

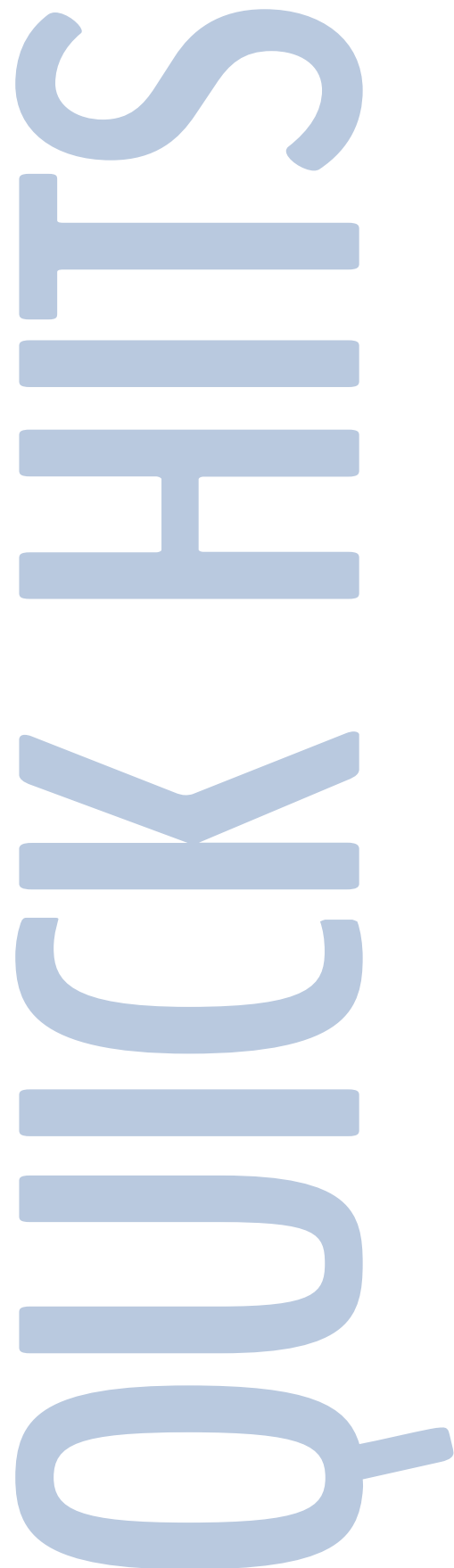
Credit Mobility and Postsecondary Attainment: A Multi-State Approach to Military Credit


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Few issues in higher education are as prominent in the public discourse as the price paid by students and families to attend college. At the same time, never before has the United States faced a greater need for a highly educated citizenry. Given the primacy today’s knowledge economy places on advanced education, the future of the nation depends on helping the current and emerging workforce gain valuable postsecondary credentials. This goal cannot be achieved by simply getting more high school graduates to go on to college.

Historically, the majority of our educational policies and practices have been rooted in the archetypical 18- to 22-year-old, full-time, residential student who starts and completes her or his academic program at the same institution. However, this description fits a smaller percentage of college students every year; a decreasing percentage of bachelor’s degrees awarded in the United States are completed at a single college or university. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 60 percent of first-time bachelor’s degree recipients earn credits from more than one institution, while the National Student Clearinghouse reports that nearly 15 percent of all degree recipients in 2014 earned credits from institutions located in different states. This latter trend is likely to accelerate with the expansion of the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement, which makes it easier for institutions to offer courses online to students residing in other states. While many of the students behind these statistics represent traditional two-year to four-year college transfers, a significant number of students co-enroll by attending two or more institutions at one time. An increasing number also begin their studies at a four-year college or university but at some point attend a two-year institution, either as reverse transfers or through concurrent enrollment.

The term “swirling” has been coined to refer to a growing number of students who start and stop their educational careers any number of times over the course of several years, often enrolling in multiple institutions of varying types and in different educational jurisdictions. Students also accumulate college credits and other learning credentials through a variety of other means, including accelerated learning while in high school (e.g., Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate), distance education, community education programs, workplace training, military service, and certification programs. Organizations such as the American Council on Education and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning have extensive track records of helping students gain college credit for military training and work experience, while a growing number of institutions are offering competency-based degrees that are centered not on credits earned but on the learning students are able to demonstrate.






Students often experience credit loss when courses taken at one institution are not accepted by a receiving or home institution for various reasons. But increasing student mobility and the diversification of learning experiences that students obtain through credit-bearing and other means make the concept of a home or residential institution increasingly meaningless. The problem is exacerbated when students transfer multiple times, resulting in an individual accumulating many more credits than are necessary for a typical undergraduate degree. Given the large percentage of students who earn credits from multiple institutions during the course of their college careers, the issue of transfer and mobility of academic credentials has received increasing attention from state legislators and federal policymakers. Seemingly almost everyone has a personal story, or can relate the experience of family members or friends whose credits did not transfer for one reason or another. In many cases credits are accepted for transfer but are rendered meaningless when they do not apply to general education or academic program requirements.

The Role of Institutions and States

Colleges and universities attempt to smooth the process of transfer and articulation through a variety of means, the most prominent of which is the crafting of articulation agreements between and among individual institutions, or within institutional systems. States attempt to ease the process through the development of statewide articulation agreements, common course number systems, and online, student-friendly transfer portals, which identify course articulation and transfer opportunities between institutions and sometimes link to advising or ombudsperson services for users. Some of these systems incorporate degree audit elements that help users to identify how far their accumulated academic record will get them toward a degree at different institutions. As an example of statewide efforts to promote articulation and degree attainment, the Education Commission of the States reports that at least 36 states guarantee that an associate degree earned at a public in-state institution will transfer to any other public institution in the state, while at least 35 states guarantee the transferability of a general education core.

However, even the best systems focus nearly exclusively on courses taken and transfers attempted among institutions within a given state, and a number of these systems are limited to public institutions. It is much less often that systems consider courses taken at institutions in other states. Additionally, most of the systems in place are oriented to primarily serve 18- to 22-year-old students who are looking to transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, or other individuals who have the ability, propensity, or luxury of planning an academic course of action. Students with messy academic records are not accommodated well in these systems, which is a critical shortcoming given the volume of individuals who enroll in multiple institutions of varying types in different states at different times in their lives. The unique needs of adult students—in particular those individuals whose college attendance record spans many years and multiple institutions—are too often inadequately accommodated within state articulation, transfer, and degree completion frameworks. This includes military veterans, whose educational histories often include courses taken from several different institutions during and between deployments.



Other related initiatives address the mobility problem in part but are either too small in scale or too encumbered by institutional variables to be effective. Several colleges and universities encourage their students to use e-portfolios to document more thoroughly the extent of their learning. Several institutions conduct assessments of prior learning to help students translate work and other life experiences into college credit. However, in almost every case these processes involve a relationship between a student and a single institution. The credits that are earned through these experiences often do not transfer—or do not apply toward degree requirements—when students move from one institution to another.

A MULTI-STATE APPROACH

The problem of credit loss and impediments to credit mobility is a driving concern of members of the Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit (MCMC), which is a coalition of volunteers from state higher education agencies, university systems, college campuses, and other organizations whose aim is to advance higher education opportunity, college completion, and workforce participation for military service members, veterans, and their families. What began in 2012 as a three-state effort to share best practices and other resources to support veterans has grown to a 13-state coalition funded by Lumina Foundation with operational and administrative support from the Midwestern Higher Education Compact. Funding was obtained from Lumina in late 2014 in support of a three-year effort to:

- Maximize ways for service members to transition to college
- Create models for consistent, transparent, and effective awarding of credit for military training and experience that can be scaled regionally and nationally
- Establish strong partnerships with institutions and organizations for the purpose of promoting their shared interest in service member success
- Generate a system for documenting and tracking the academic progression of military service members at the state level

The project aims to assist military service members, including active duty personnel, veterans, and members of the National Guard and reserves, as well as members of their immediate families. The total potential population to be served in the 13 project states is at least 217,000 people, based on U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs data on the use of military education benefits by veterans and dependents in 2013. This number is certain to grow with the continued drawdown of troops from overseas deployments over the next several years.

Participants in the MCMC come primarily from the member states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The MCMC aims to broaden its potential impact through relationships with other regional compacts and to entities with national footprints, including federal agencies, advocacy groups, and other nonprofit organizations. Collaborative participants are organized into four work groups: 1) Articulation of Academic

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Credit; 2) Licensure and Certification; 3) Communications and Outreach; and 4) Data, Technology, and Systems. Over the course of the initiative, each work group will engage in discovery—including needs assessment, policy scans, and landscape analysis—to be followed by a series of activities designed to advance the goals of the project in alignment with metrics established for success. Work groups include representation from each of the 13 states in the MCMC; representatives are responsible for reaching out to relevant individuals and organizations in their respective states to ensure scale and spread of impact across the region.

A number of cross-cutting strategies are being employed to achieve the objectives of the MCMC, including collaboration and partnership with key stakeholders (both in the government and non-government sectors), policy analysis, in-state and cross-state convenings, strategic use of technology, and leveraging existing initiatives from state agencies, associations, and other nonprofit organizations to maximize their impact on service members' postsecondary success. For example, MCMC participants will identify legislative, higher education, and other agency policies and practices in the states that can be revised or better aligned to increase the participation, success, and attainment of credentials and degrees for service members. To advance federal policy for increased attainment, participants will build on existing relationships with the U.S. Department of Defense to improve bridge programs that lead to licensing and credentialing for service members.

The MCMC will also partner with national associations of licensing boards and professional accrediting agencies, as well as state licensing agencies, to improve degree attainment and credentialing through selective attention to policies and practices that can benefit service members. To improve education transitions and connections to the workforce, the MCMC initiative will seek mechanisms to enable service members to apply military training and experience to accelerate completion of degrees, certificates, and licenses that will advance their success in the civilian world.

The MCMC aims to effect change on multiple levels with several measurable outcomes, including establishment of mechanisms in individual states to track the persistence and graduation rate of service members; meaningful increases in the number of campuses that have identified course equivalencies for military training and experience; meaningful increases in the number and proportion of service members who earn postsecondary credentials; demonstrable progress with state licensing boards that accelerate progress of service members toward earning a licensure or certificate in a given field or profession; and substantive improvement in the time it takes for a service member to obtain meaningful, remunerative employment upon discharge from active duty military service.

As an illustration, the Licensure and Certification work group aims to identify professional or occupational areas in which service members can translate their military training and experience either directly into a license or third-party industry certification, or indirectly by earning credit that will accelerate completion of a one-year or longer certificate or degree program that will lead to a license or industry certification. The group intends to work with licensing boards and industry associations to realize



pathways in the new professional or occupational areas identified, and work with institutions on identifying what curricular gaps remain in these pathways and how these gaps might be bridged. The group might also work with national associations of state licensing boards in the targeted professions to remove barriers and to stimulate discussion at the national level, in an effort to provide a supportive environment for MCMC state licensing boards to make needed changes.

SUMMARY

While the exact costs are unknown, the unnecessary repeating of coursework and the failure to earn a degree as a result of obstacles to meaningful course transfer undoubtedly cost students, families, governments, and taxpayers millions—if not billions—of dollars annually. A comprehensive effort is needed to both improve higher education productivity and to bring institutional and system efforts into greater alignment with students' needs. Changes in student demographics, attendance and mobility patterns, and career pathways—together with rapid labor market and technological change—call for innovation in policy and practice to help students get the education and credentials they need while reducing the amount of time and overall cost involved in the process.

RESOURCES

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