems and practices.

Policymakers should reintroduce SJR 76, which requires all IAI participating institutions to review the transfer credits of all incoming transfer students and report instances in which courses are not deemed transferable with full credit. The resolution requires IBHE and ICCB to report the findings and provide recommendations to the legislature that will maximize the number of courses deemed transferable to all IAI-participating institutions, regardless of degree completion.

Students should receive guidance from their colleges to choose an area of focus and transfer institution as early as possible, and carefully consider which bachelor's degree pathway (GECC package, A.A., or A.S. degree) is most strategic to their future.

Practitioners who work with students should continue to refine their communications to reiterate the nuances of degree programs and guide bachelor's degree-seeking students to degree programs that fall under the IAI. Further, while many of the courses required for an A.G.S., A.A.S., and A.F.A. degree may not be IAI approved, faculty and registrars at four-year universities should be encouraged to accept these courses for transfer through their own institutional procedures, dependent upon the programs offered at their particular campus.

Student Transfer Achievement Reform (STAR) Act

Guaranteed Junior Status

In May 2015, the General Assembly passed the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act (PA 99-316), guaranteeing junior status for certain associate degree-holding transfer students. The bill provides that upon completion of an associate degree for transfer (A.A. or A.S. degree) with a GPA of 2.0 or above, a student is eligible for transfer to a public four-year institution with junior status.

However, unlike the California bill it is based on (SB 1440), Illinois' STAR Act does not guarantee admission to a public university for eligible transfer students. Rather, it provides that all public four-year institutions, subject to program capacity, must admit and grant junior status to any student who: (1) completes an A.A. or A.S. degree with a GPA of 2.0 or above, (2) meets the requirements of the transfer degree and major specific prerequisites, and (3) meets the admission requirements of the university.

Limitations of the STAR Act

It is unclear if the STAR Act has influenced institutional decision making or what implications it has had on transfer student outcomes. The bill appears to codify the practices that many institutions were implementing prior to its passage and does not address the fact that many community college graduates earn a CTE degree or certificate, rather than an A.A.¹⁵ However, to the extent the Act improves time to degree for transfer students, it is a step in the right direction. The bill does direct IBHE to file a report on the outcomes of the implementation of the Act, including the average amount of time and units it takes a community college student transferring to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree under the Act. Since time-to-degree is so intimately connected to affordability, the report will not only be useful in evaluating the policy's efficacy and impact on transfer student outcomes, but also useful to measure its impact on overall college costs per student.

¹⁵ Illinois Community College Board, "Student Enrollments and Completions in the Illinois Community College System: Fiscal Year 2017," (2017).

Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act

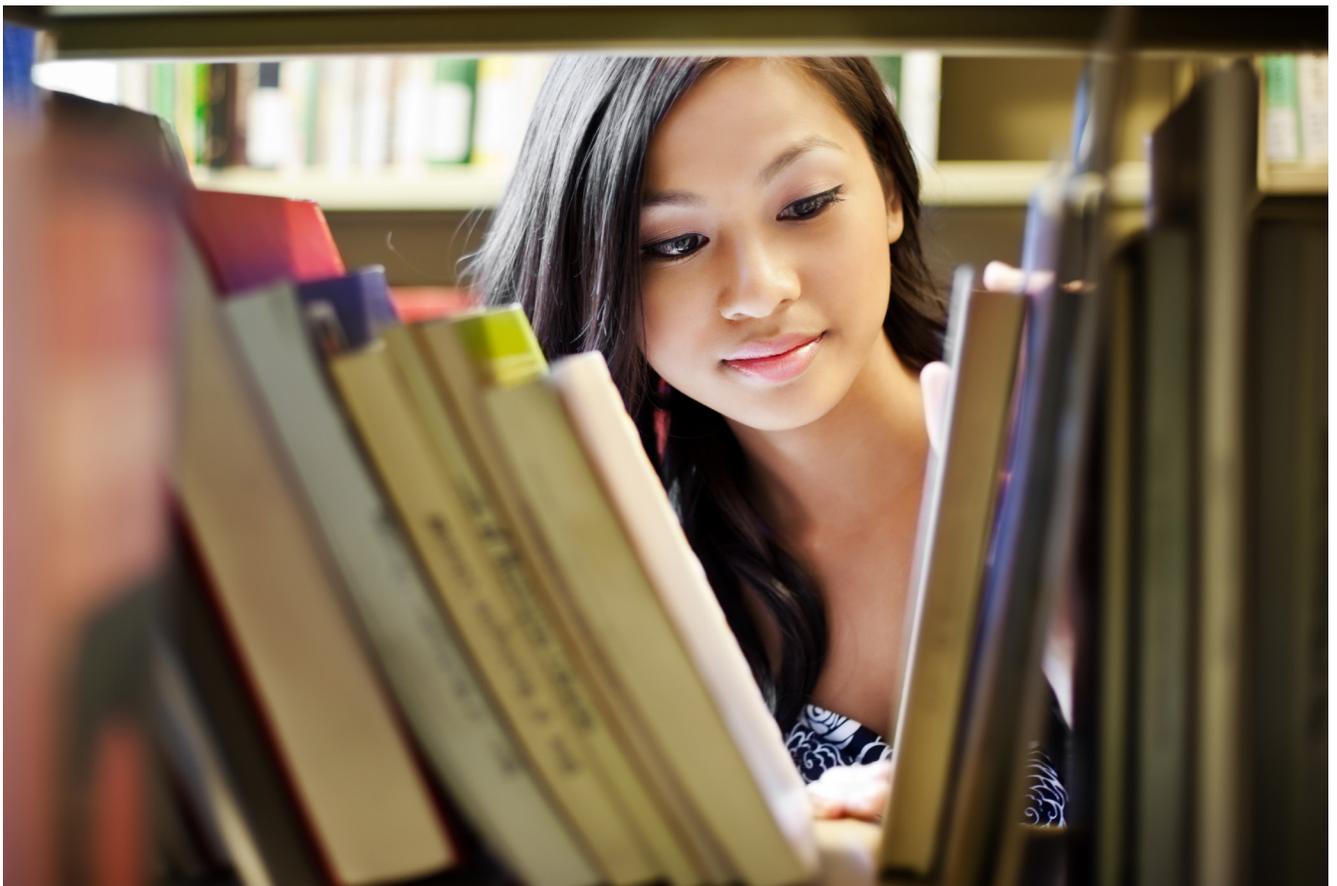
Recommendations for Policymakers, Students, and Practitioners

In addition to the STAR Act's current reporting requirements, IBHE should investigate and report, and **policymakers** should consider, the following questions regarding STAR implementation:

- Are transfer students receiving priority admission over other prospective students?
- Are transfer students with an A.A. or A.S. given priority admission over prospective transfer students with other associate degrees?
- Have admissions of transfer students increased since the Act went into effect?
- How have institutional practices changed as a result of STAR implementation?
- What is the demographic breakdown of students transferring pursuant to this Act?

Students should choose their target transfer institution early and meet with their advisors regularly to make sure they are on track to meet university admission requirements. If there is not an articulation agreement between their community college and intended transfer institution, students should strongly consider completing an A.A. or A.S. degree prior to transfer.

Practitioners who support community college students should emphasize the value of an A.A. or A.S. degree as a possible pathway to a bachelor's degree.



Senate Bill 2354

Reverse Transfer

In the push to meet degree attainment goals, many states have invested in practices and policies that improve transfer between two-year and four-year institutions, including course articulation agreements, common course numbering and guided pathways. In addition to these strategies and others, reverse transfer is becoming an increasingly popular strategy to ensure that students receive all degrees they earn.

In May 2018, the Illinois Legislature passed a suite of higher education bills aimed at keeping more Illinois college-bound students in the state. Many of these bills were a product of the bipartisan Higher Education Working Group that held several closed-door sessions with college and university leaders, advocacy organizations, national experts, and others to strategize ways to end the significant out-migration of Illinois students attending college in other states.¹⁶ Among the legislation introduced by the Working Group was SB2354, a bill ordering development of a statewide reverse transfer policy.¹⁷ With its passage, Illinois became the eighteenth state to enact a reverse transfer policy.

Reverse transfer policies vary by state, but most are designed to serve students who transfer from a community college to a four-year institution with a minimum number of credit hours, but without an associate degree. Through reverse transfer, eligible transfer students earn an associate degree while taking courses towards a bachelor's degree. Upon meeting associate degree requirements, transcripts are sent back to the community college to determine associate degree eligibility and if eligibility is met, a degree is conferred.

Given the intricacy of reverse transfer processes and a lack of interest in associate degree completion from many eligible students, some question the value of a statewide reverse transfer policy. Advocates, on the other hand, argue that reverse transfer practices award degrees to those who have earned them, help the state meet workforce demands and degree attainment goals, and reinforce the increasingly important role community colleges play in educating our workforce.

¹⁶ In 2016, Illinois was ranked second in the country for the number of high school graduates leaving the state to attend college with a net loss of nearly 20,000 students (Illinois Board of Higher Education, “Outmigration Context: Residence and Migration Patterns of Freshmen Students into and from Illinois (IBH Data Points 2018-1),” 2018.)

¹⁷ SB2354 directs IBHE and ICCB to develop a policy to foster the reverse transfer of credit for students meeting the following eligibility guidelines: earned at least 15 hours of academic credit at a community college; earned a sufficient number of credit hours at a state university to meet the community college’s associate degree requirements; agreed to the exchange of transcript information between all institutions he or she has attended; and submitted an application and his or her transcripts to a community college for review. (The Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act 2015 (Illinois) s 23).



Since the majority of Illinois students who transfer do not earn an associate degree first, and many may not earn a four-year degree after transfer, a reverse transfer policy could result in a significant increase in degree conferral and degree attainment, helping the State reach degree attainment goals and helping students achieve their career aspirations.¹⁸ IBHE and ICCB are well positioned to develop a reverse transfer policy that identifies eligible students early, requests consent often, and puts little burden on our students – all evidence-based practices that will support students who transfer without a degree.

Reverse Transfer

Recommendations for Policymakers, Students, and Practitioners

Organizations have conducted research on reverse transfer policies and have shared strategies for policy development and implementation.¹⁹ Their recommendations, a few excerpted below, aim to elevate the number of students served by reverse transfer policies and are recommended here to optimize the reach of Illinois' reverse transfer policy.

Policymakers should ensure consistency in implementation of state policy. The College and Career Success for All Students Act, for example, provides that any student who scores a 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam or 4 or higher on an International Baccalaureate (IB) course shall receive college-level credit at all public institutions. To ensure consistency in policy implementation, Illinois' reverse transfer policy should include AP, IB, and dual enrollment credits in the total credit hours that reverse transfer eligibility requires.²⁰

Students should opt-in to the reverse transfer process. Due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) violation concerns, to earn an associate degree via reverse transfer, eligible students (students with 15+ earned credits from a community college) must opt-in to the reverse transfer process.²¹ By “opting-in,” students agree to have their transcript automatically sent to their community college upon reaching 60 combined credit hours. To streamline consent requests and maximize opt-ins, institutions should include a box on all transfer admission applications and follow-up with targeted emails to those who do not opt-in at the time of application.

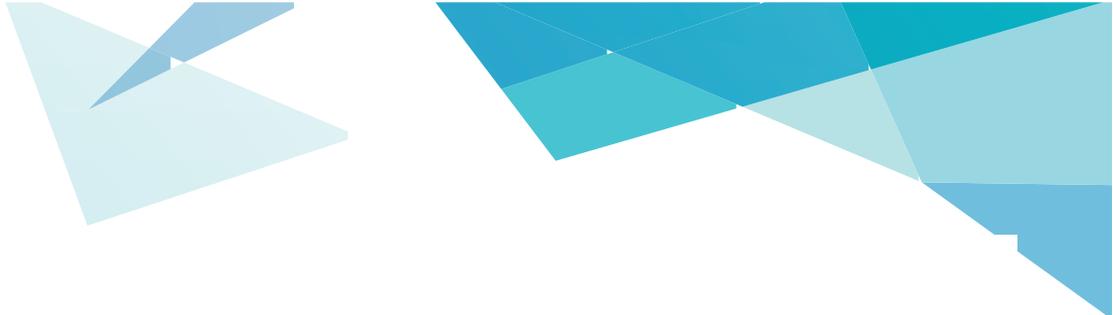
Practitioners should illuminate the continued value of an associate degree for those students who may have moved their educational goals to bachelor's degree completion.

18 Jenkins, “Redesigning College for Student Success: A Clearer Path.”

19 Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the Community College Research Center (CCRC), and the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP), among others.

20 The College and Career Success for All Students Act 2016 (Illinois) s 30.

21 Hawaii has an opt-out system, which significantly increases the number of students participating in the reverse transfer process. However, absent guidance from the federal government, it is unclear if it could be challenged as a FERPA violation. <https://degreeswhendue.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/optimizing-reverse-transfer.pdf>.



Conclusion

To serve the sizeable transfer student population in our state, Illinois has created a robust transfer system with comprehensive programs like the IAI and individual articulation agreements and partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions. Many of these programs have been formalized by state policy and continue to be evaluated and improved to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. To be sure, Illinois is leading the nation in transfer student bachelor's degree completion and outperforming other states in the percent of students transferring to four-year institutions from community colleges.

These policies work well for students who transfer to a four-year institution, after earning an A.A. or A.S. degree. However, most students do not earn a degree before transfer and many bachelor's degree-seeking community college students do not transfer to a four-year institution at all. The State has an opportunity to improve the two-year to four-year pipeline and improve racial and socioeconomic equity in bachelor's degree completion by reorienting policies to serve students who do not earn a transferable degree prior to transfer and by identifying where prospective transfer students are falling out of the pipeline all together.

In pursuit of this goal, policymakers should consider how historically terminal degrees, many A.A.S. degrees, for example, could be articulated for transfer to four-year institutions. Faculty and registrars at four-year universities should be encouraged to accept A.G.S., A.F.A. and A.A.S. courses for transfer through their own institutional procedures. New transfer policies should be student-centered, automate institutional practices, and put little burden on students. By reframing policies and institutional practices to prioritize today's college students, students will graduate faster and with less debt, and the State will continue to be a national model for transfer student success.



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