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Talent & education

When is college credit not a credit? Too often, when it's earned at a community college

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by **Chastity Pratt Dawsey**
 Bridge Magazine

Jake Wilson was a military brat who found himself in community college upon landing in Michigan after the university application deadlines passed.

He is among about 80 percent of **community college students nationally** who say their ultimate goal is to use the less expensive two-year colleges as a springboard to a four-year bachelor's degree or higher, according to research compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics.

But like many others, Wilson said his path through community college was sometimes diverted by potholes. Perhaps most frustrating was the possibility he would pay for community college courses only to find that not all the credit would transfer to a four-year university – a waste of time and finite federal grant money.

“I met with (community college) advisors a couple times,” Wilson said. “They were going to have me take classes I didn’t think I really needed – (such as) Intro to film.”

It’s a danger faced by many students like him. Nationally, only 58 percent of community college students seeking to transfer were able to retain 90 percent or more of their credits at a four-year institution, a 2014 study from the **Graduate Center of the**



Jake Wilson, 21, of Detroit, transferred 31 credits from Macomb Community College to Wayne State University. “They were going to have me take classes I didn’t think I really needed – (such as) Intro to film.” (courtesy photo)

City University of New York found. Students who lose significant amounts of credit in the transition are less likely to ultimately graduate from a university.

That's a scenario Michigan lawmakers are trying to change through a program to improve the prospect that community college credits are accepted at four-year universities.

Wilson managed to avoid this pitfall – making the leap from Macomb Community College to Wayne State University in 2013, and taking 31 credits with him. His MCC credits cost about \$80 per credit hour, versus the \$300 to \$400 per credit hour that coursework would have cost at Wayne State, so Wilson said he saved thousands by taking his general education classes at the community college.

While most community college students say they want to get a bachelor's degree or higher, nationally only 42 percent eventually do transfer, the CUNY study found.

The prospects are worse in Michigan – in the 2012-13 school year, Michigan had 100,000 students in community college programs that could be transferable to a four-year college (as opposed to vocational programs not applicable to college degrees.) But only 17,000 made the jump from the two-year programs to four-year colleges, according to Christopher Baldwin, executive director of **Michigan Center for Student Success** established by the Michigan Community College Association.

Those numbers could soon improve.

This school year is the first time community colleges and universities in the state have participated in the **Michigan Transfer Network**, a voluntary agreement between Michigan's community colleges and universities to provide better information to students on **credits that will transfer** for four-year degrees at specific schools.

The network sprung from the **state legislature's 2012 directive** to Michigan's colleges and universities to work more cooperatively to save students money and increase the number of bachelor's degree recipients.

The state's public universities agreed to accept at least 30 credits in approved general education courses from community college transfers, the equivalent of a year's work at a university. The MTA replaced the prior program, Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars & Admissions Officers (MACRAO) agreement, which some colleges had not participated in.

While the new agreement has the potential to help more students get bachelor's degrees, it has some holes: It does not address how much credit universities are required to accept for more specialized coursework at community colleges. It also does not guarantee that the two years community college students put in for an associate's degree will yield two years of university credit.

“There's not a statewide standard for this,” said Baldwin, executive director of Michigan Center for Student Success. “We need to be looking very closely at what universities are going to accept, which means the universities have to be very clear. Those conversations are not happening enough and it's certainly not clear to the students,”

Broken dreams

The hope of transferring to a college for a bachelor's degree is a constant on community college campuses. But the dream remains mostly unfulfilled in Michigan.

Using the Michigan Transfer Network, students can log in to learn if their classes are accepted for credit at specific four-year colleges. In a state where all public colleges have autonomy, standards for accepting community college credits can vary from one university to another. So while a math class at a community college may translate into credit at one institution, it may not lead to credit at another institution.

Michigan education officials say they do not keep statewide statistics on the amount of course credit or money that students save by starting at a two-year college, or the amount they lose by taking classes that don't transfer to a four-year school.

But they agree that state community colleges and universities have to work together to vet classes and better advise students on the path from community college to a university.

That means college officials need to consistently analyze thousands of ever-changing courses and figure out what to do to make the credits acceptable.

It took two and a half years to develop guidelines and standards for the Michigan Transfer Agreement. It's going to take much more time to figure out how to vet and create transfer agreements for more credits or associate's degrees to be accepted by four-year institutions, said Baldwin.

For their part, four-year colleges in Michigan point out that there are multiple reasons some credits don't transfer.

Four-year universities typically do not award credit for the passage of remedial courses – and 60 percent of community college students required remedial courses in math and reading in 2012-13, according to the State of **Michigan education dashboard**. Four-year schools may also refuse to give credit for community college classes if a student gets a low grade, said Patricia Farrell-Cole, Director of the **University Outreach & Policy Research Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan**, which represents the state's 15 public universities.

To ensure that students are given clarity on at least basic credit transfers as they plan their path through community college, the legislature tied its directive to the state's higher education funding bill.

That got the universities' attention.

"I would say that with the pressures from the state and legislators, foundations, federal government, and citizens that institutions are looking at better ways to help students with transferring," Farrell-Cole said. "We do want to conduct studies in this area."

Increasing the number of students who transfer from community college to a university

has the potential to boost enrollment, said Ahmad Ezzeddine, associate vice president for educational outreach and international programs at Wayne State University in Detroit. The more credits a student can transfer, the better chances are they will graduate and not drop out. So if that student is successful in both settings, it's a win-win for both institutions, he said.

“We can have a bigger pie – enrollment – if we work together rather than compete for the same” students, he said.

Saving money

For poor students, the savings can be enormous.

In a study of 203,000 students who began at community colleges during the 2003-04 academic year and then transferred to a four-year university, students saved \$943 million in tuition (about \$4,645 per student), according to a 2012 study cited by the American Association of Community Colleges.

More recently, **Michigan had 250,610 community college students enrolled in 2013-14**, state data shows, spending about \$3,000 on tuition each year. **Compare that to more than \$12,000 per year** for tuition at a four-year public university.

Finding an affordable path to a degree is increasingly important in Michigan where college costs more than in most states, as **Bridge has noted**. The average Michigan college student who takes out student loans graduates with \$29,583 in student loan debt – the **eighth highest in the nation**.

The state Center for Educational Performance and Information, or CEPI, within the state budget office, started collecting data in recent years on college student enrollment and transfers going back to the class of 2008.

“In 2012-13, we know from CEPI data about 17,000 people transferred from community college to a four-year university,” said Baldwin. “We don’t know much more. We need better data in Michigan.”

Transfer students earn degrees

In addition to saving money, students who successfully transfer to a four-year university are more than likely to graduate, and perform as well as students who began their studies at a four-year university.

Among the 25 percent of community college students in the U.S. who transfer within five years, 62 percent go on to earn a bachelor’s degree, according to a study released last month, “**What We Know about Transfer**,” from researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. The study hailed community colleges as a key to upward mobility, especially for low-income students who are overrepresented at community colleges. But the loss of transfer credits is a key impediment, the study said.

Increasing the transfer rate from 25 percent to 30 percent could add 46,000 bachelor's degrees nationally, according to the Columbia researchers.

Michigan is among 30 states that have adopted statewide policies to promote transfer of credits from community colleges to public universities.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in 2012 reported that 45 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to students who have transferred from a community college. Moreover, community college students who transfer to four-year institutions are just as likely to complete a baccalaureate as similar students who initially enrolled at four-year schools.

The national results hold true at Wayne State University, where the freshman class is comparable in size to the number of students transferring in each year from community colleges – about 2,000. Wayne State has increased the number of classes offered on sites near community colleges and the school's Transfer Student Success Center helps ease the move from two-year colleges.

“Our data shows that students who transfer in to WSU higher than freshman status have a six-year graduation rate (that is) higher than the six-year graduation year rate of native students (currently at 34 percent),” said Ezzeddine.

Make the match

Renee Wilson (no relation to Jake) is set to graduate from Wayne State in December. She works in the Transfer Student Success Center and said she sees the disappointment and frustration when community college students realize they spent time and money on classes that won't transfer to Wayne, calling the setback “one of the hardest things to deal with.”

Wilson started her college career at Henry Ford Community College in 2010 right after high school. She picked an associate's degree program – pre-secondary education – that would coincide with what WSU could offer and took classes every semester for two years to receive her associate's degree. She transferred 61 credits (two full years) to Wayne State and is now studying psychology and business administration.

By starting at Henry Ford, she estimates she saved between \$14,000 and \$16,000.

“I believe that the transfer process could be easier for students if advisors at community colleges would guide their students to make sure that all of their classes they take at the community college will indeed transfer to the university they are hoping to attend,” she said.



Renee Wilson, 22, transferred 61 credits from Henry Ford Community College to Wayne State in 2012. “Unusable credits that cannot apply towards a program once the student has transferred is one of the hardest things to deal with.” (courtesy photo)

Chastity Pratt Dawsey spent more than a decade at the Detroit Free Press, and is a Detroit native. She can be reached at cpratt@bridgemi.com. [See more stories by her here.](#)

15 comments from Bridge readers.

Student of the 1980s

February 26, 2015 at 10:12 am

Improving communication regarding what credits transfer – to where, and as what – is clearly a positive, in principle. Based on my personal experience I wonder how necessary it is. I attended both a community college and university in Michigan in the 1980s. My decision to attend community college for two years was based entirely on financial concerns. I was apparently blessed in (at least) two ways: (1) I had a firm idea on where I intended to transfer; and (2) the community college I attended was extremely well-prepared with information on transfer credits. Before I enrolled in a single class I had a list of all classes at the community college that were accepted to transfer to my preferred university, and what they would transfer as – i.e. if I would receive credit for a specific university course or simply departmental credit. The community college had this information available for all, or nearly all, Michigan universities. With a list of the degree requirements from the university I planned to attend I was able to enroll in classes at the community college that I knew would fulfill requirements for my four-year degree. Clear, accurate communication on transfer credits was available at some schools 30 years ago. Having this information available strikes me as a necessity for community colleges who are attempting to attract students, and to promote the success of their students who do transfer to universities. I'm disappointed to learn that my experience may not be the norm, because I wonder how any community college who doesn't nurture their students in this way could have a long life. There is an implied responsibility for community colleges to do this and do it well. But, ultimately, the responsibility falls on the student to obtain this information upon entering college so there are no surprises when the student attempts to transfer.

David Zeman

February 26, 2015 at 12:11 pm

Student of the 1980s, thank you for your thoughtful perspective on this. Your post, and this story, touch on a larger issue that frequently frame education issues: What are the responsibilities of both the institution and the student in helping students achieve their ambitions?

I was just reading a NYT story today on how Germany has made all of its universities tuition free, and the reporter quotes an American-born student who studied in Germany on what an adjustment it was because the German schools put nearly all the responsibility on the student to map out their academic path, find the courses that work best for them, etc., whereas in U.S. so many schools, particularly the elite ones, have huge bureaucracies to help guide students through their college journey.

David Zeman
Bridge Editor

Rich

February 26, 2015 at 12:33 pm

Most often, first year basic classes at a 4 year university are taught by graduate assistants. First year Community College classes may be taught by a professor with a PhD. It's time to knock down a few chimneys, especially those 4 year universities with public funding.

Lucasta

March 2, 2015 at 11:36 am

Graduate assistants at 4-year universities often have their Master's degrees (or the equivalent) by the time they teach the intro-level classes, which is all you really need to teach the intro stuff. You don't need a PhD to teach freshman composition, for example. And having a PhD doesn't necessarily make someone a better teacher.

Julie Mack

February 26, 2015 at 1:25 pm

Thank you, Bridge magazine, for this story! Charity Pratt Dawsey does a great job in capturing the advantages, pitfalls and untapped potential of Michigan's community colleges. I'm a 1979 graduate of Jackson Community College, and my middle child attended Kalamazoo Valley Community College for her first two years in higher education. What she found: Compared to starting out at say, Western Michigan University or Michigan State, she paid much less in tuition, her freshman and sophomore classes were considerably smaller and, instead of teaching assistants, she had experienced instructors. She made a fairly seamless transition to WMU, and found another advantage: Because her grade-point average at KVCC was above a 3.5, she received an automatic \$3,000 school scholarship to WMU.

The downsides of starting at a community college: While most of her classes transferred, it did take her a total of 5 years to earn a bachelor's because she couldn't cram all the classes that she needed to take at WMU into 2 years — one issue in particular was sequencing, the need to take certain classes in a certain order and have those classes finished before she started an internship that was part of her major. It certainly underscored the importance of the need for very, very careful planning when starting out at a community college.

Brian

February 26, 2015 at 1:54 pm

The Michigan Transfer Network website and network has been around for several years at least 2012. There may be a new agreement, but the Network is not new. I recommend that the article should be updated to correct that error

Matt

February 26, 2015 at 2:57 pm

The sequencing problem is always a negative factor particularly for certain majors and especially when someone has very little idea of what they really want to do until later, unfortunately this describes a lot of kids. The other place where comm college can be used very effectively even with this issue, is taking classes at CC over summer break (especially hard ones where you don't want to hurt the GPA) and even taking on-line classes even while attending a 4 year to take advantage of much cheaper tuition. My kid did both of these saving a bundle.

James

February 27, 2015 at 2:58 am

The thing that worked for me was called an "articulation agreement" which, coupled with good academic advising, enabled me to transfer 60 of my 62 community college credits from Jackson to Ann Arbor where I entered as a junior. Jackson required 2 P.E. credits as a requirement for the A.S. degree, and UM did not take those. I think that "articulation" was the key. I knew I'd major in engineering, and the counselor in Jackson told me which classes to take. Because of articulation, everything except P.E. transferred.

I also think that articulation still exists. (At least it's in Wikipedia.) In my case, someone had lined up course comparisons between the community college and the university so that calculus, poly sci, and English lit classes were equivalent and applicable in the engineering curriculum.

Needless to say, no remedial classes were included. A college prep high school curriculum took care of that. And community college in Jackson saved my parents a lot of money.

NICK FLEEZANIS

February 27, 2015 at 12:54 pm

It's time the universities understand that their aloofness and looking down on the community colleges is not to their advantage in this in this tight market and overly costly tuition environment! Higher education in Michigan and all over the country need to work for the student and not for their faculties and budgets. After thirty years of experience in both venues I've seen what damage the transfer issue can do to a student and their goals. Much has been done to improve transfer and credit acceptance rates through articulation agreements between two and four year schools. But much more needs to be done in terms of advisement and course offerings. It should not take five or six years to finish a bachelors degree. This is being challenged by institutions that have accepted and adopted the Competency-based

Learning paradigm. With student debt soaring ever higher, it's time for a change!

Michael

February 27, 2015 at 1:17 pm

Sure, people are 'saving' money by going to a community college, but if that were the ONLY reason to attend a community college, that's an indictment of the public university system and their 5X more expensive credit hours. I assume that the university charging \$400 per credit hour is providing a much better 'product'.

If you're taking remedial courses that are basically a high school class experience, those shouldn't transfer and you can't blame anyone but yourself for having to pay for them. Where is the responsibility of the student to make inquiries into the ability of these credits to transfer and plan accordingly?

Too many students, myself included, meandered through the first couple years of college. I wasted much time and money, but I did not blame the system for my failure to plan or have clear goals. That was on my shoulders alone.

Lucy

February 28, 2015 at 8:32 am

This is a recommendation that came out of the Cherry Commission report. Many if not most Michigan colleges and universities have a 2 plus 2 program or a 3 plus 1 program so students can transfer the courses taken at community college to a university and continue their bachelors degrees, many times getting their associates degree also. Students do have to indicate they are seeking these programs and follow the courses needed so no tuition money is wasted and good counselors are a must.

Many of the good things happening in community colleges and universities came out of the Cherry Commission report – but each governor and legislature want to be inspiring with 'new ideas' while simply regurgitating previous administrations work. Term limits makes it so much easier to accomplish this because there is no institutional memory – just finger pointing to make oneself look better than the other guy.

Julie

February 28, 2015 at 11:02 am

Any comments on the pending Pathways Project for community colleges?

Michael Kiella

February 28, 2015 at 2:31 pm

Another frustration to students and their parents alike, is that the 4-year institution may "take" the community college credit but not apply it to the major-minor requirement established by a department. Many explanations are given for this, some of which relate to co-requisites and prerequisites both inside and outside the major-minor department. For example, transfer microbiology earned at the community college might be assigned "biology credit" at the 4-year institution instead of the "microbiology credit" in the major-minor sequence...only because a prerequisite organic chemistry credit was not earned at the community college. The end result is that the microbiology course must be repeated at the 4-year institution to count toward the major-minor requirements: 8-hours of microbiology to fulfill a 4-hour major-minor requirement.

Another example is when the 4-year institution has a requirement for how many credit-hours must be earned at their institution, both total program credits, and credits in the major-minor sequence. The common refrain is this: we can not recognize coursework completed elsewhere, when credentialing a major-minor from our institution.

I urge students very early on, to obtain the transfer equivalence sheets from both institutions to help plan course sequences and minimize the number of courses that must be repeated.

Stephen Schewe

March 1, 2015 at 8:03 am

i transferred from HFCC to UMD in 1965 with all my Mechanical Engineering credits intact. My GPA even went up slightly at UMD, so HFCC certainly did a fine job preparing me. I paid my own way through school 100%.

My wife went from HFCC to UM Ann Arbor with equally good results.

I taught at Schoolcraft College from 1973–2004. Community colleges work, and I helped hundreds of students succeed as

they worked to achieve their college goals.

Chuck Jordan

March 1, 2015 at 1:10 pm

Great article and timely. Universities are in the business of making money. Many students do not know what they want to major in or where they want to transfer. A college education should not become a place just for job training. We need to prepare our students for many kinds of jobs of the future, not just one.