Paper finds no negative consequences for 4-year to 2-year transfers

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From 4-Year to 2-Year

New report on transfer of struggling students from universities to community colleges finds students benefit from moving in nontraditional direction.

June 6, 2016

By

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Community colleges and universities continue to work toward improving their relationship when it comes to moving students from a two-year campus to a four-year one as they pursue bachelor's degrees.

But a sizable population of students is also moving the other direction. They're transferring out of four-year universities and into community colleges for a number of reasons. A report from the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University finds that this reverse transfer benefits struggling students.

The paper details that struggling students who transfer to a two-year college are no less likely than struggling nontransfer students to earn a bachelor's' degree after they attend the community college and move back to a four-year institution. And early employment outcomes show that the labor market doesn't penalize the four-to-two transfer. It also defines "struggling" as students who earned less than a 3.0 GPA in the first semester.

"It's a very positive result, especially for students going into more structured programs," said Vivian Liu, the paper's author and a senior research assistant at CCRC. "If they're facing academic or financial difficulty, their best bet is to transfer to the two-year."

For students who struggle in their first year in the university setting, they may realize that instead of continuing to

struggle in that academic setting and pay three more years of full tuition, it could be more effective to transfer to the less expensive community college, Liu said.

"And the labor market outcomes show that you don't earn any less than people who stay. You might have a chance of earning more," she said.

Transferring from a four- to two-year institution isn't all that rare. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, about 237,000 students in 2006 completed a four-to-two-year transfer compared to about 260,000 students who completed a traditional transfer from a community college to a university. About 16 percent of students who begin at a four-year university transfer to a two-year college within six years, according to the report, which used Clearinghouse data.

The students transferring from a four-year to a two-year institution could be doing so for reasons other than academics or finances, said Janet Marling, executive director of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students at the University of North Georgia. Those reasons could be because of the distance of a campus to their home, or the need to be closer to family.

What's important is that the transfers are planned and that community colleges recognize that articulation agreements need to work both ways so students aren't just accumulating credits they can't use at either institution.

"This paper is showing our two-year institutions are providing great support for our students; it's just a matter of insuring those credits are portable, they transfer to the next destination and they have applicability to a major that can help them reach their goals," Marling said.

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