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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Navigating Transfer in Washington: Student Experiences, Barriers, and Supports

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Washington State has set an ambitious goal of 70% of adults ages 25 to 44 to hold a credential beyond high school (WSAC Strategic Action Plan 2027). Transfer through community and technical colleges is an important pathway to reaching that goal, especially for students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, adult learners, and other historically underserved populations who are most likely to begin their higher education journey at a 2-year institution[1]. In this report, transfer refers to the associate-to-bachelor's pathway, where students begin at a 2-year institution and move or attempt to move to a 4-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree.

This report is based on a study examining transfer students' experiences in Washington State, conducted by Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) at the University of Washington in partnership with the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Washington students throughout the state at different stages of the transfer process; some who had transferred, some who intended to but had not yet, and some who had stopped out[2]. We asked questions about what students experience when they try to transfer, what helps, and what gets in the way.

Key Findings

- Knowledge about the transfer process was often assumed rather than taught, and the burden of self-navigation fell hardest on students with the fewest resources.
- Advising that was generic, late, dismissive, or disconnected from students' realities and goals made the transfer pathway and degree completion less viable.
- Credits often transferred without applying to students' intended majors or graduation requirements, creating unexpected and consequential delays despite formal credit mobility.
- Students' ability to transfer depended not only on academics, but also on work, caregiving, transportation, geography, affordability, and sense of belonging. They needed supportive campus communities and institutional resources designed around real-life responsibilities.
- Stopped-out students often remained committed to transfer but needed re-entry infrastructure and guidance to return and complete their degree.

What Students Said Institutions Should Do

At 2-year institutions:

- Start transfer advising from a student's first term so students have a clear transfer roadmap from day one
- Do not assume they understand the system; make transfer knowledge explicit
- Provide a dedicated transfer navigator who could provide clear, proactive, individualized guidance on course selection, credit applicability, deadlines, financial aid, and program requirements

[1] The term "2-year institutions" throughout this report refers to Washington's community and technical colleges. While many of these institutions offer Applied Baccalaureate degrees, the associate degree remains these institutions' primary credential and the one most relevant to the transfer pathways described here.

[2] In this report, "stopped out" refers to students who attended a 2-year institution intending to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree but were no longer enrolled, either before or after transferring to a 4-year institution.

- Build transfer literacy into Running Start before students leave the program, including direct guidance on different associate transfer degrees and pathways to bachelor's degrees

At 4-year institutions:

- Improve pathway and credit transfer transparency, ensuring program maps, course equivalency policies, and any program-specific admission processes are clear and accessible to prevent unnecessary course-taking or delayed admission.
- Clearly communicate that prospective transfer students can contact advisors before admission
- Initiate contact with admitted transfer students before they arrive and assign an advisor early enough that they can help students navigate their first term
- Build structured opportunities for transfer students to find community when they arrive

At both 2-year and 4-year institutions:

- Provide advisors with the resources needed so they can be accessible to students
- Tailor holistic advising to students' life circumstances, such as parenting, disability, immigration status, financial independence, and work schedules
- Provide coordinated, program-specific advising at both institutions that connects coursework to students' intended destination and major
- Make financial aid navigation clear and accessible
- Keep identity-related resources visible without requiring repeated disclosure
- Create ongoing feedback loops with transfer students before, during, and after transfer to identify barriers, assess supports, and guide continuous improvement
- Build re-entry infrastructure for stopped-out students, including proactive outreach, contacts, restart maps, and financial re-entry support
- Extend institutional responsibility across the full transfer process, with 2-year institutions supporting students beyond completion and 4-year institutions engaging students before enrollment
- Build structured, relational touchpoints across the transition, including intentional advisor matching, named contacts at the 4-year institution, and connections with peers who have already transferred

Policy Considerations

- Build transfer literacy and transparency into the system
- Fund advising as core infrastructure
- Reduce structural barriers related to credit mobility and program entry
- Fund infrastructure that makes transfer financially and logistically possible for students throughout the state
- Build statewide re-entry infrastructure for stopped-out students
- Provide incentives for 2-year and 4-year institutions to work together to improve transfer and bachelor's degree completion outcomes
- Create opportunities for students and communities to inform transfer research and policymaking

Washington's transfer challenge extends beyond the movement of credits between institutions. Students' experiences show that successful transfer depends on whether students are taught how transfer works, connected to timely and program-specific advising, supported across financial and life barriers, and guided through nonlinear pathways when plans change or pause. The current system too often relies on students' self-advocacy and informal networks, leaving students with a significant administrative burden. **A stronger transfer system would make transfer knowledge, advising, financial planning, and re-entry support proactive and shared across institutions. These supports would help move transfer students through a transparent and viable pathway to bachelor's completion. Without those supports, transfer pathways may exist formally while remaining difficult, uneven, or impossible for many students to use.**