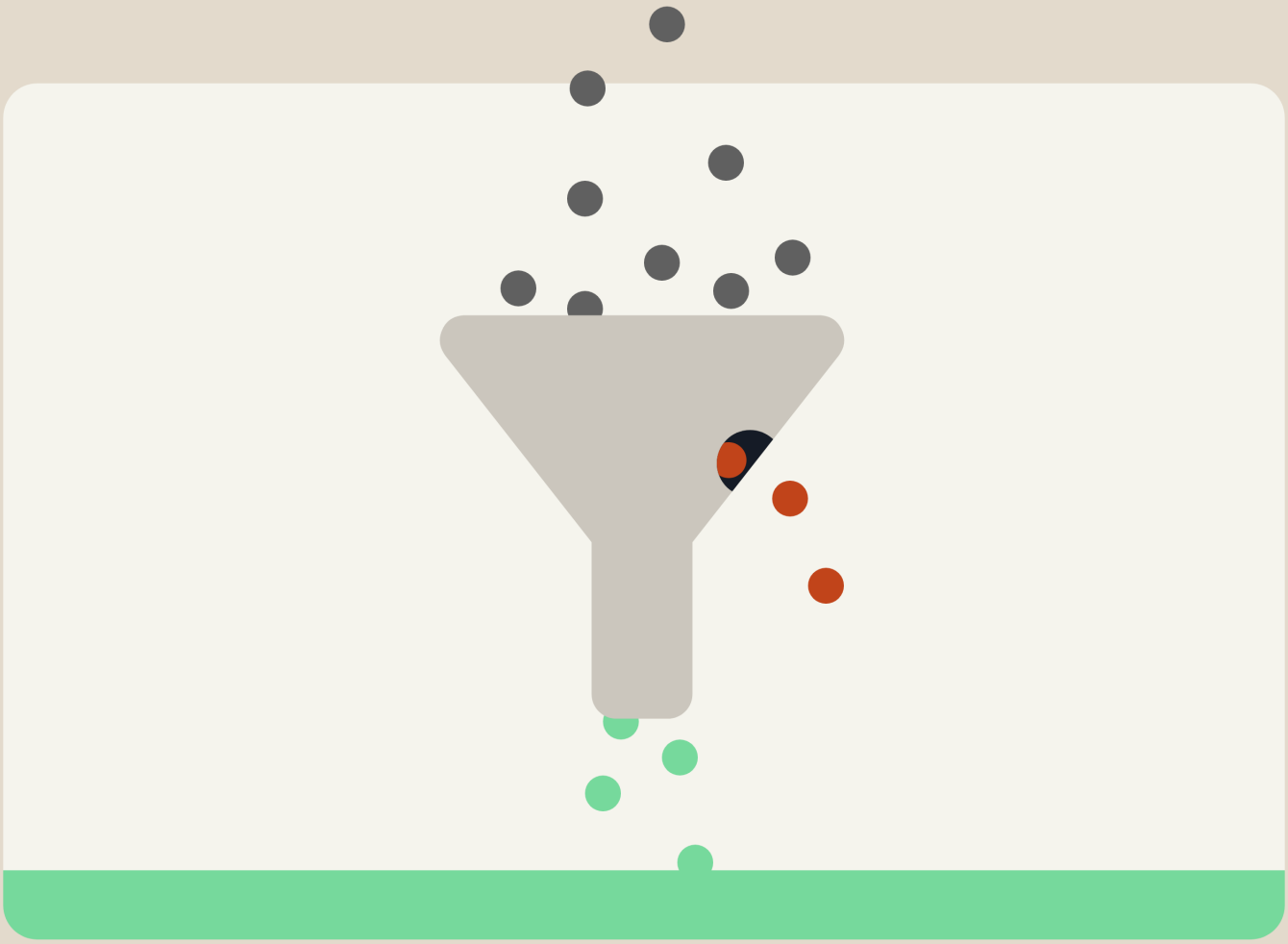
ARTICLE

The Hidden Cost of Missed Transfer Enrollment

Explore how transfer credit uncertainty affects enrollment and potential tuition revenue.



STELLIC

INTRODUCTION

Every enrollment carries more weight

With budgets under pressure at many institutions, every enrollment and every staff hour carries more weight. Many schools already have initiatives underway to grow transfer enrollment and give prospective students clearer answers, but the full financial impact of these challenges isn't always easy to quantify.

And without a clear sense of what they cost, it's hard to make the case for the resources needed to address them. We wanted to take a closer look at three in particular:

THREE HIDDEN COSTS

1 **Student attrition:** students who leave before finishing their degree

2 **Missed transfer enrollment:** prospective transfer students who may go elsewhere when they can't see how their credits will count — THIS ARTICLE

3 **Staff capacity:** advisor and registrar time spent on recurring manual work

In this article, we'll cover missed transfer enrollment, a cost that's easy to overlook because the students involved may never submit an application. To put this into context for your campus, check out the Campus Opportunity Calculator, which estimates the potential tuition from missed transfer prospects at your institution.

THE COST

The cost of a transfer student who never applies

Picture a prospective transfer student who would be a strong fit for one of your programs. They've earned credits elsewhere and want to know how many will count toward a degree with you. They visit your website and search around, but can't find a clear answer, so they move on without ever applying.

That's what makes this cost hard to see. Schools track transfer applications and enrollments, but a prospective student who doesn't get key information and quietly moves on never becomes an application. For the school, those missed students add up, and some of the costs reach well beyond tuition:

- **Tuition:** A prospective transfer student who goes elsewhere takes every term of potential tuition with them.
- **Recruiting spend that doesn't convert:** Inquiries a school paid to generate can leave before they ever become applications.
- **Feeder college relationships:** Community college advisors may be more likely to steer students toward schools with clear transfer pathways.
- **Upper-division programs:** Some programs rely on transfer students to fill junior- and senior-level seats.
- **Students' progress and aid:** Uncertainty can discourage students from continuing their education. Credits lost in transfer can also mean repeated courses, which use up Pell and loan eligibility that have lifetime limits.

13.1%

And it's likely to matter even more as this group grows. Transfer students made up 13.1% of continuing and returning undergraduates in fall 2024, up from 11.9% in fall 2020.

NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE

THE OPPORTUNITY

Where schools can step in

Credit clarity is a good place to start, and students say it matters to their decisions. In a 2024 survey of transfer students and adults with some college and no credential:

1 in 2

said they wouldn't even apply if they didn't know how much credit would transfer

EDUCATIONDYNAMICS

97%

said knowing before applying is important

EDUCATIONDYNAMICS

Transfer students have already invested time and money in their education, and they want to know how much of that progress carries forward. Knowing credits will be accepted is only part of it. Students also need to know whether those credits apply toward their intended degree, and how much longer graduation might take. For some, the uncertainty ends the search altogether. In a national survey, 16% of adults who had tried to transfer credits said they decided not to pursue a credential at all because transferring was too difficult (Public Agenda).

Unfortunately, many institutions complete credit evaluations only after admission, which comes after the student has already decided whether to apply. Evaluations also slow down when decisions are spread across departments and systems are aging (Sova research, via AACRAO). Some common points where this process breaks down:

- A student learns 60 credits were accepted, then discovers later that some don't count toward their program
- A student has to apply and wait for an official evaluation before learning how much longer graduation will take
- Credit questions bounce between admissions, the registrar, and academic departments without a clear answer

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THE BEST SCENARIO

Give prospective students a credible early view of how their credits could apply, and help staff reach official decisions faster while keeping them consistent.

ACROSS CAMPUS

What missed transfer enrollment means for your role

Transfer enrollment is often seen as admissions' job, but credit answers touch nearly every office on campus, from the registrar to academic departments. That's a good thing, since it means more of campus can help prospective students get the clarity they need. Here are some of the ways missed transfer enrollment can affect you:

ROLE	WHAT MISSED TRANSFER ENROLLMENT MEANS FOR YOU
Provosts and institutional leaders	• Transfer students are a growing share of undergraduates, so how hard to compete for them is a strategic choice. • Equivalency decisions usually sit with academic departments, and leadership can set the guidance and resources that let prospective students get answers before they apply.
Enrollment and admissions leaders	• Admissions owns transfer yield, from first inquiry to enrolled student. • Prospective students often bring their credit questions to admissions first. Those who walk away before applying never appear in the application funnel, so it's hard to tell how many were deterred by unanswered credit questions. • Earlier visibility into which programs prospects are exploring, and what coursework they bring, makes follow-up more relevant.
CIOs	• Giving prospective students answers up front depends on how articulation rules and transcript processing connect to what students see online. • When equivalencies live in spreadsheets or in one person's memory, answers are slow and hard to share across offices.
Registrars	• Registrars and transfer staff own credit evaluation, often the slowest step in the transfer process. • Equivalency tables can go years without a systematic review, and decisions that rest on individual judgment become inconsistent over time (transfer credit evaluation). • Making approved equivalencies easier to find helps staff give useful guidance earlier while keeping control over official decisions. • Each manual evaluation also takes staff time, which the staff capacity article covers in more detail.
Advisors	• Transfer advising usually starts after enrollment, so advisors inherit the effects of credit loss: repeated courses and longer paths to a degree. • When accepted credits show up in a student's plan from the first meeting, that conversation can focus on what comes next.

ESTIMATE IT

How to estimate missed transfer enrollment at your school

Stellic built the Campus Opportunity Calculator so colleges that recruit transfer students can estimate the potential tuition in the gap between transfer inquiries and applications, focusing on the share that clearer credit answers might address. It starts by asking whether your school actively recruits transfer students, so schools that don't can head to the other costs instead.

What the calculator looks at

- **Transfer students enrolled,** from IPEDS
- **Transfer applicants and inquiries,** estimated from national benchmarks in NACAC's 2019 State of College Admission and RNL's 2019 Conversion and Yield Report unless you enter your own numbers
- **Net tuition per student and years a transfer student typically stays,** from IPEDS

How it works

The calculator starts with prospective students who inquired but never applied, applies an assumed share who may have been deterred by credit uncertainty, and estimates the tuition they might have paid over the years they would have enrolled. That share, 25% to 50% by default, is an illustrative assumption informed by survey research on how much credit clarity matters to transfer decisions (EducationDynamics; Public Agenda). The result is a low-to-high range of potentially recoverable tuition.

For a longer walkthrough of the math, see how we calculate missed transfer enrollment.

What you'll see

- Potential tuition from the share of one year's non-applicants that clearer credit answers might reach
- How many transfer students you enroll compared with similar schools
- What winning some of those students back could be worth, as an illustrative scenario since no published study yet measures this
- The assumptions and math behind every result

NEXT STEP

See what clearer credit answers could be worth at your school

A prospective student who can see how their credits apply before applying can weigh your school with real information in hand. Seeing your number makes it easier to decide how much to invest in giving them that answer earlier.

CAMPUS OPPORTUNITY CALCULATOR

Calculate your transfer enrollment opportunity

Start from your school's IPEDS data and national benchmarks, or enter your own numbers.

Calculate your opportunity →

stellic.com/resources/campus-opportunity-calculator

SEE HOW SCHOOLS ARE APPROACHING ALL THREE

The Campus Opportunity Guide

READ THE GUIDE →

SOURCES

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2. EducationDynamics, *Education Re-engagement Report* (2024). educationdynamics.com
3. Public Agenda, *Beyond Transfer*. publicagenda.org
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