

straighterline<sup>sm</sup>



# Students' Lived Experiences in Transferring Credits

How Do Students Perceive the Higher Ed  
Transfer Process and Could Implementing  
Transfer Friendliness Increase Enrollment?

NOVEMBER 2022

# Methodology



## **SURVEY GOAL**

To better understand students' lived experiences and perceptions around transferring.



## **DATA SET**

Target age range was from 18-50 years old. 3,994 respondents participated in the study of which 943 met all study qualifications and completed the entire survey. Qualified respondents had some college experience, but no degree, and had previously disengaged from higher education and tried transferring from one college or university to another.



## **MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS**

Researchers looked at respondents' decision factors and motivations, perceptions and attitudes, which yielded a number of insights. The study population was further segmented into four personas to highlight the differences in transfer experiences among the survey respondents.

## **CRITICAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Co-Lead Principal Investigators**

- Dr. Amy Smith, Chief Learning Officer, StraighterLine
- Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer and Director of the Center for Research and Strategy, University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA)

# Key Findings

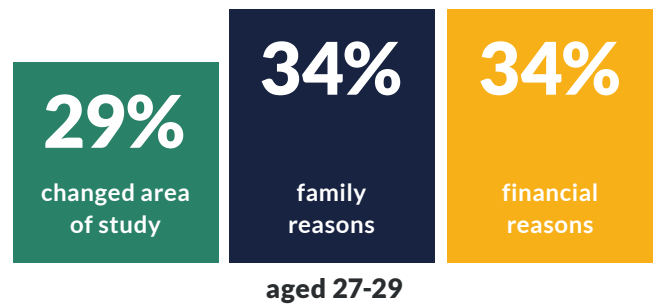
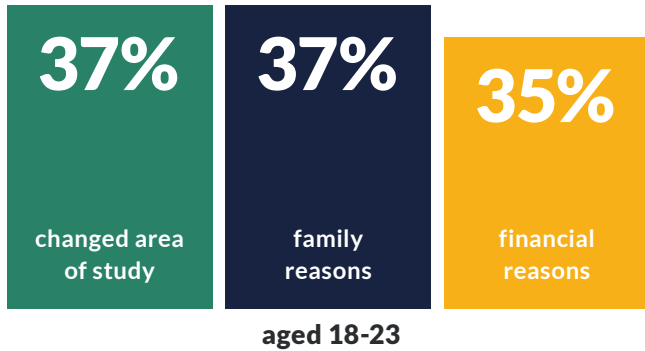
## WHAT ARE STUDENTS' MAIN MOTIVATIONS FOR TRANSFERRING?



## Age Group Key Differences

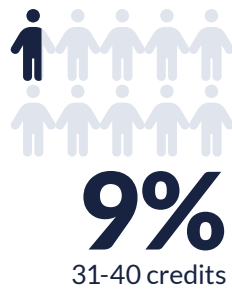
Among all age groups, financial reasons was the most common motivation for transferring, except for respondents aged 18-23 who were most likely to cite:

For respondents aged 27-29, family reasons carried equal weight to financial reasons:



## HOW MANY CREDITS DO STUDENTS TRY TO TRANSFER VS. WHAT IS ACCEPTED?

### Credits Attempted to Transfer



### Percentage of Transfer Credits Accepted



**DO STUDENTS SHOP AROUND AND EXPLORE MULTIPLE SCHOOLS TO DETERMINE WHICH INSTITUTIONS WILL ACCEPT THEIR CREDITS?**

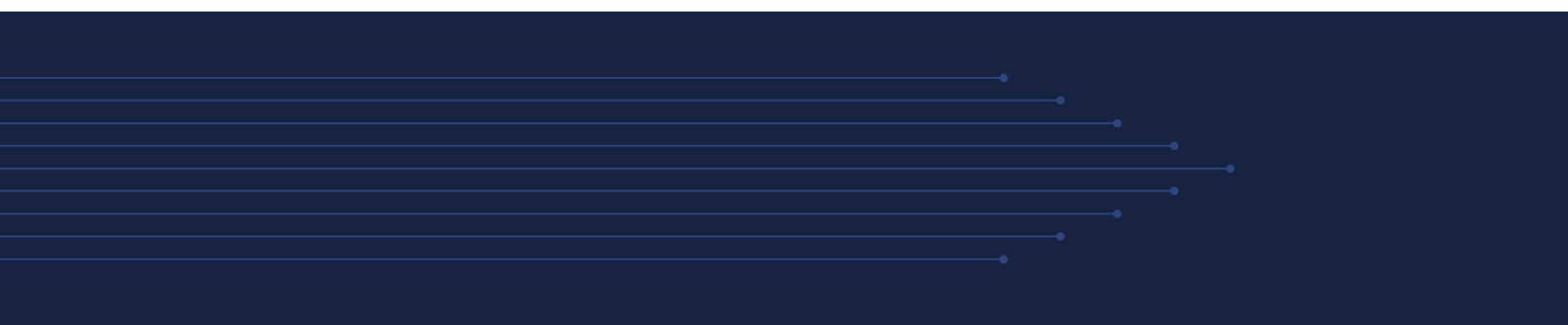
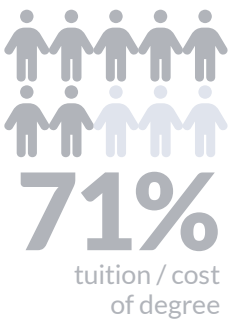


**Age Group Key Differences**

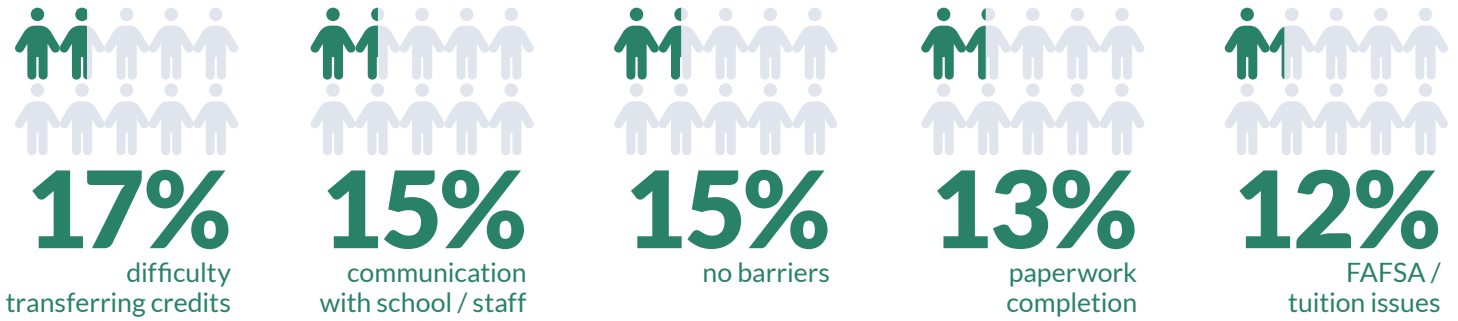
*Younger age groups are more likely to shop around for institutions that would accept their credits:*



**WHAT ARE STUDENTS' MAIN DECISION-MAKING FACTORS FOR TRANSFERRING?**



## WHAT ARE STUDENTS' BIGGEST BARRIERS DURING THE TRANSFER PROCESS?



### Age Group Key Differences

The youngest age group was most likely to cite communication with school/staff while the oldest age group was most likely to say they did not experience any barriers:



## WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO STUDENTS HAVE TO IMPROVE THE TRANSFER PROCESS?



# Implications for Higher Education Institutions

*As universities and colleges work with students to achieve their educational goals, policies need to be evaluated to better implement transfer friendliness.*

## **TRANSFER STUDENTS WANT A VOICE**

The biggest barrier or challenge students encountered during the transfer process was difficulty transferring credits. Transfer friendly practices at institutions could meet the needs of students who need to transfer credits in order to successfully complete their educational journey. There are now more than 39 million Americans who have some college, no credential, 3.1 million more than in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities for institutions to embrace these students are there but perhaps the sense of urgency to change the transfer support structure in higher education is not.

## **SENSE OF URGENCY NEEDED AMONG INSTITUTIONS**

Time is of the essence to consider this population of students who have some college credit to transfer. With the forecasted decrease in the traditional age college student population, attracting and retaining learners with some college credit will be critical to the long-term viability of many higher education institutions. To attract learners, institutions must act swiftly to address the many hurdles associated with the transfer process identified in this study.

## **CLEAR WHAT STUDENTS WANT**

Because the traditional age student population is declining, universities and colleges recognize that in order to boost enrollment they need to recruit students who have left without a degree. Of the students surveyed, 58% were between 30 and 45 years old and most had some college but no degree. This study finds that adult students want ease of transfer, improved communication, and a clear path to degree completion. These findings are a great place to start for institutions who are serious about meeting the needs of adult learners. Becoming a transfer-friendly institution starts by recognizing you may have some self-inflicted wounds.

## **REDUCE BARRIERS**

Four University of California system campuses are taking action by targeting state residents who left college without attaining a degree.<sup>2</sup> Kevin Vaughn, the university extension dean for UC Riverside said, "More and more we've seen over the last decade that the landscape of higher education is changing in significant ways. Universities that meet this head-on, I think, are going to be successful in the future." The University of California Degree Completion Program seeks to bring back former UC students and California residents who left college without getting a degree. In California alone, 6.4 million adults have stopped out according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data.

## INCREASE ENROLLMENT

Opportunity awaits institutions that take the transfer credits challenge seriously. Approximately three-quarters (76%) of individuals who transfer from one college or university to another do so only once. From an institutional perspective, this means there is a one-time opportunity to attract this potential learner as many will not change institutions again. While there are many reasons a student may transfer, some of which are out of the institution's control (moving locations, finding a better program fit) the most common reason is financial. Listing the cost of tuition on institution websites has long been discouraged, requiring potential students to navigate a series of links to find what are often less than straightforward answers. While this thinking is beginning to change, particularly among mega universities and those with robust online operations, many institutions still conceal their cost, which is in direct contrast to other products or services available for purchase.

## TODAY'S LEARNER DEMANDS MORE

The modern learner is savvy and will explore all of their options, shopping for their next institution as they would for any goods and services. Half of survey respondents explored multiple institutions to see which institutions would accept their credits and the percentage was even higher – nearly 60% – among younger age groups. Reluctance to display tuition cost, which 71% cited as the most important factor when making the decision to transfer, may lead to an institution being left off a transfer student's potential destination list. Communicating tuition facilitates transparency between the institution and the potential student. For institutions with higher price points, displaying tuition can also include value statements that illustrate why the cost is warranted, while those with lower price points can emphasize their comparative affordability. The true “cost” of transferring goes beyond just finances: it also includes the complexity of process, time, credits, and effort.

Students also want consideration for prior learning and professional certifications. The majority of survey respondents are extremely or very interested in the application of prior learning and certifications to degree requirements. Degree programs with embedded certifications could encourage transfer students to complete their educational journey and improve their employability.

The current transfer process for many institutions is often complex and cumbersome, and student expectations for responsiveness are increasing. Only 55% of survey respondents heard back from their transfer inquiries within a week, but 84% want to hear back within a week in an ideal world. While some institutions have established better systems and allocated more resources to transfer students, this is far from the norm. When asked how institutions could improve the transfer process, 20% of respondents said the institution could have better communication and transparency. This dovetails with the fact that the second most common challenge for students during the transfer process was communication with the institution or its staff (15%).

## NEXT STEPS

A recent study of community college transfer students showed that while 78% on entering had said transferring to a four-year college or university was their ultimate goal, 52% did not know transfer support services were available.<sup>3</sup> Colleges and universities need to devote more resources to facilitating student transfer support services and increase awareness of those services to attract transfer students and other adult learners. Many of the major barriers experienced by survey respondents are under the control of higher education institutions. The results of this research underscore the need for institutions to update their policies and procedures to improve the transfer experience for students and pursue the growing market of learners with some college, but no credential. The very viability of some institutions could depend on it.


<sup>1</sup> <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/more-than-39-million-americans-have-some-college-no-credential-according-to-new-research/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/23/uc-program-seeks-re-enroll-adults-who-stopped-out>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/tackling-transfer/what-community-college-students-tell-us-about-transfer>

## ABOUT UPCEA

UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. For more than 100 years, UPCEA has served most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. Founded in 1915, the association serves its members with innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA also builds greater awareness of the vital link between contemporary learners and public policy issues.

 [upcea.edu](https://upcea.edu)

## ABOUT STRAIGHTERLINE

StraighterLine is the leading provider of high-quality, affordable, online courses that help learners earn college credit and meet their professional goals. Each year, 150,000 learners take one of StraighterLine's 215 courses to upskill into new careers or earn credit from over 2,000 colleges and universities worldwide. StraighterLine works with institutions and corporate partners to provide their students and employees with flexible education options that allow them to work and learn at their own pace.

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