

SUSTAINING SUCCESSFUL TRANSFER PATHWAYS

Three admission leaders share best practices.

Mike Keane, Tom Gutto, and Emily Decatur have immersed themselves in designing effective transfer pipelines over the course of the last 10-plus years. Here are some of the lessons they've learned along the way, plus advice for colleges seeking to better serve transfer students.

By Michael Keane, Thomas Gutto,
and Emily Decatur



ORGANIZE YOUR EFFORTS

In 1976, Jack Maguire—then dean of admissions at Boston College (MA), having been recruited to the role from his faculty appointment in physics—first used the term enrollment management in print in his institution’s alumni magazine, *Bridge*. Two features of the article stand out for their relevance to our current challenges. First, he wrote it during a period of pessimism regarding the future of enrollment at four-year private institutions, with fears of “retrenchment” leading to “huge deficits” and institutional mergers or closures. Second, he identified transfer enrollment as critical to the enrollment strategy of private four-year institutions like Boston College—an opportunity to enroll “a highly qualified group of students who enrich our community.”

Fortunately for the industry, the enrollment declines projected for the late 1970s and 1980s didn’t materialize and many institutions enjoyed a period of growth. But in 2021, American higher education again faces looming enrollment challenges as the number of students seeking postsecondary education is projected to peak in the next few years before beginning a period of decline and compositional change. Institutions faced with enrollment challenges often seek to expand their prospective student markets by turning to transfer students, with mixed success. Institutions with enrollment functions designed around the “first-time full-time” student experience have confronted two realities—one, that building successful transfer pipelines is difficult and requires long-term investment, and two, that they must compete with both

public institutions that have been designing and executing transfer enrollment strategies for decades as well as other private four-year institutions that have at least a modest head start on them.

In preparation for our education session at NACAC’s 2021 National Conference, we surveyed 330 students admitted for transfer enrollment in Fall 2020 or Fall 2021 at a four-year private university in the West. We queried their experiences with the transfer application, admission, and enrollment process, as well as the extent to which that process had been disrupted by COVID-19. Key findings from that research include:

- Modest proportions of vertical transfers from two-year institutions (15 percent of respondents) indicated that the transfer application, admission, and enrollment process was “slightly” or “much more” difficult than they expected. Lateral transfers from four-year institutions were more likely to indicate unexpected difficulty (20 percent).
- Nearly twice as many transfers from two-year institutions were aware of transfer admission agreements at public four-year institutions (55 percent) compared to private four-year institutions (28 percent), despite transfer guarantee programs at private institutions being broadly available and advertised in the students’ region.
- Vertical transfers from two-year institutions were more likely to report challenges understanding financial aid options at their destination institutions and challenges finding courses that fit their



- degree plan; lateral transfers from four-year universities were more likely to report difficulty understanding credit transfer and were substantially more likely to report transferring fewer credits than anticipated.
- Major impacts of COVID-19 included students indicating they had not been able to visit campuses (53 percent) and had difficulty reaching admission counselors (36 percent) and financial aid counselors (25 percent) at institutions of interest. Transfers from two-year institutions were significantly more likely than their four-year peers to indicate challenges reaching aid representatives.

In the coming years—as has been true in recent decades—institutions that will successfully build or expand sustainable transfer pipelines are those that invest in transparent, student-friendly enrollment strategies that identify and systematically lower the barriers faced by many transfers. Jack Maguire’s 1976 article in

AMID THE CHAOTIC SEA OF VARYING TRANSFER PREROGATIVES, PATHWAYS, AND PRIORITIES, I HAVE FOUND THERE TO BE A LIFE PRESERVER OF SHARED NEEDS THAT CAN HELP UNLOCK A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS THE TRANSFER ADMISSION MYSTERY. FIRST, YOU MUST UNDERSTAND YOUR TARGET MARKET AND THEIR ROLE IN MEETING YOUR MISSION.

Bridge was titled “To the Organized, Go the Students.” This article, and the NACAC national conference session that inspired it, makes the same point 45 years later, with one slight edit: “To the Organized, Go the *Transfers*.”

–**Mike Keane**, senior enrollment consultant, Maguire Associates (MA)

INVEST TIME AND ATTENTION

Who wants to be the transfer point person? Little did I know how much this question would change both my career and my institution’s place in the transfer enrollment landscape. Prior to 2008, Loyola Marymount University (CA), like many mid-sized private institutions, managed our transfer population as an afterthought. It wasn’t that we did not appreciate or value these students—we simply never had an intentional strategy to enroll them. When our director of admission asked our counseling team to consider this “additional responsibility” it sounded fun and interesting. I was not prepared for what I was about to learn.

The transfer enrollment process is very different from the relatively homogeneous first-year process we spend most of our time strategizing. On one hand, the uniqueness of every student’s circumstance and pathway is maddening. On the other hand, it is because of this diversity and complexity that we believe these students add so much to our university. How do you develop a system that simplifies this process—and by default, the transfer student experience—while simultaneously honoring their uniqueness? The answer is hard work and relationship-building with your transfer partners.

Amid the chaotic sea of varying transfer prerogatives, pathways, and priorities, I have found there to be a life preserver of shared needs that can help unlock a strategy to address the transfer admission mystery. First, you must understand your target market and their role in meeting your mission. Internal and external context will drive decision-making and become benchmarks for future success. Second, relationships

are everything! You must spend most of your time building these important relationships with your transfer partners, as they will be critical to your overall success. Finally, if you are successful at the first two points, then you are set to excel with the third and final point—you need to deliver programs that your population is seeking. For LMU, that meant articulation agreements, guaranteed transfer admission agreements, and pathway programs.

Of course, more institutions embracing transfer enrollment strategies means more competition. But, given the number of students who intend to transfer to complete their bachelor’s degree and the current transfer success rates, transfer enrollment doesn’t have to be a zero-sum proposition. Four-year institutions can do more and serve more students. I believe the transfer sandbox is big enough for us all—so jump in!

–**Tom Gutto**, assistant vice provost, undergraduate admission, Loyola Marymount University (CA)

UNIFY AND STANDARDIZE

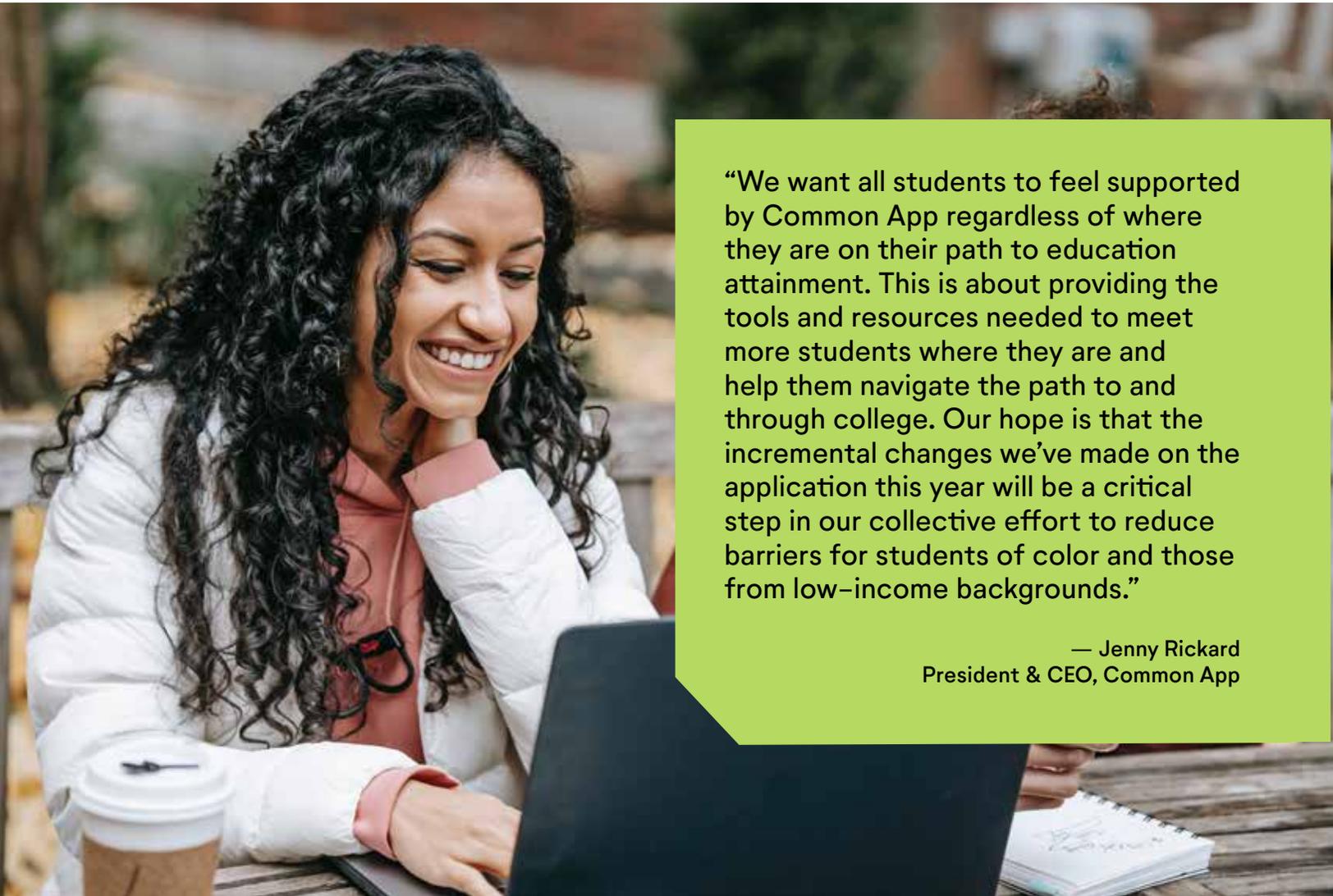
In order to unify statewide transfer and move beyond one-to-one agreements, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) has partnered with community colleges, state public higher education systems, independent college associations, and four-year institutions to create the [New England College Transfer Guarantee](#) in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

Student transfer is inherently complex and there is no one prescriptive solution to the transfer puzzle. However, through the implementation of the Guarantee, best practices and policies have emerged to guide the way forward. The following are

Their future starts here



Common App's free counselor and recommender resources are key to helping those who support students organize and navigate the college application process. Explore our recommender system resource page, college search tool, video tutorials, applicant and recommender guides, and more at commonapp.org/advisors.



“We want all students to feel supported by Common App regardless of where they are on their path to education attainment. This is about providing the tools and resources needed to meet more students where they are and help them navigate the path to and through college. Our hope is that the incremental changes we’ve made on the application this year will be a critical step in our collective effort to reduce barriers for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.”

— Jenny Rickard
President & CEO, Common App

recommendations to systematically develop, improve, and streamline student transfer:

1. Foster collaboration and buy-in across public and independent sectors.

- Begin with an exploratory phase prior to implementation.
- Utilize a top-down and bottom-up approach.
- Encourage discussion, feedback, and an open dialogue during development.
- Develop organizational structures that promote collaboration and vehicles for getting input and advice.
- Place students front and center by developing guiding principles for all institutions.
- Communicate institutional benefits to department heads and faculty.

2. Unify statewide transfer policies and promote standardization.

- **Unification**
 - Align institutional policies with state policies when possible.
 - Highlight the benefit of meeting state credential attainment goals and the economic impact.
- **Standardization**
 - Develop statewide or regional agreements and move away from one-to-one agreements.
 - Consider guaranteed admission to participating institutions and/or block transfer of general education requirements.
- **Re-evaluate institutional transfer policies.**
 - Encourage institutions to re-examine outdated transfer practices through self-assessment.
- **Flexibility**
 - Encourage mapped transfer pathways.

BY INVESTING IN BUILDING THESE PATHWAYS TODAY, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WILL BE BETTER EQUIPPED TO SERVE STUDENTS AND BUILD RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF LOOMING ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES.

- Accept credits from alternative sources such as online coursework, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), prior-learning assessments (PLA), and dual enrollment.
- Promote the flexibility of degree-requirement substitutions in the transfer process.

3. Enhance transparency and improve transfer websites.

- Improve institutional transfer webpages by simplifying and using cohesive and clear messaging across all platforms. Keep the transfer audience in mind and use language prospective students can easily understand and digest.
- Build a cohesive and user-friendly one-stop transfer website for state programs that include all public and independent transfer options.

4. Increase visibility and effective promotion.

- Develop an overarching, simplified message that promotes transfer programs.
- Adopt simple and effective messaging. Create a brand strategy guidebook and develop materials for virtual channels.
- Survey focus groups for tailored branding.
- Utilize established institutional recruitment and outreach channels.

–*Emily Decatur*, associate director, Regional Student Program & Transfer Initiatives, New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

In Nathan Grawe’s 2021 *The Agile College*, an update to his 2018 *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, the author cites a “commitment to planning” as a key ingredient for institutional success—but also a challenge given that colleges and universities have no shortage of challenges to identify and solve in the present (a statement never truer than in 2021-2022).

As our experiences convey, building transparent, consistent, and effective transfer pathways is not a quick or easy fix. It requires substantial investment of time and resources (both fiscal and personal). By investing in building (or sustaining, or expanding) these pathways today, colleges and universities will be better equipped to serve students and build resilience in the face of looming enrollment challenges. [↪](#)

Editor’s note: Content included in this article was first shared, and expounded upon, during an education session at the 2021 NACAC National Conference. To access the full presentation slideshow deck for free, [visit the NACAC website.](#)