

Sunday, January 30, 2005

Colleges wrestle with transferring credits  
Ohio regents' plan would help 2-year students move to 4-year schools

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Adam Waters started his college career at a two-year school, but that's not where he plans to finish.

This, he knows, could pose a problem.

"I'm a little bit afraid the credits won't transfer," said Waters, 20, a software engineering student at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College who hopes to graduate from a four-year university.

Transfer can be a big worry for the thousands of students who move from one Ohio college to another each year and don't want to be forced to repeat courses and shoulder extra costs.

It's a worry the state Board of Regents hopes to assuage with a new plan, to be finalized in April, that will allow students to shift blocks of credit within a degree major and make many college transitions virtually seamless. Under the plan, students also would be able to electronically compare their transcripts to requirements at any public college or university in Ohio.

The goal is to eliminate hassles and create some uniformity in lower-level undergraduate classes, "so that if it's taught at one school, it will be accepted at another school," said Bob Fee, senior assistant dean of the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. "Now that's a big job."

In the 2002-2003 school year, 27 percent of students who graduated from a four-year Ohio university with a bachelor's degree had transferred at least 30 hours from another institution, most from two-year colleges. In the fall, 3,417 transfer students applied to UC, Fee said, an 8 percent increase from the previous year. But some students haven't found the shift easy.

Drew Fink has spent months haggling over 15 English credits he's trying to move to UC from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, where he majored in physics for two years.

The Anderson Township man says his English courses at Case Western were as tough as it gets for a non-English major - in four classes, he wrote 15 papers, a total of 87 pages. But the classes had funky names like "The Life of the Mind," and when Fink enrolled at UC as a business major in the fall, the university didn't acknowledge them as English classes.

Fink, 20, has been trying to meet with school officials to explain the courses since.

"Most of (the transfer) went smoothly," said Fink, who's confident he'll be able to plead his case and get the credits. "The hard part is the bureaucracy within the college at UC."

More than a decade ago, enough students and educators groused about transfer difficulties that the Ohio Board of Regents in 1990 devised an Articulation and Transfer Policy to improve mobility among state schools. That policy required institutions to create "transfer modules," sets of general education courses that were guaranteed to transfer as a whole.

But the policy didn't satisfy everyone. Hearing more complaints, in 2003 legislators ordered the Board of Regents to make the transfer system more efficient and gave schools until April 15 to come up with a plan.

Ohio's 36 public higher education institutions have hashed out revisions to the policy. They're creating at least 40 transfer assurance guides, or TAGs, which would build on the transfer modules.

The end result would be that a student at a two-year college who took every course outlined in a TAG would be able to move into that same degree program at a four-year university without missing a beat.

"Quick, uniform, systematic," is how Monica Posey, academic vice president at Cincinnati State, describes the process.

Many state colleges and universities already have seamless transfer agreements, such as the culinary program at UC and Cincinnati State. But because the state's higher education institutions are autonomous and self-governing, a course can vary widely across schools. That's one way transfers can be tripped up.

It's unknown how much the revised policy will change higher education.

But it could help students.

"I'm in my third year of college," Fink said. "I don't want to be in college for 12 years."

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