

Excerpt from Duklas, J., Maki, K., Pesaro, J., Brady, J. (June, 2014). ARUCC PCCAT Transcript and Transfer Credit Nomenclature Study: an Examination of Current Practices at Canadian Postsecondary Organizations. Calgary, Alberta: Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) & Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer (PCCAT).

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System Overview

Higher education in the United States is a decentralized, complex system with approximately 4,500 colleges, universities and junior colleges, including but not limited to public and private universities and colleges, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges. Adding to the complexity is a combination of national, state, and institutional responsibility for postsecondary education. The national government, through the US Department of Education (USDE), establishes policies related to federal funding, predominately research and financial aid, administers the distribution of those funds, collects data and oversees research, identifies and focuses national attention on major issues in education, and enforces federal laws prohibiting discrimination in programs that receive federal funds (United States Department of Education, 2013). States are engaged in transcript and transfer practices applicable to their two- and four-year public institutions. Examples include common course numbering (e.g., Florida) and block transfer mandates (e.g. Oregon). Beyond the scope of federal and state engagement, institutions continue to exert a significant degree of autonomy, especially among private institutions. Further details on the US system are contained in Appendix G. Components directly related to the ARUCC PCCAT project scope are described below.

Transcript Standards

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO) represents 2,600 institutions in 40 countries, and is a recognized authority on student admissions, academic records and enrolment services, particularly in North America. It produces an authoritative *Academic Record and Transcript Guide* (2011), which provides a summary of best academic transcript practices of relevance in the US context and categorizes information for inclusion on the credential as:

- Essential;
- Recommended;
- Optional;
- Not Recommended.

The Guide acknowledges the substantial variability among student information databases and transcript practices across institutions and is not exhaustive. It contains a number of sections including a very helpful section that explores the area of electronic data exchange of transcript information.

With respect to transcript electronic data exchange and reporting, the NCES Institute of Education Sciences issues data standards and guidelines, including the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) project, which is a national collaborative effort to develop voluntary, common data standards for a set of education data elements (US Department of Education, Common Education Data Standards, n.d.). The purpose is to streamline data exchange and analysis, but there are no elements explicitly applicable to transcript reporting. Transcripts are used in many NCES studies and require standardized coding,

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which is done by the researchers after-the-fact using a taxonomy system called the College Course Map (CCM) as there is no standardization for transcript recording (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.).

The AACRAO Guide addresses electronic data exchange of transcript information and demonstrates a helpful example of how one region has integrated that topic with transcript standards.

Transfer Credit Standards

AACRAO (2012) has also published *Transfer Credit Practices of Designated Educational Institutions*, a voluntary exchange of information on practices for the acceptance of transfer credit. Further, it offers a section on national transfer credit practices on its website that is only accessible to AACRAO members (2012). This particular resource provides, by institution, information on accreditation, higher level credit transfer protocols, types of degrees and programs offered, contact information, whether or not PLAR is accepted, and if an appeals process for transfer credit is in place. It uses a standardized nomenclature in that the categories and types of transfer credit available are subject to specific definitions. The website also includes a *Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit* signed by the following national associations: AACRAO, the American Council on Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), 2001).

Although there are no nationwide standardized rules for transfer and requirements vary by institution, most states have developed transfer systems and policies to support within state student mobility. The use of learning outcomes as a basis for transfer is well-established in the US, with notable examples in Pennsylvania and Oregon (FitzGibbon, 2014). An example of a multi-state initiative is *the Interstate Passport Initiative*, a transfer framework of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2013) to facilitate students in five Western states (California, Hawaii, North Dakota, Oregon, and Utah), in transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions by focusing on learning outcomes. Participation at the institution, system or state level is voluntary.

A specific state example of a system that offers streamlined and readily understood transcripts and transfer credit is the North Dakota University System (NDUS) that has instituted a statewide initiative to make it possible for students to easily transfer from one campus to another within the system (North Dakota University System (NDUS), n.d.a.). To do so requires an articulation agreement. NDUS stipulates minimum content for each agreement (including department and program name of both the sending and receiving institutions, specific admission requirements to the program, an outline of the program specifying the courses and credits to be earned, completion requirements, timeline for completion, and signatures and dates authorizing the agreement). NDUS also has a *General Education Requirement Transfer Agreement* (GERTA) that outlines an approved set of general education courses that are transferable among University System campuses and North Dakota's five tribal colleges. The transfer of coursework among University System campuses, the tribal colleges and North Dakota private colleges is

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made easier by the use of a common course numbering system (North Dakota University System (NDUS), n.d.b.).

The American Council on Education (ACE) (2014) has a College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) whose purpose is to “connect workplace learning with colleges and universities by helping people get academic credit for formal courses and examinations taken outside of traditional degree programs.” ACE provides course equivalency information to make appropriate recommendations for college credit, but institutions make local decisions about awarding credit. Despite this, there is evidence of nomenclature differences. For example, credit for prior learning goes by different names including ‘PLA’, experiential learning and ‘alternative’ or ‘equivalent’ credit.

Transfer is an important element in the US higher education system. Peter and Cataldi (2005), in their study *The Road Less Traveled? Students Who Enrol in Multiple Institutions*, found that “attending more than one institution during the course of undergraduate enrolment is a common practice” (p. viii). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, n.d.) has conducted or sponsored many studies on student transfer behaviour, compiling data and statistics on the number and percentage of students who, for example, transfer from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, four-year institutions to other four-year institutions, two-year to two-year, and so on, and the characteristics of the students and the programs they transfer among.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, amongst its many activities, monitors student mobility on a national scale across close to 4,000 participating colleges and universities (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Spring 2014). In *Transfer & Mobility: A National View of Pre-degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions*, the Clearinghouse conducted a five-year longitudinal study of 2.8 million students who began postsecondary studies in 2006 (Hossler, D., Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Ziskin, M., Chen, J., Zerquera, D., Torres, V., 2012, February) and found that “one-third of all students change institutions at some point before earning a degree, a rate consistent across all types of institutions outside of the for-profit sector” (p. 5). Of those, 25% transfer more than once. The report concludes by noting the potential for changing the paradigm (p. 48) when examining supports for institutions and transfer students:

The growing emphasis on holding institutions accountable for student success has, to some extent, reinforced the traditional reporting paradigm in which the institution is the unit of analysis and students are viewed as simply entering, progressing linearly, and completing a degree — or not. Indeed, to date much of what we know about student success focuses on the efforts of individual institutions, through programs and policies, to improve student persistence and graduation at the institution of original enrollment. We know far less about the factors associated with student success for mobile students. The analyses in this report suggest that a new view may prove useful, in which students are the unit of analysis and institutions are viewed as stepping stones along a diverse set of educational paths (p. 8).

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The National Center for Education Statistics has also examined enrolment in institutions in the US and notes that more than 45% of postsecondary students are enrolled in two-year, public colleges (Institute of Education Sciences: National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012, December, p. 4). The work of organizations such as the NCES, the National Clearinghouse and AACRAO help to illustrate the value of taking a national lens in the area of transfer in addition to a local view.

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Appendix G: International Research

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Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance

The United States does not have a national framework for qualifications; however, the Lumina Foundation for Higher Education (2011), prompted and informed by the development of qualifications frameworks in other countries (p. 3), introduced a Degree Qualifications Profile “that proposes specific learning outcomes that benchmark the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees....[defining] expected learning outcomes that graduates need for work, citizenship, global participation and life” (p. 1). Through focusing on “conceptual knowledge and essential competencies and their applications, the Degree Profile illustrates how students should be expected to perform at progressively more challenging levels. Students’ demonstrated achievement in performing at these ascending levels creates the grounds on which degrees are awarded” (p. 1). The Degree Profile describes five basic areas of learning: Broad, Integrative Knowledge; Specialized Knowledge; Intellectual Skills; Applied Learning; and Civic Learning (p. 4).

Quality assurance in higher education in the United States is achieved through the accreditation process. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, non-profit organization that coordinates accreditation activity. It comprises approximately 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and “recognizes” 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. According to CHEA,

Accreditation in higher education is a collegial process of self-review and peer review for improvement of academic quality and public accountability of institutions and programs. This quality review process occurs on a periodic basis, usually every 3 to 10 years (Council for Higher Education Accreditation , 2012, p. 2).

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Accreditation is required by both the federal and state governments for provision of funds to institutions and students in the form of financial aid.

While there are no specific criteria, standards, or framework for transcripts or transfer as part of the accreditation process, Judith S. Eaton (2012), in *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation* reflects as follows:

Accreditation is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges and universities.... Although accreditation is but one among several factors taken into account by receiving institutions, it is viewed carefully and is considered an important indicator of quality (p. 3).

“All degree-granting, accredited colleges and universities represented in the National Centre for Educational Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) are eligible for inclusion in the Carnegie Classifications” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education™, developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is “...a framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education” (n.d.). Institutions are classified in categories predominately according to the degrees granted (associate, bachelor’s, master’s, doctorate [research, professional or other doctorate]).