

Best Practices in Transfer Evaluation

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Transfer students represent a critical subset of the population needed to meet enrollment goals, and they are savvy in shopping for academic programs that will honor their previous hard work. When changing academic direction, students expect gaps in their education that need to be filled and will work hard to fill them. But they resent barriers to completion in the form of denied credit, needless repetition of content, etc. In a recent survey conducted by the Transfer Friendly Campus Committee, over a quarter of new transfer students cited dissatisfaction with how their prior credits were assessed as the most frustrating aspect of the transfer process. A meaningful, thoughtful, and academically appropriate accommodation of their credits will not only reduce such frustrations, it will enhance their experience as students and ensure that they continue to learn.

Evaluation of transfer credit negotiates a tension between such accommodation and a kind of academic distinction. Universities accommodate the needs of transfer students, whose previous learning demands recognition in the interest of student access and fairness. Simultaneously, institutions distinguish themselves by prioritizing their native curricula and protecting their unique graduation and program requirements. As a result, determining how many credits to transfer and, more importantly, how to apply those credits can challenge even the most well-intentioned staff and faculty, who may find themselves at odds over what will benefit the student best, what constitutes a fair recognition of college-level learning, what coursework duplicates, and what is academically necessary.

The Registrar's Office operates from the perspective that every effort should be made to maximize transfer credit and avoid duplication of learning. Coursework at UWM should extend what was learned prior to transfer, respecting the fact that previous learning may not align with a student's present academic goals. To that end, we wish to review some best practices for transfer evaluation in light of both national and UW-System standards.

The following represent best practices in transfer credit practice and are recommended for anyone involved in transfer credit evaluation:

- Consider the "quality," "comparability," and "appropriateness" of learning when making transfer decisions. (See discussion of the "Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit" below.)
- Presume transferability. Rather than burdening the student with defending why we should accept transfer credit, UWM should be prepared to justify why something is not acceptable or cannot apply to a given requirement.
- Avoid preconceptions or prejudices based on the source of the credit. Nor should one presume the rigor or quality of learning based on the institution where the credit was earned. Look beyond external factors, such as accreditation, to a course's specific content and learning outcomes.
- Don't expect 100% equivalency. Courses may not align entirely with a particular course at UWM yet provide sufficient coverage of necessary topics to meet a given requirement. What exposure is truly necessary for the student to advance?

- Look beyond specific course equivalencies. A transferring course may not match a specific course at UWM yet still fit within a given discipline or department's offerings. Also consider that program content may be distributed differently at another institution. Consider bundling courses accepted in transfer, such that a group of courses may be considered comparable to a group of courses at UWM.
- Take the broad view. Consider the course's content alongside its function and the context within which it was taken. How does the course fit within the other school's curriculum? How can it fit within UWM's?
- Focus on application. Default to a consideration of how transfer credit can align with graduation or program requirements whenever possible.
- Privilege course learning outcomes over other measures. Course numbers may not reliably communicate level of instruction. Credit amounts may not reliably indicate how much was learned. Factors other than quantity of content, such as Carnegie hours, may impact the number of credits awarded for a given course. Where outcomes align, credit should be applied.
- Avoid duplication. Coursework at UWM should complete the student's education, not unduly complicate or repeat it.
- Be open to innovation. ACE-recommended credit, applied to military, government, or corporate-sponsored instruction, may provide evidence of learning equal to or greater than traditional college coursework. Prior learning options may also enter into transfer discussions. Delivery method (online vs face-to-face, for instance) should not factor into transfer decisions.

Background

The recommendations above are informed by the "Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit" (2017), which provides guidance to colleges and universities concerning transfer and is endorsed by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), the American Council on Education (ACE), & the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The "Joint Statement," in turn, proceeds from stated assumptions that recognize institutional autonomy; promote "social equity;" recognize the complex reality of when, how, and where students acquire credit; and encourage an expansive view of what can be considered "validated learning" (p. 1). To this end, both sending and receiving institutions work in tandem to, in the first case, make information about coursework available for review via transcripts, course catalogs, syllabi, etc. and in the second case, articulate and publish clear policies regarding transfer. Institutions are encouraged to "provide maximum consideration for the individual student who has changed institutions or objectives" (p. 2).

Three considerations are specifically outlined in the "Joint Statement"—the quality, comparability, and appropriateness of the learning being evaluated. Accreditation offers one measure of quality but is by no means the only one. While UWM accepts credit from any institution regionally or nationally accredited by a CHEA-recognized accrediting body, other determinations may be considered, such as review of course outcomes and the sending institution's mission. For example, a business school that lacks the appropriate accreditation may nonetheless provide instruction that aligns with the approach of our business faculty, which could positively impact how we view the transcribed credit. In determining quality, evaluators should be wary of preconceptions or prejudices, focusing on course content over other considerations. For example, course numbers, a common indicator of level of instruction, should be referenced with caution. Many schools in the WI technical college system are only allowed to number associate-degree courses at the 100-level, which may not convey the true nature of the course content or rigor. Additionally, the "Joint Statement" encourages openness to innovation in education (p. 4). As schools continue to wrestle with alternative means of assessing and awarding credit, relying

on a single, traditional model may fail to recognize genuine learning. In addition to internal assessment options for these learners, a willingness to embrace such innovations when used by other institutions or when validated by other agencies (such as ACE-recommended credit for military and corporate-sponsored learning or competency-based education) may broaden the path to degree completion.

In addition to the broader standards recommended in the “Joint Statement,” UW-System guidelines provide parameters for transfer credit evaluation (Board of Regents, 2015). The System’s approach echoes the “Joint Statement,” which it explicitly endorses, in its dual focus on “a student-centered transfer process” and respect for “institutional autonomy and program integrity.” Toward that end, the policy provides direction regarding the three principles of quality, comparability, and applicability derived from ACE’s document. Further direction is provided courtesy of 14 “Principles of Accommodation.” Highlights of these principles include recommendations not to adhere only to specific course equivalencies. Institutions should prioritize application of credit to degree requirements whenever possible, regardless of whether a precise course equivalency exists. GER requirements should be viewed in terms of “broad academic areas” and, when possible, recognized in the same way as at the sending institution. Departmental credit should be awarded for coursework within a discipline for which UWM may lack a comparable course. Greater accommodations are specified for students transferring within the UW-System, such as recognizing courses as meeting the same requirements as at the original institution and transferring credit earned through prior learning assessment (PLA). Exceptions granted through articulation agreements are also expressly allowed in a section devoted to Wisconsin Technical College System transfer.

References

- Board of Regents-University of Wisconsin System. (2015). UW System undergraduate transfer policy. Retrieved from <https://www.wisconsin.edu/uw-policies/uw-system-administrative-policies/uw-system-undergraduate-transfer-policy/>
- Joint statement on the transfer and award of credit. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Joint-Statement-on-the-Transfer-and-Award-of-Credit.pdf>