



NASH Commitment to Transfer: Student-Centered and Equity-Minded

Purpose and Context: why NASH, why transfer, why now?

NASH recognizes that systems matter in achieving equitable student mobility and success.

Why NASH: Encompassing a diverse array of public four-year and two-year institutions in more than 40 systems in 28 states, NASH member systems and campuses have the scale, influence, commitment to equity, and desire to impact college completion in unprecedented ways. Campuses in all public state systems of postsecondary education serve more than 75 percent of the U.S. undergraduate student body in public four- and two-year institutions. These systems also serve a vast majority of the students who transfer each year in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees as well as “reverse transfer” students seeking to complete their associate’s degrees, enabling future transfer opportunities for students to complete their four-year degrees. Of the 40 NASH member systems, 17 include both universities and community colleges, providing deep systems experience and expertise in supporting transfer student success across complex multi-sector pathways.

Since its inception in 2015, the NASH initiative *Taking Student Success to Scale* (TS3) has recognized the distinct role of university systems in increasing college attainment and in identifying, addressing and closing opportunity and equity gaps. At its core, TS3 promotes equitable, student-centered pathways for students to succeed, taking advantage of the reach of NASH members to scale and measure three sets of interventions: high impact practices, math pathways, and predictive analytics.

Why Transfer: The original intention of TS3 was to create communities of practice to leverage the collective resources of systems to support campuses in working directly with their students. In recent years, student transfer has emerged as an opportunity and challenge priority in the work to increase college attainment and close equity gaps. Transfer students constitute a large, distinct, growing and highly diverse population. TS3’s founding interventions were envisioned for students attending a single institution yet, increasingly, students experience college across multiple institutions. Transfer students require an intentional focus, different from that for first-time-in-college (FTIC) students. Research shows that white and Asian students are more likely than others to complete degrees after transfer¹, exacerbating inequity and highlighting the importance of the other three interventions to support transfer student success.

Because of their ability to coordinate and facilitate common policies and practices across multiple campuses, systems are uniquely poised to lead—as many are already doing—in the development of transfer initiatives that support the success of students as they swirl among campuses. System

¹ National Student Clearinghouse: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Signature-Report-15.pdf>

leadership is also crucial in influencing the many articulation agreements coordinated or legislated at the state level.

Why Now: In the months leading up to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, NASH had identified transfer as a pivotal issue and one that needed to be encompassed by the TS3 work. NASH set out to identify key areas of opportunity, along with recommended responses and actions to address them. The disruptions of Spring and Summer 2020—COVID 19, the newly awakened national reckoning with racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd, volatile economic conditions, and job loss —require stronger focus and an even deeper engagement with equity. COVID-19 engendered previously unimaginable interruptions and disruptions in operational continuity, delivery of instruction and student support services, academic continuity, and student progression. The exposure of long-standing inequities, including digital divides and health disparities, could no longer be ignored. In the face of unprecedented dislocation, students lost jobs and support systems overnight, removing what were for many already tenuous holds on financial stability.

Also impossible to ignore was the confrontation—yet again—with violence against Black and Brown people ignited by the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others. These horrific murders have generated an unfolding and long-overdue movement to confront differently the country’s 400+-year-old history of racism, systemic injustice, and institutionalized oppression of indigenous, Black, Brown and other populations of color.

In coming months, NASH will be working intentionally to expand the equity lens that is core to its mission to combat racism. NASH will think through with members the role of university *systems* in ending systemic racism and inequities that persist within our colleges and universities, despite the work of so many to make them engines of student access, opportunity and success. In the meantime, NASH invites its member systems to join in making a commitment to transfer student success an integral component of their TS3 work and—more broadly—their work to close equity and opportunity gaps, and to dismantle the systemic structures of racism permeating American institutions, higher education included.

A Complex Transfer Landscape

Across the United States, 1.7 million new students enroll in community colleges each year, 80% of whom plan to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, only 30% of students who started community college in 2012 transferred to a four-year school, and only 13% of those transferring students earned a bachelor’s degree within six years.

These numbers tell only part of the story: not all transfer occurs vertically (from two- to four-year institutions), but also laterally (from four- to four-year institutions), in reverse (from four- to two-year institutions), through concurrent enrollment, and through swirling among multiple schools—two and four-year—over time. This movement takes a toll on students and their ability to complete degrees. According to a 2017 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), transfer students lose nearly half of the credits they attempt to bring to their new institution. GAO researchers found that students who transferred institutions between 2004 and 2009 lost on average 43% of the credits they had earned at their previous institution.

Equally significant are issues beyond student swirl and credit mobility, including the alignment of curricula between institutions, clear pathways facilitating the successful movement of transfer students

toward completion, and persistent equity gaps in this complex landscape. Indeed, low-income and students of color are more likely to begin their post-secondary education at community colleges, and less likely to successfully transfer and complete their bachelor's degrees six years later. So many of the equity gaps that exist in American higher education, then, exist between transfer students and non-transfer students.

As noted above, this landscape has become even more complex in recent months. The COVID-19 pandemic, related economic crisis, and confrontation with racial injustice have further exposed and heightened equity gaps for vulnerable student populations, in particular low-income, first-generation, Black, Latino, Native American, and marginalized Asian American and Pacific Islander students. While every college and university in the country is facing uncertainty in terms of projecting student behavior and enrollments, improving student transfer processes—and transfer students pathways—will be evermore critical to close equity and attainment gaps.

The NASH Transfer Commitment

In response to this evolving national context, NASH is expanding the commitment of its TS3 initiative to include transfer, in recognition of the opportunities posed by successful transfer to support equitable access to, persistence through, and completion of high-quality degree programs across student populations and demographics. This expansion further leverages the foundational role university systems play in improving student transfer and removing structural barriers by: mobilizing their size and scale to coordinate and foster collaboration, pathways and portability of credits across institutions; utilizing data and analytics with a particular focus on identifying and closing equity gaps and improving student outcomes; rethinking curricula and academic and extra-academic support for transfer students; and by taking advantage of their policy-making and -informing capacities at multiple levels (institutional, system, state and state agency, and federal).

The NASH Transfer Commitment proposes areas of attention and opportunities for systems to adopt equity-driven best practices in those areas relevant to the students they serve and their institutions. Failure to do so inhibits students from completing their degrees in a timely manner, reducing their debt, and meeting workforce needs in states and across the country. States are paying attention, with state-level policy changes taking place across the country to identify and remove barriers to transfer student success and to hold colleges and universities accountable in doing so. And students are paying attention as they make consequential decisions about how to enter and reenter higher education during a pandemic, where to enroll, how to pay for college in a period of economic instability, how to ensure their own safety and that of loved ones, including educational environments that are free of racism and committed to closing equity and opportunity gaps.

Areas of Attention and Opportunity

NASH member systems are each different and distinct, in terms of students served, the composition of higher education institutions that make up each system (community and technical colleges, universities, etc.), the policy environment, influence and authority wielded. Likewise, their students are diverse in terms of income, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, geography, and linguistic backgrounds, all of which impact their access to and completion of quality educational opportunity and degrees.

The NASH Transfer Commitment seeks to encompass this diversity of systems and student populations by providing entry-points to a broad set of evidence-based principles, policy, practice and data approaches and interventions through which systems can advance the success and degree-completion of students transferring in and out of their institutions. It encourages systems to take a close look in the mirror to examine and eliminate barriers of their own making that prevent students from achieving their educational goals. Deploying the collective impact approach so successful in the founding interventions of TS3, it shifts transfer from a transactional process to a student-centered priority focused on equity and completion. The end result will be to move systems closer to the gold standard of seamless transfer and—most importantly—enable hundreds of thousands of students across the nation to successfully transfer credits, have them apply to the degrees they want and need, and complete their educational goals so they may pursue further study and enter or advance in the workforce.

Transfer Commitment areas of attention come from the challenges identified in a growing body of research on transfer student outcomes and experiences. They include:

- transfer student belonging and the student experience across the transfer lifecycle, including advising and onboarding, and financial, academic and extra-academic support before, during and after transfer;
- equity gaps and interventions needed to close them;
- access to and participation in high-impact practices;
- clear policy, practice and communication regarding credit portability and applicability to majors and degrees for students, faculty, advisors and all transfer stakeholders and partners;
- degree pathways, articulation, and alignment of transfer curricula;
- credit for prior and experiential learning;
- fine-grained data analysis and analytics; and
- policy to remove barriers, and identify and implement student-centered solutions in each of the areas above.

Responses and Actions

The areas of attention above invite areas for responses and action from systems, as appropriate to their student populations and institutional contexts, resources and relationships. They were relevant and germane before COVID and the murder of George Floyd. Moving forward, they require deeper engagement with equity and anti-racism solutions to address them, while staying sensitive to new pressures on transfer students as well as institutions because of COVID-19.

Areas of action might include and are not limited to:

- Prioritizing and incorporating equity goals and outcomes for all phases of the transfer continuum/lifecycle.
- Ensuring inclusive, quality and student-centric academic and extra-academic support specifically designed for transfer students, including advising, math success, and high-impact practices.
- Strengthening collaboration and relationship-building with community colleges, university, K-12, business, government, and nonprofit partners.
- Contextualizing and ensuring quality and equity in dual enrollment and dual credit systems as critical gateways in complex transfer landscapes now impacted by COVID-19.

- Supporting the development and sustainability of student-facing technology tools and platforms designed to accelerate transfer by enhancing credit portability and applicability to majors.
- Advancing transfer analytics as a new and increasingly important frontier, albeit rife with challenges around data-sharing and FERPA, platforms, capacity, etc.
- Identifying and engaging leadership in policy discussions in terms of source and authority: institutional, system/governing board, SHEEO and state agencies, as well as accreditors and the U.S. Department of Education.
- Promoting the role of faculty in transfer student success, including advising, mentoring, credit evaluation, etc.
- Analyzing and assessing transfer models, including data and interventions with evidence of success, across systems and states, and with attention to student populations disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, gender, first-generation status, geography, and other characteristics.

Conclusion

Expanding the focus of the NASH TS3 Initiative to include a commitment to transfer—and transfer student success—further leverages the diversity and scale of member systems to increase college attainment and close equity gaps. And it does so in a higher education landscape turned upside down by a global pandemic, and at a moment of deeper national engagement to eradicate structural racism and systemic inequities. The transfer commitment strengthens NASH’s collaboration with its member systems to pursue cross-system analyses and development of best practices to utilize primary levers of impact, most notably policy, practice, data and relationships. It deepens the holistic approach to understanding and serving today’s students. It invites members to turn the recommendations above into consequential action. And—like the TS3 commitments to HIPs, Math Pathways and Predictive Analytics—the transfer commitment keeps students and the equity imperative at the center of system and institutional endeavors, activities, and missions.

The ground is shifting beneath American institutions, including higher education. Whether these are true paradigm shifts remains to be known but the impacts are and will be daunting. Even if it is too early to anticipate student behavior and enrollment patterns, more swirl of students is certain. NASH strongly believes that American higher education has an unprecedented opportunity—and that state systems have a particular responsibility—to confront and remove longstanding systemic inequity and racism.

Resources (Selected)

- National Student Clearinghouse report following the 2011 cohort of transfer students: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Signature-Report-15.pdf>
- Columbia University Community College Research Center (CCRC) [Community College FAQs](#)
- CCRC and Aspen Institute: [The Transfer Playbook: Tool for Assessing Progress Toward Adoption of Essential Transfer Practices for Two-Year Colleges, and for Four-Year Colleges and Universities](#)
- Government Accountability Office Report: [Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits](#), August 2017
- AACRAO-CHEA-ACE [Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit](#)
- [ACE National Task Force on Transfer](#)

- “SUNY Seamless Transfer Policy and Shared Governance,” Elizabeth L. Bringsjord, Daniel J. Knox, David Lavallee, and Kenneth P. O’Brien, in *Shared Governance in Higher Education, Volume 1: Demands, Transitions, Transformations*, Sharon F. Cramer, Editor; 2018.
- “[Examining how the Analytics Revolution Matters to Higher Education Policymakers](#),” Jason E. Lane, in *The Analytics Revolution in Higher Education*, Edited by Gagliardi, Parnell, Carpenter-Hubin.
- The System Center / NASH White Paper on Transfer (forthcoming)
- UW System-WTCS *Joint Statement on Inter-System Transfer*
- UW System White Paper on Transfer
- UW System Transfer Equity Study
- UT System Transfer Study (forthcoming Summer 2020)
- Texas Transfer Alliance (part of national [Tackling Transfer](#) project with Dana Center, Aspen Institute, HCM Strategists, SOVA and 3 states – Texas, Minnesota and Virginia)
- [Education Commission of the States Policy Tracker on State Legislation](#)
- [National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students](#) (NISTS)
- Transfer Platforms: Transferology; EAB Navigate