

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Curricular Impediments to Transfer Student Success

August 2024

I. Introduction

Transfer students are an essential part of the TCU undergraduate student body. According to the TCU Fact Book, TCU welcomed 431 transfer students in fall 2023. Though smaller than the first-year cohort of 2,488, this represents a higher percentage of students than do transfer students at universities in TCU's peer and aspirant set. Yet, transfer students do not persist at the same rate as their first-year peers, trailing 87.7% to 94.3%. This gap has shrunk over the last ten years but persists, nonetheless. The gap in graduate rate is even wider despite transfer students arriving with credits toward graduation. For the 2016 cohort, the most recent for which six years of data are available, transfer students trail their first-year counterparts 78.1% to 85.6%. While there are many reasons to address these disparities, the Board of Trustees has expressed its interest in assessing potential curricular barriers that prevent transfer students from succeeding at TCU.

II. Charge from the Board of Trustees

The Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees, in an effort to enhance accessibility and affordability of transfer students desiring to attain a TCU education, directs the administration to evaluate and mitigate those unintended curricular barriers that hinder admission, degree progress and completion of transfer students desiring to attain a TCU degree. The efforts should not compromise the integrity of the TCU degree or SACSCOC or various other accreditation standards but expand access to transfer students wanting to pursue an education at TCU.

III. The Case for Transfer Students

TCU's mission compels us to prepare students for "responsible citizenship in the global community." We cannot meet our mission without providing students with a university that is reflective of society's rich tapestry.

On June 29, 2023, in a landmark case *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, the Supreme Court overturned 45 years of legal precedent in declaring unconstitutional the consideration of an applicant's race in making an admissions decision. While the long-term impact of the Court's decision on TCU's demographic composition is unknown, what is clear is that TCU's transfer population has long been critical to a diverse student body. 30.3% of incoming first-year students in fall 2023 identified as domestic students of color compared to 43.9% of incoming transfer students. Transfer students also add to the socioeconomic diversity on campus. 15.9% of entering first-year students in fall 2023 and spring 2024 were eligible to receive the Pell Grant, a proxy for high financial need. By comparison, 27.2% of incoming transfer students in fall 2023 and spring 2024 were Pell-eligible. Maintaining a healthy supply of transfer students helps the university achieve a diverse student body, which, in turn, leads to a true marketplace of ideas.

At the same time, transfer applications have dropped, mirroring a nationwide trend. Since the fall 2003 cohort, our two lowest volume years for transfer student applications were the last two years, fall 2022 and fall 2023, with 948 and 1,023 applications, respectively (we peaked at 2,726 applications for fall 2011). Local market changes pose additional risk to our transfer pipeline. A recent *Texas Tribune* [article](#) outlines the efforts of four regional institutions that are making the transfer process easier for students.

The so-called “enrollment cliff” refers to an expected and predictable drop in the universe of students seeking higher education. In his groundbreaking book, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, Carleton College economist Nathan Grawe outlines the reasons for the cliff and how it will impact colleges differently depending on the institutions’ market positions and locations. One of the effects of America’s shifting student population is that students of color will comprise a far more significant percentage of people in the traditional 18-22 college age bracket. This is especially true in Texas, one of the few majority-minority states. Whereas most of our entering first-year student population comes from outside Texas, our transfer students overwhelmingly come from the Lone Star state. Given demographic realities, we may become more reliant on transfer students, not less.

A new strategic plan is on the horizon and student-centered enrollment growth is a key pillar. Recent annual growth in first-year applications does not mirror anticipated future growth in first-year enrollment. Therefore, growing enrollment while maintaining selectivity and attracting stronger students is predicated on our ability to strengthen our transfer pathway.

In 2020, Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act. After delays and technical glitches, the updated FAFSA launched in late 2023 and caused upheaval for students, parents, counselors, and colleges. It is still being determined how many students will not attend college this fall due to the fiasco or will attend community colleges instead of enrolling in four-year colleges or universities. It is anticipated that over the next couple of years, there will be an increase in the number of transfer students applying for admission.

It behooves TCU, which relies on transfer students more than others in our peer set, to be less rigid in our transfer policies.

IV. Changes in Effect

Recent changes have already positively impacted our students’ ability to navigate our curriculum. Examples include:

The Faculty Senate recently approved changes to the Core Curriculum that allows transfer and exam (e.g. Advanced Placement) credit to be applied to the Cultural Awareness, Global Awareness, and Citizenship & Social Values areas of the Core. Students can now satisfy their Natural Sciences requirement with two courses in the same scientific area (i.e. with the same course prefix). In many cases, this will allow students to transfer to TCU having completed most of the Core Curriculum, reducing time to graduation and financial costs.

Student Affairs/Academic Affairs collaborations continue to strengthen. One example of this is the creation of a new position dedicated to transfer student success.

V. Process

Interim Provost Floyd Wormley asked Vice Provost for Enrollment Management Heath Einstein to lead a committee that reviewed curricular impediments to transfer students' success and crafted recommendations to address the barriers. The committee was comprised of administrators, faculty, and staff, primarily in the Division of Academic Affairs, who have significant contact with transfer students.

- Heath Einstein, Vice Provost, Enrollment Management (Chair)
- Dr. Muriel Cormican, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Professor of German, AddRan College of Liberal Arts
- Keri Cyr, Executive Director, Student Success
- Dr. Frank Hernandez, Dean, College of Education
- Dr. Nichole Mancone Fisher, Registrar
- Dr. Annorah Moorman, Associate Vice Provost, Student Success
- Dr. Reginald A. Wilburn, Associate Provost, Undergraduate Affairs
- April Yandell, Associate Director of Admission – Transfer

The committee met during June through August of 2024. Data collection occurred during this period and drew upon information gathered in 2023 for a similar project.

A. Surveys

Associate deans were surveyed in June 2024 to help identify curricular impediments to transfer students' success and to elicit suggestions for addressing these challenges. The survey was divided into three sections: (1) General curricular impediments, (2) College-specific curricular impediments, and (3) Potential solutions. Questions were posed along three dimensions: (1) Enrollment, (2) Persistence, and (3) Completion.

The Office of Student Success deployed the Transfer Needs Assessment in spring 2023 to inform the transfer student experience at TCU. While the purpose of the assessment was to explore the experience holistically, academic elements were included and proved useful to the committee.

B. Focus groups

Members of the committee conducted focus groups in July 2024 with three distinct groups of transfer students: (1) Incoming, (2) Current, and (3) Alumni. By dividing students in this way, we were able to observe strengths and opportunities at various stages of our transfer enrollment process without relying on experiences that occurred too far in the past.

C. Data

The Office of Institutional Research provided metrics to evaluate student progress and success (e.g. credits amassed, GPA, retention rate, graduation rate, etc.).

Data were collected from peer and aspirant institutions for benchmarking.

VI. Challenges

1. Admission

Many would-be transfer students are turned away from TCU due to the perception that they cannot succeed here. Evaluation of transfer credits during the admission process without the student quickly and thoroughly understanding what they will get credit for is a significant barrier for prospective transfer students. Further, despite a formal articulation agreement with Tarrant County College that dates back nearly a decade (and even further with our ROTC relationship), many students in our state's major community college systems – including TCC – do not see TCU as a viable option.

2. Advising

- a. Transfer students need help to identify advisors and schedule appointments. There is not a consistent process for how colleges assign advisors to transfer students nor a standard time frame for when students are connected to their advisors.
- b. Surveyed transfer students express concern about inconsistency in pre-advising (defined here as any advising that occurs prior to their initial course registration). Transfer students want to understand their path to graduation before committing to a university, sometimes before going through the admission process.
- c. Transfer students feel as though they're shuffled from one advisor to another.

3. Onboarding

Transfer students experience orientation differently from their first-year peers, making the onboarding process feel exclusionary and preventing the transmission of critical resource knowledge.

4. Curriculum Navigation

Transfer students find the TCU curriculum difficult to navigate due to a combination of inconsistent advising and arriving at TCU with unique experiences.

5. Credit Articulation

There is a perception among students of inconsistency in how courses are articulated and who determines equivalency. Associate deans serve as intermediaries, which can create challenges when credits are given to some students and not others depending on the student's home academic unit. Each college handles the process slightly differently, which can lead to the inconsistent evaluation of core attributes in transferred courses.. Some inconsistencies result from ambiguities in the learning outcomes of a course from another institution and result from thoughtful considerations of what best serves the student, so rigid conversions are also to be avoided.

6. Major Sequencing

TCU's lockstep major sequencing is not perceived as transfer friendly. Some degree plans contain pathways or requirements that are especially difficult to navigate. Courses

offered in sequence are not offered every term, making it difficult to find the appropriate entry point. Further, there is bottleneaking due to upper-division requirements that delay progress towards graduation. Specifically, transfer students often far exceed the 120 credits required to graduate because they arrive with significant credits but still need to complete 42 upper-division credits in residence.

7. Course Availability

Certain courses, including those that meet program requirements, are only offered in fall or spring. Additionally, some of these courses are offered at the same time as other required courses. For students who come in with credits and who seek to graduate within a few semesters upon arrival, our use of classroom space might be limiting. Course availability is especially problematic for non-traditional students. Students who work, are parents, and are primary caregivers to others are examples of those whose responsibilities require greater curricular flexibility.

8. Academic Support Space

Transfer students, the majority of whom live off-campus, lack an accessible landing space with resources they can count on, that meet their unique needs, near academic buildings.

VII. Recommendations

1. Admission

- a. Invest in the most up-to-date technology that allows prospective students to quickly and easily input the coursework they have completed to determine transfer equivalency.
- b. Reinforce our transfer articulation agreement with Tarrant County College and develop agreements with other large community college systems in Texas (e.g. Collin College, Dallas College, Lone Star College, etc.).
- c. Develop a team of Admission staff, working alongside Student Access and Accommodations, trained to pre-advise prospective transfer students prior to submission of their application and/or prior to their enrollment commitment. This empowers students to envision their ability to succeed at TCU.

2. Advising

- a. Identify advisors explicitly dedicated to transfer students.
 - i. At least one new advisor should be designated to work with prospective transfer students, helping them determine what will transfer and determining their degree pathway/plan and time to completion of degree, to aid in their decision-making process of whether or not to attend TCU.
 - ii. Given the advisor-to-advisee ratio, two new advisors should be explicitly devoted to advising transfer students and working in conjunction with current academic advisors across the college

- iii. At least one of the advisors mentioned above should have expertise in working with veterans.
 - b. Automate advisor assignments.
 - c. Upon submitting enrollment commitment, automated messages go out to students to alert them of their advisor and to schedule an appointment.
3. Create purple carpet onboarding experience specific for transfer students. This can be integrated into existing programs while highlighting how TCU values its transfer students.
 - a. Align transfer orientation with the standard orientation program to ensure critical information is transmitted consistently to all students. This should include individual time with advisors.
 - b. Develop 3 hour upper-level transitional course for transfer students modeled after the pilot/current ADRN 30970 Navigating Change: Transfer Student Success course.
 - c. Ensure any curricular elements introduced at Frogs First is inclusive of transfer students.
4. Enhance our mentorship program in which every incoming transfer student is assigned a returning transfer mentor. This added layer of accountability could serve both mentor and mentee.
5. The Office of the Registrar collaborates with departments and other subject matter experts to determine course articulation. Course articulation should begin in the registrar's office and not upon request of the student, but because of the complexity and flexibility of the TCU core, some collaboration will be necessary and advantageous to students.
 - a. Build out Texas Evaluation System (TES), software TCU currently licenses, to establish consistent credit articulation.
6. Eliminate bottlenecks
 - a. Academic units should review and re-imagine all degree pathways without compromising program accreditation or integrity to limit restrictive distribution requirements.
 - b. Increase offerings of required courses, specifically pre-requisites, that are offered only every 2 or 3 semesters. This would allow students to begin their major-required courses immediately and not slow down course sequencing.
 - c. Lower the minimum upper-division course requirements in residence from 42 to 36 credit hours except when accreditation and licensure prevent such a policy.
 - d. Lower the residency requirement from 58 to 45 credit hours except when other curricular requirements, accreditation, and licensure prevent such a policy. SACSCOC requires a minimum of 25% of credit hours in residence. 45 places us

well above this requirement, maintains the integrity of the TCU degree, and allows students who arrive with significant credits amassed to work through expeditiously. While it may continue to be impossible to complete a degree with 45 hours in residence in some programs, this lower minimum number of hours in residence as a university rule allows flexibility for the programs in which it is possible without compromising those in which it is not.

7. Explore all options for optimizing space utilization and course availability.
 - a. Offer foundational courses in fall, summer, and spring.
 - b. Optimize space by offering courses outside of traditional peak hours.
 - c. Examine the feasibility of developing a distance learning program.

8. Properly resource space for transfer success.
 - a. Provide permanent, dedicated, university-supported transfer study and development space where curricular support services can be delivered. While this currently exists, it has been unstable, transient, and ad-hoc.