

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Supporting Transfer Student Success

Partner The Ford Family Foundation

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Strengthening the community college-to-university transfer pathway

Transferring from a community college to a four-year college or university is an affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree. But for many students, it's a difficult path to navigate. Although most students who begin at community college intend to transfer, national data show that transfer rates are persistently low—and so is the percentage of transfer students who ultimately earn a bachelor's degree. In Oregon, these data points stand below the national average.

For over 30 years, The Ford Family Foundation has supported Oregon students in achieving their dream of a college education. Recognizing the opportunities and the challenges related to transfer, The Foundation wanted more evidence on the landscape in Oregon. In 2019, The Foundation commissioned Education Northwest for a collaborative research study to better understand Oregon's transfer landscape and highlight policies and practices that could contribute to stronger transfer outcomes for Oregonians.

A case study approach to a complex issue

The first phase of the study used state data to identify Oregon institutions that had better-than-expected outcomes for transfer students, overall and for specific populations such as students from rural communities. In the second phase, Education Northwest used a case study approach to dive deeper into transfer student experiences at six institutions: three community colleges (Linn-Benton Community College, Rogue Community College, and Southwestern Oregon Community College) and three universities (Oregon State University, University of Oregon, and Western Oregon University). This form of qualitative research allows for in-depth study of a complex issue from a variety of perspectives.

To develop the case studies, we conducted document analysis of each institution's transfer resources. We also spoke directly with members of each campus community, conducting interviews with staff members (administrators, advisors, financial aid staff, and faculty) and focus groups with transfer students. Our facilitators guided students to reflect on their experiences with transfer, what helped them prepare to transfer and adjust after transferring, and opportunities for additional support.

We [released our findings in a 2019 report](#) that described the features of a strong transfer culture, elements of clear transfer pathways, and transfer-specific student supports. Based on the findings, we also recommended ways to improve support for transfer students statewide. Our team then collaborated with The Foundation to hold several statewide in-person and virtual convenings with community college and university practitioners focused on transfer. These convenings helped prioritize the report recommendations and raise additional needs to help strengthen transfer outcomes.

Years later, The Ford Family Foundation wanted to understand what in the landscape had changed. Our researchers returned to the same six institutions to conduct interviews and focus groups. We developed an [updated 2025 report](#) with a framework for understanding the contextual factors and features of a strong transfer culture that contribute to bachelor degree attainment among community college students. We also investigated what progress was made on initiatives aimed at improving transfer outcomes. Our research highlighted the impacts of the pandemic, which had exacerbated the heightened challenges for postsecondary institutions statewide. We concluded that while promising practices had continued at the institutional level, little progress had been made toward the system-level recommendations from 2019, even though they remained relevant. Although Oregon had enacted several state policies intended to create clear transfer pathways for students, the efforts had not yielded the hoped-for results.

Using data to convene and call to action

After releasing the 2025 report, we worked with The Ford Family Foundation to host another convening to bring transfer professionals from across the state together for reflection and action. Over 56 higher education professionals attended the event to assess progress toward the recommendations from 2019, review the updated findings, and define key needs and next steps to support transfer students.

Leveraging our findings, The Ford Family Foundation has called for better system- and state-level coordination. Our 2025 recommendations built on those from 2019, pointing to areas of persistent need over the past five years. Based on the evidence, The Foundation and other invested partners across Oregon can advocate for investing in credit transfer and degree audit technology tools, investing in supports and resources for transfer students, developing and maintaining transfer agreements and partnerships, and leveraging data for continuous improvement.