



Belk Center
for Community College
Leadership and Research

The Role of North Carolina's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) on Excess Credits

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Executive Summary

North Carolina's 2014 revision of the statewide articulation agreement led to key policy changes to promote transfer between North Carolina's 58 public community colleges and 16 public four-year institutions. One of the primary changes to the policy is that students who transferred under the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) after earning either an A.A. or A.S. degree were guaranteed the transfer of at least 60 credits and junior-level status at a UNC system school. The design of this policy is intended to reduce time-to-degree and should improve the efficiency of transfer, including improving credit loss and the accumulation of excess credits. Our study is designed to understand how the implementation of the CAA impacted excess-credit-earning behaviors of transfer students under the new policy compared to those who transferred before the policy.

We examined whether or not the policy changed the number of credits students earned exceeded 120 credits (typical number for Bachelor's degree) or 140 credits (the number of credits at which the UNC System imposes a tuition surcharge). We found the policy had no effect on reducing the number of credits earned past 120. However, we did find the policy reduced the number of students who earned credits beyond 140 hours. This suggests that while the policy is helping to reduce excess credits, it is not alleviating the problem. We anticipate that the results may change once the policy has been in effect for longer and more students have had the opportunity to transfer under the policy.

Our findings suggest that the CAA may have positive effects on reducing excess credits earned and is creating greater efficiency for those who transfer. More research, with additional years of post-policy data, is needed to fully understand this trend.

Background

Community college transfer pathways are an increasingly popular option for students looking to complete a four-year degree. Accumulation of excess credits is a concern for transfer students as students who transfer from community college are on average 10 more credits, and take two more semesters, to graduate compared to those who start at a four-year institution (Fink, Jenkins, Kopko, & Ran, 2018). These excess credits have implications for students' overall time to degree and debt accumulation (Kramer, Holcomb, & Kelchen, 2018).

The Comprehensive Articulation Agreement

In 2014, the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges and the University of North Carolina Board of Governors approved revisions to the CAA. The revised CAA includes four key components intended to improve the transfer process from NCCCS institutions to UNC-SO institutions: (1) agreed upon guaranteed transfer of certain general education courses from any

NCCCS institution to any UNC-SO institution; (2), all UNC-SO institutions are required to publish four-year degree plans with courses mapped to course offerings at NCCCS institutions; (3) all NCCCS students intending to transfer are required to declare their planned transfer major prior to completing 30 hours of coursework; and (4) students who complete a transfer associate degree, Associate in Arts or Associate in Sciences (A.A. or A.S.), at an NCCCS institution are guaranteed 60 transferable credit hours to a UNC-SO institution (North Carolina Community Colleges System, 2014). Only students who earn a transfer associate degree, defined as an A.A. or A.S., are eligible for the benefits under the CAA.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of North Carolina's statewide credit articulation agreement on credit loss. Our paper answers the following research questions:

- How did the CAA impact excess credit earning behaviors beyond 120 credit hours for students who graduated within two years and within three years?
- How did the CAA impact excess credit earning behaviors beyond 140 credit hours for students who graduated within two years and within three years?

Method & Data

We used a dataset of students (n=16,572) who transferred from one of the 58 NC Community Colleges to one of the 16 UNC System institutions between Fall 2010 and Fall 2016 and subsequently graduated within three-years of transferring. We use a statistical technique called difference-in-differences that allows us to compare the number of credits earned by students before the policy with those who transferred after the policy was implemented.

Using difference-in-differences, we examine how the implementation of the CAA impacted excess credit earning for students transferring from North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) institutions into the University of North Carolina System Office (UNC-SO) institutions.

Findings & Discussion

We had limited statistically significant findings for credit earning beyond 120 credit hours. This is likely due to the recency of the policy implementation (Baker, 2016). Findings for credits earned beyond 140 credits suggests that the policy reduced the number of students who earned excess credits between 6 percentage points and 17 percentage points, for those who completed within two years and three years respectively. This suggests the policy may lead to a reduction in excess credits, but does not fully alleviate the issue. We noticed stronger effects of the policy for our models that included all students who graduated within three years compared with the subset that graduated within two years. We believe this occurred because students pre-policy who graduated within three years had more time to earn excess credits than those who took two years or less.

Implications & Future Research

The use of policy and articulation agreements to address transfer is continuing to grow. While the use of statewide articulation agreements are important as they apply to all students within a system, we recognize that institutions are developing additional transfer agreements that work to support statewide articulation. One limitation of this project is that, due to the nature of our data, we were not able to measure credit applicability—the degree to which students were able to directly apply courses taken at the community college to their degree of study. Credit efficiency

has implications for time-to-degree completion, as the more credits students are able to apply to their major, the fewer courses they will need to take at the four-year college. Accordingly, students who spend less time at the four-year university will invariably pay less for their education. Future research should focus on credit efficiency to further evaluate the efficacy of articulation agreements in easing transfer.

References

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