UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE TO IMPROVE PATHWAY TOOLS AND POLICY

MapMyPath

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research included in this report was produced with the support of the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium. The Consortium is comprised of 49 foundations and philanthropists from across Texas interested in ensuring that parents, educators, policymakers, media, and the general public have objective data about public education. The Consortium has strived to ensure that the research contained in this report is objective and nonpartisan. Created in 2011, the Consortium focuses its work on leveraging private resources to produce credible and necessary data on the most important educational challenges facing Texas. For more information on the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium please visit www.tegac.org.

Student names and images have been changed for privacy.
INTRODUCTION

Transferring between higher education institutions has become the norm for postsecondary students in Texas. The majority of students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college report that they intend to transfer to a four-year institution to earn a baccalaureate degree. However, only 35 percent successfully transfer, and within six years of enrollment only 15 percent graduate with a bachelor’s degree. On average, transfer baccalaureate graduates attempt 150 credits, in comparison to 142 for native students and the 120 required for most four-year degree programs.

While most students earn credits from multiple institutions, undergraduate curricula and advising are primarily addressed within individual colleges and universities. There is dramatic variation in how institutions present information about curricula and transfer policies, making it difficult for students and advisers to understand, analyze, and compare program requirements. For students, this contributes to large numbers of courses taken and credits awarded that do not transfer or apply to degree or certificate programs, which translates to longer time to degree and additional out-of-pocket costs. For policymakers, this presents a serious challenge to large-scale improvements in graduation rates and time to degree. It also results in higher net costs for the state.
The MapMyPath project is designed to make undergraduate degree pathways more transparent and streamlined for students across higher education institutions. The project consists of a research component and the development of a tool to aid students and advisers in navigating higher education transfers:

First, it seeks to understand student experiences transferring between higher education institutions in order to provide new insights into the challenges that undergraduate students confront when transferring course credits between programs and institutions. This report summarizes that research.

Second, the MapMyPath project will use the insights gathered through this research to develop a sustainable, web-enabled product to serve students and educators in understanding credit transferability across institutions and postsecondary degree and certificate program requirements.

Long-term success of the project will result in reduced excess credit accumulation, increased persistence and attainment, and lower costs for students, their families, and the state. The data created and reported for the project will also enable new research and insights about the design and delivery of undergraduate education across higher education institutions.
BACKGROUND: TEXAS POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Texas Legislature has passed a number of bills related to improving higher education, transfer issues, and strengthening alignment between higher education institutions and educational pathways for students. In 1987, the Texas Legislature passed a bill that established the first core curriculum with the general purpose of ensuring quality in higher education. The most recent core curriculum, implemented in the fall of 2014, consists of a 42-semester-credit-hour (SCH) curriculum designed to develop the essential knowledge and skills necessary for students to be successful. The core curriculum facilitates the transfer of lower-division course credit between public colleges, universities, and health-related institutions throughout the state. While the courses should automatically transfer, they are not required to apply to a given major.

Building on the core curriculum policy, the state passed legislation that directs the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to develop field of study (FOS) curricula for various academic programs. The FOS curricula specify approximately one-quarter to one-half of lower-division courses for particular majors. This is meant to be a block of courses that can be added on to the core curriculum for lower-division coursework. The block should transfer not just as electives, but as courses that apply to the specified major. As of fall 2018, there are 19 approved FOS curricula. However, because the FOS agreements were traditionally intended to be added on top of the core curriculum, they do not specify general education courses required for particular majors.

In 2011, the Texas Legislature established the reverse transfer program to award an associate degree to students who transferred from, or previously attended, a public community college and earned at least 30 SCH of coursework at the community college. Students who transfer to a public university with at least 30 SCH from a community college can permit their new university to send their transcript back to the community college to determine their eligibility for an associate degree once they have earned 90 SCH.
SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In an effort to understand the experiences of students and advisers in navigating the higher education system, the MapMyPath research team conducted interviews with postsecondary students, high school students, and advisers within higher education institutions in order to:

1. Understand what it’s like to be a student or adviser focused on credit transfer and planning.

2. Identify the way both students and advisers think about their academic experience, particularly focused on course selection, planning, and degree completion.

3. Observe current processes and strategies (both good and bad) used by participants to aid in their student planning.

The research focused on understanding the experience of the participants rather than opinions. Rather than bringing them into an office, researchers met with students and counselors at their houses, dorms, offices, or other familiar places. The interview was prompted by artifacts or behavior, rather than following a question/answer script. The researchers used a series of activities to help participants communicate their thoughts in a creative way instead of simply in a verbal manner. In an effort to gather depth of data about a small sample rather than breadth about a large sample, participants were not randomly selected. Rather, selection was based on specific (but simple) criteria. Our research participants included postsecondary students who have either transferred schools or are considering transferring, high school seniors, and college advisers. These students and advisers were from high schools and two- and four-year institutions in North Texas and the Dallas–Fort Worth metro.
TRANSFER EXPERIENCES: MapMyPath Research on Student Pathways

The MapMyPath research uncovered student experiences described in this section. The insights synthesize our findings from ethnographic interviews with research from the field of higher education transfer policy and experiences. The aim of the research was not to be predictive. The experiences described do not intend to make a statement about a large population based on the observations and findings from the interviews. Instead, the research aimed to provide inspiration and insight into the ways in which students and advisers navigate higher education pathways.
Participant interviews illustrated that students don’t fully understand the role a degree plays in a given profession or in job attainment. Students reported enrolling in degree programs because they felt that without a degree, their lives would be less valuable and they would make less money.

Making the link between education and workforce is imperative. By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require a postsecondary certification or degree. Workforces that are competitive are those in which 60 percent or more of the population between the ages of 25 and 34 have a postsecondary degree or certificate. In Texas, 42 percent of residents age 25 to 34 years have a postsecondary credential.

Additionally, postsecondary enrollment is only the first step. The most important measure of success is degree completion, which is why it is critical that students who do enroll in postsecondary education need a clear pathway to degree completion. Of the fall 2011 cohort in Texas public higher education institutions, 59 percent of public university students earned a postsecondary degree within six years and 27 percent of public two-year college students earned a degree or certification at a two- or four-year institution within six years.
José just finished his freshman year at the community college. College was always his goal. He has known since high school that he wanted to start his education in community college and transfer into a four-year university. He always heard that the education program at the four-year university was a good one, so rather than pursue his associate degree, he has been printing out the degree plans from their website and registering for classes that he knows will transfer.

After graduating, José plans on teaching in an early childhood classroom setting. He wants to someday be involved in the planning of curriculum for school districts and is considering continuing his education to receive his master’s. He believes that the job opportunities available to him will increase with the education he receives.

“Some of the classes, when I first got there, I wasn’t sure about what – how the college thing worked. I said I wanted to work toward becoming a teacher. I didn’t know what that was. I didn’t understand the whole concept of degrees, and the names. There are different degrees and each gets you a different job. I didn’t know which degree I needed.”
Insight 2: Students hear, over and over, that they need to graduate as quickly as possible.

Students reported feeling that their financial aid requirements are tied to graduation timelines and that they will run out of money if they take too long. Students also reported that there is a stigma associated with being enrolled for a long period of time – a feeling that they aren’t “doing it right.” Furthermore, the longer they are in school, the more exhaustion and disillusionment they show: students can become jaded and express an interest in quitting entirely.

Research conducted by Complete College America (CCA) highlights the propensity for students to take excess credits, stating that Texas community college students who earn an associate degree end up, on average, completing 90 college-level credits for a 60-credit degree. Likewise, Texas students who go on to obtain a bachelor’s degree at a nonflagship college complete, on average, 145 credits towards a 120-credit degree. According to the CCA, these excess credit figures for the state of Texas are among the highest in the nation.11 Transfer students who complete a bachelor’s degree accumulate more excess credit hours than bachelor’s graduates who do not transfer. Students who start their postsecondary education at a two-year institution average 24 excess semester credit hours, compared to 8 excess hours for students who start and finish their degree at the same institution.12

Excess credits add unnecessary time and create financial strain for students, their families, and the state – it is estimated that excess credits cost nearly $120 million annually.13 Further, the Texas Education Code specifies that students may be subject to a higher tuition rate for attempting excessive hours at a public institution of higher education. Students who enrolled in a public institution in the fall of 2006 or later may be charged a higher rate of tuition if the attempted semester credit hours exceed the number of hours required for completion by at least 30.14
Ned has completed almost all his courses at the community college and has started taking major-specific courses at the university. He has been interested in technology since he was a kid, and he has been diligently pursuing a course plan specifically geared to getting his engineering degree.

Ned’s advising experience has been positive. He meets with his university advisers nearly once every two weeks for advice and to discuss his life and college experiences.

Ned has every intention of completing his degree on time, but because of his need to work and the difficulty he has with math classes, he will likely experience an extended time to degree. He has already failed two math classes, and many of the upper-level engineering classes require more mathematics.

“\nThe more time I take, I feel like – the first thing they did at orientation was, they sat us down and said, listen – the longer you take for school . . . they showed a 40 percent graduation rate at four years. And then it dropped to 12. And then 3. They had one person graduate after six years. And it becomes so increasingly difficult, the amount of time is quite a bit. You want to do it as quick as possible . . . I feel like it was a slight wake-up call. Some people were surprised and shaken up when they saw the statistics. It makes sense. You just can’t be distracted from what your goal is going to be.\n”

Ned, 19, is currently taking courses at a public four-year institution and a local community college in the Dallas metro area. He is a sophomore pursuing a bachelor’s in engineering.
Before attending college, many students had little experience with course selection, sequencing, minimal grading thresholds, course equivalencies, and/or transcripts. Because access to quality advising in high school varies widely across the state, many students are entering the college system completely unprepared for the new, unfamiliar demands of college. These students struggled with simple concepts such as weighted grading and are reactive – rather than proactive – when it comes to deadlines and requirements.

This insight highlights the importance of providing transparent and useful information for students to efficiently plan and navigate higher education. Providing students with the kind of support necessary to make informed, strategic choices about course selection and enrollment with degree completion in mind is critical to student success. This is particularly important in Texas, where a majority of students start out at community colleges intending to transfer to another higher education institution to earn a bachelor’s degree. However, policy incentives and higher education funding are not structured in a way that encourages higher education institutions to invest in high-quality advising. Ninety percent of Texas community college funding is based on student enrollment rather than student outcomes. Academic advising based on student achievement, regardless of the postsecondary institution, can help bridge the gap in student outcomes.
Zabella is starting this fall as a sophomore at a public four-year university after transferring from a community college. Despite her staying on top of her degree plan and meeting with an adviser every semester, she was disappointed to learn that she had outstanding credits before being able to complete her associate of science and associate of art degrees.

Zabella is joining the university’s ROTC program and hopes to enlist in the Navy after graduating, with the goal of serving 20 years as an officer. Afterward, she wants to potentially start her own practice or work as a therapist in a school. She knows she needs to stay on top of her schedule in order to graduate on time, which is her main concern. She anticipates getting lost in the crowd at the public university, so she plans to check in with an adviser often.

“You have to be that student sometimes. I’m trying to be done with school as soon as possible.

I try to talk to my adviser every semester. We have a rapport. I had met with her prior to this summer semester and she told me that I was going to be done. And now I’m not done. I don’t know what happened. There wasn’t a mistake on my part because I thought I was going to be done. That was my assumption.”
The college student body is changing. Students are returning to school to follow a new passion or increase their pay but often find themselves overburdened by responsibilities and time commitments. Students with families commonly take online-only classes for their core curriculum and quickly realize the complexities of attending their major courses in person.

First-generation, underprepared, low-income, and working adults are increasingly comprising the majority of student population in higher education. In fall 2015, 25 percent of students enrolling in higher education were 25 years or older, and nearly 40 percent were working while enrolled. As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, evidence shows that students are consuming higher education in new and different ways. Many students are “swirling,” or enrolling and taking courses at several different institutions without following a traditional educational pathway at one institution. While this allows for greater flexibility, swirling can lead to increased costs and excess semester credit hours because of the lack of a clear pathway to degree.

**Haley, 31, is taking classes at three two-year institutions in the DFW metro with plans to transfer to a public four-year institution to study education.**

Haley is a parent of five kids, owns two dogs, works, and is going to school all at once. She is primarily taking online courses toward a teaching degree and wants to teach K–6 at a public school. She has a teaching assistant job at the local school but feels constrained by her lack of degree – she wants to run her own classroom.
Haley has had a good experience in school. She has been able to take classes on her own terms and at her own pace and is doing well in the required classes. She is on track to graduate. She finds the advisers helpful, albeit intimidating, and has a very clear view of what she needs to do to graduate. She is also confident that she will be accepted to the public four-year university, because the community college has a relationship with the school.

The only real problem she’s had regarding school logistics has been with her degree plan. When the school changed her degree plan, they didn’t note in her file that she was started on the 2014 plan. She was almost enrolled in classes that wouldn’t have counted, but because she was so diligent about keeping track of her classes, she was able to catch the adviser’s mistake.

“When she pulled my stuff up and said I need eight courses, I was like, wait a minute! That’s not what I have at home. And I was like, that can’t be, I was pretty on top of it and I know I only need three or four classes.

But she found the other degree plan behind that. In the system, it doesn’t pop up when they pull up your name. A different degree plan would have pulled up. I would have been there another year – I was almost in tears when she told me I needed six to seven more classes. I was like, no, what do you mean? I haven’t planned to be here that much longer. I know what I need. I pay attention to it.”
Alisa has done well in high school – she’s ranked 34th out of over 600 graduating seniors – and has a very clear idea of what she’ll be doing after she graduates. Her goal is to be a nurse, and she will get there by completing her work at community college and transferring to a local public university.

She’s taken a lot of AP classes as well as some dual-credit courses for college credit. She is very thoughtful and introspective about her next steps and the impact her choices have. She feels that hard work pays off, and that now that she has a plan, it’s very clear the steps she needs to take to achieve her goals. She also sees that some of her classmates don’t have the same goals, and she tries to help them.

Her approach to academics, and – it appears – to life, is very methodical, logical, and structured. She seeks help when she needs it, thinks about challenges and decisions before taking action, and then is prepared to act from the choices she makes.

“I have a sophisticated plan for how that’s going to work out. The health science program I’m in, I can graduate with a certification that you normally have to pay for, but I’m getting it for free. My plan will be to try to get some job in a hospital, preferably, and start working there as I go get my associates. That way, the hospital knows me, and they get to know my work ethic. And a lot of hospitals will pay for education. That would be a way to get my money pressure off of myself. And I would work, get my associates, become a nurse. Go back to the same hospital, tell them – I’m a nurse, you know my ethic, I know your rules. Hire me as a nurse. And I would continue on to my bachelors. That’s my plan in the long term.”
Umberto is a highly motivated and self-aware student, pursuing an associate degree at a community college with the very clear intention of transferring to a four-year university. He’s already been accepted at the university, but he postponed entry in order to take classes that are less expensive.

Umberto has three cousins who are civil engineers. He’s had an interest in pursuing this path for a long time; he has only a rudimentary understanding of what a civil engineer does, but he knows it has to do with man-made structures, like bridges or roads, and requires a lot of math.

Umberto is confident that all his credits will transfer for his new role, because he spoke directly and in person to the head of the engineering program, who told him exactly what to take. He’s proactive in researching the requirements for his education.

Umberto also acknowledged that he may change directions to pursue business, but he has no idea if his credits will count toward that direction.

“I’ve had that form since I graduated high school. I think it’s good for three or four years. I’ve gone to the actual school and gone to the head of the engineering department, the civil engineering, and I spoke to him one on one to make sure. He even looked at my transcript, and I wanted an exact answer. He looked at what I had, and he verbally told me, take this in the summer, this in the fall. I’ll be seeing him maybe once I finish the three remaining courses I need.”

Umberto, 21, is pursuing an associate degree at a two-year institution with plans to transfer to a public four-year institution.
RECOMMENDATIONS

All public institutions of higher education should be required to develop recommended course sequences for each of their degree programs and to make those recommended course sequences readily accessible.

Navigating course selection for on-time graduation is complex for both students and advisers. Clearly communicating recommended course sequences for degree programs would improve degree transparency and help students select courses that both transfer and apply to their major, minimizing excess credit hours.

All public institutions of higher education should participate in automated reverse transfer through the National Student Clearinghouse.

Working across multiple institutions can further complicate pathway planning and degree completion. Automated reverse transfer awards associate degrees to students as soon as they have the required credits, regardless of whether they transferred out of the community college before completing the credential. Reverse transfer can be a motivating factor for students to continue their studies and would allow higher education institutions to better track student outcomes.

Support institutions in the development of online tools and resources designed to make transparent pathways for students completing postsecondary degrees and certificates.

In order for students and advisers to select courses that count for their degree or certificate pathway, the information must be readily available and accessible. Higher education institutions should invest in technology and tools that makes complex degree information easily consumable, allowing students to make informed decisions about their degree path.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.


10 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

