



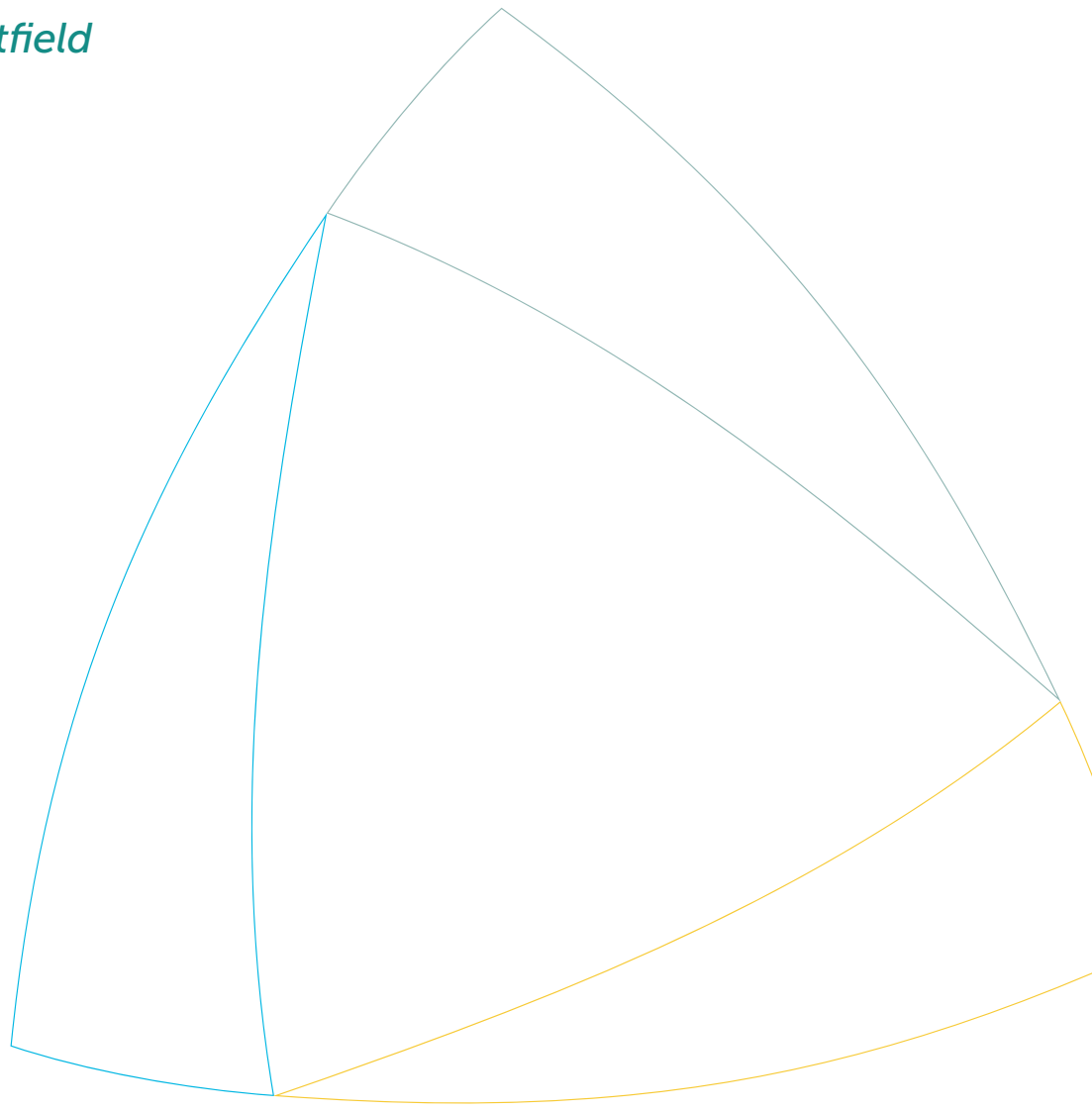
**SHEEO**

STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

# State Transfer Policy Standards Project: Centering Equity in State Transfer Reform Efforts

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The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) serves the executives of statewide governing, policy, and coordinating boards of postsecondary education and their staffs. Founded in 1954, SHEEO promotes an environment that values higher education and its role in ensuring the equitable education of all Americans, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic factors. Together with its members, SHEEO aims to achieve this vision by equipping state higher education executive officers and their staffs with the tools to effectively advance the value of higher education, promoting public policies and academic practices that enable all Americans to achieve success in the 21st century, and serving as an advocate for state higher education leadership. For more information, visit [sheeo.org](https://sheeo.org).

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## BACKGROUND

States must adopt an equity-focused approach to transfer policies to address racial equity gaps and make progress toward attainment goals in postsecondary education. State higher education agencies should assess transfer performance based on race and income and establish standards for creating equitable transfer policies. Recognizing this need, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), in partnership with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Gardner Institute), and with support from the ECMC Foundation, initiated a three-year project on state transfer policy standards. The project aimed to develop processes and standards for evaluating transfer performance by race and income and disseminate them to the larger field. The project aligns with SHEEO's commitment to equitable education and emphasizes the importance of efficient and fair transfer pathways in achieving attainment and workforce alignment objectives.

For more than a decade, states have focused on raising educational attainment rates to meet workforce demands. At least 41 states have postsecondary attainment goals, most of which were established between 2008 and 2015. Two driving forces behind these efforts have been Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) and Lumina Foundation. The CEW report [Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020](#) indicated that 65% of all U.S. jobs would require some form of postsecondary education by 2020. Lumina Foundation's goal is for 60% of Americans to have a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025.

More recently, state higher education policy leaders have recognized the need to address equity gaps in reaching attainment goals. In 2021, national educational attainment rates were 34% for Black and 28% for Hispanic populations, compared to 50% for the White population.<sup>1</sup> Inefficient transfer pathways are a significant obstacle to equitable attainment. Although a large majority of community college students intend to transfer, only about a third actually do, and of those that do transfer, fewer than half earn a bachelor's degree.<sup>2</sup> Students of color and low-income students are more likely to begin higher education at a two-year institution than White and higher-income students,<sup>3</sup> and less likely to complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated equity gaps in two-year to four-year transfer rates, emphasizing the urgency of addressing transfer performance.<sup>5</sup>

To achieve equitable transfer outcomes, transfer policies and practices need to be reimaged on a larger scale. State and system-level reforms are crucial, focusing on increasing:

- Transparency for students, including the ability to plan transfer paths across multiple institutions and glean information about likely outcomes.
- Transparency and accountability for institutions, including providing information about a range of student outcomes, and support for institutions with under-performing transfer pathways.
- The likelihood of achieving attainment and workforce goals.

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To support state and system-level improvements in transfer outcomes, SHEEO launched the State Transfer Policy Standards Project. SHEEO and the Gardner Institute worked with four states—Colorado, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington—on an intensive self-study process. These states were chosen for their diverse student populations, institutional types, and governance models. The central goal of the self-study process was to assess how well transfer systems within those states were working for students of color and low-income students. Findings from the self-study were used to develop action plans to create more efficient and equitable transfer systems within the state. To facilitate this process, SHEEO drew upon its models for working with state teams and providing technical assistance and implementation support; the Gardner Institute adapted the Foundations of Excellence Transfer process to provide valuable insights at the state level.

## ADAPTATIONS OF THE GARDNER INSTITUTE'S SELF-STUDY AND PLANNING PROCESS

The Gardner Institute developed the Foundations of Excellence Transfer processes for four-year and two-year institutions in 2009 and 2010. These processes have been used by 34 two-year and 32 four-year institutions to evaluate and improve the transfer experience. For the State Transfer Policy Standards project, the Gardner Institute developed a new version of the Foundations of Excellence specifically for evaluating and developing improvement plans for a state's transfer ecosystem. This new version includes redesigned components that incorporate state-level policies and initiatives along with institutional practices.

Key elements of the redesigned process are:

1. **Aspirational Standards:** A set of six state-level aspirational principles, called Foundational Dimensions, was created in collaboration with SHEEO, the four participating states, and other stakeholders. The six Foundational Dimensions are:

- Philosophy/Rationale.
- Learning and Curricular Pathways.
- Transfer Equity.
- Organization.
- Transfer Receptive Culture.
- Data, Accountability, and Improvement.

These dimensions, along with key performance indicators, guided the evaluation of the statewide transfer ecosystem and progress monitoring.

2. **Transfer Ecosystem Surveys:** Three surveys were developed to gather evidence from various constituents within the statewide transfer ecosystem, including state-level higher education leaders, institutional faculty, staff, and administrators, and current students. The survey findings are linked to specific Foundational Dimensions and their key performance indicators, informing the self-study evaluation.

3. **State-Level Transfer Policy Audit Framework:** The Gardner Institute created the structure for auditing state-level policies, transfer initiatives, and offices or councils. This content is included in the self-study platform and serves as evidence for the members of the self-study task force to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and consider revisions or additional policies that support system and institutional goal attainment.

4. **Data Structure and Visualizations:** A structure for collecting student-level data from state or system agencies was developed. Visualizations and tables were created to show student flows through institutions and majors, credits earned, completions, and demographic disparities. These visualizations help inform evidence-based, equity-focused decision-making for the task force. The Gardner Institute worked with the states to maximize data visualizations based on the available data.

5. **Self-Study Platform:** A secure web-based platform was developed to house all the elements of the self-study process. The platform allows states to safely upload student-level data, access and respond to performance indicators, administer surveys, and upload other evidence and reports. The platform ensures secure access for task force members.
6. **Transfer GPS Community of Practice:** The Transfer Curricular Analytics Community of Practice (TCAC) was created as a complement to the Foundations of Excellence self-study process. TCAC uses curricular analytics tools to identify and address problems in curricular pathways, facilitating discussions among partner institutions and informing state-level discussions about course and curricular issues.

## WORKING WITH STATEWIDE TRANSFER ECOSYSTEMS: LESSONS LEARNED

Several overarching lessons emerged from the self-study process and working with state task forces:

- **The structure of the state task force and its interaction with institutions is critical.** Task forces representing governing or coordinating bodies and institutional representatives from all sectors of higher education facilitate critical statewide discussions on transfer policy, practice, and outcomes. Laying the groundwork for institutional, sector, and state participation by informing administrators about the project's objectives, participation requirements (including quantitative and qualitative data collection), and potential benefits increase the efficiency of task force actions.
- **Access to comprehensive student data is crucial for an evidence-based transfer improvement process, but challenges exist in obtaining and sharing data across sectors.** Gaps in the information needed to assess equitable transfer pathways demonstrated that data collection is the first and most important discussion to be had during a statewide analysis of transfer. In two of the states, difficulties encountered collecting data for this project led to efforts to build broader agreement around data collection or to bolster data collection authority within the SHEEO agency. As states embark on analyses of the full transfer experience, they should first plan for and engage in a deliberative process to determine data parameters and collection timelines. Starting with limited (but readily available) data and gradually adding more as the self-study process progresses may be a strategic approach. Institutions should have the opportunity to analyze their own data first before it is distributed at the state level, allowing them to gain perspective and feel more comfortable with data sharing.
- **Barriers to robust discussions of equity in transfer must be addressed.** Although the project was focused on achieving equitable transfer outcomes, states struggled with focusing on the specific barriers to equity. In some cases, insufficient data on transfer disparities hindered a meaningful assessment of equitable transfer pathways. In others, identifying and addressing broader structural flaws was seen as a necessary first step before addressing the specific barriers faced by marginalized student populations. Some task force members had limited experience with equity-centered transfer discussions, as transfer work is often focused on articulation of credit. Political environments in some states made it difficult to have a straightforward discussion about equity-centered transfer, with different interpretations and definitions of equity among stakeholders. Not having a mutual understanding of equity across all stakeholders made discussing equity challenging. In the future, engaging facilitators with experience guiding meaningful discussions on equity would enable task forces to have deeper discussions on transfer equity.

- **Student perspectives are essential to understanding the full transfer experience.** States incorporated student voices through surveys and by including students in state task forces or interviews. The student-centered qualitative data provided depth and validation to task force findings, revealing enlightening discrepancies between student and administrator perceptions. These resources added nuance to insights gained through other aspects of the self-study process and will guide future efforts to improve the transfer experience for students. However, the project faced challenges in getting institutions to prioritize dissemination due to limited staff capacity. Planning ahead and collaborating closely with institutions are both important for successful integration of student perspectives. SHEEOs can play a crucial role by articulating a state-level vision for transfer, keeping equitable outcomes at the forefront of transfer policy discussions, and shifting the focus from institutions to equity and the student experience.
- If the outcomes of transfer students and the associated equity gaps are to be addressed, **policy discussions must advance beyond the transactional aspects of transfer, such as course comparability and pathways, to consider the full journey of transfer students.** State task forces identified areas where states can assist in the transfer journey, including providing professional development for institutional personnel, improving information and communication for transfer students, and addressing financial aid availability. SHEEO agencies can promote a more holistic understanding of transfer through state-sponsored professional development, creating regularly updated statewide data platforms, convening stakeholder groups to improve transfer portals, and advocating for state funding for transfer-specific scholarships and awareness campaigns.



## ROLE OF THE SHEEO AGENCY IN TRANSFER POLICY

SHEEO agencies play a crucial role in creating an equitable and student-centered transfer ecosystem. Whether a state has a centralized or decentralized transfer governance system, discussions around transfer are political exercises because sectors and individual institutions are understandably focused on their own best interests and not necessarily on the needs of transfer students. The SHEEO agency can rise above sector and institutional concerns and frame transfer conversations within the broader vision for higher education in the state. Improvements to aspects of transfer—like course comparability, transfer pathways, and transparency—are necessary, but in themselves insufficient, to provide a foundation for equitable transfer. SHEEO agencies can foster transfer policy discussions that go beyond administrative aspects and facilitate deeper conversations on equity, data, and student-centered approaches.

SHEEOs can broaden and deepen transfer discussions by:

- Setting a vision and expectations for an equitable, student-centered transfer culture in the state.
- Providing transparency around transfer outcomes by collecting and sharing disaggregated data.
- Supporting professional development for state and institutional personnel on how to discuss equity more deeply and how to recognize and combat the issues leading to inequitable transfer outcomes.
- Facilitating professional learning among advisors, faculty, and others who impact the transfer system.
- Ensuring that student perspectives and experiences are heard and integrated into cross-institutional and statewide transfer discussions.
- Supporting state-level transfer tools and information resources.

SHEEO agencies must take a prominent role in transfer policy to achieve equitable outcomes.

## MOVING AN EQUITY-CENTERED TRANSFER AGENDA FORWARD: STATE ACTION PLANS

Each of the states that participated in the learning community developed action plans to improve the transfer process, outcomes, and student experiences. These plans, developed with broad stakeholder engagement, address disparities that disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color. The state transfer action plans rely on the Gardner Institute's transfer program tools and technical assistance to analyze transfer patterns and propose improvements in sending and receiving institutions across sectors.

Through the plans, participating institutions are encouraged to redesign pedagogy, courses, and academic advising to meet the needs of transfer students. SHEEO and content experts partnered with the Gardner Institute to challenge the states to consider the extent to which transfer policies and practices contribute to inequitable outcomes for students and how to justly design and redesign transfer solutions.

Community activities SHEEO and the Gardner Institute promoted toward actionable state plans included:

- Developing disaggregated data resources addressing transfer student success.
- Collecting and analyzing data to measure the effects of existing transfer policy and practice on students of color and low-income students.
- Assessing equity implications of existing transfer policy.
- Centering the needs, insights, and voices of students.
- Incorporating transfer considerations in the state's public agenda, accountability mechanisms, or funding formula.
- Forming a faculty advisory committee to inform transfer redesign.
- Developing mechanisms to promote and measure the effectiveness of guided pathways.

This approach supports the improvement and modernization of SHEEO agencies' approaches to transfer and is applicable to other member states' contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Without deliberate and recurrent development and review of transfer policies and practices to eliminate disparities for students of color and low-income students, inefficient transfer pathways will remain a significant obstacle to equitable attainment. Relying solely on institution-by-institution progress will not benefit all students. State-level efforts are essential to advance state attainment goals and to promote improved quality of life at scale.

The ongoing debates about equity in higher education, including considerations of race in admissions, highlight the critical role of equitable transfer in promoting access, persistence, and completion. SHEEO agencies are in a position of growing importance to promote more equitable transfer and attainment by 1) leveraging their engagement with policymakers, institutions, and peer agency leaders across the state apparatus, and 2) leveraging their platforms and authorities to promote the capacity for responsive change to completion goals.

Among the strategies employed by the State Transfer Policy project, two emerged as essential. The first was the Gardner Institute's creation of six state-level aspirational principles (the Foundational Dimensions) along with key performance indicators. State task forces used these dimensions and indicators to evaluate the statewide transfer ecosystem and monitor progress toward project and state goals. This strategy fostered meaningful conversations and deepened engagement among state partners, leading to action plans for new solutions.

The second important strategy involved shifting conversations away from transactional aspects of transfer to embrace fundamental discussions about students' experiences. Centering student voices in the learning community and promoting state-level planning based on their input yielded numerous benefits. Student perspectives shed light on the importance of advisement, student supports, information sharing, and addressing the particular needs of students of color and low-income students. States in the learning community and those interested in future cohorts expressed their commitment to prioritizing student experiences.

As an organization representing higher education agencies and systems, SHEEO values the findings of the State Transfer Policy project. This includes recognizing the challenges faced by state teams and viewing them as lessons learned and opportunities for development. The diverse participation in the project, spanning different governance models, political landscapes, stakeholder engagement, staff capacity, and data access, informs SHEEO's strategy of iterative engagement to promote equitable transfer with additional state cohorts. SHEEO is committed to policy advocacy and raising awareness among its membership to advance equitable attainment for all Americans, informed by findings from the learning community.

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