

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 27: THE STATE OF STUDENT TRANSFER

IRIS PALMER

ALISON KADLEC

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 27: THE STATE OF STUDENT TRANSFER

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ALISON KADLEC

PAUL FAIN

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PAUL FAIN: Pearson, the world's education company and the renowned authors are bringing engaging and informative sessions to educators on the topics of politics, government, and the 2020 presidential election in a new webinar series. Save your seat by registering at [go.pearson.com/election series](https://go.pearson.com/election-series).

Welcome to The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host and a contributing editor with Inside Higher Ed. Students are transferring less often this fall. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center this week said overall transfer enrollments were down 4.7 percent, with double digit declines in reverse transfer and summer swirl, while the predicted influx of four-year college students transferring to more affordable community colleges near home did not happen. To get some reaction to these numbers, I spoke with Iris Palmer, a senior advisor for higher education and workforce with the education policy program at New America. Palmer talked about current state policies to help more students transfer seamlessly, as well as which state incentives she'd like to see used more broadly.

IRIS PALMER: It just seems to me that states can do a much better job creating a structure that actually rewards colleges for treating transfer student well and for honoring their credits and their experience. And that is not necessarily the case right now. There's lots of policies around these transfer credits. There's lots of frustration at state legislatures for four-year colleges not honoring credits, but there isn't a lot of additional financial incentives beyond just enrollment incentives for these colleges.

PAUL FAIN: I also spoke with Alison Kadlec, a founding partner at Sova, which works on improving transfer pathways and student success. Kadlec gave me the lay of the land on how transfer students have been treated in recent years and how the current enrollment crunch could change that dynamic.

ALISON KADLEC: It's excellent that four-year institutions in recent years, and this is before COVID, looking down the barrel of enrollment declines were beginning to think more seriously about transfer students as a lifeline for them. And now with the pandemic, it is truly pressing.

PAUL FAIN: All right, let's get to the conversation.

Iris Palmer, good to see you. How are you?

IRIS PALMER: We're hanging in there, Paul. Thanks for inviting me.

PAUL FAIN: So this week, we're going to see some new figures we're going to see some new figures from National Student Clearinghouse Center on transfer. Anything about the findings that jumps out at you?

IRIS PALMER: Absolutely. I think there was a sense that there would be a lot of chaos in the transfer world, that there would be a lot more lateral transfer between four-years and between two-years, and a lot more maybe reverse transfer with students going from public four-years to public two-years in an attempt to get a cheaper education, since everyone is online or a lot of people are online. But that's not at all what we saw in the numbers. In fact, we saw a decrease in those types of transfers and an actual increase in students going from two-year to four-year schools. And that's really interesting.

I haven't had to chance to really think about why that's happening, but it actually does play into a lot of the state transfer conversations, which are all designed with that kind of transfer in mind, even though we know those first two types of transfer happen a lot. So it's really exciting actually to see that students are continuing on their educational journey even in this is incredibly trying times. We know most community college students plan to transfer to four-year colleges. And unfortunately, not a enough of them do. It's a good sign, I think.

PAUL FAIN: Don't have a lot of those these days, so...

IRIS PALMER: Exactly! Let's celebrate that. It's small but something to celebrate.

PAUL FAIN: So pre-pandemic, do you mind laying out that state of state policies to support transfer? You know, we've obviously written a lot about California and New York, but what are state's doing and what was working well before all this went down, or not so well?

IRIS PALMER: Yeah, well, that is always the question, right? Even in states where there's really, really good and solid state policies, what we would think of as making the most sense around state policy, do we really see the impact on student success and student transfer success in those states? That's an open question and one that actually needs a lot more research. But, that being said, I think that there's sort of a set of policies at the state level that we consider good policy around transfer.

The first one is common course numbering. So that's just having uniform numbering convention for all classes that are similar or have the same learning outcomes across the two-year and four-year system. It just makes everything much easier, so that they don't have to go through the syllabus and try to figure out, is this class equivalent to that class, because that's already been done through the systems of the state.

The transferable lower division courses, so this is sort of setting out a set of general education requirements that hopefully are the same across all institutions. Now, lots of states have this, but they also allow other general education requirements to be placed on top of it. I'm thinking about U Texas. I mean, that can actually cause a lot of problems around this particular piece. And so the best policy would be to have a set of general education courses, that once you take them, you don't need to take any more general education courses across this.

And then we have sort of the guaranteed transfer associate's degree. And this is what they've been putting together in California between the CSUs and the community colleges. What's tricky about this is that you really do need to have transfer degrees that are aligned with majors. So they have to have major pathways in them, because 60 credits is a lot of credits, but it gets half a bachelor's degree. And so we really need to have the prerequisites lined up to take a certain major if you don't want to a lot of excess credits. So what's tricky about this is to make the that transfer associate's degree align enough with the major, can be really tricky, and something they've been working on really hard in California.

And I think they deserve a lot of credit for that.

The last one is reverse transfer. And this instead of using the term reverse transfer to mean people going from four-year college back to two-year college, this is actually taking the credit from the four-year college and then sending it back to the community college to be able to get your associate's degree before you transfer. One of the things that we saw in the Clearinghouse data is that more people have transferred without their associate's degree in this last few months, which is really interesting, but I think that there's a lot of evidence, well, there's some evidence to show that if you have your associate's degree, it can be a good thing if you take longer, for instance, to finish your bachelor's degree. But that's sort of the state of really well designed transfer policy. And so that's like Florida and Washington and some others have had these policies on the books for a long time and have seen some success.

PAUL FAIN: And I know for folks who don't work on this that the work to line up those pathways is quite labor-intensive and takes a long time. So, you know, given all the swirl in the system that enrollment demands that most institutions are facing, does this create some opportunities to make some progress a little faster than you've seen in the past and making sure that transfer students' credits transfer and apply to a program?

IRIS PALMER: The Clearinghouse's report indicates this, that there is going to be a lot more transfer as students are coming to terms with what their current college experience is going to be during COVID and probably for the entire academic year, I think we can say at this point. And so as students are exploring what they want to do with their college careers, I do think we're seeing...well, we are clearly...the indications are that we're seeing increased transfer. And I think there are institutions that are looking at that, and looking at it as an opportunity for recruitment and for generating enrollment.

One interesting way to look at this, though, is actually private colleges that are tuition-dependent. There is sense, and John Marcus wrote a great piece about this a couple of weeks ago, where they are guaranteeing certain credits for students who transfer into their institution as a means of generating enrollment. I think the more you see enrollment pressures on public four-years, probably the more generous they're going to be around aligning and granting credits toward majors in particular. So yes, I do think that's an increasing pressure. So far, I would say the four-year publics have been doing all right on enrollment, and so maybe they're not facing the kind of pressure that are private, tuition-dependent four-years are.

PAUL FAIN: So, obviously, in terms of recruiting there's been some changes in the last year or so with

the NACAC-DOJ deal to allow some more aggressive recruiting. Can you talk about how that may play out and whether there are areas to be concerned about?

IRIS PALMER: So we've done quite a bit of work recently on enrollment management, actually, strategic enrollment management. And one of the things we've been hearing from the field is that the NACAC changes do throw into stark relief and will change the behavior of students and institutions around recruiting currently enrolled students. And I think what it does is really combine with the enrollment pressures and the financial pressures from COVID. So I think that it could add a lot of uncertainty as colleges start to recruit transfer students more aggressively.

And this could actually work better for students, which I think is what the DOJ was thinking, because if you have colleges recruiting transfer students aggressively and packaging their credits so it actually counts toward their degree and speeds their time to degree, that could actually be really good for students. But for colleges it's scary, I think. When we were talking to enrollment managers in the spring who were saying that their models are like give or take 15 points. They have no idea what's going to happen. And I think that continues to be an issue. So I think it just adds to the uncertainty.

PAUL FAIN: As you were talking, I was thinking about the Arizona State enrollment numbers being way up, and, you know, a 51 percent increase in first-time-full-time. I was wondering if students go to online programs and then, when and if things return to normal, go back to a more traditional ground-based program, will that create additional wrinkles or will that maybe even help in some ways in terms of institutions' ability to accept credits from some of those large, online national players?

IRIS PALMER: It's a really good question. And I think it just depends on the incentives, right? We don't know, we don't have data to say whether or not students are planning to go to these online providers for one year or two years. We also had some conversations with other large online players in the nonprofit space, and they also have their enrollments way up. And it just depends on if students do plan to go back to on-the-ground, in-person education, I think that, depending on how much these colleges need enrollments, they will hopefully be more accommodating around accepting those credits. So if we start to see enrollment pressures at the public four-years, and even more at some of the prestigious maybe less tuition-dependent private four-years, we could see--this is totally speculatively on my part--but we could see an increased pressure for them to honor those credits for college students. And I hope that that absolutely happens. I think that could be an okay thing that comes out of this really terrible pandemic.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks for indulging in that. I feel like I'm asking folks to speculate more these days, but that's the time we live in. So, you know, as a last question, what are some of the state incentives that you'd most like to see come online at scale in the coming months and years? I'm obviously thinking of financial incentives as well.

IRIS PALMER: Yeah, so I think that's exactly the right question to be asking, because right now, I'm like, well, if they're really, really hurting for enrollment, maybe they'll be better about transfer policies. But what I would like to see are more states create thoughtful financial incentives for colleges to serve transfer students. So some kind of bonus structure for when public colleges get students who transfer to their campuses to graduate as quickly as possible, so creating some kind of incentive to honor their credits towards a degree.

I would also say that states like Virginia that have their transfer scholarship program, I would love to see more of those. It just seems to me that states can do a much better job creating a structure that actually rewards colleges for treating transfer students well and for honoring their credits and their experience. And that is not necessarily the case right now. There's lots of policies around these transfer credits. There's lots of frustration at state legislatures for four-year colleges not honoring credits, but there isn't a lot of additional financial incentives beyond just enrollment incentives for these colleges. So I do think creating more of those going on in the future would be a really positive thing coming out of this.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Iris, this has been super helpful. I appreciate you indulging such broad questions on enormously complex topics and for giving us a little bit to think about on that new Clearinghouse data, which I know you had very little time to think about, a really important topic and one we're going to be doing more on in the next year or so for sure.

IRIS PALMER: Wonderful. Thank you, Paul. I'm glad.

PAUL FAIN: If you're looking to go even more in depth in IHE's news coverage, check out our special reports. These deep-dives feature rich data and reporting, as well as thoughtful, substantive analysis you can trust. Visit insidehighered.com/special-reports, to view the topics we've covered and to purchase the report that best supports your area of work or study.

I'm speaking with Alison Kadlec. Alison, good to see you.

ALISON KADLEC: Nice to see you, Paul. Thanks for having me.

PAUL FAIN: So you've been working on transfer, and as we all know, there are some pretty deep enrollment concerns across all higher education. But four-year institutions increasingly see transfer students as important to their enrollment and their bottom line. Has that changed the dynamic out there?

ALISON KADLEC: I think absolutely. And I'm hoping that it will change it even more. So as you say, in the pandemic we're seeing more and more four-year institutions viewing transfer students as a vital source of enrollment, and this is leading to conversations about how well these institutions are actually serving transfer students. And when you start to peel that onion, you'd see a lot of things. So I think even just a few years ago it was commonplace when we were working with four-year institutions to ask faculty, staff, administrators to tell us what percentage of their students were transfer students, and they would guess, you know, 10, 15 percent, and they were often off by a lot. And so there was a time when it was commonplace that four-year institutions didn't even know were transfer students. And I think those days are now behind us. And that's good, because once you know...

PAUL FAIN: Wait, wait... I've got to ask, how is that possible? Like, I mean, that they were that much of an afterthought... That does surprise me.

ALISON KADLEC: Yeah, I think it is less surprising when you think about the sort of traditional structures and the long-standing nature of those traditional structures for four-year institutions and two-year institutions, viewed as very different, discrete entities that had self-contained degrees in which students would, you know, appear and stay in some hermitically sealed universe at that institution. I think it wasn't the case, it hasn't been the case for many years that students behaved in that way or attended higher education institutions in that way. But I think institutions have historically viewed their students as predominately native freshmen, particularly four-year institutions.

So, yeah, it is surprising. It was surprising to us as well, but I think it's not as surprising when you think that really the movement for community colleges and access-oriented four-year institutions to even look at their own data about what is happening to what students, finely disaggregated by race, income, you know, that that movement is not that old either, actually. You know, we're looking at maybe 20 years.

PAUL FAIN: So right now, obviously, so much is on the table, but you've got institutions increasingly caring about transfer students for reasons of their own self-interest. But also, I assume, more awareness of the need to do better by transfer students. What is it doing right now to how four-year institutions view them and what are you seeing, you know, in terms of positive change?

ALISON KADLEC: Yeah, I think one of the things that we're seeing is increased attention to building transfer-receptive cultures. And so you've got, there's a lot of great research out of UCLA, great book on "Power to the Transfer," you know, looking at actually the culture around transfer students. So we're talking about not only creating curricular coherence, but I do think that things like the guided pathways movement that has picked up steam over the last 10 years is really, you know, enormously relevant to how institutions are thinking about transfer students--the increased push to think about not only curricular coherence, but how students are supported across their educational experience, right?

So we tend to think about transfer as a matter of degree programs, but when you begin to look at transfer and peel that onion about how transfer students are actually experiencing higher education institutions, we see that there are serious issues with advising. There are tremendous challenges facing students with respect to finances. I think this is, you know, you said it was surprising that institutions might not know what percentage of their students are transfer students, you know, faculty, staff, and others.

It's also the case that there has been, and I think it's part of the bias against transfer students, there's been a long-standing assumption that transfer students, you know, who stop out, stop out because, you know, they couldn't cut it, or life happened. But increasingly institutions are looking at the percentage of their students that are stopping out in good standing for financial reasons purely. And I think that is opening a lot of eyes for institutions about what actually is derailing transfer students. And we know that an overwhelming majority of who begin at community colleges intend to earn at least a bachelor's degree. And so, you know, it's excellent that four-year institutions in recent years, and this was before COVID, looking down the barrel of enrollment declines, were beginning to think more seriously about transfer students as a lifeline for them. And now with the pandemic, it is truly pressing for four-year institutions.

PAUL FAIN: I assume that we haven't made too much progress, and I don't know the answer here, on the amount of credits and money and time transfer students lose when they enroll to four-year institutions.

ALISON KADLEC: Yeah, that's right. But what we are making progress on is being very clear about when we talk about transfer, we are not talking about sort of credits transferring, we're talking about credits applying toward a degree. And so for many years, it was really easy, and you know, I've conducted, you know, dozens and dozens of focus groups of transfer students in which the same story over and over again, I was told my credits would transfer. I was told my credits would transfer, and when I got here, yeah, they did transfer, but they transferred as electives. They didn't apply toward by degree. And there's been a tremendous amount of harm inflicted on students in the absence of clarity about the difference between the application of credits for a program and simply credits transferring toward electives.

So, yeah, there's still, there's a ton of work to be done, but at least, you know, we've made some significant progress on the conversation, so that increasingly when people use the word transfer, which is actually starting to sound a little bit arcane or out of date for some folks, because it's not, you know, it sort of signals something very discrete and clear, when in fact students... We work with a number of four-year institutions that incoming transfer have three, four, five, sometimes upwards of six transcripts from other institutions. And so this idea of sort of discrete transfer, 2 + 2, that kind of thing, I think reality is showing that that's not how students are moving between institutions.

PAUL FAIN: You know, I haven't heard the term "student swirl" in a while. Is anyone thinking about other terms for transfer students?

ALISON KADLEC: That's a really good question, and, you know, there are folks like John Fink at the Community College Research Center and others who are actually studying very closely what's happening to transfer students, you know, student mobility patterns. Like, we are hearing more and more folks start shying away from word "transfer" or finding it a non-satisfying a term, which I think is a really good sign. And so we're hearing more folks like, I recently heard the Dana Center talk about student transitions. We're hearing more about portability. Some of the terms, you know, that are more common that you hear from the realm of competency based education are starting to show up in transfer and that's probably high time.

PAUL FAIN: Even I have heard portability a lot lately, so that's a good sign. So would you mind talking a little bit about Sova and some of the work that you're doing in this space, but also, you know, the projects and the work that you're seeing that's just worth our listeners paying attention to?

ALISON KADLEC: Sure. So the work that we focus on at Sova is squarely in the middle of the places where change falls apart in practice. So we focus on implementation of good ideas. We're very interested in why it is that really good evidence-based ideas fail to become real sustainable solutions for students. So when it come to transfer, we're active in things like dev-ed reform, we actually are keen on helping people understand the connections between developmental education reform and transfer student success, really understanding fully the student's educational journey.

But when it comes to transfer, we're involved in work in several states as part of an initiative, a collaboration called Tackling Transfer with two other partners. So HCM Strategists, great organization focused on state and federal policy work, and the Aspen College Excellence Program that does strong work on leadership and leadership development for higher education reforms and student success. And so we come at this as three organizations with the perspective that significant, dramatic improvements for transfer students is necessary if this country is going to have a middle class in the future. And to tackle that, you really need to take on policy, practice, leadership, communication, all of these thing simultaneously. And so the piece of this where Sova is most focused in actually on supporting improved practice, sort of an institutional collaboration in practice and service of creating transfer-receptive cultures, and improving the ability of faculty, staff, and administrators at multiple levels to build the relationships required to break down those artificial barriers to transfer student success.

PAUL FAIN: You know, looking at the field now, are there institutions that are doing this really well. Are there points where you see progress that has been substantial, and we don't have a lot to go to really do better by transfer students, or are we still at a pretty early stage in this process?

ALISON KADLEC: Hummm, it's a good question. There are a lot of institutions that are working hard and taking the success of their transfer students very seriously. There are a lot of access-oriented four-year institutions that have an overwhelming percentage of their students are transfer students, and so they need to be thinking about working on this. But I would say that actually even the most excellent, sophisticated partnerships that you might hear about, nobody's nailing it, nobody's hitting it out of the park, because the work is so complicated and the barriers are so deeply entrenched and woven into the fabric of traditional higher education and the way that institutions function. So I'd say there a lot more work to be done than there is successes to celebrate. But that is not say that there is not great work happening--there is. There's great work happening all over the country.

PAUL FAIN: So what are some of the levers the system needs to push to start getting there in the next year or so?

ALISON KADLEC: Yeah, so I think the efforts that are underway to create truly robust dual-enrollment programs or joint-enrollment co-admission programs, not ones that are thin and on paper, but ones that are deep and true and robust, that combine curricular coherence for students so that they can see where they're going as they begin at a community college. They can see the bachelor's degree and begin with that end in mind. Where you have strong, deep connections between advisers, between your admissions folks, between your deans and directors of your programs, where transfer is prioritized in conversations at every level about everything having to do with students. So weaving attention to transfer students who have been for too long invisible to many institutions into the center of conversations about long-term student success and the financial viability of institutions is what needs to continue to happen now by virtue of the pandemic and whatever comes after.

PAUL FAIN: Well, I know we've barely scratched the surface, but we'll leave it there. And so listeners know, this I believe is the latest hour that I have recorded an interview for The Key, so it's really The Key after dark. And both Alison and I are dealing with some colds, hopefully, not COVID. My test is still out, so our dulcet tones are obstructed. So I doubly, even triply thank you for making time to speak with me and our listeners. And I always appreciate your perspectives. It always teaches me a lot.

ALISON KADLEC: I really appreciate being here even at this late hour, and with the frogs in our throats, I appreciate the chance to be here. And I so appreciate the work that you do at Inside Higher Ed. I think we need, we desperately need more support to have thoughtful, important conversations about higher ed reform and you guys do a great job. So thank you.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks, Alison. Looking forward to seeing you in person some day.

ALISON KADLEC: You too.

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PAUL FAIN: Educators around the world rely on the trusted content and digital learning resources from Pearson to improve outcomes in face-to-face or hybrid learning environments. Visit Pearson for all your online teaching resources at go.pearson.com/teachingonline.

Well, that's it for this episode. Thanks as always for listening. I'll be back next week to revisit the issue of

student anxiety, and what sort of supports universities and colleges can use to help support them better online. I hope you'll join me. Thanks.