

# Why Don't More Community-College Students Transfer?

What if most of today's 4.5 million community-college students who intended to transfer to four-year colleges actually did? That would be a winning proposition all around.

It would increase those students' odds of having satisfying and lucrative careers. It would give four-year colleges a much-needed enrollment boost when demographic trends are working against them. It would give society more better-educated and financially stable citizens. And America's more than 1,100 community colleges would improve their reputations as engines of social mobility and success. That would bolster their enrollment, which has suffered even more during the Covid-19 pandemic than enrollments at four-year colleges.

Sadly, higher education is seeing losses, not wins, in all of those columns. This explainer examines the reasons and the costs, looks at some strategies to improve the situation, and introduces three students who managed to transfer despite the obstacles.

## What Are Transfer Numbers Like Now?

"Transfer outcomes have been unacceptably low for decades," says Tania LaViolet, director of bachelor's attainment for the College Excellence Program of the Aspen Institute. Covid-era statistics, she says, indicate "bad layered on top of bad."

How bad? More than 80 percent of community-college students intend to transfer to four-year colleges, researchers have estimated. But according to figures issued by the Community College Research Center of Columbia University's Teachers College in 2021, of 100 degree-seeking community-college students, about 31 were transferring to a four-year college and only 14 earned a bachelor's degree within six years. Within those underwhelming figures loomed even-worse indications of inequity. White students were transferring at twice the rate of their Black and Latino/a classmates, and higher-income students at twice the rate of their lower-

income classmates.

The pandemic has worsened the situation. Community-college enrollments overall have plummeted by roughly a fifth since 2020, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, and between spring of 2020 and spring of 2022, transfer rates from community colleges to four-year colleges decreased by 11.5 percent. Janet L. Marling, executive director of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students at the University of North Georgia, says that students older than 21 and students from underrepresented minority groups continue to struggle particularly with transfer during the pandemic. She also worries about re-engaging students who stopped out during the last few years.

### **What Are Some Common Hurdles?**

Transfer numbers were disappointing pre-pandemic because transfer processes have been, by and large, dysfunctional. Often, credits don't transfer, and even when they do, they don't necessarily count toward students' intended majors. Financial aid isn't consistently available, and when it is, it requires slogging through complicated paperwork. Four-year colleges don't offer the same convenience and flexibility as two-year colleges in location and scheduling options. And students who do transfer sometimes experience "transfer shock," feeling out of place, unwelcome, and academically and socially adrift.

The Covid-19 crisis added further challenges and complications. Early in the pandemic, jobs dried up, making college even less affordable while family responsibilities multiplied because of remote schooling, limited or no child and elder care, and spikes in illnesses and deaths. Computer and Wi-Fi access and cost presented additional burdens.

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### **What Role Does the Economy Play?**

Then the economy recharged, offering tempting job prospects. A May 2022 unemployment rate of about 3.5 percent was the lowest seen since the 1960s, with an estimated 1.9 job openings for each unemployed worker.

It's impossible to read the minds of students who are not there, but here's what experts think is happening:

Particularly after early-pandemic lockdown layoffs and furloughs, for many potential students, the short-term payoff of work has been more alluring than investing in their educations for deferred, murkier returns down the line. More recently, the economy has overheated, fueling inflation and eye-popping food, housing, utility, and gas costs. Those who have probably made immediate income from such jobs feel even more crucial to workers who are weighing job-school trade-offs.

Add pandemic-era factors to the traditional barriers to successful transfer, and it's no wonder that transfer percentages are trending lower than ever. That's deeply worrisome to experts like Aspen Institute's LaViolet, because today's short-term job inducements could hurt the long-term interests of workers who would be better off focusing on their education. In the longer run, not only might they find themselves stuck in relatively low-paying jobs — jobs often paying 27.4 percent less in inflation-adjusted dollars than they did in 2009 — but those workers also might not be

able to find jobs at all.

LaViolet cites a February 2021 [report](#) by the McKinsey Global Institute on “The Future of Work After Covid-19.” The institute predicts that in the eight countries it examined, including the United States, the pandemic will accelerate the decline of low-wage jobs even as high-wage positions in health care and STEM fields will grow. By 2030, more than 100 million workers in those countries may need to switch occupations.

In advanced economies like that of the United States, that’s 25 percent more than was estimated before the coronavirus pandemic. Workers without a college degree, the report says, might well be among those hardest hit.

How long will the escalated job-glut hiring of workers without degrees continue? That’s unclear, but with most economists predicting a recession in 2022 or 2023, workers with higher degrees could be less vulnerable to job-market jolts.

### **What Are Some Efforts to Help?**

Some states, realizing the direct and indirect costs of transfer problems, have for years been trying to simplify and streamline the process. For instance, in Virginia, through its Transfer Gateway, students who have earned an associate degree and a minimum grade point average from one of the state’s 23 community colleges are guaranteed admission to more than 30 colleges and universities. Recently, Virginia created a one-year block of general-education courses that transfer to any public higher-education institution in the state and built a centralized portal to help students plan their transfer path.

To increase the number of such programs, in the fall of 2021, the Aspen Institute and the American

Association of State Colleges and Universities began to offer intensive training to 32 four-year colleges working with two-year college partners. Key to the program is the mandatory participation of the colleges’ presidents. “It takes leadership at the very top to be able to move the dial,” says LaViolet.

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### **What Do Transfer Students Have to Say?**

Even for students who have successfully navigated the transfer process and whose futures look bright, credit-transfer, money, networking, and other issues have loomed large.

“It’s a struggle from start to finish,” Robert E. Schmidt, a 30-year-old senior electrical-engineering student at the Colorado School of Mines, says of transferring credits from two-year to four-year colleges. Making that leap cost him credits, money, and time.

Scholarships, work-study jobs, and buying and selling used car parts have been crucial to his college payments. Despite the bumps along the way, Schmidt plans to graduate after one more semester and is the leader of a capstone-project team building an electric vehicle to compete in the Baja 1000 desert race.

Mase Peterson, who is 26 and uses they/them pronouns, transferred from a community college in Maine to Amherst College, where they expect

to graduate after one more semester with a bachelor's in English and gender studies. Amherst's need-blind admission was a decisive factor in being able to attend.

For Peterson, a rigorous five-week summer term at Vassar College's long-running [Exploring Transfer Program](#) helped make the move to Amherst possible. The Vassar summer clarified for Peterson the convoluted credit-transfer picture and the necessity for an impressive application portfolio.

"That was one of the more challenging parts — knowing how to frame those things," says Peterson. "How do I present myself? How do I sell myself? The acceptance rate at Amherst is painfully low."

Now eyeing media jobs and possibly graduate school, Peterson says that beyond the burden of holding down multiple jobs in addition to their studies, networking into prestigious internships — part of what's often called the hidden curriculum — remains a challenge.

Cassandra C. Pollard is a 24-year-old rising senior at the University of Maryland Baltimore County's program at the Universities of Shady Grove. Pollard thrived in the two-year Montgomery College associate-degree program in biotech and has parlayed

it into a full-time quality-control job at Vigene Biosciences. In transferring, however, she had a false start, spending a frustrating year at the University of Maryland's College Park campus, where she was academically lost in huge lecture courses.

Her second transfer went much better. At the UMBC satellite-campus program, class sizes have been more like her small-class experiences in community college, and she has done well. She wants to help devise treatments for autoimmune disorders like a genetically linked arthritis-psoriasis condition that afflicts her single-parent mother and someday might attack Cassandra herself, as well as many others.

Thomas Brock, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, says that the current transfer process is broken, but that educators and policy makers "find that inexcusable and intolerable, and are dedicated to making improvements." Florida and California are among states joining Virginia in adopting reforms to improve transfer rates, he says.

Could it get even worse, or is this the darkness before the dawn?

"I prefer," says Brock, "to be an optimist."



Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Throughout the duration of the project, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Amy Kerwin**  
Vice President – Education Philanthropy  
Ascendium Education Group

