MEETING SUMMARY

On March 21–22, 2014, 38 invited participants gathered with members of the Council of Independent Colleges’ (CIC) staff in Alexandria, Virginia, for a planning meeting to launch the CIC Community College Transfer Project, a national initiative to increase the number of community college graduates who transfer to private four-year colleges and universities and to assure the students’ academic success once they transfer. The participants included leaders of two-year and four-year colleges, researchers, policy analysts, and heads of consortia and associations that are actively engaged in transfer and degree-completion efforts. The meeting was funded by a generous grant from the Kresge Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Ekman, president of CIC, introduced the agenda on the first day of the meeting with a clear statement of the meeting’s purpose: “to explore the potential of closer relations between community colleges and four-year private colleges to help meet the national goal that President Obama and a number of foundations have articulated of increasing substantially the number of Americans who have attained bachelor’s degrees.”

Ekman then described the strategy of the meeting, which began with a common base of background readings and data distributed prior to the convening; proceeded through specific examples of programs and strategies for successful community college transfer; then moved to broader challenges and barriers that stand in the way of a more effective transfer environment; considered the special challenges of student transfers in STEM fields; discussed state-level policies that help or hinder the transfer of public community college students to private four-year institutions; then concluded with specific recommendations for actions that CIC, its member institutions, and like-minded organizations might pursue in the next three to five years.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER AND THE COMPLETION AGENDA

The opening panel addressed the issue of community college transfers in the context of the national college completion agenda.* The panelists represented four organizations that have been very active in this arena: the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation (Emily Froimson, vice president of programs), Complete College America (Stan Jones, president), the Edvance Foundation (Brian

Mitchell, director), and Achieving the Dream (represented by Northern Virginia Community College president Robert J. Templin, Jr., who serves as chair of the organization’s board of directors). The panel discussion was prompted by three questions from moderator Barbara Hetrick (senior vice president of CIC): 1) What has your organization done to address the completion agenda? 2) What strategies can you recommend to CIC for promoting successful transfer to smaller, private liberal arts colleges? 3) How will CIC and its members know they have achieved their goal of making an impact on the completion agenda? What measures should be used to determine if the project has been effective?

The panelists described very different strategies that focused on individual student support (Fromison), institutional improvements to help private colleges “think beyond their own gates” (Mitchell), a network of community colleges using common data collection and evaluation to build “a partnership for achievement at scale” (Templin), and a state-by-state process to develop degree plans for students in specific subjects designed to provide structured pathways from two-year to four-year institutions (Jones). Beyond these specific examples, the panelists introduced five major themes:

- The need to develop a variety of pathways for successful transfer from a community college to a four-year institution, recognizing that there are different kinds of community college students with different trajectories to their education, and different opportunities for institutional cooperation at the local, state, and national levels.
- The need to build trusting, ongoing relationships between sending and receiving institutions. These relationships can lead to “jointly owned pathways to success,” explained Templin.
- The desirability of a shift in the messages that private colleges send out to community college students; the present message is too often perceived as exclusionary.
- The need to build campus-wide commitments to “transfer-friendliness,” engaging the faculty, staff (especially advising staff), senior administrators, and governing boards.
- The need to reach out to (potential) transfer students as early as possible to help them navigate the transfer process. Despite articulation agreements, the transfer process can be daunting and inefficient; highly structured pathways are one solution.

The session culminated with a challenge from Templin: “Independent colleges: what is your fair share of the completion challenge?” After some discussion, other participants offered a corollary to his challenge: What is the capacity for private colleges to scale up their commitment to enrolling community college transfer students?

**Transfer Programs and Strategies in Action**

The next plenary session was devoted to specific programs for recruiting, enrolling, supporting, and graduating community college transfer students at baccalaureate institutions. It was moderated by Janet L. Marling, executive director of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, who began the session by reminding participants that transfer is both a local event and a national policy concern. The discussion moved quickly from exemplary practices that can be emulated and scaled to include significant numbers of institutions and students, to emerging practices that deserve close attention, to unsuccessful practices that should be reconsidered.
Exemplary practices fell into three broad categories:

- **Academic bridges** can be as simple (though challenging) as developing common outcomes for courses or programs among sending and receiving institutions or identifying specific courses that are roadblocks for transfer students and making sure that students complete them at the community college before they transfer. Other examples include joint courses, team taught courses by community college and four-year college faculty members, courses taught by four-year faculty members on community college campuses, and ongoing dialogues among faculty members in the same disciplines at two-year and four-year college—with the goal of dispelling perceived differences in the quality of coursework offered by community colleges and four-year colleges, and with the added benefit of introducing community college students to faculty members at private colleges.

- **Cultural bridges** typically involve bringing community college students to four-year college campuses early and often as well as developing special orientation programs for transfer students. David Finegold, chief academic officer of American Honors, argued that “just showing up” can be a best practice, because private colleges are not part of the experience of many community college students or their families. The goal is to help students feel comfortable in the four-year college environment.

- **Advising bridges** rely on strong advising partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions. Transfer advisors from four-year institutions who spend time at community colleges also help overcome information gaps between community colleges and four-year institutions.

Most of the emerging practices discussed during this session focused on building support networks, both for students and institutions. For example, Becky Packard, associate dean of the faculty at Mount Holyoke College and a leading expert on transfer students in the STEM fields, introduced the idea of a “science posse,” a cohort of STEM transfer students enrolled in the same courses and supported by academic advising before and after the transfer process. (Non-STEM students would benefit from the same kind of cohorts, especially since so much of the academic experience of juniors takes place within the major field.) Junior and senior students at the four-year college who serve as transfer-student ambassadors also can provide a continuous point of contact for mentoring and advice before, during, and after the transfer process. At the institutional level, effective relationships between two-year and four-year institutions include multiple opportunities for faculty-to-faculty and staff-to-staff (advising, financial aid, student affairs) interactions.

A different discussion began when the session moved from successful to unsuccessful or inefficient practices. Ekman asked the group whether there is an inherent contradiction between the individualized approaches adopted by many private colleges to work with community colleges and their students and the national or systemic approaches to transfer and completion presented by the opening panel? Can they coexist? Is it possible or feasible to scale the “high-touch” approaches used by many private colleges? Cathy Burack, senior fellow for education at Brandeis University’s Heller School, rephrased the question this way: Is there a difference between bringing best practices to scale (i.e., replicating specific institutional approaches) and bringing the desired outcomes to scale (i.e., helping more community college graduates transfer and complete their bachelor’s degrees)?
This led to a lively dialogue about where CIC, or any other group, could exert the greatest leverage to expand community college transfers and completions. Is the greatest potential impact at the level of national policy? At the state or regional level, where a manageable number of institutions could develop systematic, structural solutions to transfer barriers? Or at the institutional level, by fostering relationships between individual institutions and developing a “Toolkit for Transfer-Friendly Campuses” that combines proven strategies with evaluation metrics? At the conclusion of the session, several participants drew the group’s attention back to fundamental questions: What incentives do independent colleges have to pursue transfer students? Do independent colleges know how to find the students who will thrive once they transfer? What issues are local community colleges facing that independent colleges can help address? What do transfer students want, and what do they have to offer a four-year campus?

**Persistently Challenging Transfer and Completion**

In the next session, participants broke into three smaller groups to discuss persistent challenges to successful transfers and degree completion. Each group focused on a particular aspect of the issue: Student characteristics, institutional practices and resources, and systemic factors—including state policies—that transcend any individual institution. The groups were not asked to develop exhaustive lists of transfer barriers, which were summarized in the readings distributed prior to the meeting. Among the challenges highlighted by each group were the following:

**Characteristics and Needs of Community College Transfer Students**

- Self-Identity: “Will I fit in?” “I’m not like them” (i.e., the students at independent colleges);
- The perception that all private colleges are elite, usually unwelcoming, and probably too expensive;
- The lingering stigma of being a transfer student, in the eyes of both transfer students themselves and many receiving institutions;
- Assumptions about the quality of the transfer student’s prior education on the part of faculty and staff at receiving institutions; transfer students may lack “college knowledge” (explicit procedures and implicit norms) and not even be aware of commonly accepted practices on four-year campuses;
- Transfer students also may be less familiar with computer technology than other students at private colleges, which can be a barrier when confronted with computer-based placement tests and registration systems;
- Lack of advising and other support services, especially after enrollment;
- Financial aid policies that favor first-year students over transfer students; housing and academic policies that favor rising juniors over transfer students; and
- Opaque and confusing credit-transfer procedures.
- Some ways to address these challenges include: Help potential transfer students become familiar and comfortable with the four-year college even before they begin classes; offer one-stop student services; use technology to support mentoring for non-traditional students; and identify financial resources specifically for transfer students.
Institutional resources and practices

- Cohorts can work well for transfer students, but institutions often have a hard time creating and sustaining them.
- Location can be a significant challenge, especially for the many community college students who are place-bound. Some four-year institutions have reached beyond nearby community colleges by providing travel funds to bring prospective transfer students and their parents to campus programs.
- Transfer champions are important but not sufficient; campuses should institutionalize support for transfer students.
- Find ways to cushion “transfer shock” in the classroom and in student life. Athletics can play an important role.
- Develop appropriate institutional messages for transfer students. What works for a traditional 18-year-old student does not necessarily work for a 30-year-old community college graduate.
- Recognize and address gaps in academic preparation. Dedicated transfer orientation programs and remediation were offered as partial solutions, but the group also asked whether it is necessary to require special courses—for example, a required mission-related course or first-year seminar—that native students at independent colleges usually take during the first two years?
- Institutional change is hard, whether it involves changing the curriculum or retraining faculty and staff. The group asked whether there might be a role for CIC in retraining staff at member institutions to help sensitize them to transfer issues?

Systemic challenges

- Independent colleges are not usually invited to the table for discussions of state-level policy, which places them at a disadvantage in systems that are designed to facilitate transfers from public two-year to public four-year institutions.
- In many cases, public colleges and state policymakers do not see independent colleges as serving the state or contributing significantly to a public policy of college completion.
- Financial aid policies are not transfer-friendly. Institutional policies often frontload aid for entering first-year students at the expense of transfer students. State and federal policies, such as Pell Grants, may cap financial aid eligibility to the disadvantage of transfer students who need more than four-to-six years to complete a bachelor’s degree. Like many other higher education consumers, potential community college transfer students do not always appreciate the net cost of college enrollment.
- Faculty attitudes towards transfer students may represent another kind of systemic barrier.

All three breakout groups identified financial aid as a key barrier to successful transfer and completion. Financial issues include actual enrollment costs at private colleges, student and family perceptions of cost, institutional policies that frontload financial aid, and federal policies that limit access to Pell Grants when many transfer students still need support. As Brian Mitchell noted in his group, students face academic, familial, social, and cultural barriers when they transfer, but financial aid is “often the deal breaker.”
ASSIGNING PRIORITIES

Once the oral reports from the breakout groups were concluded, the late-afternoon plenary session moved to a discussion of priorities: Which challenges to successful transfer and completion are the most significant and what actions might be necessary to address each challenge in the near future? The moderator, Barbara Hetrick, asked the participants to distinguish among challenges that are *essential, important, or desirable* to address and actions that might be implemented in the short term.

*Essential in the short term*

- Define “success” for the CIC Community College Transfer Project.
- Spotlight the importance of community college transfer for students, institutions, and the national completion agenda and underscore the role of independent colleges in the transfer system. The message should be that “private or independent still means open and affordable.”
- Encourage conversations, then partnerships, between independent colleges and their neighboring community colleges.
- Identify, apply, and evaluate best practices. Carl Strikwerda, president of Elizabethtown College, argued that “We have enough best practices, but we need to put them in place at more [independent colleges and universities] and assess the impact” through demonstration and evaluation projects.
- Identify metrics of transfer volume and success that are already being collected by CIC members and incorporate them into CIC’s existing benchmarking tools.
- Develop a national transfer student portal to help match independent institutions with transfer students whose interests and characteristics are likely to be a good fit. Rod Risley, president of Phi Theta Kappa, explained that his organization already had such a tool in place ([College Fish](#)); CIC members should be familiar with it.

*Important in the short term*

- Develop a set of key benchmarks for transfer success, drawing on existing data and data-collection tools as much as possible. Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, noted that current data collection efforts at the national level are inadequate.
- Develop a “transfer tool kit” of best practices.
- Provide additional training for faculty and staff members at independent institutions to familiarize them with the distinctive features of community colleges and community college transfer students.
- Encourage broad and sustainable institutional commitments to attracting and graduating transfer students.
- Expand the conversation about independent colleges and the transfer of community college graduates to include faculty members, trustees, foundations, corporations with an interest in workforce development, and policymakers.
- Encourage institutional financial aid policies that treat native and transfer students on equal footing.
• Encourage dual-enrollment models that ensure steady financial aid support for transfer students. Because community colleges in many states have financial incentives tied to completion rates, one potential model is reverse-transfer agreements that allow community colleges to claim credit for students who transfer before completing an AA at the point where they complete associate’s degree requirements.

Desirable in the short term

• Create public-private partnerships that help independent colleges become champions of public two-year institutions.
• Explore other possible partnerships at the state and regional levels.
• Promote clearer articulation agreements and more explicit transfer pathways at the state level.
• Consider the unintended consequences of expanding the number of community college transfer students. For example, will expanding access to four-year colleges beyond the highly motivated students whom many see as the only students who manage to transfer successfully lead to a decline in student success—a scenario that makes the evaluation of transfer student outcomes even more important?

The session ended with a discussion about the variety of CIC institutions, some of which are more likely than others to commit to transformational changes that could expand by an order of magnitude the number of community college transfer students they enroll. How do “we meet institutions where they are,” when it comes to their willingness to enroll more transfer students?

Alfred Herrera, director of UCLA’s Center for Community College Partnerships, asked the group a provocative question: “How do we change institutions to meet the needs of community college transfer students and not change the students to meet the needs of the institutions?”

Special Challenges of STEM Transfer

The first day of the planning meeting ended with a presentation by Becky Wai-Ling Packard on the special challenge of transfer students in STEM fields. Packard offered five observations to spark discussion. Her first observation was that community colleges and their students differ from many CIC member institutions and their students in significant ways, and these differences create a profound challenge for a smooth transfer process. The differences include demographics, a focus on remedial credits at many community colleges, a focus on sequenced curricula at many CIC colleges, different emphases on access and “prestige,” and the importance of early relationships that form between students and faculty members at liberal arts institutions.

Her second observation was that STEM “magnifies” these transfer challenges, because STEM majors tend to be highly structured and offer relatively few on-ramps for community college graduates who transfer with junior standing. Packard’s third observation was that many faculty members at independent colleges find it difficult to see transfer students as “our students.” She attributed this problem both to misperceptions about community college students and the structured STEM curricula that put a premium on early courses and relationships within the major field.
Her fourth observation was more optimistic, as she pointed to some promising new programs: The Ramping Up STEM initiative, supported by Project Kaleidoscope and the Gates Foundation, which is developing state-level articulation agreements and STEM major maps; collaborative research projects that bring together faculty and students from community colleges and four-year private institutions; efforts to embed transfer-friendly advising messages into STEM classes; and developing STEM transfer posse cohorts. She also urged faculty at independent colleges to “walk the campus” and see it through the eyes of transfer students. Her final observation was that tough questions about transfer remain unanswered, including the actual costs of effective advising and mentoring, the disadvantages of relying on just one or a few transfer champions, and how to dispel lingering assumptions held by nearly everyone involved in the transfer process.

**STATE POLICIES AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER**

The second day of the planning meeting began with a brief recapitulation by Philip M. Katz, CIC’s director of projects, of the themes, challenges, and recommendations offered during the opening sessions. This summary was followed by a panel on the role of state-level policies that promote or hinder the transfer of community college students to independent colleges and universities.

The panel was a reminder that policies and politics vary from state to state, offering different opportunities for independent colleges to engage in policy debates or participate in transfer systems typically designed with public institutions in mind. In Tennessee, represented by the panel’s moderator, Claude Pressnell (president of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association), private colleges actively inserted themselves into the state-level Tennessee Transfer Pathways project to coordinate coursework at two- and four-year institutions. Participating independent colleges agreed to recognize specific pathways through one or more academic programs. They accept community college graduates who have completed the prescribed pathways, grant full equivalency credit, and enable students to begin as juniors. (Some independent colleges are “half-way” participants and require additional coursework beyond the prescribed pathways, which prevents them from being listed on the state’s web portal.) In California, represented by Whittier College president Sharon Herzberger, independent colleges are “driven by what’s going on with the state” and strive to mesh with the state transfer framework, usually in the context of bilateral relationships with individual community colleges. The challenges in California include the lack of an independent college culture and a state policy structure that privileges transfer pathways from community colleges to the University of California and California State University systems. The best approach in California, she concluded, is for independent colleges to coordinate their own pathways to transfer and then cooperate with the state’s public systems. She noted the possibility of a pilot program between the state network of independent institutions and one of the public community college systems.

Lawrence Nespoli, president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, reported that cooperation between his association and the state’s association of independent colleges is already well-established. In the area of student transfer, the state has witnessed an evolution from bilateral articulation agreements towards a system of general transferability of credits from junior to senior colleges. This development was encouraged by the 2006 Lampitt Bill, which also provided an impetus for the presidents of public, private, and for-profit colleges in the state to
cooperate more closely on transfer issues. The final panelist, A. Hope Williams, president of North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, noted that some colleges receive most of their transfer students from local community colleges and believe that individual agreements with those institutions meet their needs but that 26 of the 36 private colleges and universities in North Carolina had signed the statewide articulation agreement. She discussed how statewide articulation systems also may supplement bilateral agreements between institutions, as the latter are built on close local institutional cooperation and focus on specific undergraduate majors, while broader statewide agreements facilitate the growing trend of transfers from community colleges located across the state. She gave examples of independent colleges and universities that received transfers through the statewide agreement from as many as 20 community colleges, an option that would not have been available under limited local agreements. She also explained that private colleges have been able to retain some traditional requirements that are not part of the statewide agreement (such as religion and physical education) and maintain their institutional flexibility by changing those requirements from general education requirements to graduation requirements.

In addition to the panelists’ concerns about articulation, cooperation, and autonomy, the subsequent discussion again raised the issue of financial aid policies. In some states, community college graduates who transfer to in-state private institutions and those who transfer to public institutions do not have the same access to financial aid opportunities offered by the state. Private institutions also may have an incentive to reach out to potential transfer students early (that is, prior to completing an associate degree) before they exhaust their eligibility for Pell Grants or state-based awards. Most participants agreed that financial aid availability should not be a determining factor in selecting a transfer destination.

DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

At this point, the planning meeting moved into its final phase: developing an action plan of recommended activities that CIC and its member institutions, together with other groups with similar goals, could pursue in a reasonable time frame to increase the number of community college graduates transferring to independent colleges and universities and completing their degrees. The participants met in three groups with the task of recommending action steps appropriate to one of three levels: Institutional, state or regional, and national. The groups also were asked to consider the resources needed to undertake any recommended action, the potential obstacles that might be encountered, and the indicators of successful results.

The groups reconvened at the end of the morning and shared their recommendations during a plenary session moderated by Carl Strikwerda. Among the recommendations were the following:

Recommended actions at the national level

- Clearly define the goal of a community college transfer project. What does CIC want to accomplish?
- Investigate financial aid policies at the federal, state, and institutional levels.
• Facilitate faculty-to-faculty interactions between CIC member institutions and community colleges, with the understanding that CIC has different roles to play as a facilitator at the national, regional, and local levels.
• Promote evidence-based practices for transfer and completion rather than best practices.
• Develop a national public information campaign about the success of independent colleges in educating community college graduates. The campaign should be aimed at community college students and their parents, policymakers, and the staff, faculty, and leaders of both two-year and four-year institutions. The key messages might include: affordability, completion rates at independent colleges, the success of independent colleges in graduating low-income and other underrepresented groups, the impact of timely completion on total college costs and subsequent earnings, and accurate information about student debt.
• Address the inadequacy of national data about transfer students through advocacy and best institutional practices.

Recommended actions at the state or regional level

• This group began with three general propositions:

  1) There is a potential tension between collective action and the valued independence of CIC member institutions.
  2) Individual colleges and states are at very different stages in their support of community college student transfer and completion.
  3) While the state is an important sphere of action for promoting transfer and completion, especially when it comes to policy issues and articulation frameworks, it is not the only sphere. Sometimes other regions, defined by geographic proximity across state lines, make more sense—for example, in discussions about the regional recruitment of students.

• The group then proposed three types of meetings, that could be convened in multiple locations:

  1) In states that are relatively well advanced in their efforts to encourage transfers to independent colleges and universities and want to make further progress on such issues as degree pathways, statewide articulation systems, and policy improvements.
  2) In states that are less advanced, with many institutions that are just beginning to address the transfer and completion issues addressed during this planning meeting.
  3) In metropolitan or multi-state regions, with a focus on issues that are not well-defined by state boundaries.

• In each case, the meetings should bring together more than one type of institution, with each participating college represented by a team of senior leaders, faculty members, and relevant staff; the teams should be provided with data about transfer volume and student success to review in advance; and the meetings should have well-defined goals and deliverables in order to have immediate value for the participants.
• The meetings could lay the groundwork for a subsequent project in which consortia of CIC members and community colleges might address issues and practical concerns raised during the initial convenings—in effect, reiterating the process of the current planning meeting. CIC also might serve as an intermediary to fund scalable initiatives to foster transfer-friendly practices at selected member institutions.

• This group also recommended that CIC take advantage of the existing state organizations of independent colleges to encourage state-level conversations about community college student transfer and completions. This strategy would require relatively few resources, as most of the state organizations already hold regular meetings. CIC’s role would be to help frame agenda topics, identify speakers and background information, and perhaps provide modest support for travel and participation of local community college leaders.

**Recommended actions at the institutional scale**

• Develop an institutional pledge that CIC member institutions can make to demonstrate publicly their commitment to enrolling and graduating community college transfer students. The pledge should be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of CIC institutions while encouraging each institution to develop and publicize realistic goals. The pledge also might include a commitment to financial aid policies that treat first-year and transfer students equitably.

• Develop a transfer tool kit and a transfer-friendly checklist for both CIC institutions and community colleges.

• Stress the importance of relationships to transfer success. This recommendation embraces both external relationships (for example, between baccalaureate institutions and community colleges) and internal relationships (for example, between transfer students and mentors). Specific transfer-friendly practices for CIC to promote might include: sharing staff or faculty advisors with a nearby community college; developing structured president-to-president, faculty-to-faculty, and student-to-student relationships; offering joint courses; welcoming community college students to athletic or other campus events; and extending library privileges to community college students and faculty.

• Recognize the need for cultural change at two-year and four-year institutions alike. CIC should help challenge misguided assumptions.

• Help institutions collect better data: determine what institutions, researchers, policymakers, and advocates need to know about transfer students and their outcomes; ask for voluntary submission of data from both community colleges and four-year institutions; and help them make sense of the comparative data. This final recommendation requires action on the institutional, state/regional, and national levels.

**Next Steps**

The planning meeting concluded with an expression of appreciation for the contributions made by the participants and final remarks by Richard Ekman. Ekman reiterated CIC’s commitment to transfer student access and success, noting that the planning meeting had already advanced CIC’s first goal of establishing the potential role and significant impact of independent colleges on the completion agenda. The next step is for the CIC staff to synthesize what they learned at the planning meeting and then share a meeting summary with participants.
Ekman thanked everyone for the wealth of ideas they offered during the meeting and identified the following as steps that CIC, in an initial review, has the distinctive capacity to advance for the CIC Community College Transfer Project:

- Share the summary of the planning meeting with CIC institutions and other institutions and associations with interest in contributing to the completion goal;
- Form alliances among organizations and associations with similar goals and make those alliances visible nationally;
- Survey 629 CIC institutions to determine the extent of the commitment and capacity to enroll students at the junior level who have earned associate’s degrees;
- Develop an inventory of best practices;
- Work with organizations that have regional or statewide networks to convene independent colleges (joined by community colleges) to identify ways they can work together to increase the number of transfers students and then share the results nationally.
- Work with NAICU and AACC to modify the federal financial aid policies that would facilitate the transfer of students with associate’s degrees.
- Support exchanges between community college and four-year faculty members on a local basis; and
- Seek funding to support these initiatives.