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Higher Education

Transfer of College Credit

With the growing number of Maryland high school students earning community college credits while still in high school and starting their college careers at a community college, improving the college credit transfer process has become a critical policy issue. The failure of college credits earned by students to transfer and count toward a bachelor's degree is inefficient and costly to both students and the State. The lack of available data on transfer credit, including both credits that transfer and do not transfer, is an impediment to developing sound policy solutions. However, there are several potential policy and legislative solutions that the General Assembly may wish to consider.

Background

As more students start college careers at community colleges, through dual enrollment while still in high school or supported through Maryland's Promise Scholarship Program, it has become more evident that the college credit transfer process warrants attention. When course credit fails to transfer from a community college to a four-year institution or does not apply to a student's major or general education requirements when it does transfer, it increases both the cost to the student and the time it takes for the student to graduate. It also costs the State more when students remain in college longer, both for the State budget as well as lost workforce earnings. Further, according to research published in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, a student who transfers almost all of the student's community college credits is 2.5 times more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than a student who transfers less than half of the student's credits.

Dual enrollment in Maryland, which has been increasing in recent years, is poised to increase even more if House Bill 1300 of 2020, Blueprint for Maryland's Future – Implementation (the Blueprint), which was vetoed by the Governor, is enacted. Under the Blueprint, college and career ready students will have access to postsecondary courses and training, at no additional cost to the student, in grades 11 and 12. Most of these credits will likely be from community colleges. The General Assembly has enacted several other major policy initiatives in recent years to address college readiness, college completion, and college affordability, including the College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 (CCRCCA) and the College Affordability Act of 2016. The CCRCCA provided incentives for dual enrollment and also required community colleges and four-year institutions to work together to develop transfer agreements (also called articulation agreements) for college credit transfer in general education and other major academic areas, including a guarantee that students leaving community college with an associate degree would be able to transfer at least 60 credits toward a bachelor's degree.

In light of continuing legislative interest, the Department of Legislative Services (DLS) has reviewed national research findings and State laws, regulations, and policies regarding transferring college credit as well as the limited Maryland transfer data that is available. DLS will publish a comprehensive report on the college credit transfer process in Maryland, including recommended legislative and policy solutions, before the 2021 legislative session. A summary of the preliminary findings and recommendations follows.

College Credit Transfer Process Is Inefficient and Complicated

According to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, about 80% of entering community college students nationwide indicate that they want to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. However, within six years of beginning community college, only 15.8% of students who start at a public two-year institution earn a bachelor's degree within that time period (7.7% first earn an associate degree), as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Data. Of students who begin at a two-year institution in Maryland, 19.8% of students earn a bachelor's degree anywhere in the United States within six years (9.4% first earn an associate degree). One reason that students fail to earn a bachelor's degree is that the college credit transfer process is inefficient and complicated.

In Maryland, 28.7% of first-time, full-time students who entered community college in fall 2015 transferred to a four-year institution within four years. Of those students, slightly over half (53.3%) earned an associate degree or lower division certificate prior to transferring. Statewide, earning an associate degree before transferring to a four-year institution has become more popular, comprising only a little more than one-third (35.2%) of the 2006 cohort compared to more than half of the 2015 cohort. This is important because research by the University System of Maryland (USM) has shown that students who transfer at the sophomore or junior level have an increased chance of finishing a bachelor's degree within four years of transfer. Most Maryland community college students who transfer to a four-year institution transfer to a USM institution. The overall four-year graduation rate for students who transferred in fall 2014 was 56%, which is the most recent year data is available.

While the CCRCCA required the Maryland Higher Education Commission to collect and report college credit transfer data annually for Maryland students, DLS recently learned that this data is not being collected. DLS is further investigating why this transfer data is not being collected, the barriers to collecting and analyzing the data, and what can be done to eliminate the barriers. Thus, only national data is available on college credit transfer.

According to a July 2020 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, for students who begin their college career at a public two-year institution, 96.2% attempted to transfer credits. Of those students, 47.7% were not able to transfer some or all of their credits. Included in these statistics are dually enrolled high school students. Since the vast majority (94%) of dual enrollment in Maryland is at community colleges, Maryland's data likely tracks the national average. Nationwide, 46.3% of bachelor's degree recipients from the 2015-2016 academic year attempted

to transfer academic credits between institutions. Over half, or 52.4%, of bachelor's degree recipients who attempted to transfer credits were not able to transfer some or all of their credits.

According to the Columbia University report, there are many reasons why credits fail to transfer and many types of credit transfer inefficiency. In general, institutions usually require all students, whether transfer or native (meaning enrolled at the institution as a first-time student), to retake previously taken courses that do not meet specific gateway requirements. It is at the discretion of the receiving institution to determine whether course credit will be counted toward graduation and, just as importantly, toward a student's major. Some reasons stated for rejecting or not applying a course to the major include that (1) the student received a low grade; (2) the course is a technical, repeated, or developmental course; (3) the level of the course is different; (4) the quality of the course is different; (5) the student's major had changed; and (6) there is no course equivalent. Additionally, some laboratory courses may only transfer with a satisfactory grade in a corresponding lecture course. Data on the prevalence of reasons why credits fail to transfer in Maryland is not available.

Interestingly, a recent nationwide survey indicated a discrepancy between the perceptions of administrators at community colleges and those at four-year institutions with administrators at community colleges much less likely to respond that the transfer process works effectively and quickly than their counterparts at four-year institutions.

Potential Policy and Legislative Solutions

DLS has developed several potential policy and legislative solutions to improve the college credit transfer in Maryland. Final recommendations will be included in the forthcoming report.

Improve Transfer System and Data Collection

Although the report presents nationwide data about student transfers, it does not present Maryland-specific data because that data is not published. Once planned upgrades to the State's Articulation System for Maryland Colleges and Universities (ARTSYS) are made, further research into Maryland-specific data should be done to focus improvements.

ARTSYS is managed by USM for all Maryland institutions and is supported by the institutions. The upgrade will address both the outdated technology and the common course competency requirements for credits to transfer. The upgrade has been presented as a collaborative process that will include faculty from both community colleges and four-year institutions in the State. The new system will also allow students to cross-register in transferable courses through the system. Some of the upgrades have already begun, but the State's fiscal crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the institutional resources available to support these critical upgrades.

In addition, DLS will develop additional recommendations to improve the collection of transfer credit data at the student level and the analysis of longitudinal data.

Require Four-year Institutions to Report on Credit Transfer Denial

Specifically, four-year institutions should be required to report on (1) the number of students denied transfer credits; (2) the number of credits denied; (3) the reasons that transfer credits are denied; and (4) the percentage of credits denied for each reason. This would provide data to target the efforts of institutions or legislation addressing credit transfer issues.

Inform Students and Sending Institutions in a Timely Manner

A receiving institution is generally not required to inform a transfer student of a decision to deny transfer credit until the middle of the student's first semester, nor are they required to cooperate with the sending institution unless the student appeals the denial and affirmatively requests that the sending institution intercede on the student's behalf. Requiring receiving institutions to inform students of denials in a timelier manner could prevent lengthy appeals from impacting a student's graduation timeline. In addition, requiring receiving institutions that deny transfer credit to inform sending institutions could promote fairness in the appeal process by shifting that burden away from students who may not be aware of their ability to involve the sending institution.