THE PERCEPTIONS OF POLICYMAKERS ON THE TRANSFER PATHWAY

IN TEXAS PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Community college students transfer to public universities experiencing a pathway filled with complexity and inequity. Transfer students are not able to graduate at the same pace as native students at the university and complete their baccalaureate degrees 18% below the rate of native students. Policymakers have attempted to address the baccalaureate gap. This qualitative study explored the perspectives of Texas policymakers and policy influencers on the efficacy of policies intended to improve transfer outcomes. This study investigated what experience participants have with transfer policy, what their perceptions of the transfer pathway are, and how their voices can refine an understanding of policy development and ways to improve student persistence. Purposeful sampling was used to explore the perspectives of 14 Texas policymakers and those that influence policy. Findings revealed that significant gaps exist between expectations and student realities and that the completion agenda is driving policy decisions. Participants perceived that transfer students have been ignored in the completion metrics, which influence institutional priorities. Moreover, the decentralized system of independent, autonomous institutions is a major contributor to inefficiencies such as excessive student credit hours. Improving the transferability of courses was a priority recommendation of all participants both because it benefits the State’s economy and, more importantly, because it is in the best interest of students.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE COMPLETION AGENDA AND TRANSFER STUDENTS: DIVERGENT EXPECTATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economy Depends on Reducing the Baccalaureate Gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Community Colleges and Their Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning Public Priorities with Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study of the Texas Transfer Pathway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings Related to the Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendices

| A.   | PROBLEM, PURPOSE, SIGNIFICANCE, AND DEFINITION OF TERMS | 43 |
| B.   | EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW                                 | 58 |
| C.   | DETAILED METHODOLOGY                                      | 121|
| D.   | COMPLETE/UNABRIDGED FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS                  | 142|
| E.   | SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS                     | 221|
F. PARTICIPANT SELECTION........................................................................................................243
G. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED, ELITE INTERVIEWS ............245
H. TEXAS TRANSFER POLICIES AND INITIATIVES .........................................................249

COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF REFERENCES........................................................................255
LIST OF TABLES


Page

1. Texas Transfer Policies and Initiatives that Penalize Student Behaviors...........................14
THE COMPLETION AGENDA AND TRANSFER STUDENTS: DIVERGENT EXPECTATIONS

Introduction

Higher education in the United States is experiencing pressure to be more accountable to the public for its outcomes (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005; Dougherty, Jones, Lahr, Natow, Pheatt, & Reddy, 2013). Pressure from the public and policymakers are making the completion agenda a top priority (Brint, 2011; Hamilton, 2013a; Handel, 2013; Kiley, 2012; Mangan, 2013). This shift has caused a rising sentiment that universities are not adequately focusing on outcomes (Brint, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Mangan, 2013; Zusman, 2005). As accountability pressure mounts to demonstrate increased student completions, policymakers assess the effectiveness of institutions and their ability to support students to increase their graduation rates (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2014b). Degree completion is a “true bottom line” for administrators, policymakers, parents, and students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 644).

Texas is not immune to the struggle of improving postsecondary participation and success. One category of continuous challenges lies with community college transfer students in their pursuit to the baccalaureate. Of all undergraduate students pursuing degrees and certificates in Texas public institutions, 58.6% are attending two-year colleges (Complete College America, 2011). The rate of these community college students successfully transferring to universities continues to underwhelm, as do the baccalaureate graduation rates of transfer students. Of the estimated 90,000 undergraduate students enrolled in Texas public universities in 2013, roughly 19,000 of them are transfer students representing 21% of the total state undergraduate enrollment (THECB, 2014b, p. 9). However, these 19,000 transfer students are
not able to graduate at the same pace as native students at the public university as they require two additional years to complete their baccalaureate degree (THECB, 2014b). There is room to improve the Texas transfer pathway between public institutions when over half of all undergraduates attend public community colleges, but only 21% actually transfer (CCA, 2011; THECB, 2014b).

Texas public community college students are a diverse population. Hispanic students comprise 38.8% of the community college population; African American students represent 14.1% of enrollment; and White students comprise 37.2% of the community college population (THECB, 2014c). In Texas, the rate of students receiving a certificate or degree from a Texas colleges and universities within six years of high school graduation is 19.4% (The Texas Tribune, 2013). The graduation rate for full-time Texas students pursuing associates degrees at public institutions entering the fall of 2004 and finishing in four years was 11.2%, while the rate for bachelor’s degree seekers entering in fall 2002, and graduating in eight years was 62.6% (CCA, 2011). These statistics represent the challenge Texas higher education faces in increasing college completion rates, specifically at the associates level. By the year 2020, there will be a 29% skills gap between the jobs requiring career certifications or college degrees and the Texas adults who are qualified to fill them which jeopardizes the state economy (CCA, 2011).

The Economy Depends on Reducing the Baccalaureate Gap

Students who enter higher education through community colleges are less likely to receive a baccalaureate degree despite their aspirations or intent to do so. This gap is critical to public interests as community colleges are a primary entry point for lower socioeconomic students and minority students (College Board, 2011; Council of Public University Presidents
and Chancellors [CPUPC], 2010; Dougherty, 2003; Fann, 2013). Even with the significant efforts to improve transfer pathways, students are still frustrated with the barriers they face, including articulation and the transfer process (McGuinness, 2005). Policymakers are aware of the baccalaureate gap for transfer students. State legislators have attempted to address the baccalaureate gap, and to decrease the amount of time students stay in college through various policies. Their policies attempt to reduce the cost of higher education for the state and the student.

The transfer pathway remains important to community college students and to the economy in producing a better qualified, skilled workforce (Handel, 2013). Texas is a diverse state and its economy depends on producing educated citizens from all socioeconomic sectors. The production rate of bachelor’s degrees in Texas impacts the rate Texas can compete nationally and internationally in this global economy.

Increasing graduation rates for all population groups is imperative to social mobility, and supplying Texas with a competitive workforce. Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2010) also stress degree completion:

Social equity will not be achieved through access to further education alone. In order to fully enjoy the benefits of higher education and to contribute to the society and economy in which they live, individuals need to complete their program of study. True progress depends on high levels of completion for all population groups. (p. 45)

Altbach et al. (2010) continue that “mechanisms to support success are essential, yet they are rarely in place and where they do exist inadequately address the needs of the new diverse populations enrolling” (p. 45). Efforts have been made in Texas to serve the state’s diversified, vulnerable student population to improve pathways for students transferring from community
colleges to universities (CPUPC, 2008; CPUPC, 2010; THECB, 2014b). Policymakers have a stake in improving transfer success.

The Importance of Community Colleges and Their Students

The College Board (2008) claims that “American community colleges are the nation’s overlooked asset. As the United States confronts the challenges of globalization, two-year institutions are indispensable to the American future” (p. 15). As an avenue for social mobility, community colleges provide an entry point to higher education for students (College Board, 2006 College Board, 2008; Trow, 2010). American community colleges “are the Ellis Island of American higher education, the crossroads at which K-12 education meets colleges and universities, and the institutions that give many students the tools to navigate the modern world” (College Board; 2008; p. 15). These tools include the knowledge and skills to obtain employment, excel, and pursue their aspirations.

Some of the most vulnerable college students in America are studying on community college campuses. Forty-two percent of first-time freshmen enroll in community colleges and 36% of those represent the first generation to attend college (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2014). Of all the undergraduate students in America in 2012, 56% of Hispanic students; 48% of Black students; 44% of Asian/Pacific Islander students; and 59% of Native American students attend community colleges (AACC, 2014). One reason why community colleges are attractive is the cost. The average annual tuition and fees for a community college is $3,260, compared to the cost of public, instate four-year colleges at $8,890 (AACC, 2014).
Community colleges are a large sector of American higher education with access and equity as their mission (College Board, 2006; Trow, 2010). The College Board (2006) reveals that there are several reasons students choose a community college: to transfer to four-year colleges; technology; affordability; assessable faculty; class size; variety of programs; flexibility; support services; community service; student success and their commitment to diversity. Community colleges serve disadvantaged students, and the initiatives and intentional efforts to facilitate a successful transfer process is important to access and equity in American higher education (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2012).

Community colleges play unique roles in producing more baccalaureate degrees in the United States (Trow, 2010). Community college leaders devote much time building articulations, aligning curriculum and structuring advisement to aid students planning to transfer (Flaga, 2006). Building voluntary articulation agreements is extremely complicated and time consuming for two-year and four-year institutions. Articulations are less effective for the student who changes their major or who does not know their destination institution after attending community college (Bers, 2013; Handel, 2013). The students’ ability to navigate the transfer pathway and gain transfer knowledge has a correlation to their ability to persevere (Fann, 2013). Handel (2007) claims that “policymakers argue that seamless transfer means 100% transferability of all courses with no loss of credit, but community college faculty rarely warm to the notion of revising their courses to meet a generic threshold of acceptability” (43).

Aligning Public Priorities with Policy

Policymakers weigh market forces, societal shifts, resource limitations and institutional needs with a wide array of needs in the state outside of the higher education system; and their
decisions have short-term and long-term consequences (Richardson, Bracco, Callan, & Finney, 1999). The state determines the expected services institutions are to provide, and develop policies to support the public’s priorities, as explained by Richardson and Martinez (2009). Policymakers use levers or tools to influence institutional or student behavior. State policy shapes the process for students to transition from community colleges to universities, but it can have other consequences or intentions.

Wellman (2002) lists seven categories of state policies regarding transfer: legislation, cooperative agreements, transfer data reporting, student incentives and rewards, statewide articulation, statewide common core curricula and common course numbering system. Kisker, Wagoner, & Cohen (2011) also cite legislation, statewide coordination and alternative funding scenarios for implementing statewide transfer and articulation reforms. Legislators and policymakers do share common values for higher education to demonstrate greater efficiency and cost effectiveness in the transfer pathway; increasing transfer and degree completion; developing the economy; and following the spirit of legislation in the implementation of degrees (Kisker et al., 2011).

Large, Decentralized System of Autonomous Institutions

The higher education governance structure in Texas is characterized as a federal system. “Federal systems have a statewide board responsible for collecting and distributing information, advising on the budget, planning programs from a state-wide perspective, and encouraging articulation” (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 17). Texas has a coordinating board which has regulatory authority in a state with mixed single-campus and multi-campus institutions (Richardson et al., 1999).
In Texas, “legislators provide technical leadership and see themselves as watchdogs protecting institutions from excessive central dominance” (Richardson et al., 1999). Articulation and collaboration in the Texas transfer pathway is dependent on institutional cooperation (Richardson et al., 1999). Richardson et al. (1999) emphasize that “the state’s strong emphasis on local control and local decision making creates a constant, dynamic tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board” (p. 125). This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas higher education system decades ago.

Statewide coordinating agencies “may be buffers or conduits for state influence” explains Zusman (2005, p. 149). Richardson et al. (1999) characterize the THECB as a “referee or scapegoat” that “must carry out its responsibilities in an environment that often involves antagonism from the legislature and from some of the sub-systems” (p. 126). Transfer policy is complicated by the political environment pitting legislators against the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the coordinating board against institutions (Richardson et al., 1999).

**Completion Agenda Versus Transfer Students**

Politicians are not the only stakeholders at odds with one another. The college completion agenda can cause friction for transfer students and community colleges. The focus on completion can work against the transfer function at the community college (Mullin, 2012). Native students experience a more refined path to the baccalaureate as compared to transfer students in Texas. Mullin (2012) claims that transfer is a core function as a pathway to the
baccalaureate. A report by the THECB states the graduation rates of Texas transfer students at public universities lag behind native students by 13% to 20% (THECB, 2014b).

Transfer students navigate a path filled with barriers and sand traps. The transfer pathway continues to contain barriers that hinder students’ ability to graduate on time, as compared to native students. Simone (2014) stated that when students transfer from one public institution to another they lose around 12 credits. Mangan (2014b) continues by saying the “pipeline between colleges is full of leaks.” Many transfer students have to retake courses they completed at a community college (Keierleber, 2014). Research predicts that bachelor’s degree attainment for community-college transfer students could increase from 45% to 54%, if there wasn’t a loss of credit at the time of transfer (Keierleber, 2014). Community colleges are associated with low program-completion rates and have “become ground zero in the national completion movement” (Mangan, 2014a, para 2.).

Completion metrics do not adequately measure transfer student outcomes. Measuring and assigning value to degree completion can place some institutions at a disadvantage. Completion metrics focus more heavily on native student progress each institution, not considering transfer students enrolled. Institutions that enroll students that do not have a strong intent to earn a degree; enroll students that plan to transfer; or students seeking more employability skills maybe viewed as less effective (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). “Institutions that serve a significant number of these students generally do not fare very well when retention and degree completion are the metrics to which they are held accountable” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 344). Habley et al. (2012) suggest “policymakers should reengineer the standard accountability metrics to focus on the percentage of students who
enter higher education at any institution, the percentage of students who are retained in higher education at any institution, and the percentage of students who complete degrees or achieve their goals at any institution” (p. 347). Students that attend multiple institutions and graduate are counted as completers.

The completion agenda impacts policymakers’ expectations. “Policymakers believe that higher education is linked to the economic, social and cultural well-being of their state. Legislators are under pressure to show the results of their decisions, so it is no surprise that they frequently speak about the expectations they have of higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 91). Policymakers are pressured by the public to show positive results to their efforts. “Economic growth, degree attainment, and starting salaries are measurable and provide policymakers with figures and statistics that they can attribute to their efforts” (Martinez, 2004, p. 92). Their intentions may be for the good of students or institutions, but some policies fail to reach their intended goal, and become ineffective. “Policy ideas that sound great in theory often fail under conditions of actual field implementation. The implementation process has a life of its own. It is acted out through large and inflexible administrative systems and is distorted by bureaucratic interests” (Bardach, 2009, p. 35). The policy infrastructure can be less forgiving to transfer students as compared to native students.

Study of the Texas Transfer Pathway

The perceptions of policymakers and their expectations for public institutions and transfer students was explored in a qualitative study. Policymakers play an important role in the formation of higher education policy. The study identified the perceptions of legislators and policy influencers on the Texas transfer pathway. Policy influencers were identified as
state coordinating board staff, professional association members, and higher education journalists. The data indicated policymakers’ assessment of policy and infrastructure affecting transfer success. Policymakers’ perceptions aided in building a stronger understanding of their expectations for students and public institutions, and their relationship to the State economy and competitive workforce.

A qualitative research approach was used to bring meaning to the decision-making process for policymakers on transfer policy for Texas higher education. This study explored the phenomenon of transfer policy development in Texas higher education through the voice of state policymakers and their influencers. This study aimed to focus on a complicated structure of the transfer pathway and the policy that orchestrates its operation. Participants were selected due to the accessibility of data and their experience with the phenomenon to be studied. They were chosen through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What experience do state-level policymakers, coordinating board staff and influencers have with transfer policy and improving the transfer pathway for community college students transferring to universities?

2. What are state-level policymakers’ perceptions of the transfer pathway and their intended outcomes for transfer students?

3. How can the voices of policymakers and their influencers help refine our understanding of transfer policy development and improve student persistence and educational experiences?
Data collection for this study included semi-structured individual interviews with four legislative staff from the Texas Senate Higher Education Committee and the Texas House of Representatives Higher Education Committee. Three additional interviews were held with staff from the THECB. Five professional association members and two higher education journalists where interviewed for their perspective of the transfer pathway and actions that would improve transfer success. Interviews were conducted in person or by phone; and their duration was 30 to 90 minutes.

The population of policymakers was small and they were qualified by their responsibilities in enacting higher education policy. To increase the depth and meaning of the responses, a semi-structured, open-ended approach was used. The qualitative data was digitally recorded and transcribed from fourteen interviews. Transcripts were sent to participants for narrative accuracy checks. The transcripts were read multiple times before coding began. Analytical insights that occurred during data collection were recorded to track emergent themes and field-based analytical insights (Patton, 2002). Coding was used to identify the categories, patterns and themes reoccurring in the transcripted interviews, and NVivo computer software was used for this content analysis (Patton, 2002). Participants from each category reviewed the findings to provide a member check for the conclusions and implications developed.

The theoretical framework of the study was based on the Espoused Theories of Action (Argyris & Schon, 1996). The theory was developed to identify governing variables and action strategies that manage behavior to gain and maintain control others, and set goals (Howell, 1999). This framework guided the development of interview questions; data analysis; and
confirmed that policymakers do attempt to influence the action of institutions and students. They place heavy focus on reducing the time to degree through their policies.

**Policymaker Expectations**

The perceptions of policymakers and those that influence transfer policy in Texas reveal that there is an expectations gap between policymakers and community college transfer students:

- Policymakers expect students to take a linear path from community colleges to universities by taking the specific courses that transfer directly into a baccalaureate.
- Policymakers expect students to earn credit within a finite length of time from start to finish.
- They also expect students to know which baccalaureate degree they seek and the university to which to transfer at the time they enter community colleges.
- Policymakers expect that advisors can provide individual attention for each student in prescribing their degree plan and timeline.

The perceptions of policymakers and those that influence policy in Texas revealed priorities and values that are at odds with the public higher education system and transfer students.

**Reduce time to degree.** Participants stressed the need to reduce the time transfer students require to graduate with their baccalaureate--the time to degree. Current policies in the state intend to curb costly excessive credit hours for undergraduate students.

The cost to underwrite unnecessary courses to state taxpayers is $300 million annually. The total cost to Texas students and taxpayers of excess credit hour accrual is $490 million, almost half a billion dollars annually. (Leslie, 2015)
Participants stated that the primary focus of policymakers’ work is save money by reducing the time to degree for all students, including transfer students.

The main goal is time to degree. If you focus on decreasing the time to degree, either to an associate’s degree or a baccalaureate degree, you decrease costs to the institution, costs to the student and family; and you increase efficiency in higher education and the ability to move somebody through the system, so use of the resources can be for the next cohort of students. The real challenge as a State now is in completion. We’ve made great strides on access and enrollment, but fall short in completion.

-Legislative Staff Member

For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money and decrease the time to degree, which also saves the state money and saves the students some money and time. Students can go to work, start paying taxes and other good things can come out of this right? What drives this is saving money, getting people into the workforce sooner, reducing the stress of state resources and money that students need to borrow. They can then buy houses, spend money and start investing.

-Coordinating Board Staff

For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money. It’s not necessarily a bad thing because it’s one of those things where you can actually have two different goals that actually converge on the same end results...The real question we have to ask ourselves is, and it’s our responsibility to do that: “What’s good for students? What is good for Texas students? Not what is good for our institution, but for the students?” The reality is that what’s good for Texas students is also what’s good for your institution’s students.

-Coordinating Board Staff

Aligning with the theoretical framework, the findings demonstrate that Texas policymakers do attempt to influence student behavior through punitive transfer policies, like the Excess Credit Hour Tuition Limit, Six-Drop Limit and Three-Repeat Limit (Table One). These policies carry significant financial consequences for students and formula funding consequences for institutions. (It is also important to note that the federal government does the same by limiting financial aid to students at 150% of time to degree.)
Table 1
List of Texas Transfer Policies and Initiatives that Penalize Student Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Student impact</th>
<th>Statute or rule</th>
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<tr>
<td>Excess Credit Hour Surcharge</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive formula funding for 30 or more excess credit hours attempted towards an undergraduate degree. (Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</td>
<td>Students may face tuition surcharges once they attempt 30 or more credit hours over the credit hours required for their undergraduate degree at public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, §13.100-13.109</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six-Drop Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including transfer work.</td>
<td>Unless students meet specific exceptions, undergraduates can not drop more than six courses during their career while attending public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapter A, Rule §4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Repeat Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive formula funding for a course attempted more than two times. (Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</td>
<td>Students may face surcharges once they attempt the same course more than two times. The surcharge may occur on the third attempt.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, Rule §13.105</td>
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Policymakers make assumptions that students are savvy on how to navigate higher education; and that they are sophisticated in the knowledge of their future career interests. Policymakers stress the importance of students graduating on time to support the workforce needs and the economy of the State by “buying cars and houses” and “getting off state support.” These assumptions of sophisticated, savvy students exhibiting the preparation and social capital necessary upon entering college are not realistic.
**Gap with Student Expectations**

Students do not carry knowledge of the completion agenda or the role community colleges play in their quest for a baccalaureate according to participants. The local community college seems an inviting place to explore careers and higher education resulting in excess credit hours and lengthy time to degree outcomes. The findings reflect that students are naïve of policies; policymakers’ expectations; and the consequences for not taking the linear path within the expected timeline. The literature confirms that students are influenced by their family and their early educational experiences; and their own college expectations and characteristics strongly influence their own degree attainment (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Pike, Hansen & Childress, 2014). Research on community college students also reveals that baccalaureate expectations are influenced by student backgrounds, motivational beliefs and community college experiences (Wang, 2013). The completion agenda is focused on getting students through the pipeline to the baccalaureate as if all students should progress at similar rates. However, students’ baccalaureate expectations are dependent on a number of factors which influence time to degree, excess hours, and the motivation to graduate. Ignoring student differences jeopardizes the efficacy of policies, and produces unremarkable completion outcomes.

The number of certificates and associates degree available are abundant and the pathway through those before transfer can steer students into credit that does not transfer. “The missions and functions of community college have historically been comprehensive. In addition to serving students who intend to transfer, vocational and technical education, continuing education, remediation, and community services” are also offered to meet students’
needs (Wang, 2013, para. 10). Some students are not sophisticated in the differences between workforce education/technical credit and academic credit; or the penalty for accruing too many hours at the community college while they finish any needed developmental coursework while exploring careers. Students can encounter “significant negative consequences due to their lack of knowledge of the transfer process and not being well advised that included having to repeat courses, taking additional courses, delaying time to transfer and/or degree completion, and costing more money” (Fann & Marling, 2012, p. 36).

The community college may provide a convenient, safe, friendly environment where students grow in confidence and build social capital through academic integration and interacting with faculty and advisors (Wang, 2013). Students are not completely cognizant of the expectations to leave the community college with no more than 60 hours of transferrable credit that directly apply to their degree plan according to participants. Students do not realize that they are expected to know the program and the university they intend to attend at the moment they enter the community college if they intend to stay on pace. Participants stress that time to degree and excess hour problems can be caused by students’ indecision and changing their majors. Students are not sophisticated enough to understand the complexities of the transfer pathway and the consequences for lacking that knowledge. The problem can be compounded when they receive conflicting information about transfer from institutions (Fann & Marling, 2012).

**Student knowledge and experiences with state policies.** Throughout the interviews, participants perceived transfer students as uninformed and naïve of policies, only becoming enlightened when the negative effects of them affect the student, and when it is too late to
avoid the consequences. These perceptions align with the findings of Fann and Marling (2012) during interviews with Texas transfer students who stated they were unaware of policies until after they transferred or received penalties. The negative effect usually involves financial penalties for the student. The policies are intended to prevent particular student behaviors following policymakers’ expectations. However, these expectations are lost on students that are unaware of them.

For example, students that are classified as Texas residents pay in-state tuition rates. However, there is a state policy that allows institutions to charge out-of-state tuition rates when a student attempts at least 30 hours over the credit hours required for a degree.

The student facing [penalties for excess hours or repeating courses] doesn’t know their path forward, or doesn’t have the time and resources to study and research it as carefully. Students are negatively impacted, and blindsided sometimes by those financial restrictions.

-Legislative staff member

I do think it is unfair to a student if they are not aware of those policies, and so they encounter them once they have already bumped up against those thresholds. I think that making students aware of the limitation on dropping how many courses you can drop is just information they should have at the beginning so that they know that this is a busy time for their family, they should only take two classes that semester. They can make more informed choices.

-Legislative staff member

The perceptions that students receive inadequate information and advising concerning policies also reoccurred throughout the interviews.

Students and institutions can be financially penalized with some of the things like three-peat rules, excess credit hours. They're a barrier to the students. They're not enforceable in terms of the policy responsibilities that institutions have. But in the application of those stated policies, the students are the ones who suffer the most because colleges don't necessarily worry about that. Colleges are worried about that
now, and are taking actions to remedy the situation, but before they had no direction from legislature, for example, nor from the coordinating board. Basically, the movement to take care of some of this is starting at the local community college level and it's becoming more and more of something that they're looking at.

*Professional association member*

**Native Versus Transfer Students**

Transfer students are at a disadvantage to native students earning their baccalaureate. “Transfer students [require] more than two additional years to complete their degrees, when compared with their university native peers. Time-to-degree data for individual Texas public universities show that no university has been able to graduate transfer students in the same time period as it graduates native students” (THECB, 2014). Participants of this study attribute this reality to inefficiencies and inequities in the transfer pathway. Transfer students arrive on the community college campus with varying degrees of academic readiness, resources, and frequently change their aspirations. Combining those challenges with universities’ financial aid, scholarship, orientation, and advising support systems designed more for incoming freshmen than transfer students, the problem is compounded according to participants. One of the greatest challenges for students was identified as the excess credit they are earning at community colleges prior to transferring implicating the quality of advising they receive.

It’s crazy. Students are transferring into universities with eighty or ninety credits. They are at an associates’ degree-and-one-half at the time of transfer.

*Legislative staff member*

I think advising is the key component, either investing in more advising, helping students understand which courses are credit-bearing to advance their degree, and which are in the elective category, so that you don’t have students transferring with 80 or 90 credits. They should be out of community colleges at 60 or 70 credits. You don’t need that many credits to get an associate’s degree.

*Legislative staff member*
The problem I saw is that the legislature put a limit to their associate degrees, and that was one of the big impediments for the bachelor degrees. An average number of hours of somebody who came out of community college was 90 hours. There's no way you can get only 30 hours more for a bachelor degree. So people transferred with a lot of hours, and I'm not sure how many people understand what that's about. It's about how many hours the state paid for. It doesn't matter that they didn't complete, it doesn't matter that they cannot be applied to your degree. The state paid for them.

-Coordinating board staff

Inequitable university environment. Transfer students face an environment where institutions, faculty and the curriculum are more inwardly focused without considering the best interest of the transfer student who has yet to arrive or who may never arrive on their campus. All participants stated that institutions and advisors do not adequately inform students of state policies or aid. Participants hold students less responsible for complying with the system in place than institutions do. Participants assume students are not aware of the consequences for taking excess hours or changing their major, and blame institutions for not being more forthcoming with students. Policymakers believe that advising and transition services are not the same from institution to institution, and other advising inequities could exist between academic departments. Transfer students may not land in an environment focused on them as much as new freshmen when they arrive at the university. Institutions expect transfer students to be more college-savvy than they may be. The environment may not provide transfers the same traction to propel them forward as the students who enter a university as a freshman.

I don’t think the advising is very good. I don’t think students really know what to do when they are ready to transfer. Many of the schools send students to computers to show them what will transfer and what classes to take. If I were in a university, I would spend a week with an orientation to show them how a university works, where things are, deadlines, etc., because they come from a smaller campus, with smaller classes. Universities place them in huge classes where nobody will know their names and it isn’t easy to speak to professors, that is the big difference between universities and community colleges. Universities do this [orientation] for their freshmen, but not their
transfers. The fact that they’ve been to a community college doesn’t mean they know how to navigate the university.

- Coordinating board staff

There is not continuity for that swirling student. Whatever campus they land on may not be equally focused on the transfer student.

- Legislative staff member

Decentralized system spells disadvantage to transfers. The completion agenda emphasizes reducing the time to degree, and increasing graduation rates. Both of these measures are elusive to transfer students facing the unexpected challenges of the independent, decentralized nature of Texas. Transfer students move between institutions that are autonomous and independent of each other. Native students do not face this experience. The faculty of each institution are responsible for the curriculum development on their own campus, but yet stakeholders expect students to transfer seamlessly from one institution and degree program to another. The decentralized matrix of independent, autonomous institutions contributes to the low completion rates, excessive credit hours, and more time to degree for the transfer student.

Policymakers understand the decentralized nature contributes to the problem, but they are hesitant to use policy to fortify the transfer pathway. Practices in reverse transfer, common course numbering systems, and articulation agreements have been preferred over prescriptive practices. Once faced with prescriptive policy decisions, a more passive approach prevails with less urgency than the completion agenda implores.

We impose so much as a legislative body on institutions already. If we were in control of what universities could do, we would have equalized mediocrity.

- Legislative staff member
I think it’s improving slowly. I definitely would say it’s improving, but there’s a long way to go. I think that there’s been a lot more attention around articulation policies, and just transfer like common course numbering or all of those policy aspects from the state or the local level. I don’t really think those things make transfer easier for students.

-Legislative staff member

You have to be careful. It is always a balancing act. You could say everybody [institutions] has to increase their graduation rates and then the next day, everybody is going to increase their admission standards. So, you want to balance that out...and also in making sure students can get through in a timely fashion. Not all students can get through. Not everyone is going to be able to enroll full-time and that’s something that has to be acknowledged. Life does get in the way.

-Legislative Staff Member

Disparities in resources and curriculum at community colleges. The completion agenda places high expectations on community colleges and their efficacy in pushing students through to graduation. The funding formula for institutions is marked with disparate metrics that shift more resources to research institutions and universities than the less visible community colleges who educate more than half of the students participating in higher education in the State. The institutions that serve the growing population of students with less financial resources and college preparation are expected to do more with less, while equaling serving academic and workforce education demands. There is a consensus that the State needs to match its expectations and commitment to education to equitable funding for higher education and community colleges.

If you look at what the distribution of funds is between community colleges and four-year institutions, or the general education institutions, they get three point something billion dollars, and community colleges only received under a billion dollars.

-Professional association member
If you look at funding from a macro perspective and community colleges, they are not going to be able to sustain this kind of funding model for very long. And if so, institutions are going to have to either shoot up taxation rates so that they can get the income or they will have to get it from the backs of students’ tuition.

-Professional association member

Community colleges are the only ones in the higher ed system that are flexible enough to meet the needs of any population that comes into our communities. They are open enrollment, unlike restrictive universities. Serving the demographic shift is going to fall on the back of the community colleges. They are not being supported appropriately by the state to do this work.

-Professional association member

Findings Related to the Literature

The study did align with the literature review in most areas. The decentralized, federal system of higher education contributes to problems transfer students face. The autonomy and independence of institutions is helpful for serving local communities, developing strategic planning, and funding; but the transfer student is disadvantaged by the system (Richardson et al., 1999; Habley, 2012). The State does identify that there is a problem, but there are barriers to the seamless transfer listed in the literature review and confirmed in the interviews.

I think it’s improving slowly. I definitely would say it’s improving, but there’s a long way to go. I think that there’s been a lot more attention around articulation policies, and just transfer like common course numbering or all of those policy aspects from the state or the local level. I don’t really think those things make transfer easier for students.

-Legislative staff member

Participants confirmed that the completion agenda and accountability initiatives are at the forefront of policymaking to save the State financial resources (CPUPC, 2010; Hamilton, 2013a; Handel, 2013; Mangan, 2013).
Policymakers are aware of the baccalaureate gap for transfer students as the literature suggested (Hamilton, 2013b). State legislators have attempted to address the baccalaureate gap, and to decrease the amount of time students stay in college through various policies (Kisker et al, 2011). Their policies attempt to reduce the cost of higher education for the state and the student (Martinez, 2004). As confirmed by the participants, the transfer pathway remains important to community college students and to the economy in producing a better qualified, skilled workforce (Handel, 2013; THECB, 2014a).

Texas is one of the most vibrant states economically and it is because of our higher education system. We have to act. Every moment we do not act means that somebody’s stopping out, dropping out, or having a negative experience. We can not afford that luxury if we are going to maintain a strong middle class.

-Professional Association Member

That’s what makes me so passionate about being involved in community colleges. We are changing lives; we even get success. But one of the quotes I heard at a national conference is deep in my psyche. Vice President [Joe Biden] said “Community college is the pathway to the middle class.” And that resonates with me because the talk we had thinking about the middle class that it is starting to evaporate. That won’t happen if you keep community colleges vibrant. That middle class will be sustained.

-Professional association member

Implications for Policy

Transfer advisors, admissions officers, financial aid officers, orientation staff, faculty and administrators can help policymakers create policy using the knowledge from their work directly with transfer students. A task force representing an equitable cross-section of institutions and a composition of these stakeholders can hold promise for practical solutions. These stakeholders have a unique perspective of the actual problems within the transfer pathway at the granular level. Ideas and innovation can organically be developed for the
legislative committees for future policy discussions. However, this approach could have limited results. According to some participants, policymakers tend to legislate based on anecdotal experiences of key stakeholders or the least restrictive approach, despite the best data and consultation. Unless the legislators are serious about the results of a bottom up legislative solution, the task force’s efforts would likely be in vain.

**Recommendations for policymakers.** Institutions are accountable for the inefficiencies students face on their campus, and formula funding should encourage them to remove inefficiencies. Participants stated that if funding is not tied to transfer success, institutions will not prioritize their approach to serving transfer students and their success. Additionally, an important change should occur in the calculation of graduation rates at the federal and state levels. Transfer students are not calculated in IPEDS graduation rates, and do not reflect the realities what is occurring. Metrics should acknowledge community colleges’ efforts in successfully sending their students to the university for further studies. Likewise, the metrics should also calculate the university’s work in successfully serving the transfer student through to the baccalaureate. If decreasing the baccalaureate gap for transfer students is a priority, then metrics should be improved to measure transfer success at the community college and university level. Institutions will prioritize their resources where formula funding and rankings calculate success. Extrinsic motivations in the form of incentivized funding could impact institutional priorities and how to approach transfer success on each campus. The calculations for graduation should better reflect the realities of completions occurring on both ends of the pathway.
Carrots and sticks prevail. Policymakers are focused on saving money and graduating students quickly; and the current transfer policy structure seems to attempt to use “carrots and sticks” to accomplish the goals. Policymakers seem to seek the right reward or punishment for preventing excess credit using extrinsic motivations. Policies seems to imply that students and institutions will not comply without a punishment or a reward. The punishments are more financially punitive for students, and appear to protect the institution from financial loss by allowing higher tuition fees for excess hours. Even though participants believe students are not aware of transfer policies, they continue to use policies as a “carrot and stick” solution to modify behavior.

Policymakers may prefer the least restrictive policy to implement change, but the value or priority of community colleges should be reevaluated. If improving transfer success and outcomes are a priority, then a more prescriptive policy with additional resources, and a more prescriptive transfer infrastructure is required to reduce inefficiencies in the decentralized higher education system, despite tendencies of the State to prefer local control at the institutional level. Transfer occurs in between two institutions, so no institution is directly responsible or accountable for the student’s success. Presently, students do not have a neutral party to provide advice on transfer decisions. All advisors are inherently biased for the institution employing them, providing students without an objective perspective in which to make transfer decisions. A framework for change should be more about building interconnections, supporting student success, and incentivizing institutions to cooperate.

A mismatch with consumer market demands. Along with divergent expectations rests the stark differences between the market’s demands and how policy assumes all curriculum is
the similar. Policy assumes students and programs are similar, and there is a propensity to continue to make things the same. The initiatives to facilitate transfer in Texas, such as the Fields of Study Curriculum and Core Curriculum, are dependent on curriculum being similar. However, the market and consumer demand values institutional creativity. Institutional autonomy works against the Fields of Study Curriculum and its attempt to provide more prescriptive solutions to the transfer pathway. To preserve institutional creativity and autonomy, technology provides a potential solution. If the State could develop a statewide transfer system, students would be able to compare institutions and degree plans against their earned credit to make informed decisions. Technology provides promise to illustrate degree pathways between institutions; guide the timing of the transfer; and offer neutral information to students without institutional bias. Investing in a technological solution could preserve curricular, institutional creativity and provide students information on how many hours they have left to earn their baccalaureate prior to the point of transfer. Such a system could save students time and money, and save the State money by preventing excess credit hours caused by some of the inefficiencies the system could alleviate with the use of technology.

Policymakers and policy influencers need to consider the gap in expectations with students and research ways to help students and policymakers develop more realistic expectations. College students in a democratic society are adults with free will and the freedom to explore career options in their pursuit of happiness. Policymakers are stewards of millions of dollars in taxpayer money charged to allocate money in the best interests and needs of the State. Policymakers in Texas have created a threshold of 30 hours of excessive credit hours; a limit of repeating a course no more than two times without penalty; and a limit to only
drop six courses during an undergraduate degree. They have attempted to quantify the amount of time students can explore careers and earn excessive credit off the linear path to the baccalaureate. These policies imply that students have similar experiences, expectations and goals as they work towards their degree. They are written as if all students are similar. These policies are also ineffective if the intended audience is oblivious to them. The policies are meant to modify behavior, but the reality is that students are not aware of them early enough in their college career to truly respond as intended. Policymakers believe students are not aware of the policies, and yet the efficacy of transfer policies depends on students’ awareness of the policies.

*Differentiate policies between native students and transfer students.* The reality is that native students do not experience the same barriers as transfer students, and have significantly better outcomes. Another important reality is the fact that not all students enter college with the same skills or knowledge, and they will not progress at the same rate. Policymakers should consider mandatory advising to occur incrementally throughout a student’s career, so students have the opportunity to learn how to stay on track earlier in their career. This could have a better opportunity to modify student behavior, and educate them on what is expected of them to graduate on time. Instituting mandatory advising may provide the information students are lacking at critical decision times during course selection periods.

With the known disparities between native student progress and transfer student progress (THECB, 2014b), should policies for excess credit hours be equally applied to both populations? Transfer students face excess credit hour penalties more frequently than native students due to the loss of credit at transfer and the inefficiencies in the transfer pathway.
Consideration should be given to provide more equitable consequences to transfer students until the inefficiencies can be removed.

Implications for Practice

The inefficiencies that transfer students experience causing the loss of credit or earning excessive credit should be identified and addressed. These inefficiencies are derived from curriculum differences between upper and lower division institutions; workforce education courses; course numbers used and unique courses. Solutions should occur at the local level and the state level, and must heavily involve faculty. The solutions should be student-focused requiring participants to see the big picture of what their work will accomplish for thousands of students statewide; the reduction of time to degree; and the positive effects on the State economy. The solutions to the inefficiencies will require compromise from community colleges and universities, as well as, academic faculty and technical faculty.

There are implications for practice at the local level for community colleges and universities. Institutions should evaluate how transfer-friendly their campuses are by talking to advisors and students. The inefficiencies found should be addressed.

Student-friendly publications. There are simple things institutions can do to improve experiences of students. Some of them do not require significant financial investment. A coordinating board member suggested that institutions review their own publications and college catalogs to confirm they are student-friendly and accurate. Use student focus groups to identify problems and have students review your edits. This work should also be done on campus websites including information requests, financial aid websites, and navigation and search functions. Institutions should review their information from the lens of the transfer
student, including the centralized location of transfer articulation agreements. Several legislative participants also perceived that institutions do not adequately warn students about excess tuition charges or Six-Drop limits, which can blindside students. Improving communication to students could help increase awareness of these policies.

**Targeted student services.** Universities should devote equitable resources and financial aid for incoming freshmen, and transfer students. Orientation and engagement activities should be as intensive for transfer students as freshmen. Institutions should not assume that transfer students are prepared to navigate the process without support. Devote more resources to engaging new transfer students, and provide frequent, individualized advising. Students should be more aware of their “expected” linear path and the penalties for taking credits off the path. Students should be informed of policies multiple times throughout their career during advising and through websites and publications.

**Engagement of community college faculty.** Community colleges need to do a better job in educating students about the transferability of workforce education, technical courses; and faculty should be involved in looking at the plethora of academic and technical degrees on campus to see if there are ways to reduce the number of credits community college students take that do not transfer. Even if a student does not have the intent to transfer when taking workforce courses, what happens if they later pursue a baccalaureate? Are there better ways to align the curriculum at the community college level to ameliorate the problems caused when a student decides to further their degree beyond the technical associates’ degree in applied sciences?
**Know your students.** Institutions can improve on inefficiencies if they analyze student data. The performance of transfer students should be regularly monitored by community colleges and universities to identify inefficiencies in services or curriculum, and find solutions to reduce the number of students falling off the expected linear path through the transfer pathway to the baccalaureate. Institutions do not bear all the blame or responsibility for transfer student outcomes. The students themselves bear some of the responsibility for changing majors and for when “life that gets in the way.” Institutions should support students through detours caused by personal issues with more intrusive, frequent advising. Support for career planning may lessen the occurrence of major changes and enrolling in nontransferable courses that do not apply to their bachelor’s degree. As one THECB staff member stressed, the real question everyone working on the issues is “What is good for students? What is good for Texas students? Not what is good for our institution, but for the students?” The reality is that what’s good for Texas students is also what’s good for your institution’s students.”

Reducing the inefficiencies in the transfer pathway can help students stay on the path to the baccalaureate with less excess credit. Students should be more aware of the linear path and the penalties for taking credits off the path. Institutions should look at ways to increase students’ understanding of the expectations held for them. Reviewing websites, publications, degree plans, and student communications can identify ways to improve student awareness. Advising and faculty are also in direct communication with students, and can help inform students of the expectations held for them.
Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore what policymakers really understand about the challenges students face with financial aid; transportation needs; child care and nutrition; while juggling studies, keeping a home and taking care of dependents. Having a traditional college experience may hinder a policymakers’ understanding of the realities of community college students and transfer students today. How do policymakers’ past personal experiences in higher education and life form their perceptions with students today? The same question can be asked of other stakeholders including those pushing the completion agenda. Do their experiences mirror the experiences students face today? Did they attend community college or public universities? These are questions future research should examine to understand their expectations of institutions and students. Those expectations drive policy decisions, and possibly their priorities for allocating resources.

Research should identify any disparity in resources or institutional focus between incoming freshmen and transfers at the university level. The disparity of resources is not limited to institutional decisions as State formula funding models; national graduation rate metrics; federal and state financial aid; and scholarships emphasize the traditional incoming freshman student over the transfer student. Research on the disparity should also analyze the effects on special populations of students.

Workforce education versus academic credit. Future research on the inefficiencies caused by the bifurcated curriculum at Texas community colleges could explore the following questions: Do employers know the difference between the Associates of Science/Arts and the Associates of Applied Arts and Science earned at Texas community colleges? Do community
colleges design curriculum based on local needs or any attractive formula funding differences between technical, workforce education courses and transferrable, academic courses? Are the differences in formula funding driving the agenda to enroll students in programs/courses than may not transfer? With the technological advances today, are there technical degrees that are more similar to academic, transferrable associate’s degrees?

Future research should identify inefficiencies that lead to excessive credit hours and unacceptable time to degree. How many degree completions could be increased with improved efficiencies of curriculum and services by institutions or a statewide systemic change? Since students face barriers and confusion with workforce education credit, it may be time for Texas to realign the curriculum to improve the inefficiencies it causes for students. Research exploring the number of transfer students impacted by these barriers could quantify the money that is lost by the State and the possible negative effects on time to degree for students.

Policymakers write policies to influence behavior to decrease time to degree. However, some students may be forced out of the college when faced with punitive financial penalties partly due to inefficiencies of the decentralized higher education system. Future research should consider the effects of financial penalties on vulnerable, at-risk populations of students. Studies should also examine whether the consequences of policies are more heavily carried by transfer students over native students in Texas, and if the policies are counterproductive. If transfer students are effected more negatively than native students, then findings could be used by policymakers to modify policy to more equitably influence student behavior. Future research should explore the economic benefits of improving the efficacy of the transfer pathway for the State, institutions, and students.
Concluding Remarks

The findings support the literature that the completion agenda is driving policy decisions creating an expectations gap. Participants stressed that reducing the time to degree for students is a top priority for policymakers, but students may have other priorities.

For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money and decrease the time to degree, which also saves the state money and saves the students some money and time. Students can go to work, start paying taxes and other good things can come out of this right? What drives this is saving money, getting people into the workforce sooner, reducing the stress of state resources and money that students need to borrow. They can then buy houses, spend money and start investing.

- Coordinating Board Staff

However, the completion agenda is focused more heavily on measuring native students who start at the university their first year, and do not transfer; or those that stay for an associate’s degree at a community college. Transfer students have been ignored in the completion or performance funding metrics, which influences institutional priorities. For community colleges, the completion focus has been on graduation rates, and less on credit for helping students seamlessly transfer to universities. Community colleges feel pressure to award associate’s degrees even at the detriment of the transfer student.

The completion agenda is in conflict with transfer students. The completion agenda has little tolerance for students’ plight with vertical alignment curricular problems; technical versus academic course selections and other inequities in the system over native students. The inefficiencies of the transfer pathway cause students to earn excessive credit hours and detour a timely graduation. Time to degree metrics indicate that transfer students are at a disadvantage by starting at a community college before attending the university. However, the metrics do not fully explain the realities community college students face including
employment and family responsibilities. The slow pace to graduation may have less to do with institutional factors and more on students’ realities; but the completion agenda does not discern the cause.

The inefficiencies in the Texas transfer pathway are not a glamourous topic to make the news headlines. It is a complicated curricular problem, with complicated answers. The topic doesn’t draw the general public or the press as much as other topics like guns on campus. The problems of the transfer pathway are difficult to explain to constituents, and does not offer much low hanging fruit for the legislative committees. The problems exist, and students bear the brunt of the problems as time carries on with no systemic change in Texas.

There is a disconnect in what higher education people are excited about and what the public is really excited about. I think transfer stuff can get lost in the weeds there a little bit because it is wonky and complicated. It is not as easy to solve like “guns on campus”. You can’t fix transfer with a few words.

-Higher Education Journalist

There is hope of gradual improvement with each legislative session, as aspects of the problems are tackled piecemeal. The transfer pathway is drastically better than it was twenty to thirty years ago according to participants of this study, but much work remains. For those involved in the efforts of decreasing inefficiencies, the State will best be served by institutions and faculty thinking in the best interests of all students, and not those currently on their campus. Institutions and faculty that focus more inwardly and resist seamless, curricular alignment do a disservice to the transfer students leaving or entering their campus, and to the State as a whole.

Students are less sophisticated than policymakers give them credit for in following intricate policies and curricular pathways. All stakeholders should keep the students’ best
interests at the center of their work. As more students attend college at multiple institutions throughout their career, higher education has to adjust to the fluid, mobile student population and find ways to develop curriculum that is more mobile as well. Improving curriculum mobility is the one expectation all stakeholders share as it can benefit the State’s economy; and more importantly, it is in the best interest of students.

References


the Center for the Study of Community Colleges #11-1]. Oak Park, CA: Center for the Study of Community Colleges


Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, Texas Education Code, Chapter 54, Subchapter A § 54.014 (2005).


APPENDIX A

PROBLEM, PURPOSE, SIGNIFICANCE, AND DEFINITION OF TERMS
Higher education in America is experiencing pressure to be more accountable to the public for its outcomes (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005; Dougherty, Jones, Lahr, Natow, Pheatt, & Reddy, 2013). One area of mounting pressure is to increase college completion rates (Hamilton, 2013a; Mangan, 2013). Degree completion is a “true bottom line” for administrators, policymakers, parents, and students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 644). As public funding has decreased over the last few decades, institutions have turned to research, tuition, new donors, and commercialization to offset declining state and federal funding (Harcleroad & Eaton, 2005; Zusman, 2005). This shift has caused a rising sentiment that universities are not adequately focusing on teaching and student learning outcomes (Brint, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Mangan, 2013; Zusman, 2005).

Pressure from the public and policymakers are making the completion agenda a top priority for higher education in the United States (Brint, 2011; Hamilton, 2013a; Handel, 2013; Kiley, 2012; Mangan, 2013). As accountability pressure mounts to demonstrate increased student completions, policymakers analyze the effectiveness of institutions, and their ability to support transfer students and increase their graduation rates (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2014b). Increasing criticism for inefficiencies and unresponsiveness to external stakeholder groups has called for reform of public higher education (Rabovsky, 2012).

Improving college completion rates is a widespread issue facing American higher education. A National Commission on Higher Education Attainment was convened in October 2011, and included members representing two-year and four-year public and private
institutions. The goal of the commission was to create a plan for improving student persistence and graduation rates in America. On January 23, 2013, the commission released “An Open Letter to College and University Leaders: College Completion Must Be Our Priority.” The commission challenged American higher education to make student retention and completion a critical campus priority (American Council on Education, 2013).

Texas is not immune to the struggle of improving postsecondary participation and success. Of the estimated 90,000 undergraduate students enrolled in Texas public universities in 2013, roughly 19,000 of them are transfer students representing 21% of the total state undergraduate enrollment (THECB, 2014b, p. 9). However, these 19,000 transfer students are not able to graduate at the same pace as native students at the public university as they require more than two additional years to complete their baccalaureate degree (THECB, 2014b).

According to a 2014 report by the THECB (2014b), “the most time-efficient path is that of a native student enrolling in a four-year Texas public university and completing their bachelor’s degree at the same institution” (p. 13). This is a harsh reality for Texas community college students who aspire to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Of the students pursuing undergraduate degrees and certificates in Texas, 58% are attending two-year colleges (Complete College America [CCA], 2011). There is room to improve the Texas transfer pathway between public institutions when over half of all undergraduates attend public community colleges, but only 21% actually transfer to a public university (CCA, 2011; THECB, 2014b).

Texas public institutions face pressure from legislators to increase student learning outcomes as state policy is shifting to align funding allocations with student success instead of the historical student participation formulas. State legislators develop transfer policies that
define the transfer pathway and provide government controls to influence institutional behavior (THECB, 2014b). In addition to policymaking, legislators create the state budget and determine allocations to public institutions. “Crafting the state budget is the single most important part of a state legislator’s job” (McMillen, 2010, p. 59). In Texas, legislators are using the budget to influence institutional priorities. Instead of funding being based solely on student headcounts, a legislative shift in Texas is pushing for a formula funding pattern based on student success outcomes (Hamilton, 2014).

Problem Statement

American community colleges play a significant role in postsecondary education as 47% of bachelor’s degree earners take courses at community colleges and 28% start at two-year colleges (Mullin, 2012). Mullin (2012) claimed students starting at community colleges and transferring are as successful as the native students who start at the university. However, students who enter higher education through community colleges are less likely to receive a baccalaureate degree despite their aspirations or intent to do so. This baccalaureate gap has been studied for decades examining institutional characteristics and student characteristics. This gap is critical to public interests as community colleges are a primary entry point for lower socioeconomic students and minority students (College Board, 2011; Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors [CPUPC], 2010; Dougherty, 2003; Fann, 2013). State legislators have attempted to address the baccalaureate gaps found in their own state education systems, including Texas public higher education (College Board, 2011). Operational reforms have attempted to improve institutional performance at community colleges and universities to improve the transfer pathway to the baccalaureate (Bers, 2007; CPUPC, 2008,
2010; Dougherty, 2003; Handel, 2013). In Texas, reformers are calling for structural changes in the THECB and the community college system to improve institutional performance and student outcomes (Hamilton, 2012).

In 1999, Richardson, Bracco, Callan and Finney (1999) made a startling prediction that “in the absence of significant change in Texas’s system of higher education, growth in enrollment and student diversity will most likely outstrip the current capabilities of the system” (pp. 126-127). The population is becoming more diversified by race and ethnicity (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012, p. 47). “Texas has increased total enrollments in higher education by more than 537,000 students since 2000. During this time, enrollments for Hispanics and African Americans have doubled” (THECB, 2013, p. 1). More than 196,000 undergraduate credentials were awarded in Texas during 2012 with annual awards to Hispanics increasing by 125% and to African Americans by 75% since the same time period (THECB, 2013). Texas higher education consists of 146 public and independent institutions representing 12.7% of the 2012-13 state budget (THECB, 2013). In Texas, there are 50 public community colleges and 38 public universities (THECB, 2013). “Seamless movement from one institution to another has become a far more critical factor now than it has been in the past” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 348).

The enrollment in public community colleges represents 58% of all undergraduates attending public institutions in Texas (CCA, 2011). Community colleges play their own unique roles in producing more baccalaureate degrees, and the students at community colleges have diverse academic backgrounds and ambitions (Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012). Community college leaders devote much time building articulations, aligning curriculum, and
structuring advisement to aid students planning to transfer (CPUPC, 2008, 2010; Flaga, 2006; THECB, 2014b). State policy provides a framework for these activities (THECB, 2014b).

Universities also play an important role in the transfer process, serving diverse academic backgrounds and ambitions (College Board, 2011). Transfer students are deeply concerned about their academic abilities and their financial situation (Handel, 2007). University faculty, advisors, and student success staff help assimilate them into the new academic culture (THECB, 2014c). University leaders devote much time building articulations, and structuring advisement and orientation for new students (THECB, 2014b). As with community colleges, universities work within the same framework built for the Texas transfer pathway by policymakers.

Even though community colleges and universities play their own unique role in the transfer process, they are both called to improve student success and completion rates by policymakers (THECB, 2014b). Smooth transitions are important in encouraging persistence and assimilation into the new institution (CPUPC, 2008, 2010). Even with the significant efforts to improve transfer pathways, students are still frustrated with the barriers they face, including articulation and the transfer process (McGuinness, 2005). “Four-year colleges and universities represent the pivotal gatekeepers in the transfer pathway, although they have rarely asserted their role in the transfer process” (College Board, 2011).

Policymakers are aware of the baccalaureate gap for transfer students. The transfer policies developed are intended to close that gap and improve the transfer pathway for transfer students. The transfer pathway remains important to community college students, and to the economy in producing a better qualified, skilled workforce (Handel, 2013).

Despite significant progress toward state higher education goals, Texas must do better, faster. According to the Center on Education and the Workforce 4 out of 5 jobs lost
over the last few years affected workers with a high school diploma or less—most economists agree these jobs will not return. In fact, by 2020 about 2 of every 3 jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training, including 13 of the top 20 fastest growing career fields with the best potential for earnings growth. (THECB, 2013, p. 2)

Despite efforts by stakeholders over the last decade, transfer rates remain steady at institutions across the country (Handel & Williams, 2012). To improve the transfer process, statewide articulation agreements are in use in several states, including Texas. Handel and Williams (2012) find these statewide articulation agreements do not impact transfer rates with any statistical significance and may have a negative correlation. In Texas, legislative policymakers, the THECB, and institutions have made statewide articulation agreements a priority in recent years; however, graduation rates have remained stagnant for transfer students (THECB, 2014b).

Texas has been active in the effort to improve pathways for students transferring from community colleges to universities (CPUPC, 2008, 2010; THECB, 2014b). A Transfer Summit held in 2008 gathered the presidents and chancellors of Texas higher education institutions, and policy recommendations were created along with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2008). In 2009, the Texas Transfer Success Conference was held in eight sites throughout Texas. Led by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, and the University of North Texas Center for Higher Education, this summit focused on transfer student interface and service (Jacobs, Cutright, Niebling, Simon & Marling, 2010). The summit included keynote addresses from student success experts, the presentation of thirty Successful Transfer Enhancement Programs Awards, and professional development for participants (Jacobs et al., 2010). Along with these statewide
initiatives, institutions in Texas continue to implement transfer policies and initiatives to improve transfer student success, while policymakers continue to seek ways to mobilize success (THECB, 2014b).

A recent, comprehensive study in Texas explored the efficacy of transfer policy and practice in Texas by researching the perceptions of campus administrators, transfer students, and minority, first-generation, and non-traditional transfer students (Fann, 2013). The perceptions of students and campus administrators are important in measuring the efficacy of the present transfer system; and policymakers also have a stake in transfer success. This study explored another angle of the transfer pathway by exploring the perceptions of policymakers and their expectations for public institutions serving transfer students.

Policymakers play an important role in the formation of higher education policy. These perceptions of policymakers and those that influence transfer policy in Texas revealed priorities and values that impact institutions and transfer students. Recent public concern of college completion rates fuels the growing dissatisfaction with higher education, and Texas is included in the trend (Hamilton, 2012). Texas policymakers call for increased accountability including student success, learning outcomes, and graduation rates (THECB, 2014b). As in Texas, American higher education has been exposed to external political pressure as governors and legislators tie support to the institution’s budget or compliance (Trow, 2010). Administrators work with state government officials in executive and legislative branches to respond to concerns; while attempting to maintain autonomy and minimize political influence (Trow, 2010).
The transfer pathway in Texas is complex due to the nature of the Texas higher education system. Students experience the pitfalls and unintended consequences of the present transfer system (Fann, 2013; Habley et al., 2012; THECB, 2014b). Stakeholders in Texas higher education desire to see students transfer seamlessly into universities and persist through graduation. “Unless policymakers focus attention on expanding, streamlining, and simplifying common course numbering, course applicability, and articulation agreements, students will continue to fall through the transition cracks and student success will be minimized” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 352).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of legislators, coordinating board staff, and policy influencers on the Texas transfer pathway. This study identified areas of agreement and divergence between policymakers. The data also indicated policymakers’ assessment of policy and infrastructure affecting transfer success to achieve the influential completion agenda. Policymakers’ perceptions built a stronger understanding of expectations for public institutions.

“Policymakers believe that higher education is linked to the economic, social and cultural well-being of their state. Legislators are under pressure to show the results of their decisions, so it is no surprise that they frequently speak about the expectations they have of higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 91). Unless the other stakeholders can understand policymakers’ beliefs and intentions in their decisions, there can be confusion and frustration. Understanding policymakers’ perspectives and intentions for improving the transfer pathway can provide insight into future policy directions, and the pressure exerted by stakeholders and
public policy needs. In researching the powerful “the nature of the power and how they achieve their aims” can be understood, and policy influencers can then “be in a better position to influence future policy” (Walford, 2003, p. 186).

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What experience do state-level policymakers, coordinating board staff and influencers have with transfer policy and improving the transfer pathway for community college students transferring to universities?
2. What are state-level policymakers’ perceptions of the transfer pathway and their intended outcomes for transfer students?
3. How can the voices of policymakers and their influencers help refine our understanding of transfer policy development and improve student persistence and educational experiences?

Significance of Study

Texas has been considered “ground zero” in the national completion agenda and the battleground for higher education reform in the United States (Hamilton, 2013b; Kiley, 2013; Lindsay, 2014). Community colleges are a focus of the national completion movement (Mangan, 2014a). This study of the Texas pathway contributes to the knowledge needed to design significant change in transfer policy formation in Texas, and its role in reform efforts. Since Texas tends to be a trendsetter, the findings of this study are relevant to stakeholders beyond Texas.

Since the Transfer Summit in 2008, the relationship between Texas higher education and policymakers has been experiencing an erosion of confidence and collaboration (Hamilton,
2013b). Legislators have ordered a study of the community college system and the feasibility of restructuring the community college system under centralized administration (Hamilton, 2012). Legislators have also initiated the shift in aligning some formula funding with student outcomes for public institutions causing professional associations to respond with allocation recommendations (CPUPC, 2008, 2010; Hamilton, 2014). Policy recently mandates an annual report from the THECB of transfer student outcomes to compare institutions and encourage improvement (THECB, 2014b). Transfer student outcomes remains a predominate concern in Texas higher education with the announcement of a Texas Success Center to coordinate the multiple transfer initiatives around the state (Hamilton, 2013b). This study contributes to understanding the reasons why the public is losing confidence in public institutions, and the pressures exerted on policymakers to initiate reform and accountability as policymakers speak for the public interest.

For the Texas economy to be competitive with other states and to compete globally, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating adopted *Closing the Gaps by 2015* to focus state policy (THECB, 2013). *Closing the Gaps by 2015* established four primary goals used to measure higher education in Texas against our peer states:

- Participation: By 2015, add 630,000 more students to higher education over 2000 levels;

- Success: By 2015, award 210,000 undergraduate credentials (degrees and certificates) each year from high quality programs;

- Excellence: By 2015, substantially increase the number of nationally recognized programs or services at colleges and universities;

- Research: By 2015, increase the level of research and development obligations to Texas institutions to 6.5% of national research obligations (THECB, 2013, p. 1).
The significance of the study was that it focused on questions political actors seek to answer on how to contribute to these statewide goals by improving transfer success and college completion. This study was designed to analyze the areas of strength and weakness that policymakers, coordinating board staff, and policy influencers perceive in the Texas transfer system. Policymakers and their influencers provided a broader scope of the needs of the Texas economy, transfer students, and institutions to provide a seamless transfer pathway.

One facet that causes this study to be unique and significant was the voice of the policymakers and their influencers. Research on transfer success typically doesn’t include qualitative data from policymakers or policy influencers directly. Policy is often discussed, but not from the voice of policymakers and their unique experiences and perceptions of the transfer pathway in Texas.

This study aimed to provide insight into the future of transfer policy in Texas, and the future direction of the Texas transfer pathway. The findings are useful to future policymaking to improve transfer student success and to negotiate a better transfer pathway between institutions. “Among contemporary political scientists, the dominant view is that politics involves negotiation and conflict among sharply etched interests. Competing groups make trade-offs, seek victories, or accept defeat” (Helig, 2008, p. 30). This study demonstrated competing interests, exposed inadequate information, revealed misunderstandings and provided unmet needs in the current transfer policy in Texas.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were applied:
Completion - This term is interchangeable with graduation or persistence to degree stating the rate or percentage of students completing a degree with a specified time for an institution (Habley et al., 2012).

Course numbering - The course numbers assigned to college courses by individual institutions or a state that can require one common course numbering system for all public institutions (Root, 2013).

Native student - Students who do not transfer, and attend college where they begin college (Mullin, 2012). Native students are typically compared statistically to transfer students attending the same institution.

Persist – To be continuously enrolled to pursue a degree with the intent to graduate (Habley et al., 2012).

Policy levers or tools – The practices and procedures of governance and administration that “provide operational tools or levers of public policy through which elected and appointed leaders can strengthen either market or institutional influence” (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 198).

Reverse transfer - Several approaches that provide transfer students the opportunity to complete their associate degree while attending a four-year college, including a retroactive credit award (Fain, 2014). Students receive their credentials after they leave the community college, and the community college is able to increase their graduation rates by using reverse awarding of degrees (Bers, 2013).
**Statewide core curriculum or lower-division curriculum** - The common general education course requirements within the freshman and sophomore years of college, typically the beginning 60 credit hours of course work (Root, 2013).

**Transfer** - Acceptance of a student into one postsecondary institution from another postsecondary institution, which may include the transfer of credit hours (College Board, 2011; CPUPC, 2008; Root, 2013). The scope of this study was limited to Texas transfer students attending public institutions.

**Transfer and articulation agreement** - Agreements that describe how community college courses taken at a community college will transfer to a four-year college or university (Handel, 2007).

Voluntary, formal or informal agreements or memorandums of understanding listing the requirements and rules for the transfer of credits between postsecondary institutions (CPUPC, 2010; Root, 2013). Complex process which decides how a course fulfills general education, major requirements, electives, grade and credit hour requirements considering state prescriptions for public institutions (Bers, 2013).

**Transfer pathway or process** - The pathway between community colleges and four-year institutions (College Board, 2011). “In the traditional transfer pathway, students begin post-secondary education at a local community college, usually completing lower-division, general education courses, along with introductory courses in whatever major they have selected” (Handel, 2013, p. 7). The most prevalent transfer pathway is from the two-year institution to the four-year institution (Marling, 2013).
Transfer student - A student who attends more than one postsecondary institution during their college career (CPUPC, 2008; Habley et al., 2012). “A student who started her postsecondary education at a public two-year institution and stayed there at least one full-time semester is considered to have transferred if at any point she was observed at a four-year institution of any type, anywhere for at least one full-time semester” (Handel & Williams, 2012, p. 24).

Unintended consequences - The side effect of a policy their creators did not anticipate (Mettler, 2014).
APPENDIX B

EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW
This chapter explored the relevant statistics and characteristics of the community college transfer student. The institutional roles critical to the transfer pathway were discussed along with its challenges and complexities that transfer students face. A summary on public policy and accountability initiatives within the Texas higher education system revealed the various policymakers, and those that influence their decisions in building the infrastructure of the Texas transfer pathway for community college students to navigate. This chapter provided a summary of the literature reviewed for the scope of this study.

**Relevant Statistics**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics for the fall of 2012, there were eighteen million undergraduates enrolled in over 7,000 institutions in the United States (Newman, 2014). For the 2012 fiscal year, Newman (2014) reports total revenue for four-year public universities fell 1.5%, but they spent 3% more than the previous year. During the same time, total state funding for four-year public institutions in the United States declined $3 billion and total federal funding declined $1 billion (Newman, 2014). “State appropriations now account for a slightly smaller portion of four-year public-college revenue (20.9%) than tuition and fees (21.1%)” (Newman, 2014).

The national graduation rates at four-year institutions show 59% of students who entered a four-year college in 2006 graduated within six years; while two-thirds of community college students failed to graduate within three years before dropping out or transferring (Newman, 2014). However, the metrics used to measure community college success and track transfer students are insufficient to accurately measure completion or transfer rates (Cohen &
Kisker, 2010; CPUPC, 2010). Efforts to improve the measurement of transfer success and graduation rates continue on the federal or state level by various groups like the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, many states and university systems, and the national Voluntary System of Accountability (CPUPC, 2010).

Texas public community college students are a diverse population. Hispanic students comprise 38.8% of the community college population; African American students represent 14.1% of enrollment; and White students comprise 37.2% of the community college population (THECB, 2014c). In Texas, the rate of students receiving a certificate or degree from a Texas colleges and universities within six years of high school graduation has risen from 17.2% to 19.4% according to a recent study (The Texas Tribune, 2013). Of all undergraduate students pursuing degrees and certificates in Texas public institutions, 58.6% are attending two-year colleges (CCA, 2011). The graduation rate for full-time Texas students pursuing associates degrees at public institutions entering the fall of 2004 and finishing in four years was 11.2%, while the rate for bachelor’s degree seekers entering in fall 2002, and graduating in eight years was 62.6% (CCA, 2011). These statistics represent the challenge Texas higher education faces in increasing college completion rates, specifically at the associate’s level. By the year 2020, there will be a 29% skills gap between the jobs requiring career certifications or college degrees and the Texas adults who are qualified to fill them which jeopardizes the state economy (CCA, 2011).

The Community College Transfer

Student characteristics of transfer students have been heavily studied (Doyle, 2009; Dowd, Cheslock & Melguizo, 2008; Gonzalez, Hilmer and Sandy, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Research of
transfer students has analyzed the socioeconomic backgrounds, psychological factors, educational backgrounds and aspirations (Tinto, 1993; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012). Some studies have evaluated psychological attributes that might influence transfer students (Habley et al., 2012; Wang, 2012). Research has found that the grade point average earned at community college, college involvement, and math remediation also are strong predictors of persistence (Wang, 2009). In addition, motivational characteristics may be strongly related to transfer persistence, including attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Wang, 2009, 2012). These motivational behaviors may be influenced by training, environmental support, and interaction with faculty (Wang, 2012). Understanding the upward transfer to four-year institutions requires institutions and policymakers are knowledgeable of student needs and attributes, so that initiatives and policy can positively influence transfer students and success. Community colleges serve disadvantaged students, and the initiatives and intentional efforts to facilitate a successful transfer process is important to access and equity in American higher education (Dowd et al., 2008; Wang, 2012).

There is an abundance of literature addressing the transfer shock that occurs when students change institutions. Transfer shock has been attributed to the initial drop of student grade point averages and transfer student failure (Flaga, 2006; Grites, 2013). Academic leaders and enrollment managers search for ways to improve institutional effectiveness to ensure transfer success and reduce transfer shock (Flaga, 2006).

There can be informational and cultural barriers to transfer students. The need for transfer agents to help community college students can help improve the experiences of underserved populations (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; THECB 2014b). In a study by Bensimon and
Dowd (2009) social capital plays a large role in creating educational opportunities for racial minority students. Faculty members, counselors and other institutional agents can cause successful experiences. The same study by Bensimon and Dowd (2009) found that successful transfer experiences were linked to authority figures that provided resources between community college and the university to cross cultural barriers. Transfer agents aid in providing assistance, networking, resources, and opportunities; and, these relationships can build confidence and aid in knowing the questions to ask during the transition period (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; THECB 2014b). These transfer agents can benefit students that lack the academic and social skills to navigate an institution’s structure and culture (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009).

**Outcomes for Students Starting at Public Two-Year Institutions**

Contemporary studies are attempting to determine if college does matter. Scholars have found difficulty in measuring the outcomes of college by quantifying the amount of learning that occurs during the undergraduate years (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Berrett, 2013). There are differences in attributes, methodologies, and interpretations of studies for measuring outcomes (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Berrett, 2013). The value of obtaining a baccalaureate degree is the driving factor behind community college students transferring to four-year colleges (Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The value of a baccalaureate then correlates to the need for effective transfer policies for students and institutions (Trow, 2010).

College completion for community college students is typically defined as the number of certificate or associate degrees conferred at an institution. “Students who started at a public community college at age 20 or younger have the highest college completion rate (41.8%)
compared to 29.3% for those age 20-24 and 37.5% for those over age 24, according to analysis of outcomes after six years” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014a).

**Online Students Transfer and Graduate Less**

Online learning has become a major form of instruction in the twenty-first century. Not only has on-line courses grown at public and private institutions, but the explosion of for-profit, online institutions is changing the complexion of American higher education (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). With their growing popularity, on-line education offers students flexibility and convenience (Brown, 2011). In an analysis of community colleges and transfer students, the impact of on-line education cannot be ignored.

Brown (2011) reports that Washington State community college students enrolled in online courses graduate and transfer at a lower rate than students enrolled in traditional courses. In Brown’s 2011 study, the students enrolled in the online courses were generally more affluent and had stronger academic records. The study also noted that students in developmental education were at greater risk of non-completion (Brown, 2011).

In 2010, a similar study was completed on the Virginia community college system and online education. Jaggars and Xu (2010) found a significant difference in the rates of completion between online and traditional courses. These two studies (Brown, 2011; Jaggars & Xu, 2010) reinforce the need to assess student persistence and factors which negatively impact student success, completion, and transfer. Awareness can lead to course design strategies and improved academic support services to reduce the barriers students face.

The few empirical studies that have compared online and face-to-face outcomes in the community college setting suggest that students are substantially less likely to complete online
courses, even after controlling for a wide array of student characteristics (Carpenter, Brown, & Hickman, 2004; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Zavarella, 2008). Overall across studies, students who took a given course online had estimated withdrawal rates that were 10 to 15 percentage points higher than students who took the course face-to-face (Jaggars & Xu, 2010). Students in online courses often complain of technical difficulties, a sense of isolation, a relative lack of structure, and a general lack of support, all of which may contribute to low completion rates (Jaggars & Xu, 2010). Institutions should consider these types of studies and their own online student outcomes as they grow their online offerings and improve student academic resources.

The American Community Colleges

The College Board (2008) claims that “American community colleges are the nation’s overlooked asset. As the United States confronts the challenges of globalization, two-year institutions are indispensable to the American future” (p. 15). As an avenue for social mobility, community colleges provide an entry point to higher education for students (College Board, 2006, 2008; Trow, 2010). American community colleges “are the Ellis Island of American higher education, the crossroads at which K-12 education meets colleges and universities, and the institutions that give many students the tools to navigate the modern world” (College Board; 2008; p. 15).

Community colleges are the largest sector of higher education in America. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2014b), there are 1,132 community colleges, which enroll 12.8 million students. Out of the 12.8 million community college students in America, 7.7 million are enrolled in credit programs; 60% are enrolled part-time; and their average age is 28 (AACC, 2014b). Women constitute 57% of the community college student
body which represents 45% of all undergraduates in America (AACC, 2014b). The age of students ranges from teenagers to senior adults, and take a wide array of courses in academic and technical fields (AACC, 2014b). “Community college enrollment has grown by 21% between 2003 and 2011, but its proportion of the undergraduate population has remained fairly constant at 45%” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013).

Some of the most vulnerable college students in America are studying on community college campuses. Forty-two percent of first-time freshmen enroll in community colleges and 36% of those represent the first generation to attend college (AACC, 2014b). Of all the undergraduate students in America in 2012, 56% of Hispanic students; 48% of Black students; 44% of Asian/Pacific Islander students; and 59% of Native American students attend community colleges (AACC, 2014b). One reason why community colleges are attractive is the cost. The average annual tuition and fees for a community college is $3,260, compared to the cost of public, instate four-year colleges at $8,890 (AACC, 2014b).

Community colleges are a large sector of American higher education with access and equity as their mission (College Board, 2006; Trow, 2010). The College Board (2006) reveals that there are several reasons students choose a community college: to transfer to four-year colleges; technology; affordability; assessable faculty; class size; variety of programs; flexibility; support services; community service; student success, and their commitment to diversity. These reasons contribute to the growth of community colleges in America over the last century. The National Commission on Community Colleges recently published a report calling for more support from the federal government, better accountability measures and a significant change in transfer policies (College Board, 2008). According to The College Board (2008), community
colleges train nearly 80% of police officers, firefighters, and emergency responders; educate over 50% of nurses and health care professionals; almost 40% of all foreign students in the United States; award over 800,000 associate degrees and certificates each year; and serve half of all baccalaureate degree recipients that begin in community colleges.

Despite the proportion of undergraduate students served and the evidence of success outcomes, community colleges are overlooked in national discussions and education policy concerns (College Board, 2008). The College Board’s Center for Innovative Thought (2008) recognizes four trends in the United States: economic vulnerability, growing instability of the middle class and social mobility, demographic and population shifts, and the need to rebuild capacity in schools and communities. The College Board (2008) identifies obstacles facing community colleges. These barriers include rising costs and enrollment with declining resources. Community colleges are foundational elements to social mobility and college access; however there has been less of an emphasis placed on student success and measuring outcomes (College Board, 2008).

The National Commission on Community Colleges recommends a new social contract between national leaders, state officials, and community colleges designed to place community colleges in the lead position to strengthen American communities and national competitiveness thus strengthening the economy (College Board, 2008). The commission recommends that Congress and the President enact legislation that creates universal public education through at least 14 years of school; enhances programs and infrastructure, student services and aid, while creating a stronger culture of evidence (College Board, 2008).
The second recommendation by the Commission (College Board, 2008) encourages community colleges, governors and state legislators improve financial models, increase transfer rates and align the curriculum between K-12 schools and four-year institutions. Regarding transfer students, the Commission (College Board, 2008) believes that the need for graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as well as elementary and secondary education will be dramatic in the future. The Commission identifies a baccalaureate completion gap affecting students from low-income backgrounds and ethnic minority groups; and provides ways to expand opportunities and success at community colleges can contribute to more qualified students transferring to four-year institutions (College Board, 2008). “The Commission believes statewide articulation agreements on acceptable programs of study that qualify students for junior standing on transfer should be developed to encourage degree completion” (College Board, 2008).

As reported by the College Board (2008), the third recommendation of the Commission asks for new accountability measures that are suited for community colleges and their unique missions. This recommendation also encourages an increase in degree attainment to meet national workforce needs by emphasizing access, excellence, and success (College Board, 2008). Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2010) also stress degree completion:

Social equity will not be achieved through access to further education alone. In order to fully enjoy the benefits of higher education and to contribute to the society and economy in which they live, individuals need to complete their program of study. True progress depends on high levels of completion for all population groups. (p. 45)

Altbach et al. (2010) continue that “mechanisms to support success are essential, yet they are rarely in place and where they do exist inadequately address the needs of the new diverse populations enrolling” (p. 45). Higher education in America continues to face challenges in
measuring student success in community colleges, and providing adequate resources to serve their diversified, vulnerable student population.

Institutional Roles Critical to the Transfer Pathway

Policymakers expect institutions to implement transfer policies; create transfer-friendly culture; and articulate campus priorities (THECB, 2014b). To understand the efficacy of the transfer pathway, an understanding of the critical role campus leadership, faculty and boards play is imperative. If institutional board members, faculty, and campus leaders are not engaged in promoting transfer success, the state-level policies and initiatives developed may experience limited implementation (Bensimon, 2007; Eaton, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Helm & Cohen, 2001; Maliszewski, Crabill & Nespoli, 2012; Simmons, 2010; White, 2011). The participants of this study were asked how institutional leaders should be engaged in the process.

The Role of the President

In reviewing literature on building transfer-friendly cultures, there is virtually no literature on the characteristics of effective leadership. For community colleges and universities to cultivate transfer-friendly cultures, leadership from the top of the organization is imperative (Herrera & Jain, 2013). Miller (2013) stresses “the presidents emphasize the academic mission of their institutions and the importance of academic rigor as an essential component of the transfer pipeline. Each has infused the notion of importance of transfer into their campus culture” (p. 42). The president sets the tone for priorities on campus; while most of the work done with transfer students is handled by academic advisors, faculty, and enrollment management staff. The offices that work with transfer students report to different areas of the campus and to separate directors, deans, or vice-presidents. Organizational
conflict, confusion, or stagnation can occur when there is not an intentional direction from the top.

Dr. Edward Hernandez served as the Chancellor of Rancho Santiago Community College District for thirteen years in California. Part of his success as chancellor was his work moving community college students into four-year universities according to Stern (2010). “In addition to creating job options, Hernandez said that the success of a community college stems from the number of its students that transfer to four-year colleges. Why? It’s a statewide priority for the system” (Stern, 2010, para. 18). Dr. Hernandez encouraged a transfer culture in his college district:

The colleges identify students who are doing well, offer specialized counseling, encourage students to take more classes and amass more credits, enabling them to transfer. Interested students are taken on bus trips to visit four-year state colleges such as the University of California-Santa Cruz and expose them to a campus. Studies show that students who succeed at community college have a connection to college, and these trips and having mentors help create that connection. (Stern, 2010, para. 19)

As another example of presidential leadership in transfer success, the Big Ideas Project demonstrates success. Maliszewski et al. (2012) report the New Jersey Council of County Colleges created the Big Ideas Project, and it was chaired by all 19 community college presidents as they tackled eight areas integral to student success. “One issue critical to college completion and improving student success continues to be the student transfer experience from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions” (Maliszewski et al., 2012, p. 70). To move New Jersey’s 19 community colleges to a unified, effective transfer experience for students, presidential leadership, and involvement was needed according to Maliszewski et al., (2012). The presidents can influence their institutional priorities and coordinate multiple divisions towards a goal; and without presidential priority, initiatives can be less effective
Maliszewski et al. (2012) state that even though the presidents at the community colleges were important elements to improving the transfer experience for students in New Jersey, the participation with university presidents was also needed. One of the state university president’s took a leadership role and bridged the universities and the community colleges together to increase collaboration and cohesion (Maliszewski et al., 2012). This collaboration helped create more ownership in the transfer experience in New Jersey’s colleges and universities (Maliszewski et al., 2012).

As another example of presidential leadership in transfer success, the President of Long Beach City College, Eloy Ortiz Oakley cited his most important contribution:

Getting all of Long Beach City College’s stakeholders focused on a specific goal: to improve our student success and to focus all of our energies and resources on improving our students’ ability to complete their educational goals. (Simmons, 2010, para. 26)

When asked about financial pressure and increases in college applications, President Oakley continues by saying: “At a time when we have the greatest demand, we have the least amount of resources we’ve had in years” (Simmons, 2010, para. 32). His statement supports the
challenges higher education leaders face with increasing pressure to improve student success while utilizing less state financial support. These are examples of leaders actively engaged in the transfer culture of their college positively contributes to the effectiveness of supporting transfer success.

Presidents need to maintain a positive relationship with state legislators. Richardson et al. (1999) remarked that the “institution’s future depends almost entirely on the political skills of its president” in the political environment in Texas as noted by a faculty member in a study. (p. 135). McMillen (2010) states that “legislators get a lot of political capital out of representing universities” (p. 21). McMillen (2010) says that presidents should know the state agencies that impact budgets and that “the president needs to know the players and the politics in play” (p. 21). Since the governor’s office establishes the tone in the state and makes appointments that affect higher education, presidents should be supportive of the governor (McMillen, 2010). State legislators have two important political priorities that should be understood—the desire to be reelected and the priority to be loyal to their party affiliation (McMillen, 2010).

**Role of the Faculty**

The role of faculty and their impact on student success cannot be overlooked by chief academic officers, deans, or presidents. The relationships they form with students are important. Faculty members are critical to the connections students make with the campus academic environment and curriculum (White, 2011). Leaders should acknowledge the role of faculty in transfer success. White (2011) states:

> Achieving successful outcomes requires strong and courageous leadership at all levels of the institution, but getting the faculty to improve teaching and learning outcomes very often requires a president/chief executive officer who not only understands the value of the teaching and learning process but also supports that process through action. Given
funding limitations for faculty development and training, the president must be an advocate for both to create successful learning outcomes” (p. 23).

White (2011) explains that faculty development requires financial resources which may be limited, especially on the community college campus. Improving teaching and learning on a campus should include full-time and part-time faculty. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) stresses that strategies like enforcing strict attendance policies, eliminating late registration, providing highly effective advising and implementing student success courses can increase the number of students getting through community college successfully. Faculty members have a role in implementing these strategies. Data from retention studies and research can inform those focused on improving strategies in teaching and learning.

Improving teaching and learning on a campus can be especially challenging for community colleges that have limited professional development funding and high percentages of part-time faculty. “But a renewed focus on teaching and learning in the community colleges should be implemented to improve college persistence and completion rates” (White, 2011, p. 27). Leaders are challenged with improving teaching effectiveness and gaining support from the faculty to implement changes. Building a transfer-friendly culture must involve faculty and staff at the community college and university level (Herrera & Jain, 2013). Community college faculty members play a critical role in preparing students for upper-level coursework. Leaders can influence the teaching and learning on campus and transfer student outcomes. “The community colleges’ roles in higher education would be well served in producing more highly skilled workers and college transfer-ready students who persist and complete at the baccalaureate level” (White, 2011, p. 27).
Aside from faculty development, there is a need for collaboration between community college and university faculty. Vertically aligning the curriculum between institutions can aid transfer students in seamless transfer, shorten the time required to graduate and avoid repeating similar courses (THECB, 2014b). Leaders can facilitate opportunities for faculty to work together. Examples of these linkages are providing incentives for faculty to write grants together, team-teach courses, build community college scholars programs, transfer clubs and dual admissions programs (Helm & Cohen, 2001). Maliszewski et al. (2012) recommends “…convening regular meetings of discipline-based faculty work groups to develop the major-to-major transfer pathways as well as provide overall leadership on statewide transfer reform efforts….faculty leadership and involvement matters most in achieving successful transfer results for community college students” (p. 77).

Curricular concerns at the university level do impact community colleges and is an area of tension between the two types of institutions. Eaton (2007) states the curriculum at universities causes difficulty for students in choosing the correct courses at the community college and determining the timing of the transfer.

The community college’s role in connecting the lower school with the higher learning is carried predominantly by the liberal arts curriculum that it provides and by its students’ tendencies to matriculate and, eventually, transfer. The liberal arts curriculum was inherited from the universities, modified in the direction of general education, and further influenced by student abilities and the universities’ shifting requirements. (Eaton, 2007, p. 211)

The tension between the two can impede the efforts to improve transfer success. Four-year institutions influence the curriculum at the community college, often with little warning or communication (Eaton, 2007). Some changes may aid curricular alignment to increase academic persistence in transfer students to baccalaureate degrees. However, these
university-level changes can cause tension by limiting the academic decision making for community college faculty (Eaton, 2007).

Faculty members at both levels play a crucial role in the success of transfer students. Students do not need to be forgotten in the curricular discussion.

The major hurdle for community college students pursuing a baccalaureate is the ability to transfer credits from the two-year to the four-year institution...Only a little over half of the students who attended community college were able to transfer all their credits to four-year institutions. The articulation policies—the transition from a two- to a four-year program through agreement between institutions on the manner in which credits can be transferred—did not allow these students to get credit for all their work at the community college level. A similar problem existed for noncommunity college students who attended more than one four-year institution. Universities want students to experience their own courses. (Gardner, 2007, para. 23-24)

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) stresses that strategies like reducing general education choices and structured program pathways can increase the number of students getting through community college successfully.

Faculty play important roles in curriculum design and their decisions impact student success. Curricular decisions are held by the faculty of institution. However, the transfer students attending more than one institution are at a disadvantage to native students that enroll in the same institution for their entire degree (THECB, 2014b). Leaders can lead faculty to communicate and collaborate across institutions to promote seamless transfer. Knowing the challenges transfer students face is important for faculty and leaders to understand.

Role of the Board

Presidents work with many constituencies including faculty, staff, administration, and the community. In creating a transfer-friendly culture, presidents should include board members in the work of improving transfer success (White, 2011). Board members are acutely
aware of the growing challenges on college campuses with accountability and funding pressures. Board members can also play a role in creating a transfer-friendly culture on campus. White (2011) states that the “president is the sole leader in the institution who must be able to get the buy-in and support from boards of trustees” (p. 23). The relationship with the board is important in deciding priorities and budgeting.

Although mutual trust and respect is at the top of the list of effective board-president/CEO relationships, so is keeping the board informed about student learning outcomes and overall student success. According to Boggs (2006), “achieving access alone is not enough; the development of a culture that places learning at the heart of the institution must have the demonstrated support of the CEO and the trustees.” (White, 2011, p. 24)

White (2011) stresses it is important for board members to understand the complexity of higher education and the president’s vision for success. Presidents work closely with boards reporting the college’s progress towards goals. It is important that transfer success initiatives are listed along with other outcomes reporting to the board. “Establishing a system for effective governance and board/CEO relations goes a long way toward achieving successful outcomes and institutional accountability” (White, 2011, p. 29).

In an interview with the President of Long Beach City College, Eloy Ortiz Oakley described his work with his governing board of trustees:

One of the primary things we did was work with our governing board of trustees to make student success the number one priority of the college, and thus through our planning process we reallocated resources to ensure that we served that mission first. We were able to reduce and scale back and eliminate programs and services that the college was engaged in, but that did not serve that goal directly, and focus in on that. We wanted to ensure that our students could get their certificates and degrees and be able to transfer successfully. We were fortunate that the entire leadership of the college rallied around that. (Simmons, 2010, para. 46)
From President Oakley’s description (Simmons, 2010), one gets a sense that the board of trustees understands the challenges of the college; supports the president and the college; and, uses their ability to reallocate resources to increase transfer success despite financial constraints. The interview with President Oakley (Simmons, 2010) is an example of a collaborative, participative relationship between the president, the board of trustees, and the college leadership in rallying around transfer success goals.

**Traits of Practitioners**

As leaders move their campuses toward change efforts and improved effectiveness, sensitivity to the schema of constituents can be helpful. Understanding the perspectives of the faculty, board members or staff can aid leaders in communicating effectively and influencing change. Grasmick, Davies, and Harbour (2012) claims a leader’s vision for an institution is built on the leader’s schema from the accumulation of his experiences and perspectives. Grasmick et al. (2012) says “…leaders are keenly aware of the significance of their values and belief system as a frame for moving their institutions forward” (p. 79).

Grasmick et al. (2012) identify participative leadership as highly interactive, dynamic and is an approach for building cultures for broad participation in organizations towards a central vision. The core values and beliefs impact the level of participative leadership cultivated by leaders (Grasmick et al., 2012), including their level of interest in transfer success. To develop a transfer-friendly culture, leaders should consider how their leadership style and perspectives of transfer students affect their leadership. Leaders should also consider whether their leadership style accommodates the level of participative leadership on campus required for creating a stronger transfer-friendly culture.
In K-12 education, there is heavy scholarship on the impact practitioners (teachers, principals, counselors, et al.) have on student success (Bensimon, 2007). In higher education, the “dominant paradigm of student success is based exclusively on personal characteristics of students that have been found to correlate with persistence and graduation” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 443). There is little research examining the characteristics of faculty and leaders that influence student outcomes in higher education. “When I say that practitioners are missing, I am referring to the lack of scholarly and practical attention toward understanding how the practitioner—her knowledge, beliefs, experiences, education, sense of self-efficacy, etc.—affects how students experience their education” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 444).

Despite the rich literature correlating student characteristics to outcomes in higher education, there is little scholarship on faculty, advisors, deans, or other leaders (Bensimon, 2007). A campus intent on improving success outcomes needs to know more about practitioners’ impact on students. Practitioners do play a role in a student’s success or failure. Knowing how faculty, staff, and leaders can have a positive impact to student success, an emphasis on building relationships and supporting students can produce results. Creating a transfer-friendly culture involves faculty, staff, administrators, and executive leadership (Herrera & Jain, 2013). The literature clearly identifies a large gap in research of higher education leadership and their attributes in affecting student success. However, Walford (2003) states that research on leadership in education is a growing topic.

The role of the president cannot be overstated and neither can the role of faculty. Faculty spend the most time with students directly in preparing them for degree completion. The teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom has a strong correlation to student
persistence and transfer success (White, 2011). Providing faculty development and instructional resources can positively impact transfer success (White, 2011). Also, measuring teaching effectiveness and institutional spending in light of transfer student success can help leaders set priorities and build the infrastructure necessary for student success (Rabovsky, 2012; THECB, 2014b). Building infrastructure requires support of the president and the board of trustees. White (2011) claims the relationship between the president and the board is crucial to sustain the momentum and affect change. Board members should understand the challenges of transfer students and the institutional characteristics that impact students’ ability to persist to graduation. Leaders in higher education experience pressure to demonstrate student outcomes including transfer success and graduation (THECB, 2014b) and board members can aid in supporting change efforts (White, 2011).

Leaders can analyze the impact of their campus transfer initiatives and institutional culture on student success outcomes. Understanding what impacts student success can help leaders in higher education improve the way they approach transfer students (Herrera & Jain, 2013; Maliszewski et al., 2012; Simmons, 2010; Stern, 2010). Examples of transfer-friendly practices include transfer centers, transfer advising, transfer orientation, transfer engagement activities, and scholarships (Miller, 2013; THECB, 2014b). “Ensuring that students receive accurate, updated information about transfer of course credits is critical to timely degree completion at the four-year institution” (Miller, 2013, p. 47). Marling (2013) reaffirms that early degree audits can aid students in making informed decisions before paying for tuition.

Understanding the relationship between leaders and their role in the transfer process can influence student graduation rates and guide institutions in participative planning and
decision-making. The completion agenda is a national focus in higher education (ACE, 2013). To improve the production of baccalaureate degrees, leaders are key to the creation of transfer-friendly cultures and student success (Helm & Cohen, 2001). Miller (2013) reports that one study identified three characteristics that contribute to higher transfer rates: a structured academic pathway; a student-center culture; and culturally sensitive leadership (Miller, 2013). These characteristics transcend the responsibilities of a single area of the campus. These characteristics require a collaborative, intentional approach by faculty, staff and administrators to create a transfer-friendly campus.

The transfer process is complicated and there are several factors that contribute to transfer success (Handel, 2013). More research should be initiated to understand the roles stakeholders play. Future research should seek to gain the perspective and professional traits of academic leaders, faculty, and board members that positively impact transfer success.

Aligning Public Priorities with Policy

Public policy attempts to impact performance within the state and provide direction. Richardson et al. (1999) define “the goal of state policy, then, is to use state authority to achieve public priorities by balancing the interest of institutions and education professionals with broader societal concerns” (p. 195). Policymakers weigh market forces, societal shifts, resource limitations, and institutional needs with a wide array of needs in the state outside of the higher education system; and their decisions have short-term and long-term consequences (Richardson et al., 1999). There are many things to consider in the policy process.

Whitty and Edwards (2003) explain there are different “notions of who the “powerful” are in education and how their power is exercised” as well as “different perceptions of
rationality in policy-making” (pp. 355-361). Whitty and Edwards (2003) also discuss that policymakers are not able to predict the consequences of their policies, and the process of implementation may only “broadly and vaguely” resemble its initial plan (p. 362).

Power relations figure at all levels in the system, and power struggles may occur in and around the policy’s design and construction that derive only loosely from its formal objectives. But to reduce education policy to the sum of innumerable individual decisions...is to ignore...the power relations between different parts of the system. (p. 368)

This study sought to discuss the politics, ideologies, and interest groups associated with the Texas transfer pathway. This study also sought to understand the social and economic relations of decision making and the barriers to transfer success. The term “policy scholarship” refers to the:

Examination of the politics and ideologies and interest groups of the policy-making process, the making visible of internal contradictions within policy formulations, and the wider structuring and constraining effects of the social and economic relations within which policy-making is taking place (Grace 1991:3). (Whitty & Edwards, 2003, pp. 638-645)

In studying policymaking, personal relationships can influence the analysis of power and the relationship should be acknowledged at the “micro-politics” level among policymakers and their influencers (Whitty & Edwards, 2003, p. 655). Whitty and Edwards (2003) recommend that policy studies of the powerful should describe and analyze the micro-politics of personal relationships and the macro-politics involved (p. 655).

Social Mobility

Politics in American higher education may be shifting social mobility downward causing growing social inequality (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014). Mettler (2014) argues that American higher education is returning to a type of caste system that is deepening the gaps between
social divisions. Federal and state support of higher education has significantly declined in recent years due to a changing belief that higher education benefits the individual more than society as a whole (Fain, 2013; Fischer & Stripling, 2014; Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014). According to Kelderman (2014), between 2008 and 2012, per-student state spending on public higher education as declined about 27%. Hiltonsmith and Draut (2014) astutely point to the funding of higher education is heavily carried by students at the same period when low- and middle-income families experience “stagnant or declining household income” (p. 1). Han del (2013) states the “increasing stratification of higher education makes transfer the most important-and perhaps the only-viable avenue for students from underserved groups” (p. 11). Fann (2013) stresses the serious economic consequences for all levels of the society as the achievement gap grows.

Mettler (2014) believes that by shifting from a public good to a private good, America is “squandering one of the finest accomplishments and historic legacies, a system of higher education that was long characterized by excellence and wide accessibility” (para. 2). America no longer leads the world in college participation (Mettler, 2014). In the last thirty years, eleven other nations have risen above America in baccalaureate graduation rates (Mettler, 2014) “The decreasing affordability of higher education is eroding the last relatively secure path into middle class, as more students take on larger amounts of debt to finance their higher education, or forego it altogether” (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014).

Hiltonsmith and Draut (2014) claim that state higher education funding per student has declined $2,394 from 2008 to 2012, which is a 26.7 % decrease. In examining state funding per
student, Texas ranks the twentieth state in the United States paying $7,202 which is a 21.9% decrease since 2007 (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014).

One idea recently proposed by a policy-advocacy group suggests a competitive federal grant program to offer states the incentive to increase state allocations and lower higher education costs (Keierleber, 2014a). The Center for American Progress suggests the federal government could match state funding if states “agreed to carry out reforms that ensured students would have access to an affordable and high-quality education” (Keierleber, 2014a, para 2). In addition to improving a college going culture in elementary and secondary students, the plan would build more stable state support, improve policies for admission, transfer, and student success and college readiness (Keierleber, 2014a).

Social mobility is further limited by the type of institution attended. Mettler (2014) explains that “many needy students are sequestered into separate and inferior institutions, including the for-profits, from which they are likely to emerge without degrees and with crushing levels of debt” (para. 10). Stripling and Fischer (2014) state “College students and their families, who just a decade ago paid for about one-third of the cost of their education, are on track to pay for most of it. In nearly half of the states, they already do” (para 2). “The rapid expansion of the community college system in the United States put postsecondary institutions within the geographic reach of most of the American population” (Altbach et al., 2010, p. 41). This increased accessibility does not equate to increased transfer and baccalaureate obtainment (Handel & Williams, 2012). The likelihood of transfer for community college students to universities continues to be affected by the socioeconomic status of the student (Altbach et al., 2010; Dougherty, 2003; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006).
The three areas that policy is failing according to Mettler (2014) are insufficient federal student aid, declining state support, and the large portion of aid given to for-profit institutions with poor success rates. Mettler (2014) describes three types of problems with policies: design problems, unintended consequences, and lateral effects. Policies should be reviewed to stay relevant. Mettler (2014) explains “the extent which lawmakers engage in policy maintenance depends on the political context in which they dwell” (para. 27).

In 1947, the President’s Commission on Higher Education warned: ‘If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at all at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them. (Mettler, 2014, para.42)

Public Policy

The environment and system designs established through policy actions influence the performance of higher education systems (Richardson & Martinez, 2009). “Policy environments are determined be the roles states adopt in trying to find an appropriate balance between the values and preferences of those who lead and staff colleges and universities and the demands of other stakeholders who rely on higher education services” (Richardson & Martinez, 2009, p. 5). The state determines the expected services institutions are to provide, and develop policies to support the public’s priorities, as explained by Richardson and Martinez (2009).

To describe system design, Richardson and Martinez (2009) says it is encompasses the number and type of community colleges and public universities; institutional missions; the characteristics and powers of agencies between government and institutions; the number and diversity of academic programs; and the role of private institutions. A segmented system provides of individual governing boards that work directly with the state; a unified system is
characterized by a consolidated governing board that governs all public institutions; and a federal system includes a coordinating board with responsibilities to make decisions representing public interest (Richardson & Martinez, 2009). The State of Texas is a federal system that currently authorizes the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in its role as rule maker, liaison, and coordinator of Texas higher education (Richardson et al., 1999; THECB, 2014b).

**State Policy**

Policymakers were the focus of this study and the levers or tools they used to influence institutional or student behavior. State policy shapes the process for students to transition from community colleges to universities, but it can have other consequences or intentions.

“State policy can also affect the demand for higher education. It might be argued, for instance, that by providing need-based financial aid, states broaden access by increasing opportunities for potential students. This, in effect, changes the demand for higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 78).

State policy affects the demand and supply of higher education. “Supply speaks to the availability of higher education services in a state. Institutions are the providers of the services, and their capacity to offer higher education services is influenced by state policy (Martinez, 2004, p. 78). The budget making authority of policymakers have a direct impact on the number of institutions, faculty, staff, and services that can be offered to the public. “States directly influence the supply of higher education services by the level of funding they provide to institutions” (Martinez, 2004, p. 78).
Martinez (2004) explains that “any state policy aimed at the funding, governance, or operations of institutions influences supply. Students are ultimately affected by these policies, just as institutions are affected by policies directed toward students” (p. 78). Policies are created by the values and intentions of the policymaker; and those decisions should be informed of scope of the change and who will be affected by it.

The best that can be said is that the trade-offs inherent in any prospective state policy change should be identified so that an informed discourse may emerge. The resulting policy should be based on a mixture of values, ideals, and fiscal realities unique to the state. No state would be advised to completely ignore one sector over the other simply because of demographic shifts in the population. A focus on either the two- or four-year sector does not imply the exclusion of policy in the other sector. (Martinez, 2004, p. 85)

Institutions are dependent on financial support to maintain their level of services and academic offerings. Policymakers know they make the budget allocations for higher education. To influence the behavior of institutions in the direction desired by policymakers, “the dominant policy mechanism states have used to ensure efficient operations within their education is accountability. Monitoring and assessment systems are commonplace in states across the nation today, and it can be expected that such systems will continue to evolve” (Martinez, 2004, p. 86).

There are two types of state appropriations: the ones that flow to students and the ones that flow to institutions. “State policy aimed at student aid influences demand, whereas policy aimed at institutions influences supply” (Martinez, 2004, p. 88). State appropriations impact the state higher education system. Policymakers influence the economy and the capacity of institutions when they make decisions about institutional funding (Martinez, 2004).
Challenges and Complexities within the Transfer Pathway

A review of literature finds leaders in American higher education face a multitude of challenges on today’s college campuses. Among the challenges of growing enrollments and decreasing state revenues, there is also accountability pressure to improve teaching effectiveness and to increase learning outcomes (Brint, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Mangan, 2013; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005; Sigler, 2007; Zusman, 2005). Only half of community college students seeking baccalaureate degrees actually earn one (Handel & Herrera, 2006). The pressure to produce more college graduates is shifting higher education’s focus from college access to college completion, which highlights the transfer pathway used by millions of students (Handel, 2013). The college completion agenda challenges higher education to reduce student attrition and increase graduation rates (CPUPC, 2010; Hamilton, 2013a; Mangan, 2013).

Graduation rates are broadly defined as being flawed measures of success or college completion. The measure has been debated as it is defined by the federal government. Selingo (2013) explains that graduation rates only count “full-time, first-time students who enroll in the fall, excluding those who transfer out of the institution or transfer in and eventually graduate” (para 2). Selingo (2013) states that graduation rates are used to assess the quality of an institution. Not all institutions are the same or serve the same populations. By attending an institution with high graduation rates, students are not guaranteed success or graduation (Selingo, 2013).

There is an element of success dependent on a student’s prior educational experiences, preparation and intrinsic motivation. “Going to a college with a high graduation rate doesn’t guarantee that the student will get a degree, of course, but the so-called ‘peer effects’ of being
around other students who want to finish college make a significant difference” (Selingo, 2013, para 7). To better inform students on their potential for success at a specific institution, Selingo (2013) appropriately suggests that institutions publish more graduation statistics by type of student. If students were able to assess how others like them perform, students might be able to choose a better fit when selecting a college (Selingo, 2013). Transfer students also need more data on how successful other transfer students have been at a university. This information can provide a more informed transfer decision and expectations for the university.

**Community Colleges**

Community colleges play unique roles in producing more baccalaureate degrees in the United States (Trow, 2010). Community college leaders devote much time building articulations, aligning curriculum, and structuring advisement to aid students planning to transfer (Flaga, 2006). Building articulation agreements is extremely complicated and time consuming for two-year and four-year institutions. Handel (2007) claims that “policymakers argue that seamless transfer means 100% transferability of all courses with no loss of credit, but community college faculty rarely warm to the notion of revising their courses to meet a generic threshold of acceptability” (43). Articulations are less effective for the student who changes their major or who does not know their destination institution after attending community college (Bers, 2013; Handel, 2013). The students’ ability to navigate the transfer pathway and gain transfer knowledge has a correlation to their ability to persevere (Fann, 2013).

One notable change effort is spreading through community colleges. There is a need for meaningful data that identifies areas jeopardizing student retention. Jaschik (2008) identified
the shift of community college leaders asking why data is important to how data is being used on campuses. At a National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development in 2008, community college leaders met to discuss ways to identify the causes of poor retention; and to use data to lead meaningful change for student success (Jaschik, 2008). Using large-scale assessment projects and data-driven approaches community colleges seek to improve student success and graduation rates, as stated by Jaschik (2008).

Universities

Universities are pressured to produce more bachelor’s degrees. Baccalaureate obtainment is an important accomplishment for students, their institution, and the economy. Baccalaureate degrees in the twenty-first century are important to be competitive in this globalized society (Altach et al., 2010; Miller, 2003). Miller (2003) states “in the postindustrial, postinformation age—in which the majority of workers are no longer ‘hands’ but ‘heads’—a great many people (of both genders, all classes, and many races and ethnicities) need to be mentally prepared the way only the elite used to be” (p. 6). Texas is a diverse state and its economy depends on producing educated citizens from all socioeconomic sectors. The production rate of bachelor’s degrees in Texas impacts the rate Texas can compete nationally and internationally in this global economy.

Admitting transfer students does carry specific responsibilities on universities. Universities tend to focus resources on first-year students instead of transfer students (Grites, 2013). Sigler (2007) describes a comprehensive approach to transfer admissions and student services to include strategies using communications, recruitment, transfer services, advising, technology, and transfer articulations. Specialized housing, orientation, learning communities,
and welcome center are examples of tailored services for transfer students. These resources are dedicated to serve the unique needs of transfer students which are different than a native student.

**Partnership between Community College and University**

Policymakers are not the only stakeholders engaged in the improvement of the transfer pathway. “Community colleges, universities, and state systems respond in various ways to improve the transfer relationship in order to improve transfer student performance, associate and baccalaureate degree attainment, persistence, reduce credit loss, reduce time to degree, and reduce student frustration with repeating classes and seemingly burdensome bureaucracy” (Clemetsen, 2009, p. 73). To improve the transfer pathway, Texas institutions have been encouraged to build bilateral transfer or articulation agreements (THECB, 2014b). Root (2013) defines a bilateral agreement as:

> An agreement between or among specific postsecondary institutions in a state that outlines the rules and regulations associated with student transfer been or among the institutions. Typically, the agreements map out the transfer of a student from a public two-year college to a public or private four-year institution. (p. 5)

Bers (2013) stresses that articulation agreements created by academic programs tend to be decentralized at institutions, poorly publicized to students and find support mostly from those involved with their creation. Turnover in the staff and faculty positions that work with articulations can create barriers for continuity and institutional memory of the agreements (Bers, 2013).

States that build statewide articulation agreements can relieve some of the inconsistencies found at the institution level (Bers, 2013). These transfer and articulation agreements are an “entanglement of multiple levels of collaborations/agreements involving
institutions, consortiums, higher education systems and states” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 352).

There are many gaps in agreements as not all institutional types are included and not all participate. “Unless policymakers focus attention on expanding, streamlining and simplifying common course numbering, course applicability, and articulation agreements, students will continue to fall through the transition cracks and student success will be minimized” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 352).

Creating a Transfer-Friendly Culture

Collaboration can include vertical curriculum aligning with faculty or degree planning with advisors (Fann, 2013; THECB, 2014b). Increased contact with each other can improve relations between institutions (Stern, 2010). These increased connections depend on leaders’ abilities and a shared vision to help students succeed (Grasmick et al, 2012). That shared vision is to increase the numbers of students transferring from the community college who earn a baccalaureate degree (Handel & Herrera, 2006).

Policymakers are hesitant “to make baccalaureate transfer and degree attainment a specific goal for community college students, because policymakers believe that many students do not want or need to obtain a degree” (Wellman, 2002). Policymakers “rely on institutional governance, and their coordinating boards have less power in the areas of planning and accountability” (Wellman, 2002, p. 39). However, Wellman (2002) reports high performance states have statewide coordinating boards with policy authority and budget review responsibility. Relying on institutional governance, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has less planning and accountability power (Wellman, 2002).
To improve transfer performance, Wellman (2002) recommends states develop better performance data and measures; and audit and clarify state policies. States can also set goals for performance, invest in resources for transfer, use articulation and credit transfer agreements; improve low performing institutions; and use financial aid and private institutions to leverage improved transfer initiatives (Wellman, 2002).

**Statewide Transfer Policies**

States use a variety of policies to facilitate the transfer of college students between institutions. Some states rely on bilateral agreements between institutions which rely on students and institutional staff to interpret (Root, 2013). Other states create “a single, comprehensive, statewide transfer and articulation agreement, which is clearer and less cumbersome” (Root, 2013, p. 1). According to the Root (2013) these policies reduce the time to graduation, the cost of degrees and saves state funding. Root (2013) also points to the weakness that transfer policies only address community college courses earned by transfer students, in most states. Mullin (2012) suggests that many of these policies aim to transfer credits instead of encourage students to transfer.

State policies vary in how they are legislated and how they dictate the rules for student transfer (Root, 2013). Statewide core curriculum creates a common core which includes the general education which transfers to all public institutions. Some states limit the number of hours for associate’s degrees and bachelor’s degrees. A common course numbering system is used in some states to make a uniform numbering system for courses so students and institutions can determine how a course will transfer (Mullin, 2012; Root, 2013). Another
transfer policy is the guarantee of transfer which provides for admission and the transfer of credit for transfer students (Root, 2013).

A strong transfer system within a state is suggested to include statewide transfer committees, transfer guides, transfer counselor network, appeals procedures, and monitoring systems (Root, 2013). Root (2013) lists three essential elements to state policy for college completion: statewide participation by all public institutions; statewide core curriculum of lower-division courses; and guaranteed credit transfer when community college students complete the core curriculum. Root (2013) says “a state may find that on average, transfer students take far more credits, take many credits outside their majors, take classes that are currently transferring, or are allowed too many electives, etc.” (p. 6).

Other suggestions for transfer policy actions include estimating the costs for courses that do not transfer; stressing students declare a major early in their college career; monitoring time and credit-to-degree for transfer students; and include reverse transfer provisions within transfer policy (Root, 2013). Fain (2014) notes that reverse transfers can have “a powerful impact on student motivation, by rewarding students with an achievement on their way to a bachelor’s degree” (p. 22). To support the growth of reverse transfer in Texas, the Lumina Foundation recently awarded a $300,000 grant to the Lone Star College System of The Woodlands, Texas to fortify approaches towards awarding reverse-transfer in Texas (Lumina, 2014).

The use of credit hours may contribute to problems with course transferability and student learning. The credit hour measures the length of time a student receives instruction, which doesn’t translate to measuring learning (Fain, 2012). With its pitfalls, the credit hour
does perform an important function in representing a standard on which to award financial aid for higher education (Fain, 2012). Fain (2012) explains that supporters of the completion agenda believe the credit hour should not be used as the measure for learning.

In addition to inter-state transfer agreements, some states are seeking to ease student transfers across state lines. “Sixteen higher-education institutions in four states have signed an agreement that seeks to make it easier for students to transfer their general-education work across state lines, based on blocks of learning outcomes rather than courses and credit” (DeSantis, 2014, para. 1). The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education announced the Interstate Passport Agreement created to extend transfer agreements across state lines (DeSantis, 2014). DeSantis (2014) describes how faculty members collaborated to develop a set of outcomes to develop the list of criteria students are to demonstrate proficiency.

Wellman (2002) lists seven categories of state policies regarding transfer: legislation, cooperative agreements, transfer data reporting, student incentives and rewards, statewide articulation, statewide common core curricula, and common course numbering system. Kisker et al. (2011) also cite legislation, statewide coordination, and alternative funding scenarios for implementing statewide transfer and articulation reforms. The study by Kisker et al. (2011) found the common values of legislators and policymakers to be greater efficiency and cost effectiveness in the transfer pathway; increasing transfer and degree completion; developing the economy; and following the spirit of legislation in the implementation of degrees.

**Transferability of Courses**

A recent study of the transferability of college credit by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) did find that students with higher grade point averages tended to
transfer more credits (Mangan, 2014b). The study highlights the alarming issue with transferability as “about 39% transferred no credits, 28% transferred some, and 32% transferred all previously earned credit” (Mangan, 2014b, para 5). “On average, students lost about 13 credits when transferring from their first college, the study found” (Mangan, 2014b, para. 5). Reasons for this transfer gap can be attributed to the institution not receiving the transcripts from the other institutions; institutions not having the courses being transferred; the grades of the courses being transferred; or the courses transfer to the institution, but not into the particular degree plan (Mangan, 2014b).

Another report by the NCES found one-third of the first-time undergraduate students in the study transferred at least once (Simone, 2014). Over half of these students started at a public two-year college; and only about 60% of the students in the study were able to transfer credit (Simone, 2014). Simone (2014) stated that when students transfer from one public institution to another they lose around 12 credits. This report provides proof that the transfer pathway is not seamless and credit is not easily transferred even after the creation of articulation agreements and transfer policies.

The findings of these types of reports can inform state policymakers and institutions how to design transfer policies and improve the transfer pathway (Mangan, 2014b). “More than half of state legislatures have enacted rules intended to ensure students transfer smoothly, but so far, policymakers have had limited data to work with” (Mangan, 2014b, para. 11). Mangan (2014b) continues by saying the “pipeline between colleges is full of leaks” citing another report that found 14% of transfer students are forced to start over because their
universities accepted less than 10% of community college work (para 13). The transfer pathway continues to contain barriers that hinder students’ ability to graduate on time.

“Although more than half of state legislatures have rules intended to ensure students transfer smoothly, and federal lawmakers are considering their own set of guidelines, some higher-education officials say existing state and institutional transfer policies lack flexibility or are riddled with inconsistencies” (Keierleber, 2014b, para 2). Many transfer students have to retake courses they completed at a community college (Keierleber, 2014b). According to a study paid by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant estimate that bachelor’s degree attainment for community-college transfer students could increase from 45% to 54% if there was not a loss of credit at the time of transfer (Keierleber, 2014b).

Texas Higher Education and its Political Climate

Transfer policy in Texas is complicated by the political environment pitting legislators against the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the coordinating board against institutions (Richardson et al., 1999). In 2011, legislators allocated $350,000 for a national consultant to develop a proposed blueprint for centralized administration of Texas community colleges. Reported by Hamilton (2012), the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems delivered the report, and the coordinating board responded with criticism of the report. Hamilton (2012) reports that the blueprint concludes that the coordinating board and the Texas Association of Community Colleges are not acceptable entities to oversee a proposed centralized community college system.
The Design of the Texas Higher Education System

In the United States, higher education is the responsibility of the state, instead of the national government as in other counties (Richardson et al., 1999). The higher education governance structure in Texas is characterized as a federal system. “Federal systems have a statewide board responsible for collecting and distributing information, advising on the budget, planning programs from a state-wide perspective, and encouraging articulation” (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 17). Texas has a coordinating board which has regulatory authority in a state with mixed single-campus and multicampus institutions (Richardson et al., 1999). In Texas the governor’s influence over higher education is with line-item vetoes and statewide appointments including all public university board of regent positions (Richardson et al., 1999).

In Texas, legislators provide oversight to protect institutions from excessive local control (Richardson et al., 1999). Articulation and collaboration in the Texas transfer pathway is dependent on institutional cooperation (Richardson et al., 1999). Richardson et al. (1999) emphasize that “the state’s strong emphasis on local control and local decision making creates a constant, dynamic tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board” (p. 125). This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas higher education system several decades ago. Richardson et al. (1999) explains priorities for higher education is inferred from legislative action instead of official statements since the state focuses on local control. In 1999, Richardson et al. made a startling prediction that “in the absence of significant change in Texas’s system of higher education, growth in enrollment and student diversity will most likely outstrip the current capabilities of the system” (pp. 126-127).
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

Coordinating boards aid in providing comprehensive planning at the state level. Institutions continue to maintain their autonomy, and the coordinating board provides for improved “quality of campus decision making by setting it in a broader framework” (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 255). Statewide coordinating agencies “may be buffers or conduits for state influence” explains Zusman (2005, p. 149). Richardson et al. (1999) characterize the THECB as a “referee or scapegoat” that “must carry out its responsibilities in an environment that often involves antagonism from the legislature and from some of the sub-systems” (p. 126).

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board promotes access, affordability, quality, success, and cost efficiency in the state’s institutions of higher education, through Closing the Gaps and its successor plan, resulting in a globally competent workforce that positions Texas as an international leader in an increasingly complex world economy. (THECB, 2014a)

Legislators and the THECB design policies or procedures that become the policy framework. The policy framework includes the “initiation, examination, selection, implementation, and continuation or elimination of policy” (Richardson & Martinez, 2009, p. 7). Environmental demands and stresses become policy catalysts; and state policies and the rules written by the coordinating board attempt to positively impact institutional performance and student outcomes based on current priorities (Richardson & Martinez, 2009). Assessment of those policies occurs to measure the effectiveness of policy, which can be difficult to directly attribute to specific policy. Richardson and Martinez (2009) explain that governors and legislatures may change priorities by passing new policy. “New policies emerge without much consideration of their potential impact on continuing policies. The result are frustrating to policymakers, who want to see outcomes change in desired directions, and to researchers, who
would like to be able to report with conviction whether or not meaningful change occurred because of a specific policy” (Richardson & Martinez, 2009, p. 9). Zusman (2005) explains that “governors and legislators have been key catalysts in the revision and restricting of higher education in a number of states, where they implemented statewide review of degree programs, created—or abolished—statewide boards, or pushed institutions to redirect enrollments and research programs toward engineering, teacher preparation, or other state priorities” (p. 143). “A state’s ability to change rules in ways that increase the probability of achieving outcomes consistent with the public interest depends upon where the authority for establishing new rules resides” (Richardson & Martinez, 2009, p. 242).

**Annual transfer success reports to policymakers.** During the fall of 2014, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board submitted a report to the Texas Legislature to satisfy the requirements of Senate Bill 1 of the 83rd Texas Legislature (THECB, 2014b). The report provides a comparative analysis of the transfer goals and practices of each Texas public four-year university (THECB, 2014b). Each institution is required to make institutional goals to increase the enrollment, persistence, and success of transfer students from community colleges (THECB, 2014b). Data comparing native students and transfer student outcomes at each institution is included comparing application and admission rates; financial aid awards; length of time to graduate; and baccalaureate completion rates (THECB, 2014b). The THECB (2014b) includes a narrative identifying the best practices found at institutions with higher transfer success; recommendations; and a list of barriers identified by each institution.
Texas Success Center

Reported by Hamilton (2012), the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) delivered a report to policymakers that the coordinating board and the Texas Association of Community Colleges are not acceptable entities to oversee a centralized community college system. To possibly counter the proposed blueprint and pressure by the legislators, the Texas Association of Community Colleges announced a newly formed Texas Success Center, “which is designed to provide statewide coherence and coordination to the state’s approaches to student success and to advocate for related policies” (Hamilton, 2013b, para 2). Texas institutions collaborate on many student success initiatives to improve two-year degree completion and successful college transfer. Richard Carpenter, Chancellor of the Lone Star Community College System, estimates that Texas colleges lead 30 different student success programs, but they are not coordinated (Hamilton, 2013b). The new center will be funded through $2.4 million contributions from the 50 community colleges in Texas and through various foundations (Hamilton, 2013b).

The president of the Texas Association of Community Colleges is Rey Garcia. He states that “more than 70% of Texas students begin their higher education in community college—including nearly 80% of minority students” (Hamilton, 2013b). The need for effective student success initiatives and coordination affects the large majority of students in Texas higher education. “The Kresge Foundation, which is based in Detroit and seeks to improve low-income students’ post-secondary performance, has led the push for such centers, which already exist in Arkansas, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio” (Hamilton, 2013b, para. 4). Caroline Altman Smith is a senior program officer at the Kresge Foundation and states that centers like the one
proposed in Texas by Texas Association of Community Colleges can help close the gap in student success (Hamilton, 2013b). She states that “we really see Texas as ground zero for the college completion agenda” and Texas community college students represent 10% of the nation’s community college enrollment (Hamilton, 2013b, para 5). Texas tends to set the trend for higher education reform in America (Lindsay, 2014).

The report by NCHEMS stated “important constituents have lost faith in the [coordinating board’s] ability to play the role of state system administrative body for community colleges” (Hamilton, 2013b, para. 9). A response to the report was sent from the THECB Chairman, Fred Heldenfels outlining the misrepresentations of the authority of the THECB and its role in championing community colleges in Texas; and claimed key lawmakers and policymakers had not been interviewed (Heldenfels, 2012). Those listed as key lawmakers and policymakers were important to this study as it provided a list of key people who make higher education policy in Texas. The response from Heldenfels (2012) was sent to Governor Rick Perry, Lt. Governor David Dewhurst, Speaker Joe Straus and the acting director of the Legislative Budget Board, Ursula Parks. Heldensfels’ (2012) response claims that key legislators from the House and Senate Higher Education Committees; the THECB Commissioner; and THECB members were not interviewed before the report was completed. The letter was sent to the House Appropriations Committee Chair and Subcommittee on Article III; House Higher Education Committee; Senate Finance Committee; Senate Higher Education Committee; Coordinating Board Members; Boards of Trustees of Texas Public Community Colleges; Presidents and Chancellors from Texas Public Community Colleges; Community College Association of Texas Trustees and the Texas Association of Community Colleges. This list also
provided a list of key people involved with community college policy in Texas for the purposes of this study.

In an interview, Rey Garcia said the new Texas Success Center “is a demonstration that the 50 colleges, when they want to, can act cohesively and in a unified way to achieve state outcomes and state goals without having to create a new state agency or bureaucracy” (Hamilton, 2013b, para. 10). Angela Oriano, a former associate director at the Center for Community College Student Engagement, will be the executive director of the new center. The focus of the Texas Success Center will be to focus “on key areas including workforce and skills alignment, college readiness, and transfer and articulation agreements” (Hamilton, 2013b, para. 12). “The institute will not only serve as an early way to support the center’s priority to enhance and accelerate learning across institutions,” Greater Texas Foundation President Wynn Rosser said in a statement, “but will also serve as a strong symbol of and reinforce the state’s commitment to its community college students and the importance of the student success agenda” (Hamilton, 2013b, para. 13).

**Professional Associations and Lobbyists**

The beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked with strained relations between state governments and higher education (McGuinness, 2005). The escalating demands of a growing diverse population; significant economic constraints; sluggish institutional response to change and shifts in state political leadership are cited by McGuinness (2005) as broad trends causing the strain. Change in higher education can be influenced by democratic political processes and by special interest groups (Trow, 2010). Special interest groups can include employers, foundations, associations, alumni, and the families of students.
Trow (2010) explains these groups can develop their own policy instruments through associations that communicate with specific members of government, legislatures, or universities to influence short term and long term decisions.

Higher education uses lobbyists to create and maintain more funding or beneficial programs (McMillen, 2010). Other reasons why lobbyists may be used is to gain access with a level of government, influence policy, and to resolve problems (McMillen, 2010). Lobbyists can influence government policy, and that influence should not be overlooked in considering the perceptions of policymakers on the transfer pathway. Associations and lobbyists for a particular sector or issue may gain advantages which negatively impact other sectors of higher education; and could be counterproductive in building a cohesive voice for higher education interests (McMillen, 2010; Cook, 1998). In general, higher education lobbyists have good reputations with public officials for being respectable and ethical (Cook, 1998).

Cook (1998) explains that “public officials said they rely heavily on higher education lobbyists, especially association staff, for information” (p. 185). Cook (1998) states that associations are able to explain emerging problems and assess the potential effects of policy proposals. “The relationship between public officials and association personnel is a mutual and interdependent one, with officials also supplying association personnel with crucial information” (Cook, 1998, p. 186). Professional associations can have an impact on transfer policies and the perceptions of policymakers on higher education.

In Texas, two of the major associations for higher education leaders are the Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC) and the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors (CPUPC). The presidents of public institutions in Texas are active in these
organizations. There are dozens of other professional higher education organizations in Texas for various faculty, administrators, and staff positions. The organizations may choose to communicate with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and legislators concerning issues important to their members.

Leadership from Texas public universities and system offices are also working towards improving transfer success in Texas. The Texas Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors (CPUPC, 2008, 2010) has prioritized initiatives to address challenges within the state. Recommendations include the reactivation of the Statewide Transfer Issues Advisory Committee: the sharing of information and incentives between community colleges and universities; the enhancement of academic advising available; and improved information to transfer students (CPUPC, 2008, 2010). Areas that might implicate policy changes address the state’s formula for calculating graduation rates; institutional incentives; and additional financial assistance for transfer students (CPUPC, 2010). Reports by the CPUPC in 2008 and 2010 identify best practices in similar state higher education systems including policies affecting transfer students.

**Journalists**

Henig (2008) describes policymaking as the “government’s legitimate role in prescribing a public education policy is the responsibility to create an informed citizenry” in a democratic society such as the United States (p. 245). The media and journalists play a part in reporting to citizens “if elected leaders fail to perform” and “how well elected officials are doing” (Henig, 2008, p. 197). Henig (2008) further explains that “for most citizens, key information must come filtered through intermediaries. The mass media are critical” (p. 197).
The higher education community does have a tool for sharing information. Media outlets have influence with legislative members, state government officials, professional associations, lobbyists, and institutions. Cook (1998) states that journals, higher education magazines, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* can help with the communication of important issues. “The popularity of the *Chronicle* means that it provides a common base of knowledge for the higher education community and, therefore, contributes in Washington and elsewhere to cooperation and collaboration among its many players” (Cook, 1998, p. 14). Cook (1998) further explains that the *Chronicle* has subscribers in government, associations, and institutions. “Its news stories deal with legislative, judicial, and executive branch issues in the federal and state governments, as well as association news and issues of interest and concern on the campuses” (Cook, 1998, p. 14). This point is especially relevant to this study as news outlets have influence with legislative members, state government officials, professional associations, lobbyists, and institutions.

**Texas Transfer Success Summit**

The purpose of the Texas Transfer Success Summit in 2007 was:

To provide a forum for institutional presidents and chancellors to align their knowledge and thinking about how to encourage the adoption of good practices that contribute to creating a “Culture of Transfer” at colleges and universities. The focus will be on those institutional activities and practices that will foster collaborative partnerships among colleges and universities for the purpose of facilitating the persistence and success of transfer students and actively encouraging students to continue their post-secondary education through the acquisition of the bachelor’s degree. (THECB, 2008)

Institutional presidents and chancellors were participants in smaller discussion groups to discuss advising and guidance; consistency in student achievement; student engagement; financial aid; developmental education and college readiness standards; and who attends
colleges and universities (THECB, 2008). Recommendations were provided by discussion groups and then reported in an executive summary (THECB, 2008).

**Texas Transfer Policies and Initiatives**

Policymakers use policy levers to influence institutional and student behavior towards a specific outcome (Richardson et al, 1999). Texas has been active in improving the transfer pathway in public higher education. A number of state policy levers have been added into Texas Statute, and institutions are required to comply. Other initiatives are encouraged by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, but they are not in statute. A list of these transfer-related policies and initiatives is in Appendix H.

**Core curriculum.** “Texas public higher education institutions are required by law to adopt a core curriculum of 42 semester credit hours (SCH) that are consistent with the Texas Common Course Numbering System and with the rules issued by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board” (THECB, 2014b, pp. 169-170). According to this policy (THECB, 2014b), students who complete 42 SCH transfer the set of courses to another Texas public institution without needing to repeat core courses. The THECB reports that 34% of first-time transfer students moving from public community colleges to public universities had completed the core curriculum in fall 2012 (THECB, 2014b).

**Field of Study Curriculum.** Another transfer policy passed into Texas legislation in 1997 was the Field of Study Curricula (FOSC). According to the policy, students are able to “complete and transfer courses that satisfy lower-division requirements for a bachelor’s degree in a specific academic area or field to Texas public higher education institutions” (THECB, 2014b, p.
The THECB (2014b) reports that 2% of all transfers had earned full credit through the FOSC in the fall of 2012.

**Associate of Arts in Teaching.** “The Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree is a Coordinating Board-approved collegiate degree program consisting of lower-division academic courses that transfer to baccalaureate programs leading to an initial Texas teacher certification” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171). This policy mandates requires institutions with baccalaureate degrees leading to initial teacher certification to accept the AAT curricula (THECB, 2014b).

**Reverse transfer.** House Bill 3025 was passed in 2011 requiring universities to track community college transfer students for purpose to building an infrastructure for reverse transfers (Fann, 2013). “Texas public universities are required to identify, track, and follow up with each student who has (1) earned at least 30 SCH at a community college and (2) completed a total of 66 SCH” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171). After public universities send the student transcripts, community colleges evaluate whether the associate’s degree requirements have been met to confer the degree even though the transfer student has already left the institution (THECB, 2014b).

**Voluntary transfer compacts.** “Voluntary transfer compacts are statewide articulation agreements that are entered into by signatory institutions of higher education in Texas” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171). The voluntary transfer compacts provide students guidance and “eliminate the need for multiple one-to-one articulation agreements between institutions (THECB, 2014b). There are 18 Texas public universities and 64 Texas public community colleges participating in the compacts (THECB, 2014b). The Texas Tuning Project has been a faculty-led process designed to “establish criteria-referenced learning outcomes and competencies by
degree level and subject area” to provide transparency for all stakeholders and voluntary articulation agreements among institutions (THECB, 2014b, p. 173).

**Career and technical education programs of study.** To “help students, parents, and counselors with college and career planning by providing students enrolled in higher school or college with information about clear and efficient pathways to obtain an associate degree”, Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs of Study aligns secondary and postsecondary curriculum into a career cluster pathway (THECB, 2014b, p. 172). There are over 120 state-recognized CTE Programs of Study aligning with 16 career clusters designated by the federal government (THECB, 2014b).

**Texas Common Course Numbering System.** Since the 1970s, a voluntary effort between the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, public community colleges and universities has provided the Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS) for transfer students (THECB, 2014b). The TCCNS provides a uniform course taxonomy for determining course equivalencies between participating institutions for students (THECB, 2014b).

**Lower-Division Academic Course Guide Manual.** “The Lower-Division Academic Course Guide Manual (ACGM) is the official list of courses approved for general academic course transfer that may be offered for state funding by public community and technical colleges in Texas” (THECB, 2014b, p. 173). This manual provides for better alignment with curricula and course equivalency determinations at the institutions.

**Other policy levers.** Texas policymakers have also added other controls to encourage students to complete their degree without over utilizing the public higher education system. Students face tuition surcharges for excess hours; limitations on the number of classes they can
drop; and limitations on the times a class can be repeated at resident tuition rates (Fann, 2013). Institutions face controls on the number of credit hours are required in a degree and the amount of funding allocations received for excess hours and repeated courses (Semester Credit Hours Required for Baccalaureate Degree, 2005; Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005). There is little data on the impact these levers have on student success. These levers create complexity and challenges for institutions and students maneuvering them; however there is little data demonstrating that these levers achieve the outcomes intended.

**Higher Education Legislative Committees**

Legislators play an important role in the transfer pathway. The legislative branch of government in America is responsible for creating policy. In Texas, there are two legislative-committees responsible for addressing higher education policy and needs: the House Higher Education Committee and the Senate Higher Education Committee (Hamilton, 2013b). Henig (2008) describes “government’s legitimate role in prescribing a public education policy is the responsibility to create an informed citizenry” in a democratic society such as the United States (p. 245) The media plays its part in reporting to citizens “if elected leaders fail to perform” and “how well elected officials are doing” (Henig, 2008, p. 197). Henig (2008) further explains that “for most citizens, key information must come filtered through intermediaries. The mass media are critical” (p. 197).

**Pressure from Accountability Initiatives and Improving Outcomes**

Mounting pressure from the public and policymakers are making the completion agenda a top priority in higher education in the United States (Brint, 2011; Hamilton, 2013a; Kiley,
2012; Mangan, 2013). As institutions become more accountable for their effectiveness in providing access to the public and ability to lead student success, the decisions leaders make which affect graduation success become more critical. In addition to increased accountability standards, there are sharply declining appropriations from state and federal governments (Kelderman, 2013; McNair et al., 2011).

Rawlings (2014) describes:

[Texas politicians and board appointees treat] universities as businesses in which productivity and efficiency are the primary goals, and the academic and research principles that have been so important to our country’s leadership in talent and innovation are sacrificed to utilitarianism. ‘Accountability’ is the watchword—everything that can be counted is counted, and everything that cannot be counted doesn’t matter” (para. 3).

Research in the transfer pathway finds that state policymakers can contribute to transfer success. Handel and Williams (2012) report that state leaders should “create a coherent transfer strategic plan that aligns with the state’s overall higher education objectives” (p. 12). Community colleges and universities do work on improving the transfer pathway. Handel and Williams (2012) recommend that state policymakers add incentives to joint activities between institutions serving transfer students, while including accountability and meaningful measurement of each institution’s progress. Wellman (2002) states “accountability mechanisms that are in place in the four-year institutions may actually work against the transfer priority, such as the requirement to report five-year retention and graduation rates” (p. vii). States fail to provide “mechanisms for rewarding institutions that are high performers in transfer effectiveness” (Wellman, 2002, p. vii).

The accountability movement has had its critics as other valuable milestones reached are less recognized or valued. Legislators measure institutional success on the numbers of
students that enroll, continue and earn a degree or certificate (Habley et al., 2012). Habley et al., (2012) explain that a student that does not earn a certificate or degree is considered a failure of the institution and labeled a dropout under the current definition of student success. No consideration is made to measure the institution’s ability to serve those students that do not intend on receiving a certificate or degree; enroll to gain job skills; or plan on transferring to another institution (Habley et al., 2012).

**College Completion Agenda at Community Colleges**

With the college completion agenda bringing more relevance to community colleges and their efficacy in graduating students, there is an opportunity to maximize the momentum. Marling (2013) states that the completion agenda cannot be successful without an intentional approach to transfer student success. Community colleges are associated with low program-completion rates and have “become ground zero in the national completion movement, which has ‘taken on a life of its own’ since the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation called on the nation to double the number of students who, by 2020, earn a certificate or associate degree or transfer to a four-year college or university” (Mangan, 2014a, para 2.). The relevance of community colleges in the higher education system is reinforced by success goals set by President Obama, influential foundations, higher education associations, and individual states and institutions (Handel, 2013; Mangan, 2014a).

This college completion agenda does have its critics. Mangan (2014a) reports that the major foundations dominate the conversation and focus on short-term career outcomes, ignoring educational goals. The focus on completion can work against the transfer function at the community college (Mullin, 2012). Mullin (2012) claims that transfer is a core function as a
pathway to the baccalaureate. To describe the significant role of American community colleges in postsecondary education, 47% of bachelor’s degree earners take courses at community colleges and 28% start there (Mullin, 2012). Mullin (2012) claims that those starting at community colleges that transfer are as successful as the native students found at the university. However, a report by the THECB states the graduation rates of transfer students at public universities lag behind native students by 18% (THECB, 2014b).

The success of the completion agenda may also be limited by not engaging faculty in the process. “But tying their evaluations to colleges’ completion outcomes could prompt faculty members to lower standards to get more students through” and decrease rigor (Mangan, 2014a, para 8). Administrators “cite the need to streamline course offerings ease student transfers, and improve academic success” (Brett, 2014, para 2). Critics worry that if educational outcomes are too controlled or standardized, the curriculum can become narrow and endanger institutional autonomy (Lederman, 2012). Faculty and those stressing the need for quality and rigor do not feel their perspective is heard; and feel the momentum of the completion agenda through the support of major foundations and the national attention the movement is receiving (Berrett, 2014).

Many campus strategies have been employed by community colleges to improve completion rates. Mangan (2014a) explains that strategies like student-learning communities, first-year support groups, mentor programs and career exploration courses may be supported by research, but graduation rates continue to be unimpressive. A lack of institutional commitment or collaboration with these strategies could be to blame (Mangan, 2014a).
Wang (2012) finds that upward transfer of community colleges students to universities is affected by “socioeconomic background, being Black, self-concept, high school achievement, external demands, and postsecondary enrollment patterns” (p. 870). Understanding the factors that affect persistence can inform institutional agents in their strategies and approach to serving vulnerable students (Mullin, 2012). Also, analyzing the role the university and their actions after a student transfers might explain why some transfer students do not persist (Mullin, 2012). “Institutional intent and actions must be purposeful to foster transfer student success” (Mullin, 2012). Post-transfer success at the university can improved with:

Developing a strategic enrollment plan, committing to serve transfer students, developing close relationships with feeder colleges, increasing communication between college counselors, developing transparent transfer credit policies, providing scholarships for transfer students, monitoring and assessing the transfer student experience in a way similar to the first-year student experience, requiring transfer orientation, establishing a transfer center for students, and reserving housing for transfer students. (Mullin, 2012)

**Government Controls**

Policymakers do use data to make budget decisions and inform policy; and education is a major portion of the annual state budget. “To safeguard this substantial investment and protect students from subpar institutions, policymakers need better information on institutional costs, student prices, and student outcomes—information that is more detailed and more nuanced than that used to inform students” (Voight, Long, Huelsman & Engle, 2014, p. 9). Policymakers need data to make decisions to allocate resources and create policies. Students and policymakers need information on institutional performance and outcomes. Voight et al. (2014) state:

Some students may avoid institutions with poor outcomes, but such choices are not realistic for all students given location and cost constraints, as mentioned. In terms of
policymaking, most accountability systems issue harsh sanctions only for the worst of the worst performers, allowing some subpar or mediocre institutions and programs to continue operating with substantial consequences. (p. 7)

Schmidtlein and Berdahl (2005) confirm “government controls seldom remedy the errors of those lacking competence. Thus, accountability is both general (responding to definitions of the broad public interest) and particular (responding to more limited constituencies)” (p. 78). To measure outcomes and performance, data is required to plan, assess, analyze, and strategize for continuous improvement (Voight et al., 2014). “And research has shown that deliberate use of that data as part of a data-driven culture can be the impetus for substantial improvements in student outcomes” (Voight et al., 2014, p. 11). To measure completion, policymakers “need to know how successful institutions are with student populations of public interest and how many credentials institutions contribute to the economy;” students need to know if specific institutions timely graduate their students and can demonstrate success outcomes; and institutions need to know how their students are progressing. (Voight et al., 2014, p. 14) Both policymakers and institutions use the data to measure student success; however, the data is used for different purposes.

Accountability and Performance-Based Funding

In state and federal higher education policy, performance-based funding initiatives have become popular. There is limited quantitative evidence that these initiatives are effective in improving student success outcomes (Rabovsky, 2012; Dougherty et al., 2013). Increasing criticism for inefficiencies and unresponsiveness to external stakeholder groups, have called for reform of public higher education (Rabovsky, 2012). The theory is that budgets will become less political and will motivate institutions towards better performance (Rabovsky, 2012). “By
rewarding organizations that perform well and sanctioning those that perform poorly, policymakers can provide strong incentives for public agencies to reduce or eliminate wasteful activities and to employ entrepreneurial strategies in developing new technologies and methods to improve service delivery” (Rabovsky, 2012, p. 676). These policy initiatives are limited by political and subjective budget decision makers, and disagreement on the metrics used (Rabovsky, 2012).

The ineffectiveness of these policies can be tied to a lack of support, political turnover, and economic conditions (Rabovsky, 2012). The study of Rabovsky (2012) did not find significant evidence that performance-funding policies impact state budgets or institutional behavior. Tandberg and Hilman (2013) also found performance funding does not improve degree productivity. However, there are studies that do find a significant correlation (Zhang, 2009).

Some argue that performance-based funding is necessary because institutions are not focused on student outcomes, but other priorities (Rabovsky, 2012). Another argument can be raised that the performance-funding does create a positive impact due to the possibility of additional resources (Rabovsky, 2012). “Research universities are often the most visible institutions in the state, and thus, they may feel greater pressure from state policymakers to demonstrate a renewed commitment to undergraduate education” (Rabovsky, 2012, p. 697). To avoid more intrusive policies, institutions may demonstrate some effort to appease stakeholders (Rabovsky, 2012).

Accountability may not be strongly effective in changing institutional behavior and performance, but institutions are not solely to blame (Handel & Williams, 2012). Shin (2009)
suggests states may not fully place a structure to support the change. Shin (2009) states policymakers may find more success in changing the factors that are strongly correlated with institutional performance. The accountability structure needs to be built on institutional practices says Shin (2009). Habley et al., (2012) point that “policymakers should reengineer the standard accountability metrics to focus on the percentage of students who enter higher education at any institution, the percentage of student who are retained in higher education an any institution, and the percentage of student who complete degrees or achieve their goals at any institution” (p. 347).

“Public policy also plays a major role in shaping the interaction between and among institutions and in promoting seamless movement of students between colleges” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 342). Measuring that movement and assigning value to degree completion can place some institutions at a disadvantage. Institutions that enroll students that do not have a strong intent to earn a degree; enroll students that plan to transfer; or students seeking more employability skills maybe viewed as less effective (Habley et al., 2012). “Institutions that serve a significant number of these students generally do not fare very well when retention and degree completion are the metrics to which they are held accountable” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 344). Habley et al. (2012) suggest “policymakers should reengineer the standard accountability metrics to focus on the percentage of students who enter higher education at any institution, the percentage of students who are retained in higher education at any institution, and the percentage of students who complete degrees or achieve their goals at any institution” (p. 347). Students that attend multiple institutions and graduate are counted as completers.
With Ford Foundation support, Arthur M. Cohen and the Center for the Study of Community Colleges worked to develop a definition of transfer rates, and how they should be measured through the Transfer Assembly project (Bers, 2007). Cohen (1994) defined transfer rate as “all students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least twelve college-credit units, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at the university within four years” (p. 73). Transfer rates continue to be valued metrics for measuring community college performance, and Bers (2007) attributes Cohen’s emphasis on transfer rates as elevated their use in measuring student outcomes along with graduation rates. The National Center for Education Statistics Graduation Rate Survey; The National Student Clearinghouse; The National Community College Benchmarking Project; and state accountability metrics now include data on transfer students (Bers, 2007). “The pursuit of accountability by oversight bodies and administrators creates a demand for one universally accepted transfer rate” (Hom, 2009, p. 149). Hom (2009) astutely states that the transfer rate used should reflect the specific objective policymakers address.

**Policy Outcomes**

The perceptions of policymakers may be misunderstood; and unless the other stakeholders can understand policymakers’ beliefs and intentions in their decisions, there can be confusion and frustration. “Policymakers believe that higher education is linked to the economic, social, and cultural well-being of their state. Legislators are under pressure to show the results of their decisions, so it is no surprise that they frequently speak about the expectations they have of higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 91). Policymakers are pressured by the public to show positive results to their efforts. “Economic growth, degree
attainment, and starting salaries are measurable and provide policymakers with figures and statistics that they can attribute to their efforts” (Martinez, 2004, p. 92).

Their intentions may be for the good of students or institutions, but some policies fail to reach their intended goal. “Policy ideas that sound great in theory often fail under conditions of actual field implementation. The implementation process has a life of its own. It is acted out through large and inflexible administrative systems and is distorted by bureaucratic interests” (Bardach, 2009, p. 35). There can be a number of reasons why policies fail. Policy may have some negative or unintended consequences. Reasons why some policies fail include: delays in implementation; benefits received by undeserving and unintended constituencies; excessive costs; fraud, waste, and abuse (Bardach, 2009). These activities undermine “political support and embarrasses supporters; and administrative complexities that leave citizens (and program managers) uncertain as to what benefits are available or what regulations must be complied with” (Bardach, 2009, p. 35). Policy failures may occur for reasons other than poor development.

Summary of Literature

A review of literature finds leaders in American higher education face a multitude of challenges on today’s college campuses. Among the challenges of growing enrollments and decreasing state revenues, there is also accountability pressure to improve teaching effectiveness and to increase learning outcomes (Brint, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Mangan, 2013; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005; Sigler, 2007; Zusman, 2005). These common themes are repeated throughout the literature countless times.
The review of literature led into several different directions. To gain a comprehensive knowledge of the issues surrounding the problem statement, a review of the characteristics of transfer students and institutions was conducted. The literature review focused on American higher education and Texas higher education. A review of public policy, social mobility and the policymaking process was imperative to prepare for the various societal pressures experienced by participants and their discussion on decision making. Knowledge of the specific challenges and complexities within the transfer pathway was important in understanding the national and state trends affecting transfer students. Understanding the issues facing Texas higher education required a survey of the actions of policymakers and the THECB over the last few years. The factors stressing the system, accountability and the completion agenda, were also reviewed.

Relevant statistics of the enrollment of transfer students and their success were readily available, and reveal a transfer pathway that has significant needs for improvement. Only half of community college students seeking baccalaureate degrees actually earn one (Handel & Herrera, 2006). The pressure to produce more college graduates is shifting higher education’s focus from college access to college completion, which highlights the transfer pathway used by millions of students (Handel, 2013). The college completion agenda challenges higher education to reduce student attrition and increase graduation rates (CPUPC, 2010; Hamilton, 2013; Mangan, 2013). The college completion agenda is well documented and was discussed in a large portion of the literature.

The THECB provides abundant information on the community college and university students and their institutions; and also provides a summary of statewide trends. There is
significant research available on community college student characteristics. Transfer success has also been widely studied even though there are challenges in tracking students between institutions, and measuring completion rates given the current metric used for graduation rates. There is an abundance of literature addressing the transfer shock that occurs when students change institutions. In reviewing the characteristics of institutions and their role in the transfer pathway, there is adequate research on building transfer-friendly cultures at the institutional-level. However, in reviewing literature on building transfer-friendly cultures, there is virtually no literature on the characteristics of effective leadership that influence transfer success. Despite the rich literature correlating student characteristics to outcomes in higher education, there is little scholarship on faculty, advisors, deans, or other leaders (Bensimon, 2007). The literature clearly identifies a large gap in research of higher education leadership and their attributes in affecting student success. However, Walford (2003) states that research on leadership in education is a growing topic.

In the literature on community colleges, there is a well-documented crisis caused by the large number of retirements and departures from leadership positions coming in the next decade (Keim & Murray, 2008; McNair et al., 2011). This crisis could negatively impact transfer initiatives as institutional memory and momentum is at risk with the turnover in leadership positions. There was some literature on the various institutional roles that impact transfer students, but this is an area where further research is needed.

The review of literature found the higher education system in Texas as actively engaged in transfer success initiatives and the rate of activity has been increasing since 2007. There is quite a bit of information on the initiatives created for Texas transfer students, but virtually no
data on the impact of these initiatives of statewide transfer policies, including articulation agreements and performance-funding. As Bers (2013) notes, there are few empirical studies on the impact of state articulations or transfer policies. There was some literature on the design of the Texas Higher Education System and how it differs from other large states.

Through the literature review for the study, a list of policymakers and policy influencers were identified as potential participants. One facet that caused this study to be unique and significant was the voice of the policymakers and their influencers. Research on transfer success typically doesn’t include qualitative data from policymakers or policy influencers directly. Transfer success research is typically focused on institutional practices or student characteristics. Policy is often discussed, but not from the voice of the policymaker and their unique experiences and perceptions of the transfer pathway. Another policy influencer, higher education journalists, was revealed in the literature review. “News stories deal with legislative, judicial, and executive branch issues in the federal and state governments, as well as association news and issues of interest and concern on the campuses” (Cook, 1998, p. 14). This point was especially relevant to this study as news outlets have influence with legislative members, state government officials, professional associations, lobbyists, and institutions.
APPENDIX C

DETAILED METHODOLOGY
This chapter describes the research methods of this study. This study intended to
describe policymaker’s knowledge, opinions, intentions, and perceptions of the transfer
pathway. This study also intended to provide a detailed description of the actions and activities
planned to increase transfer success in Texas public institutions. A qualitative research
approach was used to bring meaning to the decision-making process for policymakers on
transfer policy for Texas higher education. The theoretical and practical basis for the qualitative
data collection of the study is addressed in this chapter. This chapter includes the design of the
study; research questions; selection of participants; data collection; and data analysis.

Creswell (1998) states that a phenomenological study “may evolve into an exploration
of relationships or comparisons among ideas. None of these related explorations can be
anticipated at the beginning of a qualitative study” (p. 89). This study explored how people act
and react to the phenomenon, and a theoretical proposition was developed using the data
analyzed. This study developed the data discovered in the action, interactions and social
process of state-level stakeholders in transfer policy in Texas.

There is a high level of attrition between a student’s entry in college and graduation.
The attrition rate is even higher for those that transfer between institutions on their journey to
their undergraduate bachelor’s degree (THECB, 2014b). The need to improve persistence and
transfer success drives policymakers and institutions to find ways to improve retention and
graduation rates. The national completion agenda and the need to improve student learning
outcomes influences innovation and research to discover the factors that impact transfer
success (ACE, 2013). This study sought to discover policymaker’s perceptions and intentions to
improve the transfer pathway, to increase the rate of transfer success in Texas; and to illuminate the differentiated perceptions of those factors. Texas is known as a trendsetter in furthering the completion agenda (Hamilton, 2013b). The perceptions and intentions of Texas policymakers can inform higher education of possible trends and implications for future transfer policy in other states.

Design of the Study

This study explored the phenomenon of transfer policy development in Texas higher education through the voice of state policymakers and their influencers. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) state “a good research project will match the research approach to the problem to be studied” (p. 10). This study aimed to focus on a complicated structure of the transfer pathway and the policy that orchestrates its operation. “Phenomenologists reframe our knowledge of the world by focusing on the complex and elaborate structures through which this world and our knowledge of it are constructed in our consciousness” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 41). The phenomenological approach matched the purpose of this research study.

Further understanding of the phenomenological approach explains that studying the “similarity and difference as phenomena of consciousness may help us understand things about reality, dreams, time and consciousness that are invisible” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 41). This study built understanding of the reality, dreams and consciousness of state-level stakeholders in the transfer pathway. Using a phenomenological approach aided in describing the “natural attitude or natural standpoint” of the participants. (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 41) This approach acknowledges that people have internal preferences that drive decisions and choices (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998). This study sought to determine those intentions.
Paradigm of Inquiry

A paradigm of inquiry defines how a researcher approaches a study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). “Qualitative researchers approach their studies with a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide their inquiries” (Creswell, 1998, p. 74). This study approached inquiry using the paradigm of constructivism. There are foundational questions in constructivism: “How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, ‘truths,’ explanations, beliefs, and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviors and for those with whom they interact” (Patton, 2002, p. 96)? The constructivism worldview aligned with the purpose of this study. This study proposed to determine how policymakers have constructed their understanding of the transfer pathway; their perceptions and beliefs of its effectiveness; and the consequences of their beliefs resulting in transfer policy. The consequences of their actions have an impact on transfer students and institutions. These elements are foundational questions within the constructivism worldview.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study was based on the Espoused Theories of Action (Argyris & Schon, 1996). “Action strategies are based on the assumption that theories of action are used to explain, predict, and control human behavior. These theories become the norms that guide individuals in expressing patterns of behavior” (Howell, 1999, 51-52). Individuals justify their behavior or actions to others through the use of espoused theories (Howell, 1999). The theory was developed to identify governing variables and action strategies that manage behavior to gain and maintain control others, and set goals (Howell, 1999).
Argyris explored the role learning processes play in decision making and problem solving for organizational leaders and policy makers.

One might say that participants in organizations are encouraged to learn to perform as long as the learning does not question the fundamental design, goals, and activities of their organizations. This learning may be called single-loop learning. In double-loop learning, a participant would be able to ask questions about changing fundamental aspects of the organization. (Argyris, 1976)

Argyris (1976) believes that decision makers and policy makers inhibit learning processes in their behavior to increase organizational effectiveness. Argyris and Schon (1976) state “that all human action was based on theories of action...Espoused theories of action are those that people report as a basis for actions” (p. 367).

Policymakers attempt to influence the action of those targeted by the policies created. The instruments for change can be regulation or inducements. The focus is on the desired outcomes of the political levers or tools placed to control the targeted group. The inquiry of this study was intended to describe policymakers’ desired outcomes of the policies or levers they placed to control the effectiveness of the transfer pathway for transfer students.

Research Design

A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was applied to understand how policymakers view the transfer pathway and decide how they intend to influence transfer policy. Patton (2002) explains that “the phenomenon that is the focus of inquiry may be an emotion—loneliness, jealousy, anger. The phenomenon may be a relationship, a marriage, or a job. The phenomenon may be a program, an organization, or a culture” (Patton, 2002, pp.104-105). This study proposed to understand the perceptions of policymakers and a
phenomenological approach fulfilled the need to describe the job of building transfer policy and the process within a complex political system.

The researcher identified the experiences of policymakers concerning transfer policy through their own descriptions. The study engaged a small number of participants to develop meaning and to understand the participants (Creswell, 2003). The focus was to understand the perceptions of state-level stakeholders of the phenomenon as they are connected to the process building policy for the transfer pathway. This layer of influencers used aggregate data to make policies and their experiences and intentions add value to the understanding of infrastructure for transfer pathways.

The qualitative data was collected from interviews and systematic procedures of data gathering and analysis was performed. Interviews were used to collect data on policymakers’ perspectives, knowledge and intentions. The advantages to using interviews were that participants provided a historical perspective of the phenomenon; the researcher could lead the research questions; and interviews were useful when direct observation of participant work was not possible (Creswell, 2003). Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe that “the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it” (p. 108). Interviews allowed the researcher to understand the meanings policymakers hold in their roles within higher education and their impact on transfer success.

Research Questions

There were three guiding research questions for the study. The main guiding questions were as follows:
1. What experience do state-level policymakers, coordinating board staff and influencers have with transfer policy and improving the transfer pathway for community college students transferring to universities?

2. What are state-level policymakers’ perceptions of the transfer pathway and their intended outcomes for transfer students?

3. How can the voices of policymakers and their influencers help refine our understanding of transfer policy development and improve student persistence and educational experiences?

The research questions allowed policymakers and influencers to explain their experiences and perspective of the transfer pathway for transfer students; and the process and intentions of developing transfer policy in Texas higher education.

Participant Selection

The study interviewed transfer policymakers in Texas. There are six state senators on the Texas Senate Committee on Higher Education; and, there are nine representatives on the Texas House of Representatives Higher Education Committee. Each of these legislators employ aides to assist them in interacting with higher education administrators and professional associations in the formation of higher education policy, especially during legislative sessions (McMillen, 2010). Fitz and Halpin (2003) describe powerful people as operating behind gatekeepers who control access to the policymaking and administrative processes.

Legislators, legislative aides and coordinating board staff participate in the development of the infrastructure and policy surrounding the transfer pathway. McMillen (2010) stresses that “more than any other politicians—except, perhaps, for extremely popular and/or powerful
governors—state legislators have the greatest influence on both public and private higher education” (p. 56). These participants were intentionally selected based on specific criteria. The study was based on the voice of policymakers and access to their offices was imperative. Participants were selected due to the accessibility of data, their convenience of location and their experience with the phenomenon to be studied. The participants fit the criteria for the study because of their unique role that provided them close proximity and involvement in the phenomenon studied.

The researcher was acquainted with staff members at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board through her experience in serving transfer students at a public Texas university and a public Texas community college. This experience provided a unique perspective and understanding of the transfer pathway and policy implementation. The researcher’s perspective aided in conducting interviews and understanding the culture of the state higher education agency. Interviewing coordinating board staff provided a framework for legislative questions and also provided additional benefits.

Research can be conducted by talking with the legion of lower-level officials and administrative assistants, public relations officers, and so on. Potentially useful information sources are to be found among retired officials and among agency officials who are part of a dissident faction. These are rich sources at any time, but they are especially valuable in the early stages of research when it seems advantageous to defer your approach to more highly placed figures in the political establishment. (Bardach, 2009, p. 80)

Elite interviews are specialized types of interviews focused on the criteria of the participant. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain that they “are considered influential, prominent, and/or well-informed people in an organization or community” that are selected for the expertise (p. 113). The advantage of interviewing legislators, aides and coordinating board
staff was the valuable information they held due to their political and administrative positions. The participants were also chosen for their knowledge of the transfer policy process and the current issues. “Elites are also able to report on an organizations’ policies, past histories, and the future plans from a particular perspective” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 113).

An advantage to elite interviewing is also the quality of information obtained as elites can contribute “insight and meaning” to the “process because they are intelligent and quick-thinking people, at home in the realm of ideas, policies and generalizations” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114). The researcher acted with professionalism and sensitivity in interactions with elite interviewees. “It is safe to say that many politicians, administrators and important staff feel (correctly) that much of their best and most valuable work, which is being done behind the scenes, is unnoticed and underappreciated” (Bardach, 2009, p. 81).

Interviewing powerful people does require special understanding prior to the interview. Walford (2003) states “politicians and senior government officials are well versed in controlling any information they provide, and present considerable difficulties in decoding the views expressed” (p. 218).

**Participant Recruitment**

Prior to contacting any potential participants, the researcher submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher’s institution to gain permission to interview the participants. Once approved, the potential participants (see Appendix A) who worked closely to transfer policy through committee membership or work responsibilities were identified. Potential participants were mailed and emailed a letter to request participation. The letter stated the nature of the study and asked for their participation in an interview. The
initial letters were sent to specific individuals that met the criterion of sitting on the higher education legislative committees; working with the coordinating board; or influencing those in these groups. This purposive sampling was appropriate as it selects members of an elusive, specialized population (Neuman, 2000). The initial sample was selected by the nature of their work close to transfer policy development.

The letter included an informed consent form and asked them to forward the invitation to any colleagues that would also be knowledgeable of the transfer pathway and transfer policy in Texas higher education. This type of referral is known as snowball sampling and it “uses the judgment of an expert in selecting cases or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind” (Neuman, 2000, p. 198). The individual may know of someone containing specific knowledge valuable to the study (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Neuman, 2000). Participants spontaneously led to other participants through remarks, and included suggestions on who may be a friendly or antagonistic, potential participant (Bardach, 2009). Bardach (2009) states that potential participants may “appeal to political self-interest” more than “appeals to courtesy or vanity” if the study has a bearing on the participant’s political benefit or ambition (p. 77). To increase the likelihood of gaining an appointment with a participant, a letter requesting an interview preceded a phone call or email to potential participants (Bardach, 2009).

The first letter was sent to all identified participants located in the Austin, Texas area. The letter stated that data collection would occur during a specified week, and asked for interview time. Three people responded and scheduled interview times during the week. I was nervous for the first interviews, but each participant was hospitable and professional. The first day of interviews was a beautiful, clear day. I traveled to the THECB to meet with coordinating
board staff. I then drove to a coffee shop on Congress Avenue directly in front of the state capital building to meet with a journalist. After spending significant time and energy in the literature review and design for the study, there was an element of reward, confirmation and gratification in walking in front of the impressive capitol building to drink coffee and interview a journalist about policy and policymakers. My doubts about the efficacy of the study or the value of the research diminished with each elite participant’s response for an interview.

Potential participants were sent invitations 3-4 times over the course of ten months. Calls were made to offices as well. Interviewees were asked for names of others recommended for interviews and this snowball sampling was quite beneficial. No legislative interviews were provided during the legislative session. The hectic schedule of the session limited time for legislative staff. Professional association members, THECB staff and journalists were available during the legislative session. Once the session ended, legislative staff were more accessible by phone. Some legislators list their chief of staff or policy analysts’ names and contact information. These websites were helpful for contacting the staff members directly. Legislative staff members were found to be intimately involved with the research, hearings and bills created by the higher education committees. I was also able to locate the names of key policy analysts by reading higher education committee reports published between legislative sessions. These reports list the policy analysts for the respective committee involved in the report. It was surprising how accessible legislative staff members were through email and phone. Their accessibility to me and the public was enlightening and indicative of their work in serving the public interest. All calls to legislative offices were forwarded to the policy analysts who write bills for the higher education committees.
Data Collection

Qualitative studies exploring the perceptions of policymakers on transfer policy for community college students are sparse. Transfer studies are more prominent in the policy implementation stage at the student or institutional level. Many studies are largely quantitative in nature. There have been qualitative studies focused on the experience of transfer students, administrators and staff. However, the perspective of policymakers in transfer policy development is not heavily known. This qualitative study provided that perspective and closes the gap in knowledge using semi-structured interviews as the primary method of inquiry.

Interviewing provided the avenue to understand the experience, perspective and intentions of higher education policymakers (see Appendix B). Data collection for this study included semi-structured individual interviews with four legislative staff from the Texas Senate Higher Education Committee and the Texas House of Representatives Higher Education Committee. Three additional interviews were held with staff from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Five professional association members and two higher education journalists where interviewed for their perspective of the transfer pathway and actions that would improve transfer success. Fitz and Halpin (2003) explains the purpose of using semi-structured interviews with powerful people is “not to validate or authenticate one account against another, but to hear about the policy features and processes from a number of perspectives and thus enable us to construct a more complex and more finely grained narrative account and interpretation” of the “purposes, formulation and intended effects” (815).
Participants discussed their previous educational and work experiences during the interviews. This information could provide additional context for their responses. However, since the population of participants was small, revealing their backgrounds could reveal the identities of those interviewed. Each participant was provided an informed consent form prior to the interview stating: “The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. You will be given a pseudonym and no personally identifiable information will be included in transcripts or records.” To protect the identities of participants, a detailed description of their past educational or work experiences is not provided. Overall, participants held various degrees from education, liberal arts, business and law. Their previous work was broad and included positions in law firms, institutions, K-12 education, newspapers, research, business, and policy.

Interviewing various influencers added value to the study. McMillen (2010) recommends that researchers “must get to know the administrative assistants and support staff for politicians and various others. These are the people who act as gatekeepers” (McMillen, 2010, p. 162). Legislative staff members interviewed were intimately involved with higher education committee meetings, writing policy and researching directives. On the other hand, journalists covered the issues and were able to provide insights into the criteria for a story’s worthiness and the journalist’s perspective of the public’s interest. In addition to journalists, professional associations and lobbyists influence policymakers and shared their priorities. Cook (1998) explains that “public officials said they rely heavily on higher education lobbyists, especially association staff, for information” (p. 185). The data from these various state-level stakeholders added value to the study over gathering data from single perspective.
The population of policymakers was small and they were qualified by their responsibilities in enacting higher education policy. Purposive sampling was used as this population was specialized and difficult-to-reach for interviews (Neuman, 2000). Participants were provided the IRB approval form and a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview to contemplate their answers. The interviews were thirty to ninety minutes, and the protocol focused on answering the research questions. To increase the depth and meaning of the responses, a semi-structured, open-ended approach was used. An interview script was developed to guide the semi-structured interviews. Each participant was also provided a brief summary of the study; an introduction to the researcher; and a statement concerning voluntary participation and confidentiality. The researcher’s post-interview notes were also used in the data collection for reflection (Patton, 2002). The qualitative data was digitally recorded and transcribed from fourteen interviews.

Weiss (1994) recommends interviews for learning about participant’s interior experiences; what they perceive; and how they interpret those perceptions. Interviews provided the needed data from policymakers as a more complete, comprehensive response instead of answers to limited standardized questions (Weiss, 1994). The interviews provided depth and understanding to policy making processes that may be elusive or closed. Weiss (1994) encourages the use of interviews when the purpose for the research is to develop detailed descriptions; integrate multiple perspectives; describe a process; understand a participant’s perspective; and learn how events are interpreted and how organizations work in moving towards a goal. This purpose of this study aligned with these objectives and data was collected through interviews to achieve these objectives.
Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and proofread. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy against the recording. Transcripts were sent to participants for narrative accuracy checks. The transcripts were read multiple times before coding began. Analytical insights that occurred during data collection were recorded to track emergent themes and field-based analytical insights (Patton, 2002). This research study was one that was issue-focused. Weiss (1994) explains that “an issue-focused description is likely to move from discussion of issues within one area to discussion of issues within another, with each area logically connected to the others” (p. 154). An issue-focused analysis has four separate analytic processes for addressing the interview data collection. “Coding, sorting, local integration and inclusive integration are the distinct processes during the analysis of an issue-focused inquiry” (Weiss, 1994, p. 154).

Coding was used to identify the categories, patterns and themes reoccurring in the transcripted interviews, and NVivo computer software was used for this content analysis (Patton, 2002). Weiss (1994) advises that researchers find “important phenomena that significantly extend or deepen or qualify codings near the end of coding analysis” (p. 156). Open coding and then axial coding was used to begin the analysis. The next step, sorting, arranges the data into categories or patterns. Local integration then allows for the data to be interpreted and excerpt files are identified which represent the given pattern (Weiss, 1994). The last stage of the analysis, as explained by Weiss (1994), is the inclusive integration stage when data is organized into a coherent sequence and provide the meaning and context that is extracted from the content analysis.
Information was divided into categories that represent units of instances or elements. Analyzing the data required a theoretical sensitivity or awareness of the subtleties of meaning in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher brought degrees of sensitivity from readings, the study and experience in the relevant area. This sensitivity provided insight and gave meaning to the data. The data was assembled using logical analysis creating logic diagrams depicting the central phenomenon, dimensions, themes and categories (Patton, 2002). Causal conditions, interactions resulting from phenomenon and intervening conditions and consequences were also assembled (Creswell, 1998). A systematic approach to research with specific steps aided in analyzing the data.

**Member Checks**

Member checks provide the opportunity for participants to analyze the findings and verify their accuracy (Creswell, 2003). Member checks can increase the validity of the study. Content experts from each participant category were asked to review the findings to provide a member check for the conclusions and implications developed. Two of the content experts responded to the request. One response from a coordinating board staff member through personal communication confirmed the analysis represented what was occurring with transfer issues: “I think you make the points very well and your analysis of Texas transfer policies are giving an idea of what is going on.” A second response from a professional association member through a phone call stated the “paper was well researched and contained good references,” but offered an additional comment on the relationship between community college and universities. This comment has been included in chapters four and five where relevant. This
member check is especially appreciated since the participant stated that personal time with their grandchildren had been sacrificed to review the findings.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

The trustworthiness and transferability of this qualitative study was based on whether the inquiry was executed to ensure that the phenomenon was accurately identified and described. The inquiry is credible based on the multiple constituents included in the study in their original reality (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Marshall and Rossman (1999) describes the strength of a qualitative study exploring a process or pattern of interaction rests with its validity. The description of the complexities of transfer student processes and interaction was embedded with data derived from the setting provided validity. The setting, population and theoretical framework contributed to validity (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The transferability of the study provides findings useful for other situations with research questions. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that the burden of demonstrating transferability lies less with the original researcher and more with the subsequent study. To counter the weakness seen in the external validity of qualitative study, the original theoretical framework guiding data collection and analysis was guided by concepts and models. Subsequent studies following the same theoretical parameters decide if cases can be generalized for new research policy and transferred or tied to a body of theory (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The dependability of the study was separate from reliability. The researcher attempted to account for changing conditions in the factors affecting transfer success, and the changes in design created by gaining a deeper understanding of the setting. The confirmability of the
study depended on whether the findings and evaluation were dependent on the researcher’s own inherent characteristics. To achieve this Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that qualitative researchers should develop an in-depth understanding of the participants to describe the complex social system to be studied. The design and methods were explicitly detailed. The extent of detail included on how the data was obtained and the fieldwork techniques increase validity as explained by Wolcott (2001). Discussing how the data was analyzed aid researchers with their data even though the field setting may not be replicated (Wolcott, 2001). The research questions and the relevance of the data were made explicit and argued. All of these steps contributed to the soundness of the study.

A possible concern was the political undertones and conflicting agendas between the respondents. These undertones could have restricted honest and transparent responses. The respondents’ opinions of Texas higher education institutions provided a bias on the reasons of transfer policy’s ineffectiveness. The researcher built the language of the questions without a divisive or political stance. The questions did not intend to place blame on inefficiencies, but focused on the future of transfer policies and the direction of policymakers in encouraging more transfer success and improving transfer pathways.

Certain steps increased the likelihood that respondents were honest and transparent in their responses. Respondents were assured of confidentiality, their names were not to be listed on any direct quotations; and the opportunity to review transcripts. Some answers may have been given to promote a specific agenda of the legislator; however, these answers provided insight into the direction of the policymaker and their agenda on improving transfer policy.
Positionality

As researcher, I brought a methodological implication to the phenomenological approach. “The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). I brought my twenty years of experience in Texas public higher education to the study. My experience includes positions serving as a transfer student recruiter, academic advisor, transcript evaluator, admission director and registrar. I have worked with transfer students extensively through my work at a four-year Texas, public university and a Texas, public community college. Providing additional insight, my son has transferred hours from two community colleges and one four-year institution into another large university in the state losing credit and lengthening his time in college. I have professional and personal experience with the transfer policies and processes in Texas. Those experiences with students, faculty, administrators and policy contributed to my understanding of the process and the policymakers’ perceptions. These experiences have provided an intimate working knowledge of the transfer pathway from beginning to end.

Limitations

As with any study, there were limitations identified (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Creswell (2003) states that “at the proposal stage, it is often difficult to identify weaknesses in the study before it has begun” (p. 148). Legislators were hesitant to fully disclose their perceptions even with the confidentiality disclosure. “Hence informants are highly sensitive to the political implications of whatever they tell you. How an informant treats you depends in large part on how she thinks your work will be brought to bear on her personal or political
interests” (Bardach, 2009, p. 80). Any interviews with higher education journalists may have been limited by the extent of knowledge and experience the participant has with transfer issues. “Education journalists, particularly outside the more prestigious outlets, tend to lack training in research or deep experience with education policy issues” (Helig, 2008, p. 198). The primary benefit of interviewing journalists was to obtain their accounts of the attitudes and influence within the legislative process, which could be rich (Bardach, 2009). Journalists were also able to recommend key legislative aides or other contacts for the purpose of interviewing.

There were limitations to interview data that included “possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview” (Patton, 2002, p. 306). With the use of interviews, there are inherent limitations. Legislative aides may have a better grasp of the transfer policy issues, but assess to the knowledgeable aide may be limited. Whitty and Edwards (2003) says that by interviewing legislators directly, “there is also the risk that they exaggerate their own role while the “real” makers, reshapers or implementers of policy remain firmly behind the scenes” (429). Creswell (2003) explains that data collected in interviews is indirect and filtered through the view interviewees; the interview is not in the natural field setting; the presence of the interviewer may provide a bias; and participants may not be equally perceptive or articulate. In interviewing powerful people, “confidentiality [is] a problem because of the high visibility” of some participants (Whitty & Edwards, 2003, 511). Due to this imitation, the participants are not named in any findings.
Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the design, research questions, participant selection, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, transferability, limitations and positionality. This study intended to describe policymaker’s knowledge, opinions, intentions, and perceptions of the transfer pathway. This study also intended to provide a detailed description of the actions and activities planned to increase transfer success in Texas public institutions. A qualitative research approach was used to bring meaning of the decision-making process for policymakers on transfer policy for Texas higher education.
The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of policymakers on the transfer pathway for students from Texas public community colleges to public universities. In this chapter key findings are presented from interviews of fourteen policymakers and policy influencers. These policy influencers include higher education journalists, staff from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and staff from professional higher education associations. Policymakers include those who write legislative bills for the Texas House and Senate Higher Education Committees.

Participants perceived major challenges but responded with ways these can be ameliorated despite a diverse, growing population of transfer students. Five categories of findings emerged from the semi-structured interviews:

1.) A description of typical transfer students;
2.) The capacity of public higher education;
3.) The policymaking environment;
4.) Best practices in building transfer success; and
5.) Problems with the Texas transfer pathway.

Three primary research questions guided this study: (1) What experience do state-level policymakers, coordinating board staff and influencers have with transfer policy and improving the transfer pathway for community college students transferring to universities? (2) What are state-level policymakers’ perceptions of the transfer pathway and their intended outcomes for transfer students? (3) How can the voices of policymakers and their influencers help refine our
This chapter begins with a summary of the legislation passed by policymakers during data collection. The 2015 Texas 84th Legislative Session produced some changes to the transfer pathway. Reference to this work is mentioned during interviews, so a summary of the changes provides context. The next section provides a description of transfer students as perceived by the participants, along with their opinion of the capacity of the public higher education system to serve the Texas population. An explanation of the policymaking process, and the mechanisms that are working well for improving transfer success are found in the following section. The chapter concludes with the areas participants recognized as unresolved problems still contained within the transfer pathway, which guide their future work.

2015 84th Texas Legislative Summary

Data collection for the study began during the 84th Texas Legislative Session in January 2015 and continued through November 2015. There were some changes to the transfer pathway that passed before the session closed. Reference to this work is mentioned during interviews, so a summary of the changes opens this chapter to provide context. Also, Table Two summarizing the Texas transfer policies and initiatives can be found in Appendix H. The session opened with significant new leadership including the governor, lieutenant governor, and chairs of the House Higher Education, House Appropriations, and Senate Finance Committees. The State announced a new long-range strategic plan for higher education, 60x30TX, aimed to have at least 60% of Texans ages 25 to 34 will have a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015). The THECB was charged to promote the transfer of credits towards
completion to strengthen the future workforce. Transfer-specific legislation during the session focused on improving the reverse transfer process and Fields of Study curricula alignment (THECB, 2015).

One of the house bills that passed demonstrates the level of collaboration expected by the legislature between the THECB, institutions, career and technical education experts, agencies or licensing bodies, business and industry representatives. House Bill 2628 “requires the Coordinating Board, with the assistance of an advisory committee, to periodically review each Field of Study Curriculum (FOSC) to ensure alignment with student interest and academic, and industry needs” (THECB, 2015). This advisory committee is charged to “identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to prepare students for high-skill, high-wage jobs in high-demand occupations” (THECB, 2015). This collaboration is intended to produce curriculum that supports employability, incorporate multiple entry and exit points, and create industry-recognized credentials. This legislation demonstrates the expectation that institutions prepare students to enter the workforce and fill business and industry demands upon graduation.

Participants were able to discuss policies and problems in higher education in more detail than expected, especially the legislative staffers. Participants identified specific higher education issues the 84th Legislative Session attempted to address. Issues included in the list were tuition, campus infrastructure, Board of Regent behavior, guns on campus, undocumented students, veterans’ benefits and ways to get college students out of school earlier. The significant transfer policy discussed this legislative session concerned expanding the existing Fields of Study curriculum. The legislation did not make it out of committee, but
holds promise for the next legislative session. Fields of Study will be discussed further in this chapter.

1. Description of the Transfer Student

Understanding transfer students requires that institutions and policymakers are knowledgeable of student needs and attributes, so that initiatives and policy can positively influence transfer students and their success. Characteristics of transfer students have been heavily studied (Doyle, 2009; Dowd, Cheslock & Melguizo, 2008; Gonzalez, Hilmer and Sandy, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Research of transfer students has investigated a number of individual student characteristics that include socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic, cultural and psychological factors, educational backgrounds and aspirations (Tinto, 1993; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012). The participants of this study provided rich descriptions of their perceptions of the typical transfer student, and revealed their familiarity with research of transfer students and the attributes of students in Texas.

Each participant acknowledged that transfer students are a diverse population that spans age groups, educational preparation, ethnic groups, geographic locations, personal responsibilities and socioeconomic conditions. Participants understood that transfer students are not all traditionally-aged. They perceived that older students require more flexibility and support, but exhibit the internal motivation or resilience to persevere. They recognized that the diverse nature of the transfer student contributes to institutions’ challenge in addressing their individualized needs, including the additional support non-traditional students require to be successful.

Transfer students tend to be a little bit older but not necessarily, they can still be the traditional age. They come from all different types of backgrounds. Especially when
you’re looking at vertical transfer from community colleges there are more low income, first generation, and minority students. African American and Hispanic populations actually start at community colleges in higher numbers of all students who go to college in general.

-Professional association member

People who are younger are more likely to transfer but don’t stay very long. The older people stay longer. And that’s to get their associates or just to get their core, but they stay longer. Younger students, eighteen to twenty year olds, transfer in the first year. Either way, transfer is a method of moving forward and being successful.

-Coordinating board staff member

We hear about transfer students who are traditional, straight out of high school. They go straight into their local community college and intend to transfer immediately and do. Others are returners, or students who need to work and have a more flexible schedule to get any credits. I think that’s a pretty diverse pool. But again, I really think that transfer students are actually more the norm than they are the exception these days.

-Legislative staff member

Money is usually a problem, which is one of the reasons that they’re starting out at community colleges because they can get their core and some of their other courses out of the way for cheaper. A lot of them didn’t go to college right out of high school. A lot of them have done other things with their life or were working and then decided that for their career-or for the career that they actually want but haven’t begun yet-they need a degree. When they start they are in their late 20’s or in their 30’s, they are middle-aged, so they are called non-traditional students. They are our typical student here in our local community college.

-Higher education journalist

There are larger numbers of students at community colleges that need extra support sometimes. I think they are all unique so it is hard to make generalities. In terms of resilience, a lot of students are working part-time, full-time, or have families. They have been through a lot and they do have an added advantage of resilience in life. They may need a little extra support for someone to say, “You can do this.” But having someone be that person that believes in them and tells them that they can do it is important.

-Professional association member

Participants in the study noted that community colleges have more minorities and larger percentages of first generation students than universities, and those students have less access
to financial resources. One journalist confirmed that older, non-traditional students are the norm in their local, urban community college system. Participants perceived that transfer students are more likely to attend community colleges due to the lower cost and admission standards, with many of them intending to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

Texas public community college students are a growing, diverse population. Hispanic students comprise 38.8% of the community college population; African American students represent 14.1% of enrollment; and White students comprise 37.2% of the community college population (THECB, 2014c). Of all undergraduate students pursuing degrees and certificates in Texas public institutions, 58% are attending two-year colleges (CCA, 2011). The graduation rate for full-time Texas students pursuing associates degrees at public institutions entering the fall of 2004 and finishing in four years was 11.2%, while the rate for bachelor’s degree seekers entering in the fall 2002, and graduating in eight years was 62.6% (CCA, 2011). (These graduation rates represent completion in 200% of the expected time to degree.) These statistics represent the challenge Texas higher education faces in increasing college completion rates, specifically at the associate’s level. By the year 2020, there will be a 29% skills gap between the jobs requiring career certifications or college degrees and the Texas adults who are qualified to fill them which jeopardizes the state economy (CCA, 2011).

The demographic shift in Texas in recent years involving growing, impoverished or at-risk populations will drive education policy for decades to come according to one participant. This shift will drive K-12 education policy as well as higher education to increase student success for all populations.
I think roughly sixty percent of our K-12 population is classified as poor or at-risk. We have to find a way to get those kids into and through higher education. That is going to be the big push over the next twenty or thirty years.

-Legislative staff member

Another participant emphasized the importance of community colleges in social mobility. Supporting at-risk, diversified populations of students with limited financial resources can strengthen their social mobility and future employability. Improving student success can have positive effects for the student and the economy, with community colleges playing a pivotal role in serving both purposes.

That’s what makes me so passionate about being involved in community colleges. We are changing lives, we even get success. But one of the quotes I heard at a national conference is deep in my psyche. Vice President [Joe Biden] said “Community college is the pathway to the middle class.” And that resonates with me because the talk we had thinking about the middle class that it is starting to evaporate. That won’t happen if you keep community colleges vibrant. That middle class will be sustained.

-Professional association member

Wang (2012) described how student behaviors may be influenced by training, environmental support and interaction with faculty. Participants of this study also perceived that institutional support can increase student success. Their perceptions align with the research. Understanding the upward transfer to four-year institutions requires that institutions and policymakers are knowledgeable of student needs and attributes, so that initiatives and policy can positively influence transfer students and success. Community colleges serve disadvantaged students, and the initiatives and intentional efforts to facilitate a successful transfer process is important to access and equity in American higher education (Dowd et al., 2008; Wang, 2012). The participants of this study confirm that policymakers are often knowledgeable of student needs and attributes to a point, but lack first hand, personal
knowledge of the extent of the challenges that prevent seamless transfer and timely graduation. However, they do understand the importance community colleges play in social mobility. They seem committed to the promise of social mobility, but the graduation rates demonstrate that promise has not been fully realized.

College completion for community college students is typically defined as the number of certificate or associate degrees conferred at an institution. “Students who started at a public community college at age 20 or younger have the highest college completion rate (41.8%) compared to 29.3% for those age 20-24 and 37.5% for those over age 24, according to analysis of outcomes after six years.” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014a). The participants of this study also understood that traditionally-aged students do not typically stay at the community college for a long period of time and transfer faster than older students. These perceptions align with the data that shows younger students have higher completion rates in community colleges showing that older students are less successful in their pursuits at the community college level.

Perceptions of Student Experiences

Not only did participants of the study describe what they felt was a typical transfer student, but they shared their perceptions of what students experience as they navigate the transfer pathway. Throughout the interview, student experiences shared by participants were largely anecdotal and not tied to a specific interview question. They provide insight into what policymakers believe about the transfer student experience. These beliefs can have a profound impact on their policymaking decisions. Policies are created by the values and intentions of the policymaker; and those decisions should be informed of scope of the change and who will be
affected by it (Martinez, 2004). The responses by participants are combined together in this section to explain how policymakers perceive student experiences. These perceptions can inform their policy decisions.

**Student Knowledge and Experiences with State Policies**

Throughout the interviews, participants perceived transfer students as uninformed and naïve to state policies, only becoming enlightened when the negative effects of the policies affect the student. The negative effect usually involves additional financial penalties for the student.

For example, students that are classified as Texas residents pay in-state tuition rates. However, there is a state policy that allows institutions to charge out-of-state tuition rates when a student goes at least 30 hours over the credit hours required for a degree. When faced with higher tuition rates for excess credit hours, less students earn excess credit according to coordinating board staff, implying that the policy is effective.

I was involved in every bill in the last ten years, so I looked at the degree and credit hours data after the bill was passed. I can tell you that there was a drop in the number of [excess] hours taken after the bill was passed.

- Coordinating board staff member

However, the data doesn’t explain whether the decrease is due to students taking less hours or stopping out once faced with out-of-state tuition. Throughout the interviews, participants doubted whether institutions inform students about policies, like the Six-Drop Limit, Three-Repeat Limit or Excess Credit Hours tuition surcharges (Table One), before students are in jeopardy of the consequences from their uninformed decisions.
### Table D.1

*List of Texas Transfer Policies and Initiatives that Penalize Student Behaviors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Student impact</th>
<th>Statute or rule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excess Credit Hour Surcharge</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive formula funding for 30 or more excess credit hours attempted towards an undergraduate degree. <em>(Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</em></td>
<td>Students may face tuition surcharges once they attempt 30 or more credit hours over the credit hours required for their undergraduate degree at public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, §13.100-13.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-Drop Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including transfer work.</td>
<td>Unless students meet exceptions, undergraduates cannot drop more than six courses while attending public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapter A, Rule §4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Repeat Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive funding for a course attempted more than twice. <em>(Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</em></td>
<td>Students may face surcharges once they attempt the same course more than two times. The surcharge may occur on the third attempt.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, Rule §13.105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The student facing [penalties for excess hours or repeating courses] doesn’t know their path forward, or doesn’t have the time and resources to study and research it as carefully. Students are negatively impacted, and blindsided sometimes by those financial restrictions.

*-Legislative staff member*

I do think it is unfair to a student if they are not aware of those policies, and so they encounter them once they have already bumped up against those thresholds. I think that making students aware of the limitation on dropping how many courses you can drop is just information they should have at the beginning so that they know that this is a busy time for their family, they should only take two classes that semester. They can make more informed choices.

*-Legislative staff member*
Perceptions of Students’ Experiences in the Vertical Transfer Process

Participants shared their perceptions of what students face when they attempt to transfer from community colleges to universities. As stated previously, policymaker beliefs about transfer student experiences can influence the policy priorities and decisions made. The following sections provide the areas where participants believe students experience problems within the transfer pathway: advising services; lack of individualized attention at universities; lack of access to student records; delayed transfer credit evaluations; and earning excessive hours at the community college.

Perception of Advising and transition services. There was a general perception from the participants that the advising services offered at all institutions are not adequate; and transfer transition services at universities are inadequate. Participants perceive that universities’ orientation and advising services for transfer students to be inferior to the comprehensive services provided by them for incoming freshmen. There was also an implication that not all universities offer the same level of advising or transition services. Not all universities are focused on serving transfer students. Transfer experiences can be dependent on the particular university chosen and its transfer culture.

I don’t think the advising is very good. I don’t think students really know what to do when they are ready to transfer. Many of the schools send students to computers to show them what will transfer and what classes to take. If I were in a university, I would spend a week with an orientation to show them how a university works, where things are, deadlines, etc., because they come from a smaller campus, with smaller classes. Universities place them in huge classes where nobody will know their names and it isn’t easy to speak to professors, that is the big difference between universities and community colleges. Universities do this [orientation] for their freshmen, but not their transfers. The fact that they’ve been to a community college doesn’t mean they know how to navigate the university.
There is not continuity for that swirling student. Whatever campus they land on may not be equally focused on the transfer student.

Throughout the interviews, an overwhelming majority of participants perceive advising services to be inadequate; and blame the challenges students face largely the result of ineffective advising and transition services. Some of the blame was directed at the advising ratio at community colleges.

Students may have too many options, or they don’t know where they are going to transfer. We have a 900:1 advisor to advisee ratio at the community college. Once a student earns thirty credit hours, they should have to sit with an advisor and develop a degree plan. “Where are you going? What are you going to major in?” And then the final eighteen hours of your associates degree, ideally would be made up of the courses we know will transfer. That’s a goal of that degree program, to minimize the loss of credit.

Contrary to these claims, one higher education journalist believes that the advising offered at the local community college has effective advisors serving the large numbers of first-generation students who do not have a support at home for advice or knowledge for navigating college. The journalist believes the local community college’s advising services are beneficial, and believes the institution is doing its part to get students to transfer on time with intrusive advising.

They are basically stalked by their advisors. The advising is much more intrusive and I think that is good for students that don’t have anyone in their family that has been to college. This kind of advising helps students complete a baccalaureate because they didn’t take a bunch of courses that don’t transfer due to them not knowing better.
With improved advising services, transfer students may be able to navigate the choice of courses and take the ones needed to graduate on time. Teaching students how to navigate the university environment can help them know the questions to ask so students can make informed decisions. Instead of asking how many credits will transfer, prospective transfer students should ask universities how many credits they will lack after they transfer.

Teach students to ask how many credits will I need to graduate at your institutions. Advisors need to teach transfer students to ask the better question. “What will be applied to my degree, and how many hours do I lack?”

-Professional association member

Perception of the lack of timely access to student records or course evaluations.

Another problem students face is the lack of access to their records from the sending institution. A professional association member stated that students transfer and then realize their access to the community college’s student information system has been deactivated. The universities are not able to advise students without the transcripts, leaving students without instant access to their records. Several participants also recommended that institutions provide students course evaluations once the student arrives at the university, preferably before they enroll in the first semester. Students need to know how their transfer credit is being applied to the degree as soon as possible to make informed decisions according to several participants.

Give students equivalencies earlier. Students need to know how many credits are remaining to graduate, and they need to know this at the start of their first semester at the university.

-Professional association member

Send transcripts to the new institution faster. Receiving institutions can’t serve them without the information. And then the receiving institution has to process transcript evaluations as soon as possible. The receiving institution needs to look at their coursework to advise properly. We hear that cutting students’ access to student
information systems after they leave can be a barrier to advise transfer students at the receiving institution. Give students equivalencies earlier, but they need to know how they will apply and how many you are going to take. Students need to know how many credits are left to graduate when they start comparing institutions. The better question teach students is ‘how much is it going to take, not how many are you going to give me.’ There are some four-year institutions that are doing false advertising of how long it will take with all this credit they are going to accept.

-Professional association member

And advisors may not get the transcripts before the first day [of the semester]. Students may walk in today, a day before classes start to be advised. And their evaluations aren't ready, and advisors just try to advise verbally say, "Well, have you taken algebra?"

-Coordinating board staff member

Perceptions of earning excessive credit at the community college. When students earn more credit hours than what is required to graduate the student pays more for the degree and the state pays more.

The cost to full-time students is $16,000 for an extra year of college; to part-time students it is $24,388 for the two extra years. The cost to Bexar county [San Antonio area] taxpayers who underwrite unnecessary courses is $46 million annually, while the cost to state taxpayers is $300 million annually. The total cost to Texas students and taxpayers of excess credit hour accrual is $490 million, almost half a billion dollars annually. (Leslie, 2015)

Public surveys suggest that students should bear the responsibility and financial burden of excess credit hours. Zemsky (2011) reports that the general public supports students, but largely prioritizes institutional ranking and reputation over student services or financial support. “Conviction runs throughout public opinion: namely, that students themselves bear a considerable share of responsibility for meeting the challenges of attaining a higher education” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 59).

Over half of the participants stated that students leave community college with eighty to ninety credit hours. It was interesting that so many of the interviews mentioned the “90
credit hour” transfer student from community colleges, and the struggles universities have in graduating them on time. Most baccalaureate degrees are 120 credit hours, and students enter with little room for repeating courses or taking anything off of their degree plan. The limits for earning excessive credit hours or excessive repeats are used before students transfer and begin their upper division coursework. This topic was discussed heavily in higher education committee hearings, and seemed to influence the perception of those interviewed that this occurs frequently. The topic of excess credit hours in the interviews led to discussion on the state economy, and how this problem negatively affects students and the state financially, and the state needs to reduce the number of excess hours earned. At 90 credit hours, community college students face losing financial aid and out-of-state tuition due to the state policy on excess credit hours.

It’s crazy. Students are transferring into universities with eighty or ninety credits. They are at an associate’s degree-and-one-half [1-1/2 associate’s degrees] at the time of transfer.

-Legislative staff member

The president of [redacted] basically said in something that was requoted frequently that he was tired of giving transfer students bad news. Transfer students would show up at his university and then learn that all of their courses didn't transfer, and then they'd get upset at the university. And they just wanted the process to be a lot more streamlined.

-Higher education journalist

I think advising is the key component, either investing in more advising, helping students understand which courses are credit-bearing to advance their degree, and which are in the elective category, so that you don't have students transferring with 80 or 90 credits. They should be out of community colleges at 60 or 70 credits. You don't need that many credits to get an Associate's degree.

-Legislative staff member
The problem I saw is that the legislature put a limit to their associate degrees, and that was one of the big impediments for the bachelor degrees. An average numbers of hours of somebody who came out of community college was 90 hours. There's no way you can get only 30 hours more for a bachelor degree. So people transferred with a lot of hours, and I'm not sure how many people understand what that's about. It's about how many hours the state paid for. It doesn't matter that they didn't complete, it doesn't matter that they cannot be applied to your degree. The state paid for them.

-Coordinating board staff member

In community colleges, the average community college student takes about 90 hours. A huge majority of those hours are non-transferable. The effect there is, loss of revenue to the community colleges, first of all, because you have to invest in the professors and the infrastructure to support that enrollment. And secondly, students start losing Pell Grant eligibility. They start losing the value of their scholarships if they have any. They start looking at loans to compensate. Then when they move into the four-year institution they have to retake courses that they already have taken, but they don't understand why they're not transferable. So students have to retake the 12 hours they paid $856 for at the community college and pay another $3200 to retake them. So look at the economic impact, not only just on those two institutions but also look at the impact on the student and their families. And a lot of students that transfer are not your typical 20-year olds. They're like 26 years old. That's the average age. So they're already working and that's a big hit on people that are working and trying to move forward with two to four year degrees.

-Professional association member

Students and institutions can be financially penalized with some of the things like three-peat rules, excess credit hours. They're a barrier to the students. They're not enforceable in terms of the policy responsibilities that institutions have. But in the application of those stated policies, the students are the ones who suffer the most because colleges don't necessarily worry about that. Colleges are worried about that now, and are taking actions to remedy the situation, but before they had no direction from legislature, for example, nor from the coordinating board. Basically, the movement to take care of some of this is starting at the local community college level and it's becoming more and more of something that they're looking at. We're tired of investing in China. We want to invest in success. And so we believe this is the way to move forward.

-Professional association member

Participants of the study shared their perceptions of what students experience as they navigate the transfer pathway. They believe that students are not aware of financial penalties
and limits imposed on them until it is too late to prevent consequences. The challenges students face are attributed to inadequate advising and orientation services; and perceived inequity in the quality of transition services offered between institutions. Students’ experiences will depend largely on the university they choose to attend. Participants also believe students are encouraged to stay at the community college too long which causes many problems for the state, institutions and students. These beliefs can have a profound impact on their policymaking decisions and their perception that policy and formula funding should penalize community colleges more heavily for excessive credit problems.

2. The Capacity of Texas Public Higher Education

The higher education governance structure in Texas is characterized as a federal system. “Federal systems have a statewide board responsible for collecting and distributing information, advising on the budget, planning programs from a state-wide perspective, and encouraging articulation” (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 17). Texas has a coordinating board which has rulemaking and regulatory authority in a state with mixed single-campus and multi-campus institutions (Richardson et al., 1999). Coordinating boards aid in providing comprehensive planning at the state level. Institutions continue to maintain their autonomy, and the coordinating board provides for improved “quality of campus decision making by setting it in a broader framework” (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 255). Richardson et al. (1999) emphasize that “the state’s strong emphasis on local control and local decision making creates a constant, dynamic tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board” (p. 125).

This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas
higher education system several decades ago. In 1999, Richardson et al. made a startling prediction that “in the absence of significant change in Texas’s system of higher education, growth in enrollment and student diversity will most likely outstrip the current capabilities of the system” (pp. 126-127). This is the crux of the issue for Texas transfer challenges.

The participants of this study were asked if they agreed with Richardson’s (1999) prediction, and whether the current system contributes to low completion rates for transfer students. Their responses, rather than clearly answering the question, focused on funding models; the economy; time to degree; and the capacity of institutions to meet the needs of the population. They either did not understand the question; hold different understandings of capacity; or did not have past experiences with long-range planning for higher education. Another possibility is that participants relate the capacity of higher education to the availability of resources and funds to institutions.

**Capacity Depends on Funding Models**

One third of participants responded to the question on the capacity of higher education institutions by addressing community colleges specifically. Their concerns for addressing the educational needs of a growing population and transfer students centered on community colleges and their funding models.

One THECB staff member believed that community colleges are at an advantage by having the flexibility to build their own buildings without gaining funding approval from the legislature, as universities are required to do. This data would imply that community colleges can increase their own capacity for buildings and degree programs if there is local support and funding.
I think the funding model where community colleges fund some things and the state funds other things is positive. Universities have to ask for money from legislators if they need money, and if the legislature says “No”, the money will go to another need. However, if the community wants a new building, then they get a new building. Regardless of the economy, regardless of the budget, if the community wants it, then they get it...If the system became more centralized, it is not a guarantee that the community colleges could be accommodated for their needs.

Other participants stated that funding is a problem. The interviews confirmed that there is a perception that community colleges are serving an increasingly diverse student body and are pressured to add new programs often to meet business and industry needs. Reductions in funding can prevent these initiatives from being adequately implemented or effective in meeting the needs of a growing population.

There have been cuts made to education funding and I just don’t see how you can expand rapidly and have those cuts at the same time.

- *Higher education journalist*

I believe funding higher education is important for the economy of our state, and for the economy of family units and other components of our community.

- *Legislative staff member*

If you look at what the distribution of funds are between community colleges and four-year institutions, or the general education institutions, they get three point something billion dollars, and community colleges on received under a billion dollars.

- *Professional association member*

If you look at funding from a macro perspective and community colleges, they are not going to be able to sustain this kind of funding model for very long. And if so, institutions are going to have to either shoot up taxation rates so that they can get the income or they will have to get it from the backs of students’ tuition and you know what that’s going to do. It will lower enrollment and make people very, very angry at the local level. They won’t support the tax increases either.

- *Professional association member*
Community colleges are the only ones in the higher education system that are flexible enough to meet the needs of any population that comes into our communities. They are open enrollment, unlike restrictive universities. Serving the demographic shift is going to fall on the back of the community colleges. They are not being supported appropriately by the state to do this work.

-Professional association member

The state’s commitment to community colleges was also called into question by a professional association member. The participant stated that any past discussion of restructuring higher education in Texas by the legislature or the coordinating board has lacked a plan. This same participant contributes the success of the State’s Closing the Gaps strategic plan to community colleges; and any future success with the new THECB 60x30TX plan will be due to the effort of community colleges.

But then if you look at the commitment that the State has made or the commitment that the coordinating board has paid to community colleges in terms of funding their efforts in terms of students’ success, it has been negligible. They lost money this year in the legislative session. They have been losing money for years. The State’s share was 33% and even then they weren’t paying the full reimbursement that they should have paid. It is now down to about 19%. The State needs to look at the demographic shift occurring and consider what kind of commitment is going to be made to community colleges. Community colleges are the institutions flexible enough to meet the needs of any population that comes into our communities, including the transfer student.

Participants were cognizant of the inequality in funding universities versus community colleges. Participants cited the importance of community colleges in the State’s economy and serving a growing, diverse population. Throughout the interviews, the need for a renewed commitment to higher education funding was mentioned.

Capacity Depends on The Economy and its Connection to the Workforce

The perceptions of policymakers may be misunderstood; and unless the other stakeholders can understand policymakers’ beliefs and intentions in their decisions, there can
be confusion and frustration. “Policymakers believe that higher education is linked to the economic, social and cultural well-being of their state. Legislators are under pressure to show the results of their decisions, so it is no surprise that they frequently speak about the expectations they have of higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 91). Policymakers are pressured by the public to show positive results to their efforts. “Economic growth, degree attainment, and starting salaries are measurable and provide policymakers with figures and statistics that they can attribute to their efforts” (Martinez, 2004, p. 92).

The transfer pathway remains important to community college students and to the economy in producing a better qualified, skilled workforce (Handel, 2013; Zemsky, 2011). There are sharply declining appropriations from state and federal governments (Kelderman, 2013; McNair et al., 2011). This declines affects higher education and the state economy. Policymakers make budget decisions and inform policy; and education is a major portion of the annual state budget.

The state economy and higher education are closely related to employment according to participants of this study. One legislative staff member stressed the importance of community colleges to offer ‘wrap around services’ to displaced workers during a recession to reskill and find employment. This participant stated that finding funding for these services will be discussed in the next legislative session in 2017.

Community colleges have a competing focus between technical programs with industry and academic programs. Two participants claimed there is a push for increasing partnerships between community colleges and industry to meet workforce needs. Some of these partnerships result in high paying salaries for students that go into the workforce immediately
after completing a certificate or an Associates of Applied Sciences degree with advanced manufacturing skills in high need. One participant stated these programs may not involve transfer students, but their high salary potential may entice academic students into the technical programs. These participants perceived the need for students to fill workforce needs to support the economy.

Several hundred students have gone into these technical programs. By the time they are 21 years of age, they already have a retirement plan and a $60,000 to $70,000 job. One of those young people graduated five years ago. She is female, from an inner city neighborhood and a minority. She is now making $130,000 a year in a management position. She has bought her own house and has made it into the middle class. She was in a real at-risk situation, and now she is thriving. She would not have made it through a four-year college degree program.

-Professional association member

I believe funding higher education is important for the economy of our state, and for the economy of family units and other components of our community.

-Legislative staff member

There is a whole other subset of degrees and certifications at a community college that doesn’t involve transfer students. They are geared towards people who want to go directly into the workforce. There is a big push for increasing those kinds of things in tech sectors and advanced manufacturing. These students go directly into the workforce with pretty high salaries without a bachelor’s degree.

-Professional association member

Community colleges have competing focus between technical programs with industry and academic programs. These responses reflected the competing mission of community colleges to prepare students to transfer to universities and to work with industry to build technical programs. Students have choices between pursuing each direction as well. The economy affects industry, institutions and students; and plays an integral role in the community’s expectations for higher education institutions as demonstrated through
participant responses. With the reductions in funding to institutions, policymakers seek methods to reduce the amount of time students are enrolled in degree programs. To reduce the amount money spent per student, legislators seek ways to shrink the amount of time a student spends in higher education before graduation. These efforts result in tuition surcharges and other limitations.

**Capacity Dependent on Reducing the Time to Degree**

With the college completion agenda bringing more relevance to community colleges and their efficacy in graduating students, there is an opportunity to maximize the momentum (Zemsky, 2011). “College completion rates have come to play an increasing role in judging the efficiency of both individual institutions and the American system of higher education writ large. (Zemsky, 2011, p. 193). The graduation rate has come to be “a measure of the system’s inefficiency and hence its capacity to waste resources: the student’s time, energy, and money; the institution’s manpower; and the funding agencies’ direct and indirect appropriations” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 193).

Marling (2013) states that the completion agenda cannot be successful without an intentional approach to transfer student success. Community colleges are associated with low program-completion rates and have “become ground zero in the national completion movement, which has ‘taken on a life of its own’ since the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation called on the nation to double the number of students who, by 2020, earn a certificate or associate degree or transfer to a four-year college or university” (Mangan, 2014a, para 2.). The relevance of community colleges in the higher education system is reinforced by success goals set by President Obama, influential foundations, higher education associations and individual
states and institutions (Handel, 2013; Mangan, 2014a). The emphasis of the new THECB strategic plan 60X30Tx is placed on greatly increasing the number of people holding a certificate or higher education degree in Texas.

In discussing the capacity of Texas higher education to meet the needs of transfer students or the new strategic plan, one third of participants mentioned the need to reduce the time transfer students require to graduate with their baccalaureate. Current policies like the Six-Drop Limit, Excess Credit Hour Limitations, and the Three Repeat Limit (Table One) are policies intended to curb excessive credit hours for students at community colleges or public universities. One of the legislative staff members stated the primary focus of their work is to reduce the time to degree for all students, including transfer students.

The main goal is time to degree. If you focus on decreasing the time to degree, either to an associate’s degree or a baccalaureate degree, you decrease costs to the institution, costs to the student and family; and you increase efficiency in higher education and the ability to move somebody through the system, so use of the resources can be for the next cohort of students. The real challenge as a State now is in completion. We’ve made great strides on access and enrollment, but fall short in completion.

In examining the growing diversity of Texas and the capacity of higher education institutions, the K-12 system was mentioned briefly. A journalist mentioned there has been a nationwide discussion to consider free, public education as K-14 instead of K-12. Another participant suggested that any restructure of education in Texas would be successful by local efforts, and not state efforts. And, early high school programs and dual credit programs could produce incoming college freshmen with 30 to 48 credit hours which reduces the time to degree, according a professional association member.

Regardless of efforts to reduce time to degree for transfer students, funding models, or the economy; the capacity of institutions to serve the population is of importance as revealed
by participants. As one legislative participant stated: “We have to find a way to get those kids into and through higher education. That’s going to be a big push over the next 20 to 30 years.”

The student population Texas serves is increasingly more financially vulnerable; and the participants of this study recognize the unique challenges faced by today’s institutions.

**The Capacity of Public Institutions to Meet the Needs of Texas**

Zemsky (2011) states the “public’s collective advice was that colleges and universities should continue to focus on what they did best: attracting the best possible teachers and researchers to their colleges and ensuring that student work hard to achieve high academic standards” (p. 59). The participants of the study had differing opinions on whether higher education in Texas can meet the needs of its stakeholders. A legislative member believes there is capacity to handle the growing population in Texas; while a journalist perceived the need to add more Tier One institutions to serve more students. A legislative member interviewed believes there is some capacity available, despite the fact that there are not available spaces at the flagship institutions in Texas.

We’ve got 1.5 million college students in our institutions in 37 public four-years, 50 community college districts, 38 private, non-profit institutions. We have met our goals with Closing the Gaps for participation, but there is capacity remaining. People who want to enroll will enroll if they are able to do so financially or time commitment-wise, assuming life doesn’t get in the way. There are generally seats available except for two institutions that are at capacity.

In an opposing view, a journalist stated that there is a initiative to create more Tier One institutions in Texas. The journalist did not believe there are enough Tier One institutions to satisfy the population’s needs in a large State. If it is difficult to enter the two flagship institutions in the State, then you are not serving the whole State, according to the participant.
Challenges and complexity of a decentralized, large higher education system. A coordinating board staff member stressed the complexity of the decentralized higher education system in Texas in determining whether there is capacity. The response acknowledges the variety of institutions operating independently of each other and the growth of the transfer student population in the THECB work to coordinate rules for students and institutions.

We have 56 plus systems in Texas. Every community college is its own system and acts as their own system, and then we have six, four-year systems, plus the independent public institutions. So I think what the legislature has done, and what we have tried to do through [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board] rules is to try to lessen the impact on the student from shifting from one system to another system. Are we doing it better now than we did twenty years ago? I think the answer is “Yes”. But part of that is that there were not many transfer students twenty years ago.

The dilemma of coordinating a large, independent, decentralized higher education system is not a recent issue in Texas. A higher education journalist provided some history and politics to the struggle to build capacity and coordinate institutions.

One thing I always thought was interesting is that the [former high ranking state officer] would always say, when you got them off of record, was talking about how the systems in Texas have evolved. There is no logic or reason to the higher education system. They are weird mixtures of different kinds of universities in different places. [Redacted name] would say that Texas needed to go back and just totally redraw all of the systems, which is pretty radical. It is never going to happen, but I thought that was pretty fascinating.

Policymakers’ description of transfer students and their experiences provides insight into policy motivations, but they did not directly answer the question of whether the State has the capacity to serve its growing population. Participants either didn’t understand the depth of the question or were unfamiliar with the capacity remaining in institutions across the state. In examining the Texas transfer pathway, the challenges surrounding transfer students should not be examined in isolation. The Texas higher education system is a lengthy list of independent
institutions and systems that are decentralized. This description helps to understand the complexity students face in navigating the transfer pathway among the institutions. Policymakers and influencers work within this complicated environment with limited resources, the State economy, and uncertain capacity limitations of institutions. Implications for future resources and capacity are unclear if policymakers do not have a clear understanding of whether the current system of institutions is capable of serving the current and future needs of the State.

3. Texas Policymaking Environment

Participants answered several questions concerning the completion agenda and how the policymaking process works in Texas. In their responses, participants discussed their perceptions of how the Office of the Governor, faculty members and institutions play a role outside of the legislative higher education committees. The policymaking process is influenced by national and local politics and the agendas of policy influencers.

Completion Agenda is a Major Influence on Policymaking

Mounting pressure from the public and policymakers are making the completion agenda a top priority in higher education in the United States (Brint, 2011; Hamilton, 2013a; Kiley, 2012; Mangan, 2013). As institutions become more accountable for their effectiveness in providing access to the public and ability to lead student success, the decisions leaders make which affect graduation success become more critical. Legislators measure institutional success on the numbers of full-time, first-time-in-college (FTIC) students that enroll, continue and earn a degree or certificate within 150% of the time to graduation (Habley et al., 2012). Marling
(2013) states that the completion agenda cannot be successful without an intentional approach that includes transfer student degree completion.

The participants in the study confirmed that the completion agenda provides “pressure from the federal initiative and the drive for completion. It is so data-driven right now that there’s just a lot of pressure to get the right types of results tracked and recorded.” The completion agenda was mentioned by coordinating board staff, professional association members, legislative staff and journalists. Participants provided their perspective of how it is influencing the transfer pathway.

The time to degree is a major issue affecting completion, and it was mentioned numerous times during the study in several contexts. When students take 80 to 90 hours before leaving a community college, the extra hours become a barrier to baccalaureate completion and excess tuition charges. Solutions to reduce the number of hours taken at the sending institution is of great concern during the last legislative session. Excessive credit hours can contribute to low self-esteem and increased student debt according to THECB staff.

The push for years, for years was all about participation. And the idea was, if the students get in then they will get out. No, they don't. So the fact that you enroll them doesn't mean they will complete and graduate. And what we discovered is people may be worse off if they don’t finish, because they take some classes, they don’t succeed, their self-esteem goes down –“I’m a failure”. But in the same time, they end up with debt. They don't have anything to show for their college work. They have a loan they have to repay, so it's not necessarily showing that going to college was a good thing. It's a good thing if they finish.

One journalist also believes the time to degree metrics are arbitrary and unrealistic given students are not all the same.

I think institutions get a bad rap. Some students just aren’t going to be graduating in four years or some arbitrary amount of time. Some take longer, and some can go
shorter. I don’t know why we need to be so limiting to say “Graduation must be in X amount of time, otherwise it is worthless.”

The push for improving college completions has focused heavily on native students who start at the university their first year, and do not transfer. Transfer students have been ignored in the completion or performance funding metrics, which influences institutional priorities according to a professional association member.

I think that is slowly changing, because it’s been in more conversations recently. Some institutions are great and they look at data. But if a transfer student doesn’t equal something that helps institutions get funding for performance-funding models, they don’t really see it as a reason to improve the transfer metrics [at the campus level]. The focus is on the right types of results that can be tracked and recorded [for performance funding].

Policy reform efforts should consider changing the metrics used to reward the successful transfer and graduation of transfer students. The completion agenda will have a stronger emphasis in the statewide completion initiative called the THECB 60x30TX accountability strategic plan. According to coordinating board staff the plan will focus on increasing post-graduate degrees, degree obtainment, marketable soft skills, and student debt related to first-year job income. Tracking and recording success will be of great importance to institutions and the THECB.

One legislative staff member cautioned that legislators should take a realistic approach to increasing the expectations for completion. The local economies, industries and communities in which institutions are located have unique needs and students. There are economic realities for particular low-income areas. Legislators should not make generalities for what should work and be expected at all institutions.
You have to be careful because what applied in Odessa doesn’t apply to Dallas, or Houston, or San Antonio, or Austin or Tyler. People in Austin have to be careful to make sure they understand that we don’t have all of the answers for everybody.

Also, in mentioning the effect the completion agenda has on college access, this legislative staff member recognized the need to maintain access, and recognized students have life commitments that affect their progress. This provided some context to the discussion that legislators understand that students carry some responsibility in their time to degree.

Institutions do not carry all of the responsibility for outcomes.

You have to be careful. It is always a balancing act. You could say everybody [institutions] has to increase their graduation rates and then the next day, everybody is going to increase their admission standards. So, you want to balance that out...and also in making sure students can get through in a timely fashion. Not all students can get through. Not everyone is going to be able to enroll full-time and that’s something that has to be acknowledged. Life does get in the way.

The completion agenda does have some positive attributes as described by one THECB staff member. The initiative aims to save resources, improve the workforce, and help the economy.

For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money and decrease the time to degree, which also saves the state money and saves the students some money and time. Students can go to work, start paying taxes and other good things can come out of this right? What drives this is saving money, getting people into the workforce sooner, reducing the stress of state resources and money that students need to borrow. They can then buy houses, spend money and start investing.

This response shows that the emphasis is not to solely save the State money. The completion agenda can improve the economy by saving families tuition money, helping students enter the workforce earlier with more credentials, and allow for resources to be spent in other ways by the student and the State. The legislative process moves forward within an environment of limited resources and competing demands from stakeholders. However, this environment may provide an uneven playing field for the students from low income families or underrepresented
groups. Understanding the legislative process requires that the competing demands be understood and those that hold influence over the process, and those making decisions for all students.

Politics in Texas Higher Education

The political environment in Texas is in a state of transition as several key policymakers moved out of their positions leaving new leaders in important positions. The 2015 session opened with significant new leadership including the governor, lieutenant governor, and chairs of the House Higher Education, House Appropriations, and Senate Finance Committees. (THECB, 2015) Texas is a large state with tense politics involved in higher education, as perceived by participants of this study. One professional association member stated it best by saying “I used to work in Washington DC, and I have seen more politics at the state level than I did before.”

The Office of the Governor. The relationship between higher education and the governor has been acrimonious and well-documented in recent years under Governor Rick Perry (Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton, 2013b). When asked about the relationship between institutions and the governor’s office, one journalist predicted that the environment will be better with the shift in 2015 from Governor Rick Perry who was in office for fifteen years to Governor Greg Abbott. Also, one of the past champions on the transfer pathway was on one of the higher education legislative committees, but has since left office. That legislator’s chief of staff has now moved to the governor’s office as the higher education advisor, so they may become the new transfer champion according to a journalist. From the selection of the higher
education advisor to dedicating resources to research, the direction from the governor’s office provides promise to future of the relationship with education.

The environment has already improved. [Governor] Abbott announced a big announcement that he is taking one of Perry’s accounts, you would call it a slush fund. He’s called for eliminating one of those and turning the money in it into a research funding fund for universities. So I think that’s a pretty strong signal that he will try to be a least perceived as pretty friendly to universities. He’s called for the legislature to fully fund Hazelwood [veterans’ benefits] that costs millions of dollars where there is no reimbursement. This year it is $169 million statewide, and I think in two years it is supposed to get over $260 million. [Funding veterans] sounds great, but once you look at the numbers, I don’t know where they will find all of that much money.

In Texas, the governor appoints each board of regent member for each public university. One of the first actions by the new governor was to choose new members for an embattled board at the University of Texas (UT) which has been in the news for the past few years. The journalist claimed that Governor Abbott may be more collaborative with higher education than Governor Perry, by making inferences from his board appointments.

Governor Abbott’s first appointees to the UT Board of Regents are cherry-picked to be super friendly and defensive of UT-Austin. So my sense is that he is really big on being nice to the universities. Even Governor Perry’s people said that is probably where you will see the biggest difference between the two governors—it is in higher education. He said that education is his biggest priority.

One journalist believes that relationships are improving under the new governor, and cites that community colleges have improved their relationship with the THECB recently.

There’s a lot of bad feelings around, between the institutions and coordinating board, although community colleges in the last couple of years have gotten back on board with the coordinating board. I think that is probably a big one in terms of mending relationships is getting everyone on the same page.

A coordinating board member described how the goals of the legislature, coordinating board, and institutions may not have to be at odds. By being more student-focused, institutions can actually help and support their own missions.
For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money. It’s not necessarily a bad thing because it’s one of those things where you can actually have two different goals that actually converge on the same end results...The real question we have to ask ourselves is, and it’s our responsibility to do that: “What’s good for students? What is good for Texas students? Not what is good for our institution, but for the students?” The reality is that what’s good for Texas students is also what’s good for your institution’s students.

The responses of the coordinating board staff repeatedly focused on student-level issues and goals. This mindset is important considering they rarely interact with students directly.

Keeping the student’s best interest in mind during work with legislators and institutions, the coordinating board can be an important voice for the transfer student and their experiences.

**Policymaking Process**

The higher education legislative committees juggle many issues when considering policies. The transfer pathway and other competing issues are addressed as problems arise. Problems are brought to the committees from a variety of sources including professional associations, constituents, institutions and other legislative committees. The committees continue working, collecting data and conducting hearings even when the legislature is not in session. To receive attention, the transfer pathway has to compete with other issues to receive adequate attention and discussion.

When asked about the transfer pathway, one legislative staff member admitted progress has been made, but additional higher education issues remained. The member conceded that transfer policies passed may not be effective.

I think it’s improving slowly. I definitely would say it’s improving, but there’s a long way to go. I think that there’s been a lot more attention around articulation policies, and just transfer like common course numbering or all of those policy aspects from the state or the local level. I don’t really think those things make transfer easier for students.

-Legislative staff member
Minimize the use of policies. Participants all recognized that there continues to be issues surrounding the transfer student and the time to degree. However, policy may not be the solution to these problems. Several legislative staff members expressed a desire to limit the control of policies over institutions. These participants wanted to be clear that they take considerable time to find the best solution for all stakeholders using the least restrictive policy possible. “We try to avoid taking an axe to a problem where we just need a knife or something.” They also expressed respect for the work of the THECB and institutions. These participants stated that they are not content experts on the issues. Decisions concerning strategic goals needs to remain with the institutions, according to one participant in one poignant quotation.

We impose so much as a legislative body on institutions already. If we were in control of what universities could do, we would have equalized mediocrity.

-Legislative staff member

Zemsky (2011) adds that a substantial bureaucracy would be required to hold “individual institutions accountable for the quality, efficacy and safety of their education products” (p. 119).

Legislative members understood that policy is not always the answer, and institutions needed to have some responsibility to solve their challenges. Policy is in place to safeguard against spending waste; protect students; and provide guidelines. As one participant explained policies can be needed and a positive influence on how students proceed through their education.

I think policies are put in place for a good reason, to limit waste or abuse of the institutions of higher education and their resources, and also to limit the waste or
inefficiencies on the students’ side too, so they don’t waste time and cost taking courses that they ultimately drop or aren’t able to complete successfully.

**Committee level work.** Legislative members were asked about the work of the House Higher Education Committee and the Senate Higher Education Committee. Data shows the two higher education committees work independently of each other, but they do collaborate. Legislators sit on multiple committees, and employ staff dedicated to higher education issues to help create legislation. These committees have more issues to address than each legislative session has time to allow. Members try to determine the priority of the issues for each session. The legislative members explained the process. It was noted that there is sparse attendance for hearings; and the public is not as interested in higher education hearings as much as K-12 hearings.

Our office, similar to other offices, is organized by policy areas. I cover portfolio issues for [redacted name]. I have been working for them for a while, so I have been able to dig into these issues individually; but also to understand their perspective and approach to higher education. There is usually a different staff member assigned for each committee.

*-Legislative staff member*

The House Committee [for Higher Education] has its own chair, its own vice chair, and its own members and leadership structure. The Senate has the same structure. But these two committees have a very, very good relationship. And I think more importantly, the two chairs get along very well.

*-Legislative staff member*

Some of it is based on relationships we have with the institutions of higher education in our individual member’s district. So conversations with them and community colleges find what works and what doesn’t work, or what they find to be successful or frustrating. This is the same for the students who participate those systems. Legislators and the Lieutenant Governor recommend charges to study or interim research for their own studies. Both committees and the Senate and the House will hear hearings on their respective charges, and ultimately come up with a report, and sometimes that report, combined with reports done by the Legislative Budget Board, the THECB and there are
others will inform the priorities and other gaps or needs for improvement for the next session.

-Legislative staff member

In the Senate, the Higher Education Committee has seven members, and those members each usually have one staff member with them. The Chair typically has two, plus a committee clerk; and anybody who has an interest in the issues at hand: almost always all of the government relations teams from the two-year and four-year institutions, and then any other relevant stakeholders...There’s usually a moderately full room, not as popular as some for the other committee hears; but I’ve never understood why public education has better attendance than higher education; but it’s true.

-Legislative staff member

Participants were asked who they interact with on policy work. They were asked if they are able to speak to presidents directly. Participants mentioned various stakeholders in their interactions.

I usually, on behalf of our office, interact with administrators. The community college level, that is almost always the case. That is someone either in the chancellor’s office, or the president’s office, or the executive leader herself. At four-year institutions there’s usually a government relations person, and the best government relations teams always put you in touch with somebody who actually works in that area, so they will facilitate a conversation with the advising department, for example.

-Legislative staff member

The typical day for the committees. Legislative staff members were also asked what a typical day looks like while the committee is in session. The description depicts a flurry of activity to accomplish the goals of the committee, and mirrors the activity described by the journalist. The committee has broad issues to address including funding, financial aid, curriculum, research, safety, and more. Transfer issues compete with all other policy work facing the legislative session. Each day is filled with meetings, planning and networking with stakeholders.
A typical day when we are in session is a much quicker pace and very reactive. So you are preparing for a hearing the next day, reviewing bills, meeting with staff and stakeholders, and then also I would be making sure my boss has what he needs for the bills that will be on the Senate floor for him, and also the bills that will be heard for the first time in committee the next day. So it’s a whole day of interactions.

-Legislative staff member

We have three types of typical days. A session day is really busy. Between the middle of January to June 1st of an odd-numbered year, we usually do hearings on a Wednesday, so our day will start at 6:00 a.m. on a Wednesday, as we’re kind of getting the logistics, and the last minute things ready for hearing bills, and making sure we have all of the amendments, or committee substitutes. A lot of the rest of the time is either planning the following week's hearing, or staffing the senator, and on the senate floor or in senate finance, on either higher education finance issues, or his higher education legislation on the floor, in addition to monitoring or talking with house staffers or meeting with stakeholders.

-Legislative staff member

During times the legislature is not in session, work on higher education issues does not stop. Participants explained that there are directives from the Lieutenant Governor, hearings and interim reports to prepare.

In the interim, in the odd numbers, probably about a month ago, we got seven interim charges from the lieutenant governor. So, since we received those charges, we spent a lot of time reading and analyzing data, requesting data, trying to get a bunch of information about the charges that the lieutenant governor gave to the committee. And then, we'll review those and start doing briefings with our committee staffers, our colleagues, saying, "Okay, here's the charges, here's some data." We'll take a look at it and we chat. And then starting February or March, the committee may start meeting once a month to do interim hearings on those charges. And that it'll be it until about November, then we'll write the interim report that you referenced earlier, and submit it to the Lieutenant Governor's Office. And that'll serve as the basis for a lot of legislation going into 2017.

-Legislative staff member

Perceptions of faculty. During the interviews, policymakers and influencers spoke of how faculty are perceived. Policymakers’ perceptions of faculty may be entirely irrelevant to
the work faculty actually do. However, these perceptions may influence how they approach policy decisions with implications for faculty. One journalist spoke of faculty and how policymakers share mixed reviews of faculty in general. The participant stated that some faculty can be seen as self-serving, while others are seen as wanting students to succeed and desire to be a part of the process. [The participant made reference to the movie “God’s Not Dead” where a college professor is portrayed as being intolerant of students that believe in God.]

I think faculty do get a bad rap. Especially in the legislature, they are distrustful of university professors in general at the Capitol. Even at UT, if you talk to UT professors, it’s a pretty diverse group politically as well as temperamentally. Like the God’s Not Dead movie, it makes it sound like all the professors are the mouthpiece for Satan.

Faculty members do play a part in strengthening or weakening the perceptions of legislators concerning their work towards student success. Including faculty in the campus discussion about transfer success and outcomes on campus can have an impact on improving faculty attitudes.

Pull in faculty and give them the real data about their transfer students. Faculty will be blown away by the data because they have no idea that their transfer students are so successful, and faculty don’t have a way to identify who they are. This kind of activity can help change misconceptions and misperceptions about transfer students and the course credit they bring in.

-Professional association member

Faculty contributions to curricular decisions are paramount in building a pathway towards degree completion.

There are 6,000 courses in the Workforce Education Course Manual. Faculty can teach whichever courses they want to. And if you think about it, “Why? That’s stupid.” Why are we letting people teach the same content? Faculty say “You are impinging on my academic freedom.” No, I am not; this has nothing to do with academic freedom. Faculty lose sight of the student in their work and their curricular decisions. I worked
with one faculty member who asked me why should he adjust his curriculum to help credit transfer more smoothly. He asked, “So what’s in this for us?” meaning us, the faculty. I said that was the wrong question to ask. I told the people in the meeting that the question should be “What’s in this for students? Does this curricular decision make them better off or not?” But faculty often lose sign of the student. Faculty say “I want to teach this. I don’t care whether they need it or not. I’m going to teach it though because I like this stuff.” Even if administrators wanted to do something, they are limited because faculty drive curricular decisions and how credit transfers.

-Coordinating board staff member

At the community college level, you need to get faculty in the conversation about their curriculum and looking at three of four different universities and those degree plans. There such a difference in what universities expect. When you have a faculty member that has developed their own unique course and they think all their students need that one course, you have to get them in the discussion to help them understand those unique courses really hurt transfer students and their progress in the university’s degree plans.

-Professional association member

Their role in the completion agenda and supporting students towards graduation cannot be understated. The relationships they form with students are important. Faculty members are critical to the connections students make with the campus academic environment and curriculum (White, 2011).

If I were leading a university, I would help transfer students by spending a time teaching new transfer students how the university works, where things are, etc., because they come from smaller campuses. Then the university places them in huge classes where nobody will know their name, and it won’t be easy to talk to professors who can be less accessible than community college faculty. It’s a big difference.

-Coordinating board staff member

Poor perceptions of faculty by legislators can drive policymaking to be more prescriptive than faculty may prefer. Participants acknowledged that some faculty work tirelessly on transferability issues. There is room for some faculty to do a better job serving marginal students, but the actions and attitudes of these faculty reflect on all faculty.
Perceptions of institutions. During the interviews, policymakers and influencers spoke of how institutions are perceived. The perceptions policymakers have of institutions can have an impact on policy and funding decisions. Participants of the study mentioned several perceptions of institutions: problems with the decentralized higher education system; resistance to performance funding; greed of four-year institutions; and their hiring of politicians over scholars in leadership positions. These perceptions can impact the politics that institutions face.

A coordinating board member stated a key issue with the limits with the THECB authority over institutions. This key issue is a disadvantage to the decentralized system in Texas, when there is resistance to an initiative, and inconsistencies in implementation.

Let’s say we implement something based on the needs of our state. Once we implement something, then we cannot impose it on anybody. You cannot do a thing because each college is their own master. You can suggest it, but there is no way you can impose it.

The participant further illuminates the politics by explaining that universities are more state-oriented, while community colleges are more locally-oriented. The state’s priority may not be the community’s priority, as one community may have another priority. For community colleges, the community’s goals may take priority over state goals according to this participant. The local community is funding its campus, and driving the priorities. Inconsistencies in implementing initiatives can be attributed to the decentralized nature of the Texas higher education system. The limitations of the THECB’s authority cannot be overcome without the statute establishing its authority level is changed.

Institutions are perceived as resistant to accountability measures. One area that the state has seen resistance from institutions is in performance-based funding. Legislators discuss
it in each session, but universities don’t want it according to one journalist. This participant stated that one bill was introduced in the last session that would have tied 25% of funding to outcomes. It didn’t pass and the legislator is now out of office for the 84th Legislative Session according to this participant. Politics can impact the results for institutions and elections.

Professional association members have direct access to policymakers on the national and state level. Their perceptions can influence stakeholders through interacting with the professional association. Not all data collected from association members were positive for higher education. One participant places blame on four-year universities for some of the transfer problems, including rising tuition costs.

The four-year institutions are getting this aura of being greedy. They want more money, they are raising tuition, they are making the baccalaureate inaccessible; and even if they give a degree, they are not worthy in the workplace. Texas is one of the most vibrant states economically and it is because of our higher education system. We have to act. Every moment we do not act means that somebody’s stopping out, dropping out, or having a negative experience. We cannot afford that luxury if we are going to maintain a strong middle class.

As professional associations access policymakers and influence policy, they are a part of the political landscape by default.

Institutions also function in the political landscape within their communities and the State. To effectively navigate the political environment, institutions are increasingly hiring politicians to lead their campuses instead of scholars. Institutions are hiring more politicians to lead them in the selection of campus presidents. A coordinating board member stated the tendency is there to hire politicians and not instructional leaders. These campuses are using millions of taxpayer dollars and presidents are stewards of that money.

Some people are saying “What a minute, this is not a business, education is not a business.” I don’t believe we should change it to a corporate world.
Institutions have multimillion dollar budgets; have immeasurable value to their communities; and enroll millions of students across the state. Policymakers make resource allocations and policy decisions based on their perceptions of how responsive institutions are to various stakeholders, and politics influence those decisions. These perceptions can influence the policymaking process and the transfer pathway.

**The journalist’s work.** During interviews, journalists were asked about their work. They were asked how they research issues, and how they decide which issues to report within their stories. Transfer issues compete with all other higher education issues, and knowing how journalists choose to cover particular policy issues can impact how transfer issues can gain prominence. When a higher education journalist was asked how they collect information for their stories, they explained the network of contacts used to determine current issues.

I find out about stories in multiple ways. Someone will have a new policy that is going on to detention, and they will do a press release. Or it’s more likely I’ll just hear about it from someone at the Capitol from people on the higher education committees because they are super passionate about these issues. I go to lunch with some staffers. I ask what they are working on and if they are super passionate about it, I will hear about it. I go to coffee with a lot of people because I think people will tell you more and you get into better conversations in person than over the phone.

*Higher education journalist*

To understand the work that journalists do and how they obtain their information, participants were asked about their daily work. When asked about a typical day for a journalist looks like during the legislative session, the participant described a flurry of activity.

Staffers might have breaking news. I heard there was breaking news about protests at the Capitol, so I had to jump and cover it instead. Your day can get suddenly hijacked by
another issue. Some days are just purely interviewing people, transcribing and writing. No day is typical, but each involves talking to as many people as possible and writing.

**-Higher education journalist**

4. Best Practices for Transfer Success

Community colleges and universities have unique cultures and missions. There are distinct differences in their levels of community outreach, developmental education, workforce education and research. Each plays an important role in higher education, but the two levels of institutions do not work extensively together to improve transfer success (Handel & Herrera, 2006). Students depend on both community colleges and universities to succeed, and the way institutions collaborate can have an impact on transfer success.

Improving opportunities for...transfer students involves helping them to adjust to two different kinds of institutions, each with its own set of values and assumptions...there is a lack of understanding among community colleges and universities of the differences between their cultures. (Handel & Herrera, 2006, p. 3)

What often seems as an apparent lack of understanding or respect between community colleges and universities limit the success of a transfer-friendly culture. If transfer success is a priority for institutions, then community college and university leaders must expand their scope to increase collaborations between institutions (Handel & Herrera, 2006). Collaboration should include all faculty and staff that work with transfer students.

Participants in this study identify the responsibilities they perceive institutions should carry to help transfer student succeed. They discuss a number of areas where institutions can play a vital role in improving transfer success. The participants also discuss the work of faculty and advisors stressing their role in helping transfer students be successful. The THECB is
perceived to have a role central to policymaking work along with professional associations in making the pathway as seamless as possible while using innovation and proven approaches.

**Institutional Role and Responsibility in Transfer Success**

In terms of best practices, some activities work for community colleges and some work better for universities. Not all initiatives are favored by both sides, but hopefully the students’ needs are factored into the decision by institutions according to coordinating board staff. Institutions have the authority to promote success on their campus, and participants of this study provided several examples of campus-led initiatives that can be considered as high impact practices.

**Institute model and vertical curriculum alignment.** One such example is receiving national attention at a large community college system in Texas. A professional association member explained how one community college system is not waiting for state statute to address student needs. (The name of the community college system is omitted to protect the identity of the participant.) This system developed institutes within their colleges and advising guides for students transferring to local universities. The advising guides have aligned courses from early college high schools to the institutes in the community college, and then the required courses all of the way through the four-year degree. These institutes required collaboration and work with faculty from the two-year colleges and the four-year institutions, where there has been little dialogue. The participant explained how the collaboration provided the dialogue to support the curricular alignment work that occurred. This communication is important in breaking down barriers regardless of the curriculum alignment that occurs according to another participant. Without looking beyond institutional issues, it is difficult for
faculty and staff to see state-level solutions for improving problems caused by their institutional decisions.

And the faculty members are finding out that they don’t have dissimilar goals in terms of their curricular responsibility. They both [community college and university faculty] see the rigor aspects, and they are tying that together. It is having some really positive results in terms of the relationship between faculty and administrations...This community college system is on the ball. They are making changes through local decisions because they were tired of waiting for the legislature. Four-year institutions will have to start acknowledging that they are going to have to depend more on the students coming out of community colleges, and they should not set up barriers because of their particular course requirements that would hinder the transfer of students from community colleges to the institutions.

-Professional association member

Community colleges and universities have the same goals; but the curricular articulations are laborious, tedious and time consuming working through the issues with academic ownership and rigor. Institutions see the big problem with completions, and both sides are cooperative. It takes time to get both sides to sit down, but when they do there is no conflict. It is just taking the time and having the resources to do it. Community colleges are advised to build these articulations at the regional level, but their students transfer beyond the region. All of the articulations won’t help those that transfer statewide, unless there is a statewide solution. There needs to be more alignment work at the state level.

-Professional association member (Response from member check)

The difficulty of transferability is what I would characterize as a kind of turf war, because everybody is a little more siloed in Texas. They’re doing their very best to serve the students that they have, and they believe in their course sequences, in their faculty, and in their programs and processes; and sometimes it’s hard to break out of that and see how best to help students connect or cross over...Everyone thinks they are teaching the [content] the correct way.

-Legislative staff member

Institutional transfer symposiums and transfer champions. Another high impact practice model for institutions was provided by a professional association member. This model
could be replicated in Texas to address challenges. Hosting institutional transfer symposiums and cultivating transfer champions on campus can have positive effects.

Appalachian State University put together a transfer symposium. The charge came from the administrative level, so they really already did have the support from the executive level to focus on transfers, and they put together a university-wide team. You could really look at the issue, see and find out where they were. They interviewed faculty and pulled together any misconceptions and misperceptions that faculty had about transfer students. And then looked at their population and used data to drive the programming around supporting transfer students. They brought faculty in from the top transfer department, and gave them the real data. Faculty were blown away because they had no idea that the transfer students were so successful, or even how to identify them. It was definitely something that stood out as a positive because they had campus-wide support for it, and faculty actually wanted to come to the symposium and get involved in the conversations. I think that's what's so important. I think schools seem to have more success when they really do include faculty in part of the process. So it's not just one transfer person that’s responsible for everything. So we're kind of making everyone accountable to help transfer students around the campus.

-Professional association member

Regarding transfer champions, a professional association member shared:

Be that person that pushes the envelope and really makes sure we are doing something for transfer students. They are really inspiring. I think we need to get that word out more, and kind of encourage people to be those people at their institutions. It's been really quite remarkable how just one person at a university can start something.

-Professional association member

A campus-wide conversation can gain more traction on transfer issues as more people become accountable for the process, and focusing on the need to decrease the time to degree.

Faculty’s Role and Responsibility in Transfer Success

Faculty play a crucial role in the success of students. Earlier in the chapter, the perceptions of faculty were discussed. The following discussion provides data on how faculty can be active participants in improving transfer success. Institutional leadership is challenged with improving teaching effectiveness and gaining support from the faculty to implement
changes. Building a transfer-friendly culture must involve faculty and staff at the community college and university level (Herrera & Jain, 2013). Community college faculty members play a critical role in preparing students for upper-level coursework. Leaders can influence the teaching and learning on campus and transfer student outcomes. “The community colleges’ role in higher education would be well served in producing more highly skilled workers and college transfer-ready students who persist and complete at the baccalaureate level” (White, 2011, p. 27).

**Involve faculty in the process.** In the transfer pathway, faculty determine the credit required to earn a degree within prescribed legislative credit hour limits. Faculty control curricular decisions and the evaluation of credit transferring into institutions. Colleges will be more successful in fortifying the transfer pathway when faculty are a part of the process. One institutional staff member cannot be responsibility for all things involving transfer on a campus.

Institutional memory can also have an impact on the transfer pathway. As faculty and staff change positions, the voluntary, informal and formal articulation agreements can be lost in the shuffle. Some are not maintained or published in a centralized location. Continuity can become a problem with administering the agreements when there is a shift in staff or faculty, which can cause confusion and problems for the student. Students may not even know agreements exists.

A lot of programs and agreements exist because one person is very committed. When that person leaves or retires, nobody else is interested, or didn’t think it was such a great idea. If I can’t find the agreement, the student will not even know it exists. I have never understood why institutions don’t tell your students about your agreements.

*-Coordinating board staff member*
Students cannot utilize the plan, if they are not made readily available to the student.

However, a professional association member does not have as much faith in the effectiveness of articulation agreements. The faculty do hold some of the blame in the problems transfer students face. Participants perceived faculty as being focused on the institutional degree plan, but not willing to view the “big picture” of their role as a larger higher education community of institutions.

There’s been a lot more attention around articulation policies and the common course numbering system, but I don’t really think those things make transfer easier for students.

*Professional association member*

They are doing their very best to serve the students that they have, and they believe in their course sequences, in their faculty, and in their programs and processes; and sometimes it’s hard to break out of that and see how best to help students connect or cross over. That is true for two-year and four-year schools. Everybody thinks they are teaching [content] the right way.

*Legislative staff member*

Faculty are perceived as lacking a larger sense of responsibility to consider how their courses or degree plans affect transfer students. Faculty control the curriculum at institutions and their decisions have a direct impact on the transfer pathway regardless of whether they are the sending or receiving institution. This fact seems to drive the recommendations to coordinate work between the workforce education faculty and the academic faculty, as well as field of study work.

**Coordinating curriculum between workforce and academic faculty for transfer success.**

Two coordinating board staff members mentioned there is a transfer problem between workforce education courses and academic courses that mirror each other, but only the
academic courses transfer to universities. This disconnect is identified as an area for improvement later in this chapter. Both participants claimed that faculty need to be involved in the decision to offer academic courses that transfer or workforce education courses that may not transfer. Sometimes there is little difference between the courses in content or textbook.

There are 6,000 courses in the Workforce Education Course Manual. Faculty can teach whichever way they want to. And if you think about it, “Why? That’s stupid.” Why are we letting people teach the same content [when one doesn’t transfer]? Faculty are going to yell and say, “You are impinging on my academic freedom.” No I’m not; this has nothing to do with academic freedom. But that’s what faculty will avow. They lose sight of the student.

-Coordinating board staff member

THECB proposed in the legislative recommendation to do some alignment work, so you may some bills come through alignment of technical programs, career clusters and the Fields of Study. It is really important for institutions and faculty to give feedback during the session on proposed bills. It is a THECB priority to work on better alignment in thinking about transfer. In legislative hearings, there has been a lot of interest in transfer and thinking that Texas needs to do a better job in making transfer more seamless for students.

-Coordinating board staff member

I was talking about the workforce classes. So many times I saw the accounting class, it was the academic accounting and the workforce accounting. Same cluster, same faculty. They were all together. One was transferable, one was not. Why? Because all of them should have been, if that was the occupation, just put them all under academic one, and be done in case the student transfers later.

-Coordinating board staff member

One professional association member briefly mentioned a promising collaboration occurring between professors from academics teaming up with workforce professors. The faculty collaborate on the context of what they are offering students who may work towards a certificate or a transfer pathway, so they are not competing pathways. The credit is non-redundant and provides flexibility to the workforce student that decides to later pursue a
transfer pathway. The participant perceived this partnership between the academic and workforce faculty as a “contributor to the vibrancy of the community.” This type of collaboration can improve completion rates because each student can walk away with a credential according to this participant.

**Faculty versus the time to degree.** Faculty and the completion agenda may have competing priorities that do not always complement each other or students. One is focused on comprehensive knowledge attainment, while the other is focused on graduation metrics. It is difficult to get a consensus. One coordinating board member shared a story concerning core curriculum to explain this conflict negatively affecting student success.

I was talking to the core curriculum committee discussing the new core. And this professor asked me, “So what is in this for me? He meant “us, the faculty.” I said a little bit about what I thought was in it for faculty, but I said, “You know, really that’s the wrong question to ask. The question you should be asking is: What is in this for students? Does this make them better off or not?” SACSCOC [regional accreditor] expects curriculum to be driven by faculty. But faculty often lose sight of the student because faculty will say “You know, I want to teach this. I don’t care whether they need it or not. I’m going to teach it though because I like this stuff. This is what I did my dissertation in. I don’t want to teach that history class because mine is better.” I understand the attitude, but at some point, you really need to put your students first.

-Coordinating board staff member

**Fields of Study Curriculum (FOSC) holds promise for transfer success.** The Fields of Study Curriculum is state policy designed to help students transfer more credit directly into the major beyond the core curriculum. According to the policy, students are able to “complete and transfer courses that satisfy lower-division requirements for a bachelor’s degree in a specific academic area or field to Texas public higher education institutions” (THECB, 2014b, p. 170). Few students are benefiting from this policy. The THECB (2014b) reports that 2% of all
transfers had earned full credit through the FOSC in the fall of 2012. Expanding the FOSC was a legislative recommendation for the 2015 legislative session.

Institutions can be limited in how they address problems within the transfer pathway. Even if administrators want to implement a change, they can be limited due to faculty-driven curricular decisions and how credit transfers as explained by a coordinating board staff. Faculty decisions can be protected by academic freedom and limit what decisions an institution can make. One coordinating board member believes the FOSC are a best practice in facilitating the transfer of credit with policy in a state with numerous independent, public institutions.

I think the fields of study would go a long way. We want to resurrect them. We are really going to try to do it in a big way. One of the things the THECB has asked the legislature for is enough money that we can hire a person to devote themselves exclusively to fields of study. Fields of study can ameliorate the loss of transfer credit. But I'll be honest with you, part of the issue there, sort of the enforcement mechanism of it, is how you get the four-year universities to abide by it. Fields of study are not voluntary. By statute, they are law and you don’t need an articulation agreement. They amount to a state-wide articulation agreement and simplify it.

-Coordinating board staff member

The fields of study provide some small venue for that [collaboration] because, by law, those committees have to be made up of half community college, half four-year institutions. So you have to get the two sides together at least at 12 of each have to come together to talk to each other about this and try to reach some consensus on it. I've served on some committees. I've seen a lot of them in action - and I think that if you can kind of remind them that they're really not there to represent their institution, they're really there to represent their field. And then what is it students need to know? And what's really best for students in this? Once they've started to get past that, "I'm here to represent [my institution]" or, "I'm here to represent [my] College," or whatever it is, and they really start thinking about, "What is it that my discipline needs? What is it this major needs, what is it the students need from this?" They can usually come together and actually do some good work but sometimes it takes a little while to kind of get them past this notion of, "I'm from [redacted] and everybody knows that we are really the only true university in the universe."

-Coordinating board staff member
Since FOSC are named in statute, institutions must comply with the transfer of credit within the FOSC according to one participant. Once those FOSC are further expanded, more transfer students will benefit from seamless credit transfer as long as the student takes courses within the FOSC plan for their program. FOSC can be a high impact practice in a large, decentralized higher education system.

**The Role and Responsibility of Transfer Advisors in Transfer Success**

Transfer advising was mentioned by most participants of the study as problematic. Earlier in this chapter, the perceptions of what students experience in advising was discussed. In this section, the views of how transfer success can be increased through improved advising. Participants from each category support additional resources and professional development to strengthen the quality of advising received by transfer students. Participants agree that the high advisor-to-student ratio limits the effectiveness of advising and the time spent with each student. Legislative staff also recommended improved accessibility and virtual advising services using technology. Advising is identified as an important aspect of transfer success, and advising should be individualized to the student requiring more advisors, according to several participants.

The reason why I don’t think that advising is not good is there are not enough advisors. I don’t think they really have time to sit with the students.

-Coordinating board staff member

We have sometimes a 900-to-one advisor-to-advisee ratio. The advisors don’t know what is out there and have a hard time helping their students.

-Legislative staff member
I think advising is the key component, either investing in more advising, helping students understand which courses are credit-bearing and advance their degree, and which are in the elective category, so that you don’t have students transferring with too many hours.

-Legislative staff member

I think we should put in more money and carry more advisors. That might seem like an easy answer. Our ratio in Texas is worse than other places. Maybe not the worst, but it’s definitely not near the top in terms of ideal. I think that that is a big thing. How can you really advise someone when you are advising hundreds of people?

-Higher education journalist

Sometimes students really need individual attention because transfer is such a specific thing and it is so individualized that you really do need to have that one-on-one with an advisor.

-Coordinating board staff member

Information needs to be available where students are most likely to access it. A student shouldn’t be required to go to a physical advising center. There should be an ability for them to email with an advisor to access course plans, or read degree plans online, to take advantage of the technology and flexibility that students are used to.

-Legislative staff member

First generation students don’t have that support system to advise them on what to take and what to do in college.

-Professional association member

One legislative staff member nicely summarized the path students take through the transfer process, and how they are find themselves off course.

A student can have the wherewithal, or time, or personal resources to navigate the system, and maybe their family has gone to college before. A student can attend full-time, explore curriculum paths, and research paths more thoroughly; or they have a really engaged advisor who is able to outline the available paths. Then you add the articulation agreements an institution might have which can guide the process. If any part of these components are not clear; or is not in a position to articulate an agreement, or there’s not a proactive or engaging advising center, then consider the student has regular life events going on with family and work, the path gets disrupted.

-Legislative staff member
Suggestions to improve transfer advising were mentioned by several participants. Several professional association members recommended that institutions build relations with feeder institutions, and other approaches with advising were provided during interviews. Sending institutions should inform receiving institutions who these students are, what kinds of needs and challenges they may have and how they can serve them better.

-Professional association member

It is important for advisors to help students self-advise, so an advisor and student should use the computer tools each time they meet to teach students the technology available to make decisions when they are not able to meet with advisor. Review college websites, visit the campus and get involved immediately when you transfer.

-Professional association member

Receiving institutions have to process transcript evaluations as soon as possible. The receiving institution needs to look at their coursework and advise properly before the semester begins.

-Professional association member

Sending institutions should not cut students’ access off to student information systems prematurely. Turning off access to student records before the transcript is received by the receiving institution becomes a barrier to advising new transfer students.

-Professional association member

Community colleges should train their students to ask “how much credit are you going to take towards a degree and not how many credits are you going to give me.”

-Professional association member

Tell students “you don’t have a lot of time, you need to be planning from the time you decide when you are transferring institutions.”

-Professional association member

There are some institutions that are investing in advising. One professional association member shared that a large community college system has more than tripled their advising
staff, and the system is developing specific advising guides aligning curriculum for specific majors to particular feeder institutions. These advising guides are not generic, but specific for programs. This work requires collaboration between the institutions to align curriculum, develop pathways, and increase awareness of programs for advisors. This participant stressed that community college and university faculty and advisors need to be collaborating to improve the transfer pathway between the institutions.

**Community college advisors.** Participants perceive that community colleges want to keep their students on their campus longer to graduate with an associate’s degree before they transfer. This strategy is possibly at the detriment of the student.

It may not help students pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Transfer student could move on without taking these 20 to 30 additional credits towards an associates, and these may not even be transferable or accepted only as elective, which does not make the student move through faster.

*-Coordinating board staff member*

A higher education journalist perceived that when the community college advising as more intrusive and beneficial for students since there are more first generation students on the local community college campus. This participant believes that these students are “stalked by their advisors” and receive more attention, so they are less likely to transfer with unnecessary credit.

They are basically stalked by their advisors. The advising is much more intrusive and I think that is good for students that don’t have anyone in their family that has been to college. This kind of advising helps students complete a baccalaureate because they didn’t take a bunch of courses that don’t transfer due to them not knowing better.

*-Higher education journalist*

**Student’s indecision.** Participants acknowledged that transfer advisors’ jobs are difficult in guiding students through dozens of possible degree plans into a number of potential
university programs available. The job is more difficult due to students’ indecision in their choice of major, decision to pursue a bachelor’s degree, and the choice of university as cited by several participants. Students also have choices of taking courses that apply to workforce education programs, academic plans, core, or elective courses.

A lot of students do not know what they want to do for a major when they start college. They don’t know if they want to transfer or not. That makes it difficult to advise.

-Coordinating board staff member

I think institutions get a bad rap. Some students just aren’t going to be graduating in four years or some arbitrary amount of time. Some take longer, and some can go shorter.

-Higher education journalist

THECB’s Role and Responsibility in Supporting Transfer Success

Texas has a coordinating board which has regulatory authority in a state with mixed single-campus and multi-campus institutions (Richardson et al., 1999). Articulation and collaboration in the Texas transfer pathway is dependent on institutional cooperation (Richardson et al., 1999). Richardson et al. (1999) emphasize that “the state’s strong emphasis on local control and local decision making creates a constant, dynamic tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board” (p. 125). This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas higher education system several decades ago.

THECB Role in policymaking. Coordinating board staff members described their role in policymaking and implementing rules for institutions to follow. Some bills might address odd things that arise from anecdotal stories told legislators; but the participant states that the
majority of work follows more thoughtful work than the policymakers receive credit for writing. Foundations and large donors can also have a profound impact on the agenda because they control the funding for it.

Even though the THECB provides recommendations to the legislature, they may not always be followed by legislators, using the “Six drop rule” as an example. The THECB reported in that example that the proposed legislation was not doable, but it passed anyway and is now law according to this participant. Coordinating board staff explain that they assist legislators by testifying in committee hearings, and speak directly to legislators and their staff.

In general, we hear what the legislators want, when they introduce a bill or they work on a bill, they always ask questions from us. And when a bill is introduced, part of our job is to analyze it and outline the implications because there may be unintended consequences and monetary considerations.

-Coordinating board staff member

There is a fair amount of conversation, particularly with staffers, but it is the staff who actually draft legislation and tells these guys whether it’s a good thing or bad thing or not. We have collaborated with staffers. They will send drafts to us to see what we think and tell them what the pros and cons are.

-Coordinating board staff member

[Legislative agendas] come from a lot of different places. Sometimes they come from institutions. Sometimes it comes from professional organizations, foundations and groups. You take somebody like Bill Gates. He’s got the money to go to an institution and say, "Well, this is the results I want, and I'll give you 5 million bucks to try to get them. "5 million, huh? Yeah, we can probably do that. Yeah, yeah that's a good result; we'll work on that." That drives a lot of the agenda sometimes. People like that can have a profound impact on the agenda, because they get to control the funding for the agenda, to a great extent. But in terms of legislation, the reality is a lot of it comes from a prominent donor or somebody that these guys know whose kid had a problem. A lot of legislation is based on anecdotal. And sometimes on an anecdote. My brother-in-law's son had this problem, and so, "We'll fix that, we'll pass the law." So, you get a lot of odd things, but on the other hand. One of the things about being in this job, I have seen that the legislature is probably a little bit more thoughtful than I would have given them credit for before. Because the staff and stuff, they do run things by us and say,
"Look," and we do a formal bill analysis for anything that comes through that affects higher education. We do a formal bill analysis. That analysis goes back to the legislative budget board; it goes back to the people who introduced the legislation, that kind of thing. So, we get that, but they also send us stuff and say, "Look, we’ve drafted this, does this fit what you want? Does it make any sense? What are the pros and cons of this, what’s the upside to doing this legislation? What’s the downside to it?"

- Coordinating board staff member

At the end of the legislative session, the THECB posts a summary of the bills that got through [the legislative process]...It is really important for institutions to give feedback during the session on proposed bills. And at the end of the session institutions should read through the bills to know what has an impact. We try to cover and post everything that affects higher education. There is always a flurry of rules to write if things have to be implemented right away. A lot of the time with reporting, we are given a year to get things implemented and get the data.

- Coordinating board staff member

The coordinating board develops a list of priorities prior to each session. For the 2015 84th legislative session, the priorities were financial expanding; limited expansion of baccalaureate degrees at community colleges; and transferability and Fields of Study Curriculum.

There is proposed legislation this year that looks at outcomes-based funding for universities will have a big impact if that goes through;...and Fields of Study. The THECB proposed in the legislative recommendation to do some alignment work, so you may some bills come through alignment of technical programs, career clusters and the field of study.

- Coordinating board staff member

And the Coordinating Board, before every session, also develops a list of their priorities. This session their priorities were things like financial expanding, to have limited expansion of Baccalaureate degrees as community colleges; and one of their priorities was transferability. Specifically, their role in they wanted to expand their Fields of Study.

- Legislative staff member
To sum up most perceptions of the transfer policy in Texas one participant knows there are still frustrations for all stakeholders. This participant stated that the coordinating board has made better alignment a priority to assist transfer students; and there has been heavy interest in a seamless transfer pathway during legislative hearings.

But on the whole, I think our policies are much better than other states. I heard about other states from Achieving the Dream work, and Texas is much better, more productive to transfer, and we aren’t holding students back.

- Coordinating board staff member

Positive perceptions of the THECB. The legislative participant perceived the coordinating board as responsive, quick to provide advice and is a better source of data for decision making. A higher education journalist described the THECB as a “treasure trove of public information.”

[Redacted name of coordinating board staff member] is a good example of someone of someone that is very responsive, very quick to offer a perspective and counsel as needed.

-Legislative staff member

IPEDS data doesn’t matter. We appreciate a lot of it, but frankly the coordinating board takes into consideration transfer students, for example, when they calculate graduate rates. The THECB has better data.

-Legislative staff member

THECB role as antagonist. Several participants noted that the coordinating board is placed in an antagonist role in some issues. A journalist stated the coordinating board is in a “pretty thankless position” in the process. The journalist also explained that lawmakers get mad at the THECB because institutions tell legislators that they are mad at them. “The
coordinating board is stuck in the middle, and it is terrible place to be as the scapegoat for everyone.”

One coordinating board member perceived that institutions like to talk about their own independence, but they appreciate someone telling them what to do. The THECB is placed in that position sometimes.

The institutions are going to protest loudly about violations to their autonomy, while at the same time, it’s okay with them because they know it could be good for students. And most of them really want to do what is good for students. Most of them don’t deliberately set out to cause problems for students. That is not their motivation behind this.

Some of the problems with the transfer pathway are caused by unintentional action or lack of action. One participant explained that the two flagship institutions in the state do not talk to each other, so they create problems that they don’t know. Each is doing what is best for its own institution without regard to other institutions which causes transfer problems.

They don’t even know about the problems, and there is nothing that tells them they have to care about that either. So they don’t. For the flagships, that is not a big issue. Not many students are transferring between the two institutions, but there are a lot of people transferring between other institutions and for them, it is a problem.

-Coordinating board staff member

Not only does the THECB mediate between institutions and the legislature, but they also handle student transfer disputes. Two coordinating board staff members discussed their role in handling transfer disputes. They do not participate in disputes until the student brings a dispute to the THECB, but they received very few.

The kicker in it is that it has to be a student who brings the dispute forward; the institution can’t do it. You can sit at your institution and know some other institution is screwing over this student and that they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing. But unless the student is willing to step forward and file the dispute, you can’t do
anything about it. The students either don’t know or they are reluctant to bring disputes to the THECB.

The THECB aids in building the regulatory infrastructure for institutions to follow. Articulation and collaboration in the Texas transfer pathway are dependent on institutional cooperation in many aspects. The strong emphasis on institutional autonomy creates tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board as confirmed by participants; and as revealed by Richardson et al. (1999). This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity due to the number of independent systems and institutions present. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas higher education system several decades ago and the lack of collaboration between institutions.

**Professional Associations’ Role and Responsibility in Supporting Transfer Success**

Professional associations play an important role in higher education. They can represent categories of students, faculty, institutions or other stakeholders. They play a role in policymaking due to their direct access to policymakers. One professional association member explained the role clearly.

Because we have different [professional association] groups, you have community college, university, and legislative groups, and we try to be collaborative and try to bring everyone together. But we always get some kind of surprise, and it’s usually related to transfer policy. Surprise legislation that groups take to the legislature can come, and we aren’t prepared for them. Legislatures get information from specific groups, and it can have a negative impact when professional groups are working independently of the entire higher education system, especially when you are going with your own individualized request towards something for a couple of institutions.

One coordinating board staff member discussed their relationship with professional associations, such as the Texas Association of Institutional Research, the Texas Association of
College Registrars and Admissions Officers (TACRAO) and the Texas Association of Community Colleges. The THECB analyzes legislation, presents it and receives feedback on whether it makes sense according to one coordinating board staff member.

The relationship with professional associations can help the coordinating board in implementing changes as well. A coordinating board staff member explained how TACRAO impacted the rulemaking decisions of the THECB.

We just had a big thing with TACRAO. One institution had an idea about attaching numbers to the component area options of the core curriculum. By tagging courses on the transcript with the corresponding component area, transferring core curriculum credit between institutions could be improved. It struck me as being a pretty good idea in a lot of ways. But, TACRAO objected to it, not because they thought the concept was bad, but because of all of the various student information systems used by institutions. So there’s a lot of issues with implementing the change. TACRAO raised the question and said “We don’t know how to do this, so we need more time to study it.” So we pulled the rule.

Not all work with professional associations involves legislation. A professional association member discussed how staff stays abreast of contemporary issues and research in transfer student issues.

I comb through the latest research around transfer, like reading journal articles, talking to people, talking to our members. I try to follow up by going to different conferences that focus on transfer, or have an aspect on transfer students. I try to gather best practices; network to meet people and talk to them about the challenges they are facing or the things they are doing; and then just try to get the resources out to our members to support them.

-Professional association staff member

I approach the transfer issue from really a place of, how can we best support those students, which I think is definitely where a lot of people would want us to be.

-Professional association staff member
Professional associations can be important allies for institutions and legislators. Their work can support student success and the completion agenda, while promoting best practices. Another professional association member described their work to solve problems facing higher education, while balancing work between institutions and policymakers.

We listen to the best practices across the country and come back with ideas. The minute we come back, we customize them to our needs. We started learning that our roles, not just making sure we had a budget or that we had policies that were acceptable in the general norm. We started questioning things like why do we have such a low graduation rates? Why do we have such low returns on the investment of the fiscal investment we make? And we grew from that discussion. Now, we are totally immersed in working with state organizations and the national organization. Every year we learn something new.....This helps us support the chancellors and the presidents because if they come to us with an idea, instead of sitting there looking at them like, “What planet did you come from?” we know what they are talking about and we know we need to support them. And we know we need to pass policies that will support that particular implementation.

A study on the role of policymaking would be incomplete if professional associations were ignored. They work alongside stakeholders to further the special interests of their membership. The direct access they have with legislators provides influence and a voice to their interests. Those interests can antagonize or support the policymaking process. Understanding the problems and interests professional associations pursue can provide insight into their role in policymaking and the influence they hold in promoting best practices.

5. Problems with the Texas Transfer Pathway

Despite years of attention by policymakers and institutions, there are still problems found in the transfer pathway between community colleges and universities. Students face longer times to degree and expense if they transfer institutions. In the study, one journalist shared that a local university president is regularly quoted in meetings that he is tired of giving transfer students bad news when they enroll on his campus. Students may focus their
frustration on the receiving institution even though the wrong courses were taken at the sending institution.

Participants of this study identified a number of remaining problems within the transfer pathway. Even though Texas has strong data on students, there are still data needs which were well articulated by participants concerning federal data sources and decision making. Participants defined other barriers that interfere with seamless transfer. They identified that the FOSC should be expanded; transfer financial aid support should be increased and transferring core courses as issues.

Students do contribute to their own transfer problems and participants acknowledged this in their responses. For institutions, participants identified the visibility and perception of community colleges as problematic, as well as the independence and autonomy of institutions. A recent controversy is included in this section discussing one community college system’s attempt to improve the transfer pathway, and the problems their innovations created for them.

Data Needs

During interviews, participants shared positive perceptions of the quality and quantity of data available from the THECB. Over half of the participants mentioned that the data available in Texas far surpasses what other states have available on their students.

I can pick up the phone and call the coordinating board for information all day, any day.

-Legislative staff member

The coordinating board has better data. I don’t look at the federal IPEDS data.

-Legislative staff member
We can track transfer students. We track them between, we can actually track students now from eighth grade to employment. As long as they stay in Texas, we can track them all of the way through.

-Coordinating board staff member

The coordinating board actually does a pretty decent job. Actually, one of the things Texas is recognized for is data. I have had people from other states tell me this, “Oh, Texas, by far, has the best data.” It really is interesting to me. I didn’t realize this until I came to work here. I have had people at these national meetings with state officials and others say we do a great job. One woman asked me “So tell me what you are doing in Texas? Because whatever you all are doing in Texas, well it’s just a matter of time before we are doing it too.” I looked at her and said, “Really?” She replied, “Yeah, that’s really true. You guys really do lead the pack to an extent.” I was then thinking, “Oh no.”

-Coordinating board staff member

Participants did not have positive perceptions of the federal data available through IPEDS and disapproved of the federal metrics used to calculate graduation rates.

I don’t pay attention to the federal graduation data because it is flawed.

-Legislative staff member

Since the participants work in different aspects of the transfer pathway and in different fields, it was surprising that so many of them had opinions on the data available, and had strong desires for improvements on data from the federal level. All participants believed that data is important and needed for measuring success and effective programming.

Data collection on transfer students is problematic. One coordinating board member explained that the THECB knows which courses students take in Texas public institutions, but they have no way to know what courses transfer to the receiving institution. Also, credit from out-of-state institutions, private institutions or credit by examination is not known by the THECB so that credit creates holes in the data in terms of measuring time to degree for all
students in the pipeline. Another weakness in the THECB data was explained by coordinating board staff. Current institution reporting does not allow the THECB to follow students through articulation agreements because they don’t know which students participate in the agreement.

We can improve, but we are not going to in terms of what data we have, because of the reporting system and students moving between Texas schools. We know what courses they take. We don’t know how many courses actually were transferred, accepted at the new institutions. We just know that they took them. If they come from out-of-state or from a private institution, we have no idea. Or if they get that kind of credit by exam, we don’t have that either. So when we get a request, it is hard to assess because you don’t have all the information.

-Coordinating board staff member

I would love to know if the articulation agreements are working. I don’t know. I cannot go in and figure it out because I don’t know which students are a part of the agreement and which are just transfer students. We would like to analyze those in more depth.

-Coordinating board staff member

I’m sure there are things I wish I had that I don’t; but I can’t think of them right now. It’s on a case-by-case basis. Usually any data that I need, I can request from the institutions, and try and get it. Part of my job is partitioning the kind of information my boss would like to see and understand; and so a great deal of that is student impact - how many students are affected by a policy, how many would be affected by the change - and demographic data. The institutions of higher ed and the coordinating board are very forthcoming with information.

-Legislative staff member

You can always have more data. I don’t want to sound flippant or silly, but we often tell people that too much data is our problem as staff, not your problem as a stakeholder. We have pretty good data, or have access to it. We do have holes, but that is not a surprise. I think one of the holes we have is we don’t know which students go out-of-state and graduate. You have to take those numbers into consideration when you are looking at certain policies.

-Legislative staff member

A participant from a professional association explained by it is difficult to find good data on transfer students.
I absolutely think there’s tons of room for improvement for how data is collected about transfer students. I spend time trying to look for all of that data specifically. I thought the National Student Clearinghouse was probably the most helpful. But especially IPEDS on the federal level, it’s just that they don’t have that type of data available for really looking at transfer students. I think institutions have data available on their campus, but I don’t have access to it.

This participant cited helpful sources for research worth mentioning. Helpful data can also be gathered from the American Association of Community Colleges; The Center for Community College Student Engagement; the Education Commission of the State; the Lumina Foundation; and the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students. This participant explained that the available data does not provide the full picture of transfer student completions as it is collected now, and there is a need for improvement.

I wish we had a mechanism in place to track what is happening with the transfer students I definitely think that with some of the pressure from the federal initiative and drive for completion, it’s data driven right now that there is just a lot of pressure for getting the right types of results that can be tracked and recorded, and I don’t really think they capture the full picture at all. So I think there is a lot of data that gets lost in the current state of play.

-Professional association member

Federal data sources ignore transfer students. All participants were asked their perceptions of the federal graduation rate metrics and data. The majority of participants responded that they would like to see the metrics improved for transfers and data tracked for all students and not a small cohort of students entering an institution each fall semester. One legislative member stated that they do not pay attention to the federal graduation rate data.

The IPEDS data doesn’t matter. We appreciate a lot of it, but frankly the coordinating board take transfer students in consideration when they calculate graduation rates. IPEDS data doesn’t accurately describe what is going on with a student population like we do in Texas where so many people are not first-time, full-time, or entering in the fall. Until IPEDS changes that, it’s better to not look at it.

-Legislative staff member
Several participants stated that student success or transfer success should not be based on one or two metrics. They explained that outcomes are more complicated than that and can’t be summarized in one graduation rate.

Data metrics can be used against institutions for various reasons. One higher education journalist illustrated the weakness of IPEDS graduation rates, and how they can misrepresent reality.

IPEDS graduation rates certainly need to be changed. The Texas Association of Business put up a billboard knocking an institution in Texas for their graduation rates. If you look at IPEDS, their six-year graduation rate is maybe 25%. But if you look at the coordinating board data that does include transfer students, their graduation rate is twice that amount. This particular school has many students that transfer out after their first year or two, and others that transfer in for the last two years. They should get credit for the students they do touch and help with their education. Texas data is better than a lot of national data, so it’s hard to compare our institutions to other institutions because we have to use the IPEDS standard. Texas is doing a pretty good job and it would be great if what we are doing in Texas could be done nationally.

Another participant used his own time to degree to show that he would have been deemed a failure by IPEDS metrics despite earning three college degrees because he transferred prior to receiving an associate’s degree.

One professional association staff member stressed the importance of updating the federal metrics for measuring student success, and the need for legislators to understand the population of students enrolled at specific institutions.

The metrics are killing us. Because of the diversity of community colleges, the IPEDS cohort does not hold together well. The cohort has low graduation rates, low transfer rates, everything is low, low, low. The condition is not reflected in those measures. An inner-city community college system graduates 7,000 students a year, but a legislator might look at their low graduation rate and say “We are not getting our money’s worth.” But when you look at the number, the system is graduating an equivalent of one community college every year. That is significant. The IPEDS metric is a research-
based concoction, but it really doesn’t tell much about the institution. It says a lot about the population, but not the institution.

A solution to current metric was offered by a professional association member. The participant believes the population should be segregated at the time of enrollment based on their intent for gaining job skills, transfer or certificates. Then separate metrics should be collected according to each population. “Colleges have too many populations coming to them, it is too diverse. They need to diversity the metrics to capture student intent and then to track that intent.”

A professional association participant stressed that the metrics need to change. The current metrics do not adequately represent the real story of what is occurring and the data is not representative of the state of affairs.

We need to change the metrics. I’m real stubborn about that. We need to change the metrics, so we can tell the true story of what’s happening. The state is doing some incredible stuff in higher education, but we are always moaning and groaning about how we need to do something else. Well, the reason is we don’t have the appropriate metrics and we are getting the wrong messages...Look at the data from IPEDS, the National Clearinghouse, and the THECB and you get different results. That is a problem. Who is telling the truth?

Another professional association member reinforced the need for metrics that mirror what is actually happening with students.

So there is a big gap in terms of perception of what institutions are doing because of the metrics that are being generated and the reality of the condition.

Coordinating board staff also concur that the metric should be changed. One member stated that institutions are set up to fail with the flawed metric.

Public higher education is allowing itself to be evaluated by a metric based on the number of students that start and complete their degree at the same place. If you don’t start at the institution you graduate from, you aren’t counted. The population of students at public institutions are constantly changing as people transfer in and out, and
stop out and re-enroll as they swirl around. You see this more with publics than the privates. How can you compare student populations or between institutions? We need to look at graduates and the time it takes to finish, regardless of where they started.

Public institutions have a large number of students that move in and out of them throughout their college careers. However, the metrics that gauge their efficacy are based on a traditional, linear, four-year path taken by traditional, full-time students. The metrics simply do not measure the efficacy of addressing the needs of a mobile, fluid student population.

**Positive perceptions of THECB data.** A legislative staff member stated that data can be requested from institutions or the THECB to partitioning information for the legislator to see and understand. Much of the data examined reviews the student impact and how many students are affected by a given policy; how many are affected and their demographics. This participant states that institutions and THECB are very forthcoming with data requests. Another legislative member was asked if they can pick up the phone and call the THECB with questions. The participant quickly responded “Yes, all day, any day” implying the THECB is responsive to legislative requests.

A legislative staff member explained where the committee obtains its data for decision making.

We actually have a shockingly good data in Texas related to higher education. A lot of it is from the THECB. If it is a policy need, say transfer, the THECB issues a transfer report once every year, or every other year. We go to the coordinating board when we don’t want to bother the institutions. We also get information from the budget board or journal articles. It depends on what we are looking for.

A journalist also stated that the THECB and institutions are receptive to records requests, and the journalist does not usually need to use open records requests. Email or phone requests are adequate methods to receive needed information.
Another higher education journalist perceived that not all lawmakers use data for decision making, and anecdotal stories sometimes take priority.

Some look at data and some don’t. Nowadays you have more who don’t. You have more who have gut feelings, or they talk to Johnny from the neighborhood. I think you have more of that right now. That doesn’t mean it will always be that way. Arguments based on data can be hard to really see at the Capitol it seems like. The coordinating board is super data-centric. They give a lot of advice and they also listen to advice.

The coordinating board plays an important role in higher education in Texas. They are using their position to provide data and help mediate between the different stakeholders, according to participants. A coordinating board member stated that the THECB has the ability to track students from eighth grade to employment as long as they stay in Texas. This type of effort provides stakeholders information for making decisions and identifying students’ needs.

**Fields of Study Curriculum (FOSC) Needs to be Expanded**

Throughout the study, FOSC were repeatedly cited as a method to improve the transfer pathway. Thirty-five percent of the participants mentioned them in their responses. Earlier in this chapter the role of FOSC and faculty together for transfer success was discussed, but FOSC is included in this section of the chapter as an area of to improve. Coordinating board staff stated that FOSC were included in legislative recommendations from the THECB to improve curriculum alignment work. A legislative member cited FOSC as one of the priorities submitted to the legislative committees as a THECB priority. The legislation to strengthen FOSC did not make it out of committee in time before the legislative session ended in 2015. A higher education journalist believed that the legislation ran out of time and was not “killed” or “folded down.”
Coordinating board staff stated that FOSC would help the transfer pathway, and more resources and staff could be devoted to develop them more extensively. One participant explained that the FOSC are statute and not voluntary. Public institutions must comply, and articulation agreements are not necessary. The FOSC amount to a state-wide articulation agreement that not only transfers the credit, but can apply credits towards the major credits within the degree. The process for creating the FOSC was also explained.

Fields of Study committees have to be made up of half community college representatives and half with four-year institution representatives. So you have to get the two sides together at least at twelve of each have to come together to talk to each other about this and try to reach some consensus on it. Members are there to represent their field and not their institution. We try to remind them that the committee is there to decide what is really best for students in these agreements. They answer “What is it that my discipline needs? What is it this major needs? What is it the students need from this?” They can usually come together and actually do some good work.

Not only are the FOSC changes supported by the THECB, but a higher education journalist claimed that community colleges desire an expansion of FOSC.

There are other states that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accredits, maybe in Virginia or Florida. Basically, every public university in the state has fields of study. If you started an English major at one community college anywhere in the state, you would be able to get all of your courses to transfer to an English major at any public university. That is what community colleges want in Texas. The THECB was pushing for it, but it was just one of those bills that was never important enough to people to make it through.

With community colleges and the THECB in favor of expanding the FOSC in Texas, future recommendations and legislative work might consider resources and manpower for them. All categories of participants mentioned that FOSC would improve the transfer pathway.
Transfer Students Face Less Financial Aid

Literature on transfer student issues often cite challenges with financial aid or scholarships. “State policy can also affect the demand for higher education. It might be argued, for instance, that by providing need-based financial aid, states broaden access by increasing opportunities for potential students. This, in effect, changes the demand for higher education” (Martinez, 2004, p. 78). States can also set goals for performance, invest in resources for transfer, use articulation and credit transfer agreements; improve low performing institutions and use financial aid and private institutions to leverage improved transfer initiatives (Wellman, 2002). Despite this fact, there was a surprisingly low number of comments gathered during the study concerning financial aid or scholarships.

Most mentions of the financial needs of transfer students were minor recommendations for the State and institutions. A professional association member recommended that transfer scholarships should be more equitable to those created for first-year students. To solve this discrepancy, the participant recommended that institutions fundraise for the unmet needs of transfer students and involve leadership in the cause. A higher education journalist believed that stakeholders share in the responsibility to secure funding for students to do what they need to succeed. Another suggestion by a professional association member offered that financial literacy on student loans and financial aid could help relieve the fears of loans that some transfer students hold.

A word of caution was provided for federal default policies for institutions by one participant. Defaulting on student loans can carry unintended consequences for students, universities and the community.
We were looking at the risk sharing proposal by Senator Alexander from Tennessee, and his concept is “Well, if they default on their loans, then the community college should be held responsible, and also the four-year institutions should also be accountable. They should all share in that risk or they should have some skin in the game. If a student defaults on a small loan at a community college and you look at the provisions in that loan, the student is locked in for life and the interest is insidious. They won’t be able to buy a car or a house. If they try to transfer to a university, they will not be able to enroll or get aid. So it’s a major crisis and something that should be looked at.

-Professional association member

Financial aid and scholarships can support student success by providing a means of attendance.

Participants recommended that all stakeholders support the fundraising and creation of equitable aid and scholarships for transfer students. Financial literacy and financial aid counseling might alleviate fears and avoid student loan default. Students who run into default face financial hardships, credit problems and a barrier to the baccalaureate.

Four-year institutions are seeing student transfer with 80 or 90 credits. They are at an associates and a half basically at that point. So everyone agrees that there’s a problem. It is frustrating that there is not a single-shot solution, and so everything always gets talked about in silos. In the last session, we talked about iconic course numbering, block scheduling, articulation agreements, and outline curriculum pathways. But of them individually, the answer’s always “Well, that not solely transferability” and so I think that that’s a classic public policy problem, to try to fix them as individual problems. When really a combination of all the potential solutions is probably the best fix.

-Legislative staff member

Extra courses that students take that do not transfer extend their time to degree, reduces their Pell Grant eligibility, reduces the benefits of scholarships and increases loan debt.

Confusion about the Core Curriculum

The core curriculum is the generally understood block of “basics” that students take for every bachelor’s degree. These core classes are transferred into the university from the community college, and core classes are offered at each institution for associates or bachelor
degrees. Two coordinating board members explained that there are misconceptions about the core and its transferability between institutions.

I have looked at the issue of transfer for a long, long time. And that’s where I begin to really notice the disconnect between the legislature and the rest of the world on core curriculum. The policymakers believe the core curriculum is going to transfer, in their minds, they think that transfer means that 42 hours is all going to apply to a degree. But that’s not necessarily the case. If you took biology in your core, and you decide to become a geologist, then that biology is not going to county. Because the student now has to go back and take geology. The student should have taken geology to begin with, but who knew he wanted to pursue geology?

-Coordinating board staff member

Because sometimes, there are other unintended consequences that nobody thinks of. But I think with a transfer, everybody wants it to work. The transfer should work because the idea of transfer - at least in Texas - is it will lower the cost of the student. So I think the Core Curriculum bill and all that was passed, but in the end, it took it from the university's hands who didn't really want to transfer their courses. But right now, they have to accept the lower division. If the student changes their major though, they have taken the wrong core classes needed for their major, and people don’t understand that.

-Coordinating board staff member

Legislators’ lack of understanding about curriculum and why core classes do not transfer contribute to their frustration with institutions. Core curriculum is not a one-size-fits-all block of courses that all students take. There are choices within the core that align with specific careers and programs. Students’ indecision and major changes create some of the problem that institutions cannot control. Students have to share some of the responsibility for their courses not transferring as a consequence of changing their minds.

**Student Contribution to the Problem**

All categories of participants attributed part of the problem with transfer with students. Students do not know where they are going to transfer early in their college career, they have family situations that may interfere with their plans and they change their minds as to which
program they want to pursue. Institutions and policy problems cannot bear all of the blame for the problems identified.

One of the big issues is always the student who changes their mind, and I think we also have to recognize that if a student changes their mind, that it is their problem. We can’t solve those issues.

"Coordinating board staff member"

Although that is also becoming a big thing is, lawmakers saying, “College is not for everyone.” They are trying to cut back on encouraging everyone to go to college. There is blame that the poor performance is due to some students’ lack of ability.

"Higher education journalist"

If a student really starts off majoring in engineering and decides that they really ought to be a historian instead, there’s not much we can do about that.

"Coordinating board staff member"

**Controversy in Addressing Transfer Issues**

As mentioned by professional association members, legislative staff and journalists, there has been recent controversy. One community college system decided to change the names and degree plans for academic associate degrees. This decision was partially based to prevent their courses from not transferring to all of the local public institutions as stated by a journalist.

The community college system said they don’t want students losing courses in the transfer anymore. In order to stop that from happening, this system said “we don’t want you to take courses towards two-year majors anymore. We want you to identify the school you want to transfer to, and what you want to major in at the university, and you can take courses here that are going to transfer towards your degree program wherever you want to go. In doing that they basically eliminated majors because the coordinating board then asked the accrediting agency to say that you can’t list majors on diplomas or transcripts if they don’t represent a coherent body of skills and knowledge. There are too many options of courses, so now you can no longer say you’re offering an English major. Those students are getting generic liberal arts degrees. I’ve been told other states are going this way.
The community college system may not have been prepared for the outcry this change caused.

Faculty and students protested the change and desired to keep the associate’s degrees with the name of their major attached. These groups did not want to receive a generic liberal arts associate’s degree. One journalist described the controversy and the protests that occurred during board of trustee meetings for this community college system.

Faculty and students were saying “You are taking away our majors, everything we have worked for is no longer communicated to the public. What will employers say if I just have a generic liberal arts degree? This is more important to us that you think it is.” People were talking about it in Austin and the news. The outcry was really vocal and there were a couple of meetings where dozens, if not 100 people were calling for the chancellor’s resignation. The policy passed.

The local universities did not get involved in the controversy, but it was reported that the universities were “tired of giving transfer students bad news when their courses didn’t transfer.” Universities want the process to be more streamlined and they want students to take more courses at the community college that will transfer.

Visibility or Perception of Community Colleges is Problematic

Participants perceived that community colleges are at a disadvantage at the state-level because of the influence the large, dominating universities have on the public, especially with their athletic programs. This negatively affects the community college’s ability to get on policymakers’ radar. One higher education journalist perceived a lack of attention is given to community colleges by the general public or in policy discussions.

I think that part of the difficult aspect of covering higher education is that when people talk about higher education, they are talking about four-year universities. Community colleges are left out of that bucket of what the general public is talking about when they’re talking about higher ed. I don't think policy makers leave that out because if you're close enough to it, you know that community colleges are a major part. I think when people talk about policy or if there’s a higher education conference or a
conference call with the THECB, much of the discussion is directed to four-year schools and not a lot of it is about community colleges. I don’t know if community colleges feel overlooked that way but I certainly feel.

In Texas there has been a push to strengthen the common course numbering system. It was mentioned by multiple participants in discussing transfer issues. A coordinating board staff member explains that common course numbers will help students know which class to take, but it will not solve the transfer issues. “The problems are much more complicated than anybody realizes. The real problem is if the course applies to the degree plan.” One participant stated that community colleges may not have realistic perceptions of the problems that could be solved by improving the system.

The big thing that people will perceive as a big change that will be addressed in the next legislative session is that legislation will force every institution to use a common course numbering system. The two-year schools think that if we adopt all this, our transfer issues will just go away. It’s also a much more complicated thing than anybody realizes it.

- Coordinating board staff member

All participants stressed the importance of improving the transfer pathway. It was identified as an issue affecting large numbers of students, but it is overshadowed by other issues such as guns on campus, capital improvements and budgets. A coordinating board member emphasized that the issues will be more complicated once community colleges begin offering baccalaureate degrees as well. The fact that many policymakers graduated in four years from the same institution, “they are less in tune with today’s reality as they are sort of nostalgic” and projecting their experiences on their perceptions as described by one journalist.

There is a disconnect in what higher education people are excited about and what the public is really excited about. I think transfer stuff can get lost in the weeds there a little bit because it is wonky and complicated. It is not as easy to solve like “guns on campus”. You can’t fix transfer with a few words.
APPENDIX E

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS
Pressure from the public and policymakers are making the completion agenda a top priority for higher education in the United States (Brint, 2011; Hamilton, 2013a; Handel, 2013; Kiley, 2012; Mangan, 2013). As accountability pressure mounts to demonstrate increased student completions, policymakers analyze the effectiveness of institutions and their ability to support transfer students and increase their graduation rates (THECB, 2014b). Degree completion is a “true bottom line” for administrators, policymakers, parents, and students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 644).

This chapter presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter Four. It provides a discussion of the implications for action and recommendations for further research.

Texas has been active in the effort to improve pathways for students transferring from community colleges to universities (CPUPC, 2008; CPUPC, 2010; THECB, 2014b). Even with the significant efforts to improve transfer pathways between community colleges and universities, students are still frustrated with the barriers they face, including articulation and the transfer process (McGuinness, 2005).

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of fourteen policymakers and policy influencers; and their expectations for public institutions serving transfer students. Elite, semi-formal interviews were used to obtain the data from legislative staff members, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board staff, higher education journalists and professional association members. The perceptions of policymakers and those that influence transfer policy in Texas revealed priorities and values that impact institutions and transfer students. This study
identified areas of agreement and divergence between policymakers. The data indicated policymakers' assessment of policy and infrastructure affecting transfer success. Policymakers' perceptions built a stronger understanding of their expectations for students and public institutions, and their relationship to the State economy and competitive workforce.

Summary of Findings

This study resulted in some interesting findings. Participants from all categories acknowledged the challenge institutions face with a growing, diverse student population that is less traditional than in the past. Participants reported their perceptions of transfer students and the problems they experience; identified ways to improve transfer success; explained how transfer students are at a disadvantage due to the complexity of Texas higher education; described the policy environment in Texas; and revealed disparities in resources and curriculum at community colleges.

**Perceptions of Students and the Problems Experienced**

The findings show to an understanding by policymakers that transfer students are not as traditional as in the past, and arrive on campus with less financial resources. They also understand that transfer students arrive on campus with varying degrees of academic readiness, resources, and frequently change their aspirations. Combining those challenges with financial aid, scholarship, orientation, and advising support systems designed more for incoming freshmen than transfer students, the problem is compounded according to participants.
Identified Ways to Improve Transfer Success

Participants revealed their perceptions of how faculty, institutions, and advisors can improve the transfer pathway and decrease the baccalaureate gap.

Faculty play a crucial role. Participants were able to identify areas where faculty can ameliorate some of the problems transfer student face in an environment where institutions are more inwardly focused without the transfer student in mind. The greatest challenge revealed in the study lies with faculty and institutions failing to work together in the best interest of the transfer student who has yet to arrive or who may never arrive on their campus. The participants did not believe all faculty members are cooperative. However, they are aware that there are faculty that work diligently to improve curriculum and pathways.

The role of institutions and advisors. All participants stated that institutions and advisors do not adequately inform students of state policies or aid. Participants hold students less responsible for complying with the system in place than institutions do. Participants assume students are not aware of the consequences for taking excess hours or changing their major, and blame institutions for not being more forthcoming with students. Policymakers believe that advising and transition services are not the same from institution to institution, and other advising inequities could exist between academic departments. Transfer students may not land in an environment focused on them when they arrive at the university. Advising and orientation services were the primary problems mentioned in the interviews. However, policymakers concede that the problems are caused partly because students change their minds, and the student-to-advisor ratios are too high.
Transfer Students Disadvantaged by the Decentralized Higher Education

All participants confirmed that transfer students face challenges due to the independent, decentralized nature of Texas higher education. Transfer students move between institutions that are autonomous and independent of each other. The faculty of each institution are responsible for the curriculum development on their campus, but yet stakeholders expect students to transfer seamlessly from one institution and degree program to another. The findings in this study identify that the current higher education system as a whole does have the capacity to facilitate the transfer. However, the decentralized matrix of independent, autonomous institutions contributes to the low completion rates and excessive credit hours for the transfer student. Due to the decentralized system in Texas, the THECB often plays the role as antagonist or scapegoat, despite the fact that all categories of participants had positive perceptions of the THECB.

The Political Environment in Texas

Participants reported an improved, more collegial political environment for higher education. Key positions in the legislative and executive branches have changed creating promise and a more collaborative environment. Despite the abundance of data provided to the legislative committees, several participants stated more decisions are based on anecdotal data, and less on actual data. One journalist stated:

Some look at data and some don’t. Nowadays you have more who don’t. You have more who have gut feelings, or they talk to Johnny from the neighborhood.

This finding is not surprising, but disappointing considering the institutions and students affected by their policies and decisions. A significant amount of resources and time are spent
by the THECB and institutions to create the data, and the data should be used to identify priorities.

**Disparities in Resources and Curriculum at Community Colleges**

The funding formula for institutions is marked with disparate metrics that shift more resources to research institutions and universities than the less visible community colleges who educate more than half of the students participating in higher education in the State. The institutions that serve the growing population of students with less financial resources and college preparation are expected to do more with less, while equaling serving academic and workforce education demands. There is a consensus that the State needs to match its commitment to education to the funding provided to higher education and community colleges.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

The study did align with the literature review in most areas. The decentralized, federal system of higher education contributes to problems transfer students face. The autonomy and independence of institutions is helpful for serving local communities, developing strategic planning, and funding; but the transfer student is disadvantaged by the system (Richardson et al., 1999; Habley, 2012). The State does identify that there is a problem, but there are barriers to the seamless transfer listed in the literature review and confirmed in the interviews.

I think it’s improving slowly. I definitely would say it’s improving, but there’s a long way to go. I think that there’s been a lot more attention around articulation policies, and just transfer like common course numbering or all of those policy aspects from the state or the local level. I don’t really think those things make transfer easier for students.

- Legislative staff member
Participants confirmed that the completion agenda and accountability initiatives are at the forefront of policymaking to save the State financial resources (CPUPC, 2010; Hamilton, 2013a; Handel, 2013; Mangan, 2013).

One area where the study conflicted with literature was concerning the political climate within Texas. The participants of this study described a collegial environment between stakeholders where improvements were expected with the new leadership changes in the Office of the Governor and the legislative committees. Perceptions of the THECB and institutions were more positive than the literature suggested (Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton, 2013b; Richardson et al., 1999).

Governor Abbott’s first appointees to the UT Board of Regents are cherry-picked to be super friendly and defensive of UT-Austin. So my sense is that he is really big on being nice to the universities. Even Governor Perry’s people said that is probably where you will see the biggest difference between the two governors—it is in higher education. He said that education is his biggest priority.

-Higher education journalist

The literature disclosed a tense push to reorganize the community college system in Texas, but no agenda of a reorganization was revealed (Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton, 2013b). With the large number of turnover in political positions, this conversation had subsided. One surprise revealed that policymakers in this study are more realistic than described (Habley et al., 2012; Rawlings, 2014), and attempt to not be content experts or not be overly prescriptive in policymaking. It was surprising to learn they attempt to use the least restrictive policy possible.

We try to avoid taking an axe to a problem where we just need a knife or something.

-Legislative staff member
We impose so much as a legislative body on institutions already. If we were in control of what universities could do, we would have equalized mediocrity.

-Legislative staff member

Policymakers are aware of the baccalaureate gap for transfer students as the literature suggested (Hamilton, 2013b). State legislators have attempted to address the baccalaureate gap, and to decrease the amount of time students stay in college through various policies (Kisker et al, 2011). Their policies attempt to reduce the cost of higher education for the state and the student (Martinez, 2004).

For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money and decrease the time to degree, which also saves the state money and saves the students some money and time. Students can go to work, start paying taxes and other good things can come out of this right? What drives this is saving money, getting people into the workforce sooner, reducing the stress of state resources and money that students need to borrow. They can then buy houses, spend money and start investing.

-Coordinating board staff member

As confirmed by the participants, the transfer pathway remains important to community college students and to the economy in producing a better qualified, skilled workforce (Handel, 2013; THECB, 2014a).

Conclusions

There are three major conclusions to the findings and analysis of this study:

1. The large, decentralized system of independent, autonomous institutions is a major contributor of the problems within the transfer pathway.

2. Inefficiencies in the transfer pathway lead to excessive credit hours and unacceptable time to degree for students.
3. There is a distinct gap in expectations between policymakers and transfer students, especially community college students.

1. **Large Decentralized System of Independent, Autonomous Institutions**

   The decentralized higher education system in Texas contributes to the problems experienced in the transfer pathway. There are advantages to the decentralized system, but transfer students are placed at a disadvantage. Inconsistencies in implementing initiatives can be attributed to the decentralized nature of the system. The strong emphasis on institutional autonomy creates tension among the institutions, the legislature, and the coordinating board as confirmed by participants; and as revealed by Richardson et al. (1999). This environment makes the transfer pathway difficult to implement or to maintain continuity due to the fact that individual institutions can choose how they will implement policy. The transfer student is at a disadvantage due to the design chosen for the Texas higher education several decades ago. The system makes it difficult for policymakers to legislate a solution.

   There is a lot to be said for autonomy and independence because it allows institutions to develop their own cultures. And Texas is independent by nature. But, can a balance be struck between doing what is best for the institutions and what is best for students, especially transfer students? Stakeholders do attempt to serve the best interest of students, but priorities are determined by politics and the public. The headlines rarely highlight the capital improvements needed in the transfer pathway.

2. **Inefficiencies Lead to Excessive Credit Hours and Unacceptable Time to Degree**

   Despite the complex nature of Texas higher education, institutions, faculty and the THECB should consider a systemic curricular change to reduce redundancies and barriers
caused by the bifurcated curriculum in Texas between academic, transferrable credit and technical, workforce education. Solutions are needed for inefficiencies, so students will earn less unnecessary credit and transfer more hours into their baccalaureate degree plan. “It is best to focus on truly systemic change—that is, to promote conditions and circumstances that make most if not all institutions rethink first their assumptions and then their operations—or more precisely, their production functions” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 209). The production functions of producing workforce, technical curriculum should not alienate students in the transfer pathway; and the THECB can provide the environment for that statewide work.

Public agencies can help engineer change, but their levers for doing so are quite specific and in that sense often limited. Money - the more the better - helps but cannot in itself secure the changes the reformers want...Like outside reformers, state agencies cannot prescribe change (unless they are prepared for a long, exhausting battle); what state agencies must do to change higher education is create the conditions and circumstances that make change possible, even likely” (Zemsky, 2011, pp. 208-209).

The data confirms that the THECB cannot engineer change, as their authority and oversight are limited. However, participants state that the THECB can support institutions and create some infrastructure, even implying the institutions want them to prescribe some changes. Policymakers can create the policies for the large system of independent, autonomous institutions; but effective change must engage faculty and institutions provided the THECB creates the conditions to make the change possible. Encouragement to initiate this work could come from legislative directives or statutes.

One of the findings in the study was that THECB staff and policymakers are mindful of students and have their best interests at heart in their work. Participants described policymakers as being more thoughtful than they receive credit for. Some may argue their work is not always student-focused, but their intent is to help students with the least restrictive
policy possible. It was surprising to hear the legislative staff state that they are not the content experts, and that they attempt to use the least restrictive approach to policy. They depend on feedback from the THECB and institutions.

3. Expectations Gap

The findings lead to the conclusion that there is an expectations gap between policymakers and community college students. Policymakers expect students to take a linear path from community colleges to universities by taking the specific courses that transfer directly into a baccalaureate. Policymakers expect students to earn credit within a finite length of time from start to finish. They also expect students to know which baccalaureate degree they seek and the university to which to transfer at the time they enter community colleges. Policymakers expect that advisors can provide individual attention for each student in prescribing the degree plan and timeline.

Just as the theoretical framework suggests, Texas policymakers do attempt to influence student behavior through punitive transfer policies, like the Excess Credit Hour Tuition Limit, Six-Drop Limit and Three-Repeat Limit, which carry significant financial consequences for students and formula funding consequences for institutions. (It is also important to note that the federal government does the same by limiting financial aid to students at 150 % of time to degree.)

Policymakers make assumptions that students are savvy on how to navigate higher education; and that they are sophisticated in the knowledge of their future career interests. Policymakers stress the importance of students graduating on time to support the workforce needs and the economy of the State by “buying cars and houses” and “getting off state
support.” These assumptions of sophisticated, savvy students imply students exhibit the same level of preparation and social capital upon entering college, which is not realistic.

**Gap with student expectations.** The findings reveal that students do not carry knowledge of the completion agenda or the role community colleges play in their quest for a baccalaureate. The local community college seems an inviting place to explore careers and higher education. Participants state that students are naïve of policies and expectations on them. They are naïve of the consequences for not taking the linear path within the expected timeline. The number of certificates and associates degree available are abundant and their pathway through those before transfer can steer them into credit that does not transfer. Students are not sophisticated in the differences between workforce education/technical credit and academic credit; or the penalty for accruing too many hours at the community college while they finish any needed developmental coursework and explore careers. The community college may provide a safe environment with friendly faculty and staff where students grow in confidence and build new social capital. Students are not aware of the expectations to leave the community college with no more than 60 hours of transferrable credit that fully apply to the university’s degree plan. Policymakers expect students to transfer with no more than 60 hours according to participants. Students do not realize they are expected to know the program and the university they intend to attend at the moment they enter the community college. Students are not sophisticated enough to understand the complexities of the transfer pathway and the consequences for lacking that knowledge.
Implications for Policy

Transfer advisors, admissions officers, financial aid officers, orientation staff, faculty and administrators can help policymakers create policy using the knowledge from their work directly with transfer students. A task force representing an equitable cross-section of institutions and a composition of these stakeholders can hold promise for practical solutions. These stakeholders have a unique perspective of the actual problems within the transfer pathway at the granular level. Ideas and innovation can organically be developed for the legislative committees for future policy discussions. However, this approach could have limited results. According to some participants, policymakers tend to legislate based on anecdotal experiences of key stakeholders or the least restrictive approach, despite the best data and consultation. Unless the legislators are serious about the results of a bottom up legislative solution, the task force’s efforts would likely be in vain.

Institutions are accountable for the inefficiencies students face on their campus, and formula funding should encourage them to remove inefficiencies. Participants stated that if funding is not tied to transfer success, institutions will not prioritize their approach to serving transfer students and their success. Additionally, an important change should occur in the calculation of graduation rates at the federal and state levels. Transfer students are not calculated in IPEDS graduation rates, and do not reflect the realities what is occurring. Metrics should acknowledge community colleges’ efforts in successfully sending their students to the university for further studies. Likewise, the metrics should also calculate the university’s work in successfully serving the transfer student through to the baccalaureate. If decreasing the baccalaureate gap for transfer students is a priority, then metrics should be improved to
measure transfer success at the community college and university level. Institutions will prioritize their resources where formula funding and rankings calculate success. The calculations for graduation should better reflect the realities of completions occurring.

Policymakers may prefer the least restrictive policy to implement change, but the value or priority of community colleges should be reevaluated. If improving transfer success and outcomes are a priority, then a more prescriptive policy with additional resources, and a more prescriptive transfer infrastructure is required to reduce inefficiencies in the decentralized higher education system, despite tendencies of the State to prefer local control at the institutional level.

Policymakers and policy influencers need to consider the gap in expectations with students and research ways to help students and policymakers develop more realistic expectations. College students in a democratic society are adults with free will and the freedom to explore career options in their pursuit of happiness. Policymakers are stewards of millions of dollars in taxpayer money charged to allocate money in the best interests and needs of the State. Policymakers in Texas have created a threshold of 30 hours of excessive credit hours; a limit of repeating a course no more than two times without penalty; and a limit to only drop six courses during an undergraduate degree. They have attempted to quantify the amount of time students can explore careers and earn excessive credit off the linear path to the baccalaureate. These policies are ineffective if the intended audience is oblivious to them. The policies are meant to modify behavior, but the reality is that students are not aware of them early enough in their college career to truly respond as intended. Policymakers should consider thresholds that occur incrementally throughout as student’s career, so students have the
opportunity to learn how to stay on track earlier in their career. This could have a better opportunity to modify student behavior, and educate them on what is expected of them to graduate on time.

Implications for Practice

The inefficiencies that transfer students experience causing the loss of credit or earning excessive credit should be identified and addressed. These inefficiencies are derived from curriculum differences between upper and lower division institutions; workforce education courses; course numbers used and unique courses. Solutions should occur at the local level and the state level, and must heavily involve faculty. The solutions should be student-focused requiring participants to see the big picture of what their work will accomplish for thousands of students statewide; the reduction of time to degree; and the positive effects on the State economy. The solutions to the inefficiencies will require compromise from community colleges and universities, as well as, academic faculty and technical faculty.

There are implications for practice at the local level for community colleges and universities. Institutions should evaluate how transfer-friendly their campuses are by talking to advisors and students. The inefficiencies found should be addressed.

Student-friendly publications. There are simple things institutions can do to improve experiences of students. Some of them do not require any financial investment. A coordinating board member suggested that institutions review their own publications and college catalogs to confirm they are student-friendly and accurate. Use student focus groups to identify problems and have students review your edits. This work should also be done on campus websites including information requests, financial aid websites, and navigation and search functions.
Institutions should review their information from the lens of the transfer student, including the centralized location of transfer articulation agreements. Several legislative participants also perceived that institutions do not adequately warn students about excess tuition charges or Six-Drop limits, which can blindside students. Improving communication to students could help increase awareness of these policies.

**Targeted student services.** Universities should devote resources and financial aid for incoming freshmen, and transfer students. Orientation and engagement activities should be as intensive for transfer students as freshmen. Institutions should not assume that transfer students are prepared to navigate the process without support. Devote more resources to engaging new transfer students, and provide frequent, individualized advising. Students should be more aware of their “expected” linear path and the penalties for taking credits off the path.

**Engagement of community college faculty.** Community colleges need to do a better job in educating students about the transferability of workforce education, technical courses; and faculty should be involved in looking at the plethora of academic and technical degrees on campus to see if there are ways to reduce the number of credits community college students take that do not transfer. Even if a student does not have the intent to transfer when taking workforce courses, what happens if they later pursue a baccalaureate? Are there better ways to align the curriculum at the community college level to ameliorate the problems caused when a student decides to further their degree beyond the technical associates’ degree in applied sciences?

**Know your students.** Institutions can improve on inefficiencies if they analyze student data. The performance of transfer students should be regularly monitored by community
colleges and universities to identify inefficiencies in services or curriculum, and find solutions to reduce the number of students falling off the expected linear path through the transfer pathway to the baccalaureate. Institutions do not bear all the blame or responsibility for transfer student outcomes. The students themselves bear some of the responsibility for changing majors and for when “life that gets in the way.” Institutions should support students through detours caused by personal issues with more intrusive, frequent advising. Support for career planning may lessen the occurrence of major changes and enrolling in nontransferable courses that do not apply to their bachelor’s degree. As one THECB staff member stressed, the real question everyone working on the issues is “What is good for students? What is good for Texas students? Not what is good for our institution, but for the students?” The reality is that what’s good for Texas students is also what’s good for your institution’s students.”

Reducing the inefficiencies in the transfer pathway can help students stay on the path to the baccalaureate with less excess credit. Students should be more aware of the linear path and the penalties for taking credits off the path. Institutions should look at ways to increase students’ understanding of the expectations held for them. Reviewing websites, publications, degree plans, and student communications can identify ways to improve student awareness. Advising and faculty are also in direct communication with students, and can help inform students of the expectations held for them.

Habley et al. (2012) state “institutional autonomy, curricular complexity, faculty prerogative, and just plain resistance to change often stand in the way of interinstitutional cooperative and collaborative efforts” (p. 348). What is the role of higher education leaders in improving transfer success and degree completion? Leaders in community colleges and
universities play key roles in the completion agenda set for today’s higher education. Faculty, advisors and support services work with transfer students directly; however, the leaders have a strong impact on transfer success and degree attainment on their campus (Helm & Cohen, 2001). “The idea of transfer begins in the president’s office” (Helm & Cohen, 2001, p. 101). Presidents and chief academic officers are visible leaders that set the climate for collaboration and priorities as discussed by Helm and Cohen (2001). The core values and beliefs of leaders impact the culture of campus and how practitioners work with students (Grasmick et al., 2012). If improving transfer success is a priority, then leadership should be active leaders in those efforts.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should explore what policymakers really understand about the challenges students face with financial aid; transportation needs; child care and nutrition; while juggling studies, keeping a home and taking care of dependents? How do policymakers’ past personal experiences in higher education and life form their perceptions with students today? The same question can be asked of other stakeholders including those pushing the completion agenda. Do their experiences mirror the experiences students face today? Did they attend community college or public universities? These are questions future research should examine to understand their expectations of institutions and students. Those expectations drive policy decisions, and possibly their priorities for allocating resources.

Research should identify any disparity in resources or institutional focus between incoming freshmen and transfers at the university level. The disparity of resources is not limited to institutional decisions as State formula funding models; national graduation rate
metrics; federal and state financial aid; and scholarships emphasize the traditional incoming freshman student over the transfer student. Research on the disparity should also analyze the effects on special populations of students.

**Workforce education versus academic credit.** Future research on the inefficiencies caused by the bifurcated curriculum at Texas community colleges could explore the following questions: Do employers know the difference between the Associates of Science/Arts and the Associates of Applied Arts and Science earned at Texas community colleges? Do community colleges design curriculum based on local needs or any attractive formula funding differences between technical, workforce education courses and transferrable, academic courses? Are the differences in formula funding driving the agenda to enroll students in programs/courses than may not transfer? With the technological advances today, are there technical degrees that are more similar to academic, transferrable associate’s degrees?

Future research should identify inefficiencies that lead to excessive credit hours and unacceptable time to degree. How many degree completions could be increased with improved efficiencies of curriculum and services by institutions or a statewide systemic change? Since students face barriers and confusion with workforce education credit, it may be time for Texas to realign the curriculum to improve the inefficiencies it causes for students. Research exploring the number of transfer students impacted by these barriers could quantify the money that is lost by the State and the possible negative effects on time to degree for students.

Policymakers write policies to influence behavior to decrease time to degree. However, some students may be forced out of the college when faced with punitive financial penalties partly due to inefficiencies of the decentralized higher education system. Future research
should consider the effects of financial penalties on vulnerable, at-risk populations of students. Studies should also examine whether the consequences of policies are more heavily carried by transfer students over native students in Texas. If transfer students are affected more negatively than native students, then findings could be used by policymakers to modify policy to more equitably influence student behavior. Future research should explore the economic benefits of improving the efficacy of the transfer pathway for the State, institutions, and students.

Concluding Remarks
The findings support the literature that the completion agenda is driving policy decisions. Participants stressed that reducing the time to degree for students is a top priority. For the legislature, the overall goal is to save money and decrease the time to degree, which also saves the state money and saves the students some money and time. Students can go to work, start paying taxes and other good things can come out of this right? What drives this is saving money, getting people into the workforce sooner, reducing the stress of state resources and money that students need to borrow. They can then buy houses, spend money and start investing.

-Coordinating board staff member

However, the completion agenda is focused more heavily on measuring native students who start at the university their first year, and do not transfer; or those that receive an associate’s degree at a community college. Transfer students have been ignored in the completion or performance funding metrics, which influences institutional priorities. For community colleges, the focus has been on graduation rates, and less on credit for helping students seamlessly transfer to universities. Community colleges feel pressure to award associate’s degrees even at the detriment of the transfer student.
The completion agenda is in conflict with transfer students. The inefficiencies of the transfer pathway cause students to earn excessive credit hours and detour a timely graduation. Transfer students are at a disadvantage by starting at a community college before attending the university, in areas where time to degree are measured. The completion agenda has little tolerance for students’ plight with vertical alignment curricular problems; technical versus academic course selections and other inequities in the system over native students.

The inefficiencies in the Texas transfer pathway are not a glamorous topic to make the news headlines. It is a complicated curricular problem, with complicated answers. Institutions have similar completion goals, but the curricular work is tedious and requires resources. The topic doesn’t draw the general public or the press as much as other topics like guns on campus. The problems of the transfer pathway are difficult to explain to constituents, and does not offer much low hanging fruit for the legislative committees. The problems exist, and students bear the brunt of the problems as time carries on with no systemic change in Texas.

There is a disconnect in what higher education people are excited about and what the public is really excited about. I think transfer stuff can get lost in the weeds there a little bit because it is wonky and complicated. It is not as easy to solve like “guns on campus”. You can’t fix transfer with a few words.

-Higher education journalist

There is hope of gradual improvement with each legislative session, as aspects of the problems are tackled piecemeal. The transfer pathway is drastically better than it was twenty to thirty years ago according to participants of this study, but much work remains. For those involved in the efforts of decreasing inefficiencies, the State will best be served by institutions and faculty thinking in the best interests of all students, and not those currently on their campus. Institutions and faculty that focus more inwardly and resist seamless, curricular
alignment do a disservice to the transfer students leaving or entering their campus, and to the State as a whole.

Students are less sophisticated than policymakers give them credit for in following intricate policies and curricular pathways. All stakeholders should keep the students’ best interests at the center of their work. As more students attend college at multiple institutions throughout their career, higher education has to adjust to the fluid, mobile student population and find ways to develop curriculum that is more mobile as well. Improving curriculum mobility is the one expectation all stakeholders share as it can benefit the State’s economy; and more importantly, it is in the best interest of students.
Through the literature review for the study, a list of *policy influencers* was identified as potential participants:

- Professional associations
- Lobbyists
- Higher education journalists

In the letter sent from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in response to the Blueprint for Community College System Administration Report; key policymakers in Texas were identified (Heldensfels, 2012). Those listed as key lawmakers and policymakers were important to this study as it provided a list of key people who make Texas higher education policy impacting the future structure of the public community college system, according to the THECB. The response letter from the THECB (Heldenfels, 2012) was sent to the following *Texas policymakers*:

- Governor
- Lt. Governor
- Speaker
- Legislative Budget Board
- House and Senate Higher Education Committees
- THECB Commissioner and Staff
- House Appropriations Committee and Senate Finance Committee
- Coordinating Board Members
- Boards of Trustees of Texas Public Community Colleges
- Presidents and Chancellors from Texas Public Community Colleges
- Community College Association of Texas Trustees
- Texas Association of Community Colleges
APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED, ELITE INTERVIEWS
Introductions – Introduce the researcher, professional background and purpose of study

Transfer Policymaking

1. What experience do you have with transfer policy and improving the transfer pathway for community college students transferring to universities? (Opportunity to tell your story...)
2. What is the goal or the intended result of transfer policies?
3. What are your perceptions of the transfer pathway?
4. How do you identify areas that need policy development? (Ask directly about their involvement, motives, contributions, difficulties, successes.)
   - How do you approach a solution?
   - Where do you gain information for decisions?
   - Can you pick up the phone and directly call institutions or the THECB?
   - Do professional associations, government affairs officials or others provide information?
5. Describe a typical day on the (higher education committee). What is the most difficult aspect of working with higher education?

Institutions

6. Texas higher education was designed as a “federal system” that provides a coordinating board for planning, budgeting, articulation and information management. The system emphasizes local control and local decision making at the institutional level, which has many benefits, except for the transfer student moving between institutions. Many of the transfer initiatives in the state are coordinated by the THECB, but it is ultimately up to the institution to participate voluntarily (vertical curriculum alignment, articulations, etc.).

In 1999 one book (Richardson et al., 1999) predicted that if the state did not change the structure of higher education in Texas, the growth of enrollment and student diversity would outstrip the capabilities of the system.

   - Do you agree with that prediction?
   - Do you believe the current system contributes to the completion rates of transfer students?
7. What can institutions do better to improve student persistence and educational experiences? Are articulation agreements working?
8. Institutions can be financially penalized under specific policies (3-peat, excess hours, etc.). Do you believe these types of performance-related policies have a direct, positive impact on institutional behavior? Student success?
9. How can institutions be more efficient in supporting transfer students?
   a. If you became campus president, what would you do to improve transfer success?
   b. How would you be engaged in the process of helping transfer students persist?
10. How should institutions increase completion rates?
    a. Are existing metrics for calculating transfer retention and graduation appropriate?
    b. Do you have enough transfer data for decision making? On swirling students?

Students

11. How would you like to see the state encourage more students to transfer after community college? Should transfer students be required to complete an associate’s degree?
12. Texas has policies intended to encourage degree completion (120-hour limit, 30 hour limit, 6-drop, 3-peat), but students and transfer advisors describe them as barriers for transfer students. Transfer students with family obligations, work schedule changes, poor advising, or those that lose credits when they transfer face additional time and expense despite their efforts to complete their degrees.
    - Are these policies effective for native students and transfer students equally?
    - Is there any intent to modify these policies?
13. With the pressure of the completion agenda, is there concern that focusing on success will slow the momentum in participation and access to higher education for all students?
14. Students today “swirl” between multiple institutions, and do not always take a direct path from one community college to one university. Is the current infrastructure able to accommodate swirling students without adding courses or time to graduation?

Future Implications

15. Are you aware of the debate occurring across the country to change the methodology used to determine institutions’ graduation rates? (presently only the first-time-in-college students entering in the fall are counted)
16. Are there upcoming legislative actions which could have the potential of helping completion rates? Are they directed at institutions or students? What is on your plate?
17. What changes are now taking place in Texas that have future implications for higher education? Will changes alter the relationship between the state and institutions?
18. Are changing societal conditions creating or widening a gap between state and institutional priorities?
APPENDIX H

TEXAS TRANSFER POLICIES AND INITIATIVES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Student impact</th>
<th>Statute or rule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core Curriculum</td>
<td>&quot;Institutions are required by law to adopt a core curriculum of 42 semester credit hours that are consistent with the Texas Common Course Numbering System and with the rules issued by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board&quot; (THECB, 2014b, pp. 169-170).</td>
<td>According to this policy (THECB, 2014b), students who complete 42 SCH transfer the set of courses to another Texas public institution without needing to repeat core courses.</td>
<td>Texas Education Code Chapter 61, Subchapter S, Sections §61.821 through §61.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field of Study Curriculum (FOSC)</td>
<td>According to the policy, students are able to “complete and transfer courses that satisfy lower-division requirements for a bachelor’s degree in a specific academic area or field to Texas public higher education institutions” (THECB, 2014b, p. 170).</td>
<td>Few students are benefiting from this policy. The THECB (2014b) reports that two percent of all transfers had earned full credit through the FOSC in the fall of 2012.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapter B, Rule §4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate of Arts in Teaching</td>
<td>“The Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree is a Coordinating Board-approved collegiate degree program consisting of lower-division academic courses that transfer to baccalaureate programs leading to an initial Texas teacher certification” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171).</td>
<td>This policy mandate requires institutions with baccalaureate degrees leading to initial teacher certification to accept the AAT curricula (THECB, 2014b).</td>
<td>AAT fulfills the requirements of the field of study curriculum statutes and Coordinating Board rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Student impact</td>
<td>Statute or rule</td>
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<td>Reverse Transfer</td>
<td>“Texas public universities are required to identify, track and follow up with each student who has (1) earned at least 30 SCH at a community college and (2) completed a total of 66 SCH” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171).</td>
<td>After public universities send transcripts, community colleges evaluate whether the associate’s degree requirements have been met to confer the degree even though the student has left the institution (THECB, 2014b).</td>
<td>Texas Education Code Section §61.833</td>
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<td>Voluntary Transfer Compacts</td>
<td>“Voluntary transfer compacts are statewide articulation agreements that are entered into by signatory institutions of higher education in Texas” (THECB, 2014b, p. 171).</td>
<td>The voluntary transfer compacts provide students guidance and “eliminate the need for multiple one-to-one articulation agreements between institutions (THECB, 2014b).</td>
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<td>Career and Technical</td>
<td>Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs of Study aligns secondary and postsecondary curriculum into a career cluster pathway. There are over 120 state-recognized CTE Programs of Study aligning with 16 career clusters designated by the federal government (THECB, 2014b).</td>
<td>To help “with college and career planning by providing students enrolled in higher school or college with information about clear and efficient pathways to obtain an associate degree” (THECB, 2014b, p. 172).</td>
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<td>Texas Common Course Numbering System</td>
<td>Since the 1970s, a voluntary effort between the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, public community colleges and universities has provided the Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS) for transfer students (THECB, 2014b).</td>
<td>The TCCNS provides a uniform course taxonomy for determining course equivalencies between participating institutions for students (THECB, 2014b).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower-Division Academic Course Guide Manual</td>
<td>“The Lower-Division Academic Course Guide Manual (ACGM) is the official list of courses approved for general academic course transfer that may be offered for state funding by public community and technical colleges in Texas” (THECB, 2014b, p. 173).</td>
<td>This manual provides for better alignment with curricula and course equivalency determinations at the institutions. Students do not use the manual directly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excess Credit Hour Surcharge</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive formula funding for 30 or more excess credit hours attempted towards an undergraduate degree. (Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</td>
<td>Students may face tuition surcharges once they attempt 30 or more credit hours over the credit hours required for their undergraduate degree at public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, §13.100-13.109</td>
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<td>Six-Drop Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including transfer work.</td>
<td>Unless students meet exceptions, undergraduates cannot drop more than six courses throughout their career while attending public institutions.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapter A, Rule §4.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Repeat Limitations</td>
<td>Institutions do not receive formula funding for a course attempted more than two times. (Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, 2005)</td>
<td>Students may face surcharges once they attempt the same course more than two times. The surcharge may occur on the third attempt.</td>
<td>Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 13, Subchapter F, Rule §13.105</td>
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</table>

**Legislative Changes to the Transfer Pathway During the 2015 84th Texas Legislative Session (THECB, 2015)**

<p>| HB 2628-Development and Alignment by the Coordinating Board of Curricula for Certain Educational Programs | Requires the THECB with the assistance of an advisory committee to periodically review each Field of Study curriculum to ensure alignment with student interest and academic and industry needs. | Provides a guarantee of transfer of FOSC course credit to any public institution in Texas and further promises that approved courses will apply to relevant degree programs. | Adds Sections 61.823(e) and 61.8235 to the Texas Education Code |</p>
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<tr>
<td>SB 1714- Relating to the Release of Student Academic Information by a Public Institution of Higher Education</td>
<td>Allows universities to request a signed consent before releasing student academic information with each student application for transfer admissions for the purpose of reverse transfer.</td>
<td>Requires students who have accumulated at least 66 semester credit hours and who have not submitted a consent form be sent an email notification from their institution requesting authorization to release information to each two-year college previously attended.</td>
<td>Adds Sections 51.9715, 61.833 (c-1), (e) and (f) to the Texas Education Code. Amends Section 61.833 (a), (b), (c) and (d) of the Texas Education Code.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2014). *A matter of degrees: Practices to pathways (High-impact practices for community college student success).* Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership.


http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct1098/voices1098-miller.shtml


doi:10.1177/1069397110375597


Semester Credit Hours Required For Baccalaureate Degree, Texas Education Code, Chapter 61, Subchapter C. § 61.0515 (2005).


Tuition for Repeated or Excessive Undergraduate Hours, Texas Education Code, Chapter 54, Subchapter A § 54.014 (2005).


