MEETING MINUTES

Meeting: Friday, February 27
1 p.m.
via Zoom

QUORUM

The third meeting of the MassTransfer Steering Committee was held on Friday, February 27, 2026, at 1:00PM via Zoom.

The Following Committee Members were present:
Claudine Barnes
Reyes Coll-Tellechea
Joanna Gonsalves
Monique Lopez
Ryan Madison
Barry Maloney
Susan Martin
Midori Morikawa
Patrick Sullivan
George Timmons
Nef Walker

The following representatives from the Department of Higher Education ("DHE" or "Department") 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

CALL TO ORDER

Committee Chair Rick Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success, called the meeting to order at 1:05pm EST. He asked for a motion to approve minutes from the Committee's meeting on December 8, 2025, and they were approved by unanimous consent.

In his opening remarks, Chair Riccardi explained that after initial meetings focused on building a shared understanding of MassTransfer, today's agenda was designed for deeper discussion on topics such as Early College, student resources, and collaboration to generate ideas and recommendations. He emphasized that Early College is a major statewide priority closely tied to transfer policy and that the group's overall goal is to advance recommendations for improving MassTransfer's implementation in support of increased retention and degree completion. Chair Riccardi explained that traditional transfer pathways often assume fixed student categories and schedules, whereas many students now follow flexible or nontraditional routes toward degree

attainment. He stated that this shift has not only underscored the need for more personalized, adaptable transfer pathways, but also complicates the alignment of community-college experiences with four-year institutional models.

Chair Ricardi then asked Art Esposito, Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success, to present the topics for discussion.

PRESENTATION & DSICUSSION:

Early College

Director Esposito began the presentation with a discussion of MassTransfer's implications for Early College. He explained that Early College and dual-enrollment transfer issues are complex and often misunderstood. He clarified that credits earned in Early College are issued by the partner college or university and therefore are not considered "transfer" until a student later moves between higher-education institutions, typically from community college to a four-year institution. He highlighted two key MassTransfer tools that support Early College planning: the course-equivalency database, which shows how courses transfer across institutions, and the General Education Foundation, a set of widely transferable general-education courses that serve as strong Early College targets because of their portability.

He also described challenges related to the timing of admissions, as Early College students apply to four-year institutions as first-year students before their final transcripts—including college credits—are available, placing them in a hybrid first-year/transfer category that complicates evaluation. Esposito emphasized that the Department's role as a convening body is critical, arguing that collaboration among Early College, community-college, and university faculty can align curricula and create clearer, more predictable pathways from Early College through transfer to bachelor's completion.

Chair Riccardi clarified that the Committee's discussion focuses specifically on the state-designated Early College program developed by DHE in conjunction with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), which distinguishes it from other accelerated-credit options such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and Advanced Placement. He noted that Early College materials frame courses as "strategically sequenced college courses," as they allow students to gain valuable clarification as to what they do or do not want to ultimately study in college, even if the experience does not directly advance credit accumulation.

Committee Member Joanna Gonsalves asked whether there are data on the majors that Early College students pursue after enrolling in Massachusetts public colleges, such as whether they cluster in liberal arts/undecided fields or in structured programs like nursing or accounting. She explained that this matters because some majors require early course sequencing to enable four-year completion, and knowing common pathways could help institutions prioritize which disciplines to focus on in cross-segment curriculum alignment and convenings.

Chair Riccardi noted that the state maintains an Early College data dashboard and that DHE and DESE have been analyzing Early College pathways and credit patterns. He explained that Gen Ed Foundation courses were initially promoted because they keep multiple academic options open for students.

Committee Member Barry Maloney, President of Worcester State University, asked how the Committee's MassTransfer work can be aligned with broader statewide Early College strategic planning and expansion efforts. He noted that multiple Early College models exist and emphasized that transfer policy should be coordinated with the Governor's expansion goals and overall Early College strategy to ensure that both efforts align with each other.

Chair Riccardi agreed that alignment is essential and explained that those conversations are already underway internally and with partner agencies. He noted that scaling the program raises important questions about student completion, not just access. He emphasized that bringing students into Early College is only part of the goal; institutions must ensure they are set up to finish successfully. Because students enter college with widely varying credit totals—some with only a few credits and others with the equivalent of an associate degree—the system must better define expectations and student supports. He concluded that this is a key issue the group and both agencies need to continue addressing and by posing a question: what should Early College students ideally have achieved by the time they enter college as freshmen. He suggested defining expectations not only in terms of number of credits earned but also in terms of the skills and competencies students should bring with them.

Revising MassTransfer and the Commonwealth Commitment

Shifting the dialogue to possible revisions for MassTransfer, Director Esposito reviewed national transfer priorities discussed in a prior meeting—showing students clear four-year pathways, establishing admissions guarantees, developing dual admission programs, and striving to promulgate affordability. He noted that Massachusetts already has infrastructure supporting the first three of these goals built-in to MassTransfer programs. He argued that meaningful progress could come from flexible, modest changes to practice and implementation guidelines, as well as reframing curriculum maps and implementation protocols without having to secure new resources or acquire enterprise-level software. He also stated that guaranteed and joint admission agreements already exist and could be strengthened by simplifying the Commonwealth Commitment program and emphasizing regional institutional partnerships. Finally, he raised open questions about the growing adult-learner population, noting uncertainty about how many seek vertical transfer and how MassTransfer should adapt to these changing demographics.

Committee Member Monique Lopez asked whether institutions are exploring accelerated formats—such as seven or eight-week courses—and rolling admissions to better serve working undergraduates and adult learners who want to reduce the time to degree completion. She noted that community colleges often offer this flexibility, while universities may face staffing and budget constraints that limit such options. She emphasized that with fewer traditional-aged college students and a larger number of older or returning learners, universities need to adapt to meet students where they are or risk losing enrollment.

Chair Riccardi observed that higher education often places students into rigid categories (i.e. day program v. evening program) that no longer reflect how many of our students are balancing their studies and their responsibilities outside of academia. He noted that transfer students accustomed to flexible schedules, accelerated courses, evenings, weekends, or online formats may struggle when moving into more traditional four-year structures, and he indicated

that those students expect more direct guidance that clearly shows their route from start to finish.

Committee Member Midori Morikawa acknowledged that joint admission agreements already exist but asked where the real gap lies. She questioned whether the issue is inconsistent processes across institutions, operational challenges in implementation, or a lack of clarity for students, and sought clarification on what specific problem the group is trying to address regarding joint admission.

Director Esposito explained that MassTransfer originally emphasized system-wide uniformity and cost savings by encouraging students to begin at community colleges and consider transfer broadly to any of the 13 public baccalaureate institutions. However, research over the past decade suggests that strong regional partnerships and institution-to-institution relationships are more closely associated with associate degree completion, successful transfer, and bachelor's completion.

He suggested that there is an opportunity to pivot from broad, system-wide guarantees to deeper regional collaborations. In these partnerships, students identify their intended major and transfer destination early, allowing both institutions to coordinate advising and support over time. This creates a more personalized, coordinated pathway where institutions actively collaborate to guide students from the start of their associate degree, through successful transfer, and on to post-transfer degree completion.

Chair Riccardi shared language from a recent report from the Advisory Council for the Advancement of Representation in Higher Education (ACARE) that advocates for guaranteed admission with junior status for community college students transferring to four-year institutions, noting that this aligns with the group's ongoing discussion about transfer pathways and priority admission. However, he cautioned that junior status based on credit count does not necessarily lead to timely degree completion, since credits may not apply to a student's major and can extend time to graduation. He emphasized that while the goals are aligned, ensuring that transfer credits meaningfully advance students toward completion remains a key challenge.

Committee Member Patrick Sullivan questioned how prescribed transfer pathways account for students who "change their minds." He noted that many 17- or 18-year-olds begin college thinking they know their major, only to realize later that it is not the right fit. He asked whether such students receive structured support to redirect toward a new path, possibly still toward a four-year degree, or whether they are left to navigate the transition on their own.

In response, Director Esposito explained that students who change majors while also transferring institutions are often reflected in data showing significant credit loss. He explained that support for such students varies by institution but emphasized that strong, proactive academic advising is essential. He stated that holistic advising and structured support are key to helping students make informed decisions early on, and he reiterated that structural program design must be paired with meaningful proactive academic advising and support.

Committee Member Sullivan then suggested that transfer pathways should include built-in "off-ramps" providing students with alternative routes that still connect to meaningful goals and help students progress toward completion.

Chair Riccardi agreed that pathways should account for students who "take an off-ramp" and noted current efforts, such as the REUP initiative, which targets students who have earned some credits but left school without completing a postsecondary degree. He explained that many institutions offer degree-completion programs to bring these students back, often through flexible or interdisciplinary structures. He acknowledged that while financial support and basic needs initiatives address some barriers, and academic pathways provide structure, student departures often stem from complex academic, personal, and financial factors. He emphasized that pathways must reflect the reality that students may leave or change direction, rather than assuming a perfectly linear journey.

Committee Member Reyes Coll-Tellechea expressed concern that MassTransfer discussions focus too heavily on technical structures and efficiency rather than on students' lived realities. She argued that heavy regulation and rigid pathways often fail to account for life circumstances, causing many students, especially those without strong educational support systems, to fall through the cracks.

Committee Member Reyes Coll-Tellechea cautioned that students are more than credit accumulators and that education should develop durable, transferable skills rather than short-lived technical competencies. While acknowledging the presence of support systems and strong students, she suggested the current structure is imbalanced and not fully functional, particularly for vulnerable populations. She also highlighted the difference between the cycle of earning credentials and the broader, ongoing process of education, noting that many students will need to return later in life as skills evolve and industries change.

Chair Riccardi shared that, during his own teaching experience, he noted that some struggling students disengage despite outreach, while others can be brought back with timely intervention. He asked whether faculty see success with proactive or "intrusive" advising—such as requiring tutoring, mentoring, or other high-impact supports—especially for students who claim they are "fine" despite poor performance. He sought Committee Member Reyes Coll-Tellechea s perspective on whether more structured intervention helps prevent students from slipping away.

Professor Reyes Coll-Tellechea agreed that intrusive advising and proactive outreach are valuable, but she cautioned that Community College transfer-students' loss of invaluable relationships and support networks (friends, cohorts, tutors, and familiar staff) can significantly affect their success at a four-year college following their transfer.

Student-Committee Member Ryan Madison explained that early career exploration, including an elective course on the topic, and conversations with career services, helped him pivot from a business administration pathway to an emergency management pathway at MassBay Community College, which ultimately influenced his transfer to a bachelor's level degree program at Mass Maritime Academy. Committee Member Madison confirmed that advising played a key role in helping him consciously make the transition.

Collaboration

Director Esposito ended the presentation by emphasizing collaboration and convening as central to strengthening MassTransfer. He explained that most meaningful progress in MassTransfer is a product of collaboration between faculty and institutional leaders together across the Community College and State University segments. He argued that cross-segment convening—among high school, community college, and baccalaureate faculty—can ensure the rigor and transfer value of Early College credits, align coursework across institutions, and strengthen associate-to-bachelor's pathways. He also connected collaboration to broader goals such as common course numbering, consistent course equivalencies, and clearer transfer pathway maps, noting that faculty dialogue is essential to mapping content across the segments and preserving credit value.

Committee Member George Timmons, President of Holyoke Community College questioned whether the Committee is making technical adjustments or truly addressing a systemic problem. He was struck by the inconsistency across state institutions, noting concern that students with associate degrees can still lose significant credits upon transfer, even within the same public system.

More broadly, President Timmons argued that the traditional 2+2 transfer model may no longer fit current student demographics, particularly when most community college students attend part-time and take much longer to complete degrees. He suggested that the system may need more fundamental rethinking to better serve today's students and asked whether the group is prepared to reimagine how institutions and partnerships would be designed if built around current realities rather than past assumptions.

Committee Member Gonsalves responded that one major barrier to innovation is the persistence of outdated structural divisions—such as day versus continuing education programs—that reflect older funding and operational models rather than current student needs. She noted that while institutions offer flexible options like accelerated summer and winter courses, artificial administrative and funding constraints limit how seamlessly students can access these opportunities.

Chair Riccardi noted that most job postings in the Commonwealth require a bachelor's degree, which creates urgency around timely completion. However, he noted that if students take many years to finish, especially under outdated models, the labor market may shift before they graduate. He acknowledged that institutional silos contribute to the challenge and highlighted the Board's recently approved "Degree Granting Regulation for Pilot Proposals on Innovation (610 CMR 16.0), which will allow campuses to explore new models that rethink traditional structures such as reduced-credit bachelor's degrees or competency-based learning.

Committee Member Nef Walker questioned whether MassTransfer and joint admission agreements may already work reasonably well for more traditional students, while part-time, night, accelerated, or otherwise non-traditional students may lack sufficient support. She asked whether data exists to help identify which student populations need additional attention so that policies and practices can be revised to better prioritize and support them.

Director Esposito acknowledged that while detailed data on specific support needs may be limited, one clear statistic stands out: nearly 70% of community college students attend part-time. He pointed out that existing MassTransfer provisions—such as Commonwealth Commitment benefits requiring full-time enrollment—disadvantage this majority. He argued that the program should become less rule-bound by removing strict enrollment and time-to-degree requirements, so students who complete associate's degrees over longer timelines receive the same benefits as those who finish more quickly. However, he also acknowledged that broader structural issues in higher education would require more fundamental reform
.

President Timmons argued that while structural reform may be complex, some practical changes could be implemented more quickly. He suggested that offering more eight-week courses at scale would allow part-time students who typically take two classes at a time to earn a larger number of credits per semester, potentially qualifying for benefits tied to credit load. He emphasized that accelerated course models are already common across many types of institutions and could be expanded without requiring a complete overhaul of the higher education system.

Committee Member Walker shared findings from a pilot study conducted with EY-Parthenon indicating that community college transfer students who matriculate to UMass campuses perform well academically. The challenge, she suggested, is not student success after transfer but rather attracting part-time and non-traditional students—those who need accelerated, evening, or weekend options. She noted that a larger study is underway to better understand these students' experiences and emphasized that institutions themselves must innovate to better serve this population. She invited additional data to help guide future improvements.

Chair Riccardi acknowledged that structural barriers—such as traditional semester formats, credit norms, contracts, and student information systems—make innovation difficult, even when accelerated or alternative models are feasible. He noted that many of these constraints persist simply because they have always existed, not because they are inherently necessary. He suggested that MassTransfer was largely built around a traditional full-time student model, while today's students are often non-traditional. Forcing them into rigid pathways that do not fit their realities risks pushing them off track entirely, which undermines student success.

Professor Reyes Coll-Tellechea cautioned that not all programs can be easily adapted to accelerated or alternative formats. She noted that fields such as nursing and engineering are constrained by accreditation and professional standards, which limit flexibility in course structure and pacing. She emphasized that simply adjusting credit numbers or offering shorter terms is not a universal solution for all disciplines.

Chair Riccardi acknowledged the challenges and possibilities brought up concerning innovations and updated approaches. He then pivoted the conversation to implementing common course numbering, noting that it often leads to broader debates about shared learning outcomes and institutional autonomy. As a flexible alternative, he suggested using real-time course-sharing systems that leveraged articulation agreements to show equivalencies across campuses, allowing students to take needed courses elsewhere and graduate more efficiently.

Looking ahead, Chair Riccardi encouraged the Committee to begin consolidating ideas from recent meetings into formal recommendations for the Department by the end of current academic year. He also mentioned the possibility of piloting an innovative partnership between a community college and a four-year institution to reimagine pathways for nontraditional students, suggesting that a successful pilot could serve as a model statewide.

ADJOURNMENT

Chair Riccardi concluded by emphasizing a shift toward a more student-centered approach, likening the ideal system to a "graduation positioning system" that guides each student along a personalized path to completion. He thanked participants for their contributions and adjourned the meeting at 2:25 PM.

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