# LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS
## Pathways Project Implementation Memorandum

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**RE:**       Removing Community College Website Barriers that Prevent Students from Accessing Employment and Transfer Information
**DATE:**   June 13, 2022

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

The journey and pursuit of the American dream leads many individuals down a path of higher education endeavors, thus granting access to higher wage careers and middle-class status with upward mobility. For many students, this path brings them to community colleges with the intent of pursuing a certificate or degree that equips them for the workforce or allows them a seamless transfer into a four-year institution. Of those community college students, a large portion are often first generation, non-traditional and minority students who may have had minimal levels of exposure and access to higher education. Therefore, it is critical for community colleges to provide clear, well defined, and easily accessible information on their websites, regarding employment outcomes and four-year transfer options or articulations. However, it can be challenging for students to easily access accurate information on community college websites, and it is imperative that the content therein be viewed through the lens of the student's perspective.

To address these challenges, this memo will recommend a scorable rubric for ease of access and usefulness of website content for both employment and transfer opportunities. This tool will allow new students to assess their institution's website within the first week of their Introduction to College/First Year Experience course, thus offering the institution a student perspective wellness check of content. Additionally, we will also offer a checklist with a review and refresh rhythm to ensure optimal content is updated at recurring intervals. By ensuring that this critical information is both easily accessible and useful from the student's perspective, we can positively influence the early intervention of career and transfer planning.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWED

According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and The Aspen Institute (2016), community colleges play a vital role for individuals and communities as a vehicle for upward mobility. Many students who enter community college intend to transfer to a four-year institution to obtain a bachelor's degree. Bachelor's degrees serve to further improve one's socioeconomic status. Additionally, the ability for students to maneuver through the transfer process is critical. Community colleges must be prepared to share relevant information through easy-to-understand methods for students to be successful.

The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Four- and Two-Year Colleges (2016) suggest three strategies for student success – 1) Make Transfer Student Success a Priority, 2) Create Clear Programmatic Pathways with Aligned High-Quality Instruction, and 3) Provide Tailored Transfer Student Advising. Each of these strategies requires effective communication to be successful. The Transfer Playbook also includes a How to Get Started Checklist. One of the suggested steps is to review the community college's website as well as those of four-year transfer partners to assess the accessibility and accuracy of information for prospective transfer students on program options, requirements, and admission procedures. When we examined upward mobility for students, it was evident of not only the importance of effectively communicating transfer information, but also workforce outcomes information. Students must understand labor market information to make informed decisions about their education. For potential students, a community college's website is the foremost location to share this information.

The CCRC (2016) also published a paper on the Ease of Access and Usefulness of Transfer Information on Community College Websites in Texas. The research focused on transfer information offered to students to assist with informed decisions regarding their educational paths. Furthermore, the study reviewed transfer information available on community college websites in Texas. The researchers suggested that information should be easy to locate and interpret, well organized, and complete. Through interviews with college personnel and students, they identified gaps, information that was missing, and complicated systems and processes that needed improvement. The word swirl was used to describe the moving of students laterally and vertically between institutions. They also identified equity gaps.

Despite demonstrating higher educational aspirations, African American and Hispanic community college students are less likely than their White peers to earn a bachelor's degree (Hoachlander et al., 2003; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Navigating the transfer process can be challenging for some students, but those who lack social capital to assist with this navigation are more likely to not be successful. The researchers also identified several best practices that can be used by community colleges to improve the transfer process, one being the accuracy of information on college websites. While reviewing this information we realized that in Ohio College Credit Plus also complicates the transfer process. Many high school students are accumulating college credit, sometimes from multiple institutions and without clear information on how to apply these college credits to their educational goals. As part

of their data collection, the CCRC (2018) developed a rubric to evaluate college websites in Texas for ease of access and usefulness of information. We used this rubric to evaluate each of our own institution's websites and we selected one other Ohio community college's website to evaluate. We discovered there is little consistency across Ohio community colleges in the information provided, where it is located, and who is responsible for assisting students navigate this information. Some colleges have a wealth of information while others have very little.  We can only imagine how frustrating this must be for students, especially those from underserved and underrepresented populations who attempt to make decisions regarding their education. Through our discussions about information found on college websites, we realized that workforce information and labor market information was also very inconsistent across Ohio community college websites.

The National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students published a Transfer Website Strategy Guide in 2020.  This guide stresses the importance of transfer information being easy to find and accurate on institution websites.  The publication also discussed the importance of workforce and labor market information also needing to be included in this information.  When reviewing the guide, it was enlightening for us to discover that potential students are not the only individuals accessing college websites to access transfer information.  Parents, families, faculty, staff, secondary school counselors, academic advisors, and college partners all rely on community college websites for information.

Our review of various literature and team discussions confirmed the importance of college websites in assisting many stakeholders to make informed decisions about workforce and transfer was crucial to the success of our students. Based on our research, it is evident that several Ohio community colleges need a tool for evaluating their websites. Without a common tool for evaluation, information on community college websites will not be consistent, and institutions risk frustrating and confusing individuals seeking information.

## DATA EXAMINED

According to the CCRC (2018), 11% of community college students rely on their institution's website as their primary source of academic advising.  College websites also serve as an information source for the faculty and staff as well as other university personnel. An informal assessment of ten randomly selected community college websites was conducted by our team. The purpose of the assessment was to evaluate whether an individual was listed on the website as a contact for transfer information.  Six out of 10 websites did not have an individual listed with contact information.  Availability of labor market information was also assessed.  None of the websites listed a contact specifically for labor market information. Our additional observations are listed below:

- There was a strong use of acronyms such as TAG, CTAG, OGTP, OTM, CLEP, etc. with little to no explanation.  If there was an explanation and/or definition it was written in academic language.

- There was a strong use of academic language. Words such as articulation, reverse transfer, dual enrollment, advanced placement, and lateral transfer were used on all websites. This could be problematic for first generation students and other students who have little social equity to support them through the college application process.

- Each community college website had multiple links to external sites. These external sites all had varying information and levels of navigation ease.

- Most of the websites offered "self-service" webpages for students. Many external resources were included on the webpages. Most were links to external sites such as Transferology, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census Community Survey, Career Interest Surveys, and university partners.

The information collected during our assessments was inconsistent, overwhelming, and confusing. When we attempted to navigate partner university websites for additional information regarding transfer, the confusion only increased. As a major source of information for current and prospective students, faculty, and staff itis evident that community college websites should be organized, consistent, relevant and easy to navigate to avoid frustration.

## PROPOSED CHANGES/REFORMS TO BE ADOPTED

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to serve the communities in which they operate, as a lynchpin between local economy driving employers and community members seeking educational access to obtain higher wage career positions. This role is paramount and must not be taken lightly, as we systematically serve as conduit to economic advancement opportunities within the communities we serve. Considering this weighty responsibility, it is our duty to serve our students with excellence, ensuring that opportunities for career advancement and continuing education are easily accessible to all. Historically, community colleges offered educational access to underrepresented or disenfranchised student segments including veterans, women, low income, and minority students of which comprise a large portion of two-year college enrollment today (ACPAAdmin, 2015). Therefore, these students we serve often may be disadvantaged when navigating educational and career outcomes, while simultaneously receiving minimal direction and support to explore transfer opportunities, thus lacking equitable support and services than many other students.

It is with this understanding that we seek to remove institutional barriers around career and transfer information that can be found on community college websites. When considering that nearly 80 % of new community college students desire to pursue a bachelor's degree, with lower than one third doing so within six years and a fragmented 13% receiving that degree, it is evident that challenges exist around transfer success rates (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2017). It has been identified that the role online information plays within the student journey is weighty and that it continues to be a progressively fundamental element in helping students

route their college travels (GAO, 2017; Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Margolin, Miller, & Rosenbaum, 2013).

To remove barriers and open access, we propose a time of self-reflection for institutions to not only examine what may be communicated but also more importantly how it is interpreted and understood by those that we serve. When considering our online resources, they must be easy to find and understand with clear and concise messaging. They must be free of higher education vernacular and academia nomenclature that are familiar and easily understood by practitioners, but rather use common terms, ever self-reflecting on "what content do we understand that a student may not" (Kittrell et al., 2020). We must consider how language not only influences the context of the user, but also imagery which may affect various student populations especially those that are marginalized. It is recommended to utilize equity-`minded practices when designing website content in these areas, of which the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education offers great resources to be leveraged. They clearly identify a primary goal of achieving equity outcomes is access to college-level courses and four-year transfer opportunities from community colleges (Center for Urban Education, 2020).

The National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (2020) created a website strategy guide with tools that we recommend being utilized. Specifically, they have categorized transfer website tools and topics within two categories based on significance. As shown in Figure 1, these two categories are essential content that is critically important and feature content (Figure 2) that is not mandatory, yet significantly augments the student's website experience (Kittrell et al., 2020). The researchers also illustrated the necessity to monitor and update content, along with the time intervals by which these edits should occur. Though this tool helps to ensure frequent health checks with valuable content, it assumes that the evaluation be done by institutional staff and does not address career outcome content.

Therefore, we also recommend a using the scoreable rubric developed by Schudde et., al. (2018) to evaluate ease of access and usefulness of website content. We have modified the rubric into two separate rubrics, addressing both ease of access and usefulness for employment outcomes (Figure 3) and transfer information (Figure 4). We also modified the ease of access scoring, by quantifying the number of clicks it takes to locate the content, with an optimal range of two to three clicks or less. Being cognitive of the fact that we can sometimes as practitioners carry bias in our communication of information, our intent is to capture the usefulness and effectiveness of website content from the perspective of the student. Therefore, our recommendation is for these rubrics be used to score each institution's website, by engaging with new students each semester. The greatest area of opportunity would be to have them completed during their first week's assignment in an Intro to College/First Year Experience class.

This level of fresh and prompt assessment early in the student's journey, will help capture valuable data that can influence strategic website content adjustments. When used in tandem with the essential and featured content tools provided, institutions will be able to establish a scheduled and intentional frequency of website

review and updates. In addition, they will be able to capture practitioner and student perspective data, thus allowing for a richer integration of understanding of student needs and institutional hurdles, ultimately culminating to improvements of content and access to critical information that brings meaning and value to the student educational journey and success.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Ohio's 23 community colleges have varying student support services and there is not a one size that fits all model used statewide. Subsequently, each institution creates their own policies and procedures related to how they might best support students. In many cases, institutions lack funding and skilled staff that could make timely and accurate website content changes. Additionally, staff members may have a perception that students can easily access and use transfer and employment information on the institution's website, yet student compared to what current and potential experience. Furthermore, students may not be directed to the website by their advisor or another staff member. Finally, time and human capital could be major hurdles when institutions simply do not have the time and staff to manage content on their websites.

### Funding

Community colleges in Ohio receive state funding from three primary components - course completions (50% of the distribution), student progress metrics or success points (25% of the distribution) and completion milestones such degrees, long-term certificates, transfer to four-year institution (25% of the distribution). Hiring staff to update transfer and employment information on the college's website would not be the best use of state funds. However, since community college websites contain pertinent information students need for their time at the institution and beyond, it is important for institutions to ensure the information is accurate. Thus, institutions may want to consider training student advisors and other personnel on reviewing and making content changes at regular intervals.

### Staff and Student Perceptions

Another implementation challenge institutions may face is students unable to locate important information on the website. Staff may feel relevant information is easily accessible online for students; however, students may experience difficulties locating it. As stated previously, for potential and current students, the college's website is usually the first stop when they need information about the college such as their program of study, financial aid, class schedule, employment and transfer information. It may be helpful for institutions to hire potential and current students to be secret shoppers on their websites. As noted in the proposed changes and reform section, a rubric may benefit institutions for this task.

### Utilizing Online Resources

As aforementioned, lots of valuable information is housed on institution websites and in most cases, that is where some students usually begin before they ask their advisors and other staff members questions about commonly known information. Conversely, some students look to their advisors for answers, and this would be a good opportunity for them to encourage students to use the website to access the most current employment and transfer information. Although transfer and employment information usually does not change often, it is important for students to know where to find it.

## Time & Human Resources

Investing time and human resources to manage initiatives associated with ensuring websites are updated are two major challenges institutions may encounter. Depending on the size of the institution, this may be a significant undertaking as this individual would be responsible for ensuring transfer and employment information is listed on the website for every degree program. Larger institutions could delegate this task to advisors or other student support personnel and smaller ones could assign this task to departmental administrative assistants.

## CONCLUSION

In this memo we identified the challenges that many students face when exploring career outcomes and transfer opportunities upon leaving the two-year institution. We examined relevant literature and data that validated these challenges, but more importantly we identified potential solutions. In doing so, we have provided practical solutions for Ohio community colleges to utilize and implement as a means to help improve student access and support in these areas. Though we recognize that implementation challenges exist, it is our hope that the proposed reforms will be met with open adoption and serve as tools in the toolbox of all practitioners across the state of Ohio and possibly the United States.

## References

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**Supplemental Materials**

Figure 1
Figure 2
Figure 3
Figure 4

**Figure 1**

## Essential Content

| CONTENT TYPE | NOTES | REVIEW & REFRESH RHYTHM |
|---|---|---|
| **Transfer Planning Guides and Checklists** | A planning guide that outlines the specific steps of the transfer process is one of the top resources that prospective transfer students are seeking. Providing step-by-step instructions and easy-to-use checklists can help students understand and prepare for your institution's requirements. | Real-time |
| **Degree/Program Maps** | These maps show the course curriculum for specific majors and often illustrate the preferred pathway between partnering institutions. Making them clear and easy to find will help students anticipate what courses they need to take and in what order. | Real-time |
| **Academic Advising** | Because transferring credits and choosing a major is high stakes for transfer students, advising information must be clear and readily available. Advisors should be accessible in real-time or by appointment to help students troubleshoot credit issues and plan for a course load that allows them to graduate in a timely manner. | Annual |
| **Course Equivalency Database** | This tool allows transfer students to explore which credits from their previous institution will transfer, based on courses that have transferred in the past. This information is strongest when paired with degree/program maps that show students exactly which courses "count" toward a degree and which are considered "extra" electives. | Real-time |
| **Articulation Agreements** | These formal agreements between colleges/universities document guaranteed acceptance parameters based on specific course requirements, such as 2+2 or 2+3 programs. These documents are important to share but generally aren't student-friendly and should not be used in place of transfer planning guides or degree/program maps. | Real-time |
| **Deadlines and Guidelines** | Readability and plain language are key to helping students plan for (and understand the implications of missing) key admissions and financial aid deadlines. Use checklists to help applicants organize their information and ensure they have all necessary documents. | Annual |
| **Transition Support Resources** | Each campus has a unique learning curve, so showcase resources that make it easy for transfer students to ask for help. In addition to academic, health and wellness, and money management services, be sure to highlight the campus food pantry and clothing closet, childcare resources, nursing stations, and family or gender-neutral bathrooms, if available. Some students may also need guidance on where to park, how to use the bus system, and where to apply for campus jobs. | Annual |
| **Transfer Resource Center** (if applicable) | For institutions that have spaces on campus for transfer students to socialize, meet advisors, or get help, include location information, what the hours are, and an overview of services and amenities available. You can also point out adult learner, veteran, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ spaces if you have them. | Annual |

**Figure 2**

## Feature Content

| CONTENT TYPE | NOTES | REVIEW & REFRESH RHYTHM |
|---|---|---|
| **Student and Alumni Success Stories** | Success stories help ease prospective transfers' fears and anxieties because they can see that students in a similar set of circumstances have had a positive, valuable experience. Stories also give a human touch to your site and can help differentiate you from other institutions a prospective transfer may consider. Tell stories through video, photos paired with quotes, or short written stories, depending on your available assets. | Annual |
| **Search Engine Optimized (SEO) Marketing-Oriented Content** | This sort of content includes blogs, articles, and feature stories developed specifically for transfer students who may not be familiar with a specific institution but who may be searching for topics like "benefits of transferring" or "community college vs. university." By creating well-written, clear, and valuable content around key topics, institutions can simultaneously educate prospective students and build a preference in audiences' minds. In addition, use SEO keywords to ensure that your most welcoming and helpful transfer planning webpage is the top result for those searching for your institution's transfer information. | Monthly |
| **University-Sponsored, Transfer-Specific Events** | This is a key piece of information to keep transfer students engaged and moving through the admissions and enrollment process. Showcasing transfer-specific events on your site, such as transfer admission days or transfer orientation, establishes your site as an authoritative source for information and shows prospective students that you understand the unique needs and challenges transfer students face. | Quarterly |
| **Career Exploration Resources** | Aptitude tests, skills assessments, and employment outcomes can help incoming transfer students select a major that aligns with their career goals. Pairing this information with a link to the career center can help students plan to maximize resources such as job boards, job fairs, internship placement, resume reviews, and mock interviews. | Annual |
| **Interactive Tools:**<br>- Tuition Calculators<br>- Budget Planning Tools<br>- Time Management Tools | Interactive tools like the time donut on stemtransfer.org are highly popular with prospective students who need help planning their time and budget in a new context. | Annual |

**Figure 3**

Measuring Ease of Access and Usefulness of Online Employment Information on Community College Websites Rubric

| Score | Ease of Access | Usefulness |
|-------|----------------|------------|
| 1 | None: Seemingly no information to find | No information regarding employment and career outcomes |
| 2 | Low: where the information is, not intuitively located and required using search tool and various search terms to locate (8 or more clicks to locate) | Low: information present, but full of broken links that make it impossible to find adequate and accurate information |
| 3 | Somewhat accessible: The information was far removed from the homepage, but could be found by gradually clicking through several pages, with some backtracking (6-7 clicks to locate) | Somewhat useful: Employment and career outcome Information appears to be accurate, but it requires going through disorganized system, backtracking, and facing some broken links to eventually find accurate information |
| 4 | Moderate: Intuitively located, but vague labels on website menus, so finding transfer information required some backtracking to find (3-5 clicks to locate) | Moderate: Policies or processes necessary to guide student through employment opportunities and career outcomes present, but could be more detailed; flow of information move from simple to complex, but requires some backtracking to help students determine employment processes and requirements |
| 5 | High: Necessary information easily located on the first visit with minimal "clicks" from college home page, intuitively located, and labeled (2 or less clicks to locate) | High: Simple language used to define employment processes and career outcomes; succinct initial presentation followed by cohesive flow of additional details as user clicks through links to get more information; employment options (e.g., specific career positions, wages, employment partners) clearly presented |

**Figure 4**

Measuring Ease of Access and Usefulness for Online Transfer Information on Community College Websites Rubric

| Score | Ease of Access | Usefulness |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | None: Seemingly no information to find | No information regarding transfer |
| 2 | Low: where the information is, not intuitively located and required using search tool and various search terms to locate (8 or more clicks to locate) | Low: information present, but full of broken links that make it impossible to find adequate and accurate information |
| 3 | Somewhat accessible: The information was far removed from the homepage, but could be found by gradually clicking through several pages, with some backtracking (6-7 clicks to locate) | Somewhat useful: Transfer information appears to be accurate, but it requires going through a disorganized system, backtracking, and facing some broken links to eventually find accurate information |
| 4 | Moderate: Intuitively located, but vague labels on website menus, so finding transfer information required some backtracking to find (3-5 clicks to locate) | Moderate: Policies or processes necessary to guide students through transfer present, but could be more detailed; flow of information move from simple to complex, but requires some backtracking to help students determine transfer process and requirements |
| 5 | High: Necessary information easily located on the first visit with minimal "clicks" from college home page, intuitively located and labeled (2 or less clicks to locate) | High: Simple language used to define transfer process; succinct initial presentation followed by cohesive flow of additional details as user clicks through links to get more information; transfer options (e.g., transfer plans for partner institution) clearly presented |