

Does the CAA Need Further Revision? – Perspective from a Scholar Practitioner

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The North Carolina Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) underwent significant revision in 2014; however, recent research demonstrates disparities in the amount of North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) credit that can be transferred and applied to majors at University of North Carolina (UNC) System institutions. In light of a renewed statewide focus on the earning of post-secondary credentials (myFutureNC, 2019), statewide baccalaureate degree plans facilitated by common course numbering at UNC System institutions, enhanced communication related to transfer, and accountability measures related to equity could all make significant differences for multiple student populations. Is it therefore time to revise the North Carolina CAA once again?

INTRODUCTION

This brief explores the amount of credit that North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) students are able to transfer and apply to their major of study at the accepting University of North Carolina (UNC) System institution. My recent research applied difference-in-differences analysis, a quantitative methodology, to observe any changes that have emerged since the only major revision to North Carolina's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) that occurred in 2014.

My analysis, using data on 110,012 NCCCS transfer students between academic years 2009-2010 and 2018-2019, revealed that Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS) degree earners, on average, now transfer and apply to their major of choice approximately three credits (or one course) *fewer* than they did prior to the revision. Additionally, I found that Black and Hispanic AA- and AS-degree earners, on average, now transfer and apply approximately three credits (or one course) *more* than they did prior to the revision. This last fact is tempered by the further revelation that Black and Hispanic students, regardless of degree-earning status, historically transfer and apply up to three credits (or one course) *fewer* than do white students.

Lost credit hours come at a significant cost to students. For the 2021-2022 academic year, the median semester cost for tuition plus fees for a full-time student (12 or more credit hours) at a UNC System institution was \$3533 (UNC System, 2021). Thus, each additional credit taken at the university may cost a student \$294. The three-credit reduction in applicable credit therefore leads to an approximate \$1000 monetary increase, in addition to costs in extra time to complete the degree.

My extensive background related to the transfer processes in the state of North Carolina provides me the unique perspective to make recommendations related to these findings. Over 15 years of experience in the NCCCS serving in multiple roles for Catawba Valley Community College and for the System Office¹ have informed my views and, combined with my research results, lead me to suggest that North Carolina's CAA is once again in need of overhaul. I have three key recommendations that would assist in the process and enhance the transfer student experience in the state of North Carolina. While the third recommendation is completely new, the first and second recommendations build on already-existing features of the CAA.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Revise current baccalaureate degree plans** so that they would be viable at each UNC System institution for each major of study.
- 2. Enhance communication measures** pertaining to the CAA, particularly with regard to its benefits and guarantees to AA- and AS-degree earners, but also with regard to data transfer.
- 3. Establish a process to measure, monitor, and promote** equitable transfer outcomes for all racial/ethnic groups.

In this next section, I will discuss each of these recommendations and their relevance to policy and practice in the state.

Revision to Existing Baccalaureate Degree Plans. As a result of the 2014 CAA revision, each university was charged with the creation of university-specific baccalaureate degree plans (BDPs) for each major. While this was a first attempt at increasing the efficacy and clarity of the transfer process between the NCCCS and the UNC System, university implementation and advising interpretation has been uneven since the revision, with multiple different versions and numbers of BDPs with differing levels of student accessibility. As my research has demonstrated, on average, AA- and AS-degree earners are able to apply one fewer course to their major of study than they were prior to the 2014 revisions. While not definitive, this decrease could be related to the complexity of the transfer process being exacerbated, rather than alleviated, by the advent of university-specific BDPs.

When faced with the enormity of choices between possible majors and transfer destinations, these individualized BDPs can serve to overwhelm and confuse the future transfer student rather than to enhance their ability to succeed. In fact, through discussions with staff and students at multiple different universities, it is apparent that many transfer students remain unaware of BDPs or

¹ I have over 15 years of experience in the NCCCS serving at various times as an advisor, faculty member, department head, and dean at Catawba Valley Community College. Furthermore, I spent the last six years as a member, and then co-chair, of the eight-member, joint NCCCS and UNC System Transfer Advisory Committee (TAC) whose role is to interpret and govern policy related to the CAA. Throughout my service, I have made 13 separate site visits to UNC System institutions examining and learning about their respective transfer processes and CAA implementation.

acknowledge that they had to rely on an advisor to interpret and understand the BDPs. Early identification and consistent adherence to the plan are key to increasing the number of transfer credits that will apply to the major. The creation of statewide BDPs is one possible way to increase the number of students that can do that. Statewide BDPs would allow students to progress with a singular focus and to be assured that their earned credits would be applied in the same manner no matter their ultimate UNC System destination, thereby preventing the loss of credit that is quite possible under the existing system where one university may have a very different BDP than another for the very same major.

Currently, under the constraints of the 2014 CAA, in order to ensure their best possible chance of transfer efficiency, a student should monitor and attempt to complete the BDPs published by each of the institutions that they might choose (or be admitted) to attend. For example, it is in a student's best interest to identify their intended UNC System major (e.g., mathematics) as quickly as possible upon entrance to the NCCCS. Then, if the student wanted to keep their options open among several possible transfer destinations (e.g., East Carolina University, Fayetteville State University, or Western Carolina University), they would need to find and follow the BDPs for mathematics at each of these universities, hoping that there exists significant overlap in the required courses for each BDP. Lastly, they would be reliant on one of those desired universities granting their application for admission. If they were not granted admission to one of their initial three choices, as an AA- or AS-degree earner, the CAA would guarantee them admission to at least one of the other UNC System institutions, but it would not guarantee that the BDPs they had been following would be identical to those at the eventual accepting institution(s). Thus, the student could be facing additional time and/or money at either the community college or the university to complete additional, unplanned coursework because their original NCCCS earned credit hours may not be applicable to the major at the accepting institution(s).

The creation of statewide baccalaureate degree plans would alleviate the risk involved with following a single institution's BDP. This would simplify the transfer process for students and ensure that the CAA's guarantee of admission at a UNC System institution for AA- and AS-degree earning students does not also require a student to change their BDP. Instituting statewide BDPs would ensure that credit is applied in the same manner at each UNC System institution and would greatly enhance the ability to communicate the proper information in a supportive environment to future transfer students.

It will take senior leadership on both sides of the transfer process to help make such a change reality, as statewide baccalaureate degree plans would be difficult to implement in North Carolina without certain large-scale changes in policy and perspective at the individual university- and UNC System-levels.

Fortunately, the UNC System has made great strides in transfer-friendly system-wide policy change in recent months under the leadership of former NCCCS President and recently appointed UNC System President Peter Hans who has publicly advocated for a common course-numbering system (Hahn, 2020). In December 2020, the UNC System Board of Governors (BOG) ratified an amendment to the UNC Policy Manual Section 400.1.5 that instructed the UNC System to develop just such a system (UNC BOG, 2020). This implementation will facilitate smoother transfer throughout the state and would make statewide BDPs much easier to implement.

A difficult barrier to overcome may be the firm hold to tradition and, at times, resistance to change that higher education faculty members may retain. Lane (2007) draws attention to multiple reasons for this resistance to change among academics including a tendency to work autonomously (both in the classroom and in research efforts), to perceive one's own classrooms as one's own private domain, and to rely on academic freedom as a means to limit interference, while Tagg (2012) highlights a tendency toward status quo bias. Thus, what is needed is a shift to shared values and group norms (Kotter, 2012) to move the focus and purpose of higher education to the needs of the student above the traditions and desires of the individual members of the higher education community. So, for example, while a college of education at one institution may have traditionally required each student to take a calculus course as "necessary" preparation for the student's future role as a middle school teacher, would they be willing to work on a compromise with colleges of education at other UNC System institutions for the good of every education student across the state? Thus, I would appeal to faculty members across the UNC System that they work together, notably having an open mind to differing approaches versus long-held preferences, to arrive at consensus on common NCCCS courses that could be accepted for each particular major, no matter which UNC System institution ultimately accepts the transferring student. This would vastly reduce the transfer difficulties currently faced by North Carolina's students.

Enhanced Communication Measures. In order for students to know about and take advantage of the processes and procedures related to successful transfer, communication of material related to the CAA and BDPs needs to be greatly improved. These enhanced communication measures should include the following:

- » **A refined focus on the CAA and BDPs in every section of the College Transfer Success course taught in the state's community colleges,**
- » **Data sharing between the NCCCS and the UNC System, and**
- » **Quarterly updates distributed from the two system offices, written and vetted by the Transfer Advisory Committee (TAC), regarding transfer initiatives, data, and news for all community college and university employees who regularly engage with the transfer process.**

As part of the major revisions incorporated within the 2014 CAA, the NCCCS course ACA 122 (College Transfer Success) was created to prepare students for the transfer process and is now required of all students enrolled in either the AA- or the AS-degree programs. While the course generally supports students in their efforts to be successful in the college environment, ACA 122 is one of the frontline tools at the disposal of community college representatives by which to educate students on the transfer process and to ensure that students take advantage of every possible credit that they

choose prior to transfer. An increased focus on BDPs can help ensure that students remain apprised of the guarantees of the CAA and are enabled to find and follow BDPs. Regularly visiting webpages such as the [Transfer Toolbox – Advisor Resources](#) (discussed below) is crucial to the ACA instructor’s ability to stay abreast of any changes.

For students to be as informed as possible concerning the intricacies of the transfer process, those university and community college employees that interact with future or post-transfer students must also be knowledgeable concerning those same processes. Unfortunately, the NCCCS and UNC System currently possess separate data systems that do not interface directly. Thus, there is a severe lack of data related to transfer that is easily accessible by either system’s employees. For instance, while researchers may be able to access large databases that will detail how many credits were accepted by UNC System institutions and applied toward students’ degrees of interest there, they have no way to easily match those same students up to NCCCS records. Thus, it is difficult to determine which specific NCCCS courses, if any, are taken but not readily applied toward UNC System degrees without evaluating transcript by transcript. A single, shared data system and a universal student ID that would accompany a student through their primary, secondary, community college, and university attendance would open doors to a wealth of research possibilities and assist with a better understanding of what is working well and what needs improvement in the current transfer landscape. A shared data system with automatic credit articulation would also free up many university employees to spend their time in the active advising of and interaction with students rather than data entry and manual evaluation.

Additionally, each of the last four legislative reports from the TAC highlighted the importance of communication to the state of transfer between the two systems. In 2019, the UNC System Office created the [Transfer Toolbox – Advisor Resources](#) website that “house[s] information about policy changes, CAA updates, advising tools, best practices, and opportunities for connections...such that advisors can obtain needed information in one location” (State Board of Community Colleges [SBCC] & BOG, 2019, p. 9). This resource has been an important start to keeping these employees informed, but it may not go far enough. All too often, changes in policy and procedure are communicated via a top-down methodology, where provosts and other chief academic officers are sent information from a system office, and then frontline workers must rely on that information journeying through multiple levels of administrators before arriving on their own desks. Regular, transfer-related communication from both system offices should be provided through numbered memos (or some similar device), housed in easily accessible and advertised websites, and distributed broadly through community college and university communities. Thus, a renewed focus on transfer in ACA 122, an improved data system, and targeted messaging to employees working directly with transfer students are vital to student success throughout the transfer process.

Equitable Transfer Outcomes. Lastly, one major finding of my study was that Black and Hispanic AA- and AS-degree-earning students have applied approximately three more credit hours toward their majors at the point of transfer after the 2014 CAA than they were able to apply before the policy revision. Thus, the 2014 CAA has had some positive influence on these students as they gained ground prior to this policy implementation. However, this finding must be viewed in concert with another important result: Black and Hispanic students, historically and regardless of degree-earning status, have applied fewer earned NCCCS credits upon transfer to a specific major at a UNC System institution than have white students. Thus, while the revised policy has seemingly improved the situation, like other articulation agreements, the North Carolina CAA continues to be “a reproducer of inequality and social stratification” (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 447), demonstrating that

there is still work to do in addressing disparities in applied credits. As Chase and associates (2014) discovered several years ago, the transfer process continues to serve as a stratifying function, and my research shows this is no different in North Carolina.

While the 2014 CAA appears to have helped the state make strides in improving applicable credit for Black and Hispanic students, outcomes for these two racial/ethnic groups still fall short of the ultimate educational attainment levels systematically afforded to white students. These findings also serve as evidence that certain populations of students, namely white students, have been better able to navigate the transfer process (before and after the 2014 CAA) and to benefit more from the revised 2014 CAA policy than have other racial/ethnic groups. While my study does not explain why white students have been able to do this, the greater percentage of non-first-generation college students among white students in North Carolina (Tippett, 2018) likely contributes to a greater knowledge of the higher education system and advantages them in a transfer process with which they are more likely to be familiar and comfortable.

A research brief from the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program highlights multiple principles that will assist in building "a next generation transfer and applicability system" (Vandal et al., 2020, p. 7), but one stands out for its relationship to the CAA and my findings: "Achieving equitable transfer student outcomes requires transparent, publicly available data on student outcomes and credit loss" (Vandal et al., 2020, p. 8). Unfortunately, there currently exists no reference to issues of equity within the text of the revised 2014 CAA. Thus, while attempting to standardize the transfer experiences of students across the board, the 2014 CAA may have inadvertently perpetuated a system that assumes students all begin with the same advantages, when recent research (Crisp et al., 2020; Flores & Park, 2013; Witteveen & Attewell, 2020) demonstrates that this assumption is not the case.

In the landmark research by Chase and associates (2014) on statewide transfer policies in seven states (not including North Carolina), the authors noted that equity goals occasionally may be stated in policy (such as in the state of California) but more often are monitored through external accountability measures. Unfortunately, North Carolina is a state that possesses neither approach to addressing equity goals. The published CAA policy has no mention of equity goals or measures, and there exists no statewide accountability measure to monitor equitable outcomes related to transfer performance and access. This shortcoming was identified in the most recent legislative report to the North Carolina General Assembly, wherein the TAC recommended "an examination of policies and procedures as they relate to issues involving diversity, equity, and inclusivity among NCCCS and UNC System transfer students, with the objective of promoting equitable outcomes and ameliorating any discovered inequities" (SBCC & BOG, 2020, p. 11).

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I recommend that language be added to the CAA indicating the importance of ensuring equitable transfer outcomes for all students, regardless of racial/ethnic group identity. Language indicating the desire to support transfer opportunities for students from all backgrounds – and that specifically mentions historically and systematically disenfranchised groups such as Black and Hispanic students – could then be followed up with related accountability measures.

I also recommend several key transfer success outcomes be regularly measured and reviewed, and that these measurements be disaggregated by racial/ethnic groups. These outcomes should include, but are not limited to, the following:

- » **Community College degree attainment prior to transfer**
- » **Transfer student first-year GPA**
- » **Two-, three- and four-year graduation rates**

Each of these measures already exists in the UNC System’s Interactive Data Dashboards (2021), but only with an overall student view and without disaggregation related to racial/ethnic group identity. The inclusion of disaggregated data would create a greater focus on the importance of ensuring each group has equitable opportunities and is not being overlooked (Fink & Jenkins, 2017), and it would serve as a call to action where disparities exist.

The inclusion of equity goals within the language of the CAA and the addition of publicly available accountability measures on the Interactive Data Dashboards are both good first steps; but, by themselves, they lack the ability to foster needed change. Authority to act upon these goals and to institute change based on the results of data must be vested in some overseeing body. This authority could potentially reside within either (or both) system offices, within either (or both) governing boards, or (perhaps) with the TAC, and ultimately the North Carolina General Assembly may need to affirm any such changes. Regardless, as my research has exposed, while Black and Hispanic transfer students apply more credit to their majors of choice at their accepting universities since the implementation of the 2014 CAA, they remain disadvantaged overall when compared to white students. This disparity demands our attention.

CONCLUSION

Through the recommendations listed above, based on the findings of my research and my professional background with transfer as a scholarly practitioner, improvements to the existing CAA could bolster the transfer experiences of all students, particularly as they relate to applicable credit. My recommendations include standardized statewide baccalaureate degree plans facilitated by the new common course-numbering system for UNC System institutions, enhanced communication measures related to transfer, and equitable goals and accountability measures for transfer. While the first two recommendations should benefit all students, the final recommendation may be the most important as it grants greater opportunities for historically and systematically disadvantaged students. If NCCCS institutions truly aspire to the visionary goal set before them by Dallas W. Herring to equitably “take the people where they are and carry them as far as they can go,” then they must ensure that each student has such opportunities. And, if UNC System institutions hope to “expand access to higher education for both traditional and non-traditional students through...uniform

policies for the transfer of credit from community colleges to constituent institutions” (UNC System & NCCCS, 2014, p. 14), then they must share the burden for doing their parts in removing those same barriers. The 2014 North Carolina CAA made progress in reducing barriers, but there is still much to consider and reform, if equitable outcomes for all students are to be realized. May it, perhaps, be time to revise the agreement once again?

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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ADDITIONAL READINGS

The most recent version of the North Carolina Comprehensive Articulation Agreement may be read at this link: <https://www.northcarolina.edu/college-transfer-articulation-agreements/>.

The UNC System institutions' BDPs may be found at this link: <https://myapps.northcarolina.edu/transfertoolbox/advising-tools-nc-community-college-transfer-students/>.

Data related to transfer from the NCCCS to the UNC System may be found on the UNC System Interactive Data Dashboards at this link: <https://www.northcarolina.edu/impact/stats-data-reports/>.

A copy of the author's dissertation on this same topic may be found at this link: <https://repository.lib.ncsu.edu/handle/1840.20/38563>.

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