MASSTRANSFER STEERING COMMITTEE

Meeting: Monday, December 8, 2025
1 p.m.
via Zoom

MINUTES

The second meeting of the MassTransfer Steering Committee was held on Monday, December 8, 2025, at 1:00PM EST via Zoom.

The Following Committee Members were present:
Claudine Barnes
Oren Cohen
Reyes Coll-Tellechea
Joanna Gonsalves
Monique Lopez
Ryan Madison
Barry Maloney
Susan Martin
Midori Morikawa
Trinh Nguyen
Cristian Orellana
Darlene Rodowicz
Patrick Sullivan
George Timmons
Nef Walker

The following presenters attended the Meeting:
Tania LaViolet: Director, College Excellence Program; Aspen Institute
John Fink: Senior Research Associate and Program Lead, Dual Enrollment & Transfer; Community College Research Center ("CCRC")

The following representatives from the Department of Higher Education ("DHE") were present:
Rick Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success and Chair of the Committee
Art Esposito, Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success

I. CALL TO ORDER

Director Esposito called the meeting to order at 1:05PM and requested acceptance of the minutes by unanimous consent. He also introduced the Meeting's guest presenters—Tania LaViolet from the Aspen Institute and John Fink of the Community College Research Center ("CCRC")—as well as the meeting's focus: the second edition of the Transfer Playbook and its implications for vertical transfer in Massachusetts.

II. PRESENTATION: Transfer Paybook 2.0

Tania LaViolet, Director of Research and Innovation at the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, announced the release of the second edition of the Transfer Playbook, which was published in collaboration with the Community College Research Center (CCRC). She explained that the publication represents the culmination of a year of new, in-depth research that builds upon a decade of prior research from the original Transfer Playbook.

She and her co-presenter began with a review of data to set the overall context, with a focus on Massachusetts-specific data where available. They followed the data review by highlighting key findings from the Transfer Playbook.

Mr. Fink emphasized that the growing demand for bachelor's degrees is driven by labor market needs, as more family-sustaining jobs now require at least a bachelor's degree. He also noted that Massachusetts labor market data similarly show that most entry-level jobs that pay a living wage require a bachelor's degree, reinforcing the importance of transfer as a core educational pathway.

However, Mr. Fink noted that the number of transfer outcomes nationally remains persistently low, as only one-third of transferees ever enroll in a baccalaureate program within six years, and only about 16% complete a bachelor's after transferring. He pointed out that these rates have shown little improvement over time and that disaggregated data also reveal significant equity gaps, with lower transfer and completion rates for Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, low-income, and older adult students., Mr. Fink stated that although transfer students who arrive at four-year institutions are retained at comparatively high rates (about 82%), only a small share of them complete within two years, and even by six years, completion remains uneven and inequitable.

Mr. Fink indicated that Massachusetts transfer outcomes closely mirror national trends: about one-third of Massachusetts Community College students transfer, fewer than half of those students complete a bachelor's degree, and only about 14% of all Community College entrants both transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Mr. Fink noted that while these data align with national averages, they also underscore substantial room for improvement.

Ms. LaViolet added that bachelor's completion rates in Massachusetts have increased from approximately 35% for the 2007 cohort to about 46% for recent cohorts, nothing that this improvement coincides with the implementation of MassTransfer and A2B pathways. However, the transfer rate itself has remained flat at roughly 31% since 2007, limiting overall bachelor's attainment growth, which has increased only about three percentage points over the past decade and still trails the national average.

Mr. Fink then indicated that students who transfer with an associate's degree have significantly higher bachelor's completion rates than students who transfer without a credential. He also pointed out that most transfer students do not complete a credential before transferring, which raises questions about program design and the structure of degrees for transfer. Mr. Fink suggested dual enrollment and early college participation has worthy subjects for future conversations, as students who enter community college with prior dual enrollment experience have much stronger outcomes, including substantially higher transfer rates and nearly double the rate of post-transfer bachelor's completion.

Finally, Mr. Fink indicated that even in states with low overall performance, there are institutions achieving exceptionally strong outcomes, particularly for historically underserved populations. He suggested that identifying and studying these top-performing community college–university pairs ("institutional dyads") was the primary motivation for selecting sites and conducting the qualitative fieldwork that informed the Transfer Playbook.

Ms. LaViolet transitioned the discussion from data to the qualitative research findings of the Transfer Playbook. She explained that the research team identified high-performing institutional dyads based on strong overall outcomes and especially strong results for historically disadvantaged students. The study included extensive qualitative research and identified three core strategies common to high-performing dyads.

The first strategy that Ms. LaViolet emphasized was prioritizing transfer at the executive leadership level to achieve sustainable and large-scale success. She stressed that meaningful improvement in transfer and bachelor's attainment rates requires system-level change driven by sustained leadership at both the institutional and state levels. She noted a critical shift from viewing transfer as merely a credit articulation or recruitment issue to redesigning the entire end-to-end transfer student experience.

Ms. LaViolet cited several institutions executing transformational practices such as engaging dual enrollment students in transfer planning conversations; automatically classifying community college students as transfer and proactively advising them on the topic rather than making them self-identify; creating financial incentives for associate degree completion, connecting transfer pathways to careers and embedding career exploration into transfer advising protocols; and co-locating baccalaureate programs on the institutional dyad's community college campus. She also noted that high-performing institutions have implemented "transformational transfer models" tailored to regional labor market needs and local student demographics.

The second strategy Ms. LaViolet discussed focused on aligning programmatic pathways and instruction for timely bachelor's completion. She explained that high-quality pathways require clear, term-by-term course sequencing in comprehensive four-year maps that can be adopted by full-time students or adjusted for students who could only attend on a part-time basis. She also noted that effective pathways front-load major-specific coursework at community college, include at least one major course per term, and embed college-level program-specific math and English within the first year.

Ms. LaViolet shared a preliminary review of selected MassTransfer A2B pathways noting that, in some cases, Community College students completed significantly fewer major courses than students who began at four-year institutions, potentially delaying post-transfer degree completion. She indicated that these findings highlighted the need to reassess current MassTransfer mapping practices. Ms. LaViolet also noted that pathways alone are insufficient without individualized education plans. The research showed that institutions with the best transfer outcomes ensure that students develop plans in their first term, that part-time students can customize plans to accommodate their work/life schedules, that plans are embedded in student information and degree audit systems, and that these plans are used to drive course scheduling and modality decisions.

The third strategy that Ms. LaViolet highlighted was focused on transfer advising and non-academic support. She pointed out that effective systems employ early, sustained, and inevitable advising. Using proactive and holistic advising practices like a First-Year Seminar course tailored to transfer students and mandatory advising requirements with transfer advisors trained to execute caseload management protocols, institutions can ensure that significantly higher percentages of students are being supported than at institutions that rely on students to seek out transfer advising.

III. Questions & Discussion

Early College/Dual Enrollment: Committee Member Claudine Barnes opened the discussion by asking about differences between early college programs taught in high schools and dual enrollment courses taught on community college campuses. Mr. Fink explained that national transfer data does not distinguish between these models but noted that research shows only marginal differences. High school–taught courses tend to have slightly higher pass rates, while college-taught courses have a slightly stronger effect on college enrollment. Overall, both models can be effective depending on quality of design, implementation, and student support.

Committee Member Trinh Nguyen asked which priorities institutions should focus on given limited resources. In response, Ms. LaViolet identified four core priorities: 1.) developing clear four-year program pathways, 2.) ensuring students have inevitable opportunities to translate pathways into individualized plans, 3.) implementing dual or guaranteed admissions for motivation and clarity, and 4.) addressing affordability through financial incentives such as tuition guarantees. Mr. Fink added that successful systems take an iterative, sustained approach—focusing on one major barrier at scale, addressing it systemwide, and then moving to the next—often supported by consistent state leadership.

Committee Member George Timmons, President of Holyoke Community College, shared that 70% of all Holyoke Community College students are enrolled part-time and face serious barriers such as childcare, food insecurity, and transportation. He emphasized that time-to-degree and cost are the most critical issues for adult learners, and that four-year institutions typically offer fewer wraparound support services than community colleges. Ms. LaViolet responded that even when tracking students out to eight years, bachelor's completion only increases modestly and that the greatest student drop-off occurs after the first term. She highlighted emerging strategies such as summer enrollment incentives and shorter course formats as ways to maintain student momentum.

Next, Committee Member Oren Cohen raised the issue of changing majors. Mr. Fink explained that early major changes are generally associated with stronger outcomes, while late changes often delay completion. Ms. LaViolet emphasized the importance of early exploration, career-connected advising, and early major-specific coursework to help students confirm or revise their academic direction without losing time.

Committee Member Barnes raised concerns about students being moved into general studies or liberal arts degrees due to course availability constraints, which often weakens their transfer pathways. She also noted that transfer students are forced to retake courses when credits transfer but are not counted toward major requirements at four-year institutions. Ms. LaViolet explained that structured pathways—even in humanities fields—lead to stronger transfer and

completion outcomes, while unstructured general degrees yield weaker results. She stressed the need for faculty-to-faculty collaboration between two- and four-year institutions to align curriculum, instruction, and expectations. Mr. Fink added that demand-based scheduling based on student academic plans is a critical but underdeveloped area.

Committee Member Midori Morikawa asked about the use of artificial intelligence in pathway mapping and advising. Ms. LaViolet explained that current AI tools are mainly used to predict course equivalencies and suggest next courses but cannot fix broken pathways. She emphasized that future AI should support faculty alignment rather than replace it. Mr. Fink added that AI could also expedite the faculty review process for transfer credits, but human relationships and oversight remain essential.

Committee Member Joanna Gonsalves emphasized the importance of faculty collaboration across two- and four-year institutions, citing successful psychology department partnerships prior to the pandemic. She noted challenges related to inconsistent credit structures and supported more efficient systems for equivalency review. Ms. LaViolet affirmed that sustained, institutionalized faculty summits—supported and attended by leadership—were a hallmark of high-performing systems and allowed partnerships to evolve beyond basic curriculum alignment and into broader learning experiences.

Committee Member Barnes then raised significant concerns about advising capacity under MassEducate, noting that many of the Community Colleges have too few professional transfer advisors and that faculty advisors are often overextended. Ms. LaViolet stated that there is no single ideal advising ratio but emphasized that a minimum staffing threshold is necessary for inevitable advising. She described different models that are used successfully across institutions, including mandatory student success courses, technology-driven planning, professionalized milestone advising, and blended faculty–advisor systems. Mr. Fink added that group advising embedded into first-year courses and early career exploration can increase efficiency without fully resolving staffing shortages.

Committee Member Barry Maloney, President of Worcester State University, asked whether Free Community College programs improve transfer outcomes. Ms. LaViolet explained that while Free Community College increases access, it does not by itself improve transfer or bachelor's completion rates. Mr. Fink emphasized that expanded access to college must be matched with investments in student success infrastructure.

Committee Member Susan Martin described the challenge of implementing articulation agreements in unionized environments when four-year institutions request curriculum changes that community college faculty are unwilling or contractually unable to make. Ms. LaViolet explained that successful union-based collaborations rely on strong endorsements by campus and union leadership, shared data-driven purpose, and discipline-level peer conversations rather than top-down mandates. Mr. Fink added that true faculty leadership and trust are essential for sustainable progress.

Committee Member Gonsalves reinforced that in union environments, faculty buy-in requires dedicated time, funding, and early involvement in partnership design. She noted that faculty engagement is strongest when it is collaborative rather than directive. Committee Member

Monique Lopez asked whether inconsistent policies across institutions hinder articulation and joint admissions. Ms. LaViolet responded that the main issue is not the existence of policies but how they are implemented. Successful models minimize administrative barriers, automate processes, and assign clear ownership for implementation.

Committee Member Barnes emphasized the importance of segment-wide faculty collaboration across the Community Colleges, including common course numbering as a precursor to articulation with four-year institutions. She emphasized that such work requires major investments of time, leadership, and resources. Ms. LaViolet suggested that a limited number of supported institutional partnerships may serve as a starting point that can later be scaled statewide.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Rick Riccardi closed the meeting by thanking the presenters and participants, noting that additional agenda items would be postponed to the Committee's next meeting. The meeting concluded at 2:35pm.

Documents used during the meeting are available at:
https://www.mass.edu/strategic/masstransfer_committee.asp