

## ILLINOIS POST-SECONDARY TRANSFER STUDENTS: EXPERIENCES IN NAVIGATING THE HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFER SYSTEM

### Introduction

A significant number of students transfer from one college to another each year, and historically this has created challenges for students striving to attain their higher education goals. The purpose of this study was to inform state articulation policy by collecting qualitative data to characterize issues that affect students as they transfer from one college to another. Researchers conducted three focus groups and individual telephone interviews with transfer students at four Illinois universities, both public and private. In these focus groups and interviews, students were asked to describe their transfer experiences, including the strengths and weaknesses of the support services available to them from the sending and receiving institutions.

### Literature Review

#### *Student Transfer Rates and Patterns*

In their quest to attain their baccalaureate goals, some students exhibit complex college attendance patterns, transferring from one institution of higher education (IHE) to another. Nationally, nearly 60% of college students attended more than one institution on their way to earning their Bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In 2006 in Illinois, 52,507 students transferred from one IHE to another, with 42% of these students transferring from community colleges to public and private four year IHEs, 38% transferring from out-of-state or foreign institutions to in-state IHEs, and 11% transferring from public universities to community colleges and other four year public and private IHEs (IBHE, 2007).

While student transfer from a community college to a four-year college or university is the most common pattern of attendance, commonly referred to as *vertical transfer* (Striplin, 2000; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007), students' college attendance can be more complex. Other models of transfer that have been identified are *reverse transfer*, *lateral transfer*, and *swirling*. Students reverse transfer when they transfer from a four-year IHE to a two-year IHE or community college (Kajstura & Keim, 1992; Winter & Harris, 1999). Students lateral transfer when they transfer from one four-year institution to another. A significant number of students attending a four-year institution also take summer courses at community

colleges in order to complete their degree in a four year time period. Later research on student transfer patterns identified students who “swirl,” transferring to multiple colleges or concurrently enrolling in multiple institutions (Barkley, 1993; McCormick, 2003). While each of these types of transfer—vertical, lateral, reverse, and swirling—are important to note, the group of primary interest for the purpose of this study was vertical transfer students.

### *Inter-Institutional Theory*

In a study that examined Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants to provide new jobs for minorities in Oakland, California, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) noted the complicated nature of the implementation process, even when the organizational process looks simple. Additional complications arise when involving two or more organizations (two-year and four-year institutions) in a policy initiative (in this case, statewide articulation) with the goal of achieving a solution to collective problems or issues that cannot be resolved by a single organization (Gray, 1985; Gray & Hay, 1986; Gray & Wood, 1991; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Logsdon, 1991; Trist, 1983). Through inter-organizational collaborations, new behavioral expectations and specialized roles for member organizations are mapped out (Van de Ven, Emmett, & Koeni, 1975). Often though, organizations working collaboratively still maintain single organizational expectations and behaviors, and even within education organizations there exists a loose coupling (Weick, 1976). The complexity of collaboration among organizations creates challenges to providing a seamless transfer experience for transfer students.

Studies have identified barriers to articulation throughout inter-institutional collaboration including the lack of relational networks between two-year and four-year institutions (Turner, 1992), differing institutional culture (characterized by differences in size as well as institutional mission) between two-year and four-year institutions (Townsend & Wilson, 2006), and uncoordinated roles between two-year and four-year institutions that influence pre-transfer experiences and preparation and post-transfer experiences (Berger & Malaney, 2003). The purpose of this study was to inform articulation policy in Illinois by collecting qualitative data to characterize issues that affect students as they transfer from one college to another.

### *Statewide Articulation Agreements*

To help facilitate student transfer without sacrificing credits and extending time-to-degree and college costs, many states require two-year and four-year institutions to work collaboratively within a state-developed system of articulation. In 1993, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the

Illinois Community College Board, and the state's Transfer Coordinators launched the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). This initiative facilitates student transfer through bringing colleges and universities together to assure that lower-division baccalaureate courses are comparable in scope, rigor, and quality (Illinois Community College Board, 2005). Currently, 112 IHEs participate in the IAI. The initiative has identified a common core of general education courses—a “package” of courses—that participating institutions recognize as fulfilling their lower-division coursework requirements. The courses transfer from one institution to another as a package, rather than course-to-course articulation. Students can access information about the IAI initiative at the iTransfer website (<http://www.itransfer.org/newwebsite/>), which describes the types of transfer, the transfer process, and resources available to transfer students. As part of this website, students can link to the Course Applicability System (CAS), providing more specific information about which courses will or will not transfer and how these credits will apply to their degree requirements.

In an evaluation of statewide articulation agreements, Ignash and Townsend (2000) rated Illinois as one of five states (of 43 responding states) having an overall strong state-level articulation system. Illinois received this high rating because its system provided for vertical, lateral, and reverse transfers, included multiple sectors (public, private, independent for-profit and non-profit), encompassed transfer credits for approximately 50% of students at private institutions, and included articulation agreements for general education courses as well as 27 individual program majors. This high rating does not take into account problems that occur in the state related to student transfer.

### *Problems Associated with Student Transfer*

In light of states' efforts to implement seamless systems of transfer to help students achieve their baccalaureate goals, Anderson, Sun, and Alfonso (2006) found that statewide articulation agreements had little effect on the probability that students would transfer, especially for minority and low-income students, and students with GEDs. With the limitations of the study in mind, including the timing of the dataset, Anderson et al. recommended that statewide articulation agreements be developed and implemented within a montage of support services for transfer students, including financial aid, academic preparation, and a special focus on targeted support for those students at risk of not pursuing the baccalaureate degree.

Statewide articulation agreements alone are not a panacea, and students who desire to transfer may experience multiple challenges during the transfer process. These problems include loss of credits, prolonged time-to-degree, lack of access to financial aid and housing, and poor academic performance (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini,

1991; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Without supports, these challenges may impede the primary purpose of articulation agreements, which is to provide a system for students to attain their academic goals in an efficient, cost-effective manner.

## Methods

To inform the state's articulation policy regarding student transfer, student participants were recruited from four institutions of higher education, with focus group interviews conducted at three of the four institutions. Students were asked to participate in either a 90-minute focus group session or in 30-minute individual telephone interviews to answer a series of questions about their transfer experiences.

### *Sampling*

The four higher education institutions in this study were chosen because they were among the top transfer-receiving institutions in Illinois. This purposive sample of one private and three public universities was selected to achieve diversity in type and geographic location. Two institutions were located in the Chicago area (referred to as "Chicago Public University" and "Chicago Private University"). The remaining two represent public universities in the Illinois downstate regions (Public University A and Public University B).

To identify and recruit students for the focus groups, researchers contacted institutional researchers at each institution, instructing them to randomly choose 200 students who had transferred in during the spring or fall of 2007. They mailed packets with recruitment letters and informed consent forms to the selected student sample. If students were interested in participating, they returned a positive response form to the researchers along with contact information. In total, 32 out of 800 contacted transfer students participated in focus groups and telephone interviews. Table 1 shows students interviewed at each institution.

**Table 1**

### *Students by Institution and Method of Participation*

Institution	Students Interviewed	Focus Group	Phone
Public university A	10	9	1
Public university B	11	11	0
Chicago private	9	4	5
Chicago public	2	0	2
Total	32	24	8

### *Characteristics of the Participating Students*

The students in this study transferred from a wide range of institutions dispersed geographically throughout Illinois and out-of-state institutions in four states. They transferred from community colleges and both public and private four-year institutions. The transfer students also exhibited three transfer patterns identified in the literature: vertical, lateral, and swirling transfers. In this sample, over half (17) of the students were vertical transfers, moving from a community college to a four-year college/university. Several, but not all, of these students had earned an Associates Degree prior to transferring to the four-year institutions. Others left the community college because they wanted the “college experience” as a residential student rather than a commuter student. Eight of the students were lateral transfers, having left a four-year college/university to attend one of the four participating four-year colleges/universities in this study. Finally, seven students were “swirlers.”

### *Data Structure and Analysis*

The interview protocol for the focus groups was organized according to the following topics: availability of courses, financial aid, and housing; transfer of course credits; application of credits; academic advising and other counseling or supports; effects of student characteristics on the transfer process (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, gender, etc.); academic preparation, and knowledge and application of the Illinois Articulation Initiative and its web site. Questions were open-ended, allowing students to direct the conversation with probes by the researchers.

The data underwent several analyses, first in the aggregate, then in cross-case comparisons by institution and institutional sector (public and private). Initially, the data were organized categorically; student responses were coded and analyzed thematically using coding and categorization methods outlined by Coffey and Atkinson (1996). The data were reviewed and notes written on preliminary codes and categories that emerge from participant responses. After this initial scan of the data, the researchers reviewed their notes and developed a coding scheme to guide further analysis. The analysis began at a descriptive level, identifying the common characteristics that describe the data within the codes. Then themes were connected across questions to provide critical interpretations of the interdependent issues and challenges students encountered in their transfer experiences. The same analytic strategies were used for the cross-case comparisons to determine if the students from the different institutions had different transfer experiences and to look for reasons why these differences might exist.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings were grouped according to the following categories: (a) academic advising and other counseling supports; (b) course availability, financial aid, and housing; (c) transfer of course credits and application of credits; (d) academic preparation; and (e) time-to-degree.

### *Academic Advising and Other Counseling Supports*

The transfer process seems to be heavily influenced by the quality of advising students receive both prior to transfer and afterwards. The quality of the advising experience affects most of the other components of the transfer experience. Overall, the researchers found inconsistent quality in the advising these students received, regardless of the sending and receiving institutions (two- or four-year college, public or private).

Many students complained that the advising was impersonal. Often the students had to drive the content and direction of the meetings, and many complained that the advisors did not provide adequate counseling regarding courses that would transfer and approximate graduation times. As one transfer student put it, the “burden of proof is on the student to get the courses to transfer to the school.” Another student said, “It’s a lot of work trying to figure out what you need and do not need. This shouldn’t be my job. Isn’t this what they [advisors] are getting paid for?”

Sometimes this inconsistency in advising occurred within one institution or college, but not within majors. According to one student, “Within the geography department, my advisor is amazing. But, in the College of Liberal Arts, I’m just some random guy. I had to go back and talk to somebody else; he wasn’t any help at all.” In comparing the advising received at the community colleges versus four-year colleges, no distinct pattern emerged. Some students received helpful advising at some community colleges and poor advising at others. Other students reported positive advising at some four-year colleges and poor advising at others. One student stated, “In my last semester or two, I would sit down with my one advisor and that’s what I liked about my last college, I had one advisor. She knew where I was going, the classes I had taken, my major, without even looking at it and she knew me on a one-to one basis. Here, I’ve been to the advising office three times and had three different people [advisors]. Two of those people I don’t even want to see again.”

In general, students felt the advising function was an important part of their college experience. If advisors do not give students the information they need about courses or deadlines, they are often left to themselves to learn this information from fellow students or by seeking out or stumbling upon advising resources. According to one student, “At the community college, it was just something I did on my own. I didn’t really see anybody.”

In some institutions, students are assigned one advisor who helps them throughout their tenure on that campus. Other institutions offer advising on a “first come, first served” basis, and students may see a different advisor each time. For the most part, the most helpful advising tended to occur when students were assigned to one advisor. The most helpful advising typically came from faculty who were professors in the students’ major. Some majors tended to do a better job at advising their students of upcoming deadlines, course schedules, degree requirements, and so forth than others. For instance, students stated that the Colleges of Business on several campuses provided excellent advising services to their students. They stated that these colleges had comprehensive websites, tailored course catalogs, and faculty advisors who provided all of the necessary information students needed. A student who was completing a 2 + 2 + 2 degree in automotive technology received excellent advising that started with the program at his high school and continued at his community college and four-year college. In fact, this student had already met with his current faculty advisor while he was still at the community college. As a result, all of the courses he took at the community college transferred into the four-year college as intended. The researchers found that these students tended to be the most confident of their college experiences and their ability to succeed and complete their programs with a bachelor’s degree in a timely manner.

Several students complained that the advisors at the receiving institutions were not very helpful until after they were admitted. They often sought out advisors at the receiving institutions either during information fairs held at the sending institution or during visits to the receiving institution. According to a student at Public University B,

I never talked with any of my community college counselors when I wanted to transfer. I just talked with [Public University B] counselors. I would email them back and forth, asking them which classes I could transfer in and what I had to do. It seemed to me at [her community college] that you really didn’t—you had a different person every time, so they really didn’t know anything about you anyway. So, I never even told them I was transferring.

However, he, like others, complained that prior to admission, advisors at the receiving institution either brushed him off or would only give him vague information about credit transfers or anticipated graduation dates. Without an official transcript, the advisors apparently were hesitant to provide this important information. One student said that an advisor at the four-year university made him feel like he was bothering her by asking these questions. She repeatedly told him that “you should have looked at this website [presumably referring to the IAI or CAS]. It will tell you which courses will transfer and how.” Eventually, she did give him the information he was seeking. Interestingly though, once the students were officially admitted into the institution, these advisors became much more accommodating and helpful.

The researchers also found that the Internet is playing an increasingly important role in advising. Students are using institutional web sites to garner as much information as they can on their own—in a sense, advising themselves. Some universities have recognized this and developed helpful and informative web sites. However, in many cases, it was clear that while one advising aspect might be strong, others were not. According to one student, “I think the web is so good here because the advising is so terrible.” This sentiment was reinforced by another student at the same institution who said, “I had to go back to figure out what gen eds (general education courses) I had to take. They didn’t tell me that I could test out of my biology. I tried to go on the web to figure it out because the advisors are horrendous. So, I should’ve tested out of the course but ended up taking it.”

In this study, the researchers found that most institutions did not structure their advisement from the student’s viewpoint, i.e., tracing their advisement processes through the steps of students. One student expressed her frustration with the lack of coordinated services by saying, “I wish they would have informed me of all the different deadlines in one bundle rather than these half-copied, half-handwritten letters. It was almost impossible to keep everything straight.” As a result, the transfer process does not go as smoothly as it could, often costing students time and money.

#### *Course Availability, Financial Aid, and Housing*

In general, most students did not have problems with enrolling in the courses they needed. However, many of the problems related to course availability, financial aid, and housing were related to late notification of their acceptance to the receiving institution. Some of the institutions required full transcripts before accepting a student, which meant that students often did not find out if they were accepted into a college or university until a month before classes started. At this point, this is when students learned how many of their credits had transferred. This affected the courses in which they needed to enroll. One student, remarking on his late acceptance, said:

I applied very late, as (Chicago Private University) would only admit me if I had 30 hours or more. At the end of summer term, I would have 30 hours, so I had to wait for the summer so I could apply. I applied pretty late and there wasn’t much selection of classes then. I took a 4-week summer class at the beginning of the summer because I thought they would release my grades, but they didn’t until the end of summer so it didn’t matter.

The timing of students’ acceptance caused problems in other ways. They had to go by their best guess as to whether or not the receiving institution to which they had given their commitment was truly the institution that transferred most, if not all, of their courses. The researchers heard exam-



ples from students of how the course enrollment system was set up at the convenience of the university and not the student. In one case, the student had an advocate (her mom), who was able to convince the university to let her register on-line so she would avoid a 5-hour drive to the university. Other students describe such advocates—whether they were a parent or another university official—who helped them to navigate through the system. One student at Chicago Public University relied on a biology professor for guidance in course selection and scheduling. Two of the institutions where focus groups were conducted offered specialized orientation events and information packages for transfer students and this seemed to make the transition to the receiving institution much easier.

Most students try to apply for financial aid early in the year when their chances for receiving grants, loans, or scholarships are the best. However, most of the students in this study did not find out if they were accepted into the receiving institution until late summer (July or August). As a result, many students did not even bother applying for financial aid. According to one student, “I felt like I was too busy to go through the whole financial aid process, filling out the forms, talking to people. I was kind of overwhelmed by the transfer.”

Most of those who did apply for aid either received loans or no aid at all. Only one student said that he received a grant from the receiving institution. Another student said that scholarships for upper-level students in his program nearly always went to native students because faculty members made the recommendations. “As a transfer student, you’re at a disadvantage for the scholarship because the faculty may have only had you for one course, but other [native] students may have had two or three courses with them.” As transfer students, they do not have the relationship with the faculty to be recommended for these types of institutional scholarships.

Other students reported scholarships only for students coming in with an associate’s degree. According to a student at Public University A, “I applied here and got a scholarship for academics out of high school. When I transferred in, I asked if that scholarship was still available for me and they said it was only for new students during their first year. Since I was coming in as a transfer student, they said the only scholarships available are for those coming in with an associate’s.”

On two of the campuses, specific housing for transfer students existed as designated transfer floors in one of the college dormitories. It seemed that students were aware of this prior to being admitted to campus. A Public University A student stated, “When you get the welcome pack, there’s a whole page that talks about how at [this hall] floors 2 through 7 are for students 21 years and older.” Another student said, “I heard coming down here, so I already knew it was for older students. It’s one of the first buildings to fill up.”

Most of the transfer students either lived at home with their parents or sought out housing on their own on or near campus. One transfer

student at Public University B had spent time on the waiting list for housing because of the timing of his transfer and acceptance. This was stressful for him because of a university policy requiring students to live on campus as freshmen and sophomores. As he described,

I transferred in the spring and I was on a wait list for a room and they really weren't sure where I would be living almost up to just a couple days before I was to move in. No one could give me an answer. Well, if I don't get a room, where am I going to live? No one would answer that question for me. Eventually it got settled and I got a room. So, I was scared right up until a few days before.

Most students in this sample were satisfied with the availability of housing and their living situations.

### *Transfer of Course Credits and Application of Credits*

On the whole, students were very satisfied with how well their classes transferred from one institution to the other. One student described the curriculum set up at the community college from where she transferred. According to her,

[At her community college], they have specific classes that are designed for transfer students. If you know that you're going to transfer, they have the course number designed in a certain way—I think it ends in a zero. You know that it will automatically transfer anywhere in the state. That was helpful because you knew that any classes that you took specifically for your transfer would transfer so you didn't have to waste time taking the wrong classes or figuring out how it would transfer afterwards. I didn't have any problems.

A few students were surprised at how the transferred course credits were applied. For instance, one student at Chicago Public University said that a logic class taken at the community college was counted as an elective rather than satisfying the Philosophy general education requirement. A student at Public University A was surprised that his geology courses were counted as general education courses rather than as science courses in his major (geography). According to him, "So, I guess geology isn't a science."

Students who seemed to have the most problem with credits transferring were those who changed majors during or because of the transfer process. At Public University B, the researchers talked with several students who wanted to major in nursing but could not get into the program and therefore had to choose another major. Another student who transferred to Public University B from another public four-year college intended to transfer again because she couldn't get into her major. According to her,

My credits transferred but I came in to be a nursing student, but they're sending me through a lot of stuff now. So, I think I'm going

to go somewhere else. I didn't really have a problem at first getting into any of my classes. But now, this semester I had a problem and its going to set me back. I'm not going to waste money taking all these classes that I don't need.

Other courses that typically did not transfer were remedial courses, but students did not expect these courses to transfer, so were not surprised or disappointed.

A few students reported problems with meeting the receiving institutions' prerequisite requirements when it seemed that the students should be exempt. One student at Chicago Private University said that at the community college, he had tested out of English 101 and earned a passing grade in English 102. Instead of being able to enroll in the third level (e.g., English 103) at the receiving institution, he was required to go back and take the English 101 course. He probably could have tested out of that course, but no advisors or other administrators informed him of that option. At Public University A, one student was a pharmacy student at her sending institution but she had changed her major to accounting after transferring to the receiving institution. As a prerequisite for her accounting course she was required to re-take a calculus course. She remarked that this was "now my third time taking calculus—once as an AP high school course, and then at the School of Pharmacology, and now at [Public University A]."

Students suggested that it was common knowledge that private institutions seem much more willing to accept transfer credits versus public universities. One student said that it was easier to get a private institution to accept credits from public or private institutions than it was for a public institution to accept credits from private institutions. According to him, "I think coming from state to private—the credits transfer pretty easily. I talked to some people who transferred out [private to public] and they had some problems." Students at Chicago Private University were excited when they found out that after they transferred to this university, their GPA calculations started over. This was a welcomed practice for those who felt they had partaken of the "college experience" a little too much and were looking for a renewed focus on academics.

Those who seemed to experience the most problems with transferring credits were students transferring from out-of-state institutions. Of the 32 students interviewed, seven students transferred from nearby states. Most of these students did not yet have their associate's degrees. One student had been a pharmacy major, and few of her credits transferred. Another student transferred from a Michigan four-year college to an Illinois community college and then on to Public University B. She said she had some difficulty getting some of her credits to transfer and ended up changing her major so that she could graduate nearly on time. (She had a brief hiatus before enrolling in the community college.) Conversely, another student transferred from a well-rated community college in Missouri, and he had no problem in transferring credits to the four-year university.

The institutions in this study were perceived by students who participated in this study as ‘transfer friendly institutions,’ and this may have accounted for better experiences with the transfer of course credits. Several students commented on how they had preferred to go to another university in Illinois, but that 60 hours were required to transfer in and they had fewer than 60 hours. The institutions in this study were willing to accept transfer students at all levels of the transfer process.

### *Academic Preparation*

Students’ academic preparations were mixed. Some students who transferred from a community college said that coursework there was easy. Other students who attended community colleges—especially ones with strong reputations—felt that they were well-prepared. One student who went to a community college right out of high school for a year and then transferred reported that, “it gave me confidence academically because I wasn’t a great student in high school.” Some students who reported academic difficulty said that it was only in certain courses that were typically unique to their new universities, such as a foundational class providing freshmen students with an introduction to the university and its academic life. They also reported problems with classes that were writing-intensive or relied on group discussion. These were courses with which students did not have much prior experience, but once they became acclimated to the class formats, they performed well. For other courses, students said, “nothing could prepare you for it.” These were typically the universities’ most rigorous courses (e.g., sciences, aviation), but the students recognized that with hard work they could achieve. They felt confident that they could succeed in any of their courses.

### *Time to Degree*

Most students recognized that it was their fault if they would not graduate on time. Many students had “stopped out” between transfers, taking a half or full year off between colleges. Also, this student sample exhibited quite a bit of changing majors. The changes in majors were sometimes the primary reason for the transfers. In other words, students transferred to another school because the sending school did not offer the student’s desired major, or the receiving institution had a higher quality program in the desired major. The researchers also found that some students decided to change their majors after transferring to another college because they would lose credits, thus increasing their time-to-degree, or they became interested in another career option. These changes often resulted in loss of credits, or credits going toward electives rather than toward major degree requirements.

It was not clear why this group had so many changes in majors and whether this is a general characteristic of transfer students. For the most part,

students remained within the same cluster of majors (e.g., changing from business to marketing or agriculture to agribusiness). Usually, these students found out that the admittance criteria or degree requirements were more stringent or would require more time to graduate, so they changed their major to one less rigorous and demanding. Some relegated their previous major to a minor. One student started his college career as a General Education student (undeclared major) and now, after his second transfer, he is a psychology student. He expected another transfer within another year.

### **Study Limitations**

Due to the limited time and money allotted for this project, it did not produce broadly generalizable findings, but rather “clues” to issues affecting transfer students that merit further study. Only four higher education institutions were included in this sample. While institutions were selected from different geographic locations across the state, there may be some institutions in other areas of the state that have other unique issues or effective strategies regarding student transfer. Therefore, this study may not have captured the full range of issues and complications that might arise in the transfer process. Out of the approximately 50,000 students who transferred in 2006 (and presumably around the same number in 2007), 32 transfer students participated in the study. The sample size was small partially due to time constraints in which it was not possible to pursue additional recruiting methods after the initial mailings. A subsequent study with a larger sample would provide greater racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Where this study lacked broad coverage, the study strived to capture the depth and breadth of students’ stories about their transfer experiences. While this sample is not a fully representative sample of institutions and students, the participants do reflect a cross-section of public and private institutions, sending institutions, geographic locations and student transfer patterns.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The inconsistent nature of academic advising at both sending and receiving institutions seems to affect other aspects of the transfer experience. Students in this sample appeared to rely heavily on Internet websites and peers for important information about transfer issues. Timing of the admission decision, which relies on the availability of transcripts, affects transfer students’ financial aid and housing availability. Participants attending institutions with specific supports for transfer students, such as special advising, information packets, and seminars, experienced smoother transitions, including credit transfers.

Study findings also include information about the influence of statewide articulation policy on student’s transfer experiences. The transferability of courses, as reported by students, indicates that the Illinois

Articulation Initiative is effective in assuring that lower-division courses offered at a two-year institution are seen as comparable (and thus transferable) to courses at a four-year institution. There did seem to be some concern, though, expressed by students on how the transfer courses were applied for credit at the four-year institution.

Although the Illinois Articulation Initiative has helped with course transferability, students reported a lack of coordination both internally and externally among advising and admissions staff. The goals of the Illinois Articulation Initiative are focused specifically on course development and articulation; however, this study highlights the importance of relational networks and coordinated roles among institutions, features that have been identified in past research (Turner, 1992; Berger & Malaney, 2003). Regional joint planning meetings of advising and admission staff at both two-year and four-year institutions would be helpful to coordinate and make consistent the information given to transfer students. With the increasing usage of the Internet for self-advising, advising and admission staffs should also consider how institutional websites guide students to the information that they need—both on their campus as well as with other institutions.

State policy provides important guidelines and structures for student transfer, but institutional policies more directly affect students' actual experiences. Further research should delve more deeply into the nature and quality of academic advisement in relation to transfer policies and supports at both sending and receiving institutions, including the level of collaboration and cooperation in the transfer process. This study did not interview faculty or staff, but further research should include them as additional sources of information. As more students choose the potentially economical option of proceeding to a baccalaureate degree through a two-year to four-year transfer route, it becomes more important than ever to understand how both the sending and receiving institution influence student transfer experiences and to establish policies and practices that smooth out the transfer process and facilitate baccalaureate completion.

The results of this study were shared with a state policy committee charged with improving transfer policy and practice in the state's public colleges and universities. This qualitative research will be combined with quantitative analysis of transfer student transcripts to create information to guide statewide policy.

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