



## **A Perspective on Early Childhood Education and Articulation**

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## Introduction

The transfer of credit from community college Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree programs in early childhood education (typically 60–68 total credit hours, with four to six courses in general education) to bachelor’s degree programs in early childhood education has emerged as an urgent issue in early childhood education. The call for a more educated workforce is supported by the recently released report from the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, “Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation” (2015), which recommends that all lead teachers of children from birth through age 8 have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or a related field. With the number of students enrolling in teacher education programs dramatically decreasing in the last few years, strategies to achieve higher education levels for our teaching workforce are at the forefront of the field (Sawchuk, 2014, October).

One of the most cost-efficient and logical strategies is to improve articulation agreements between 2-year community college degree programs and 4-year institutions.

I have learned the importance of high-quality articulation agreements from many years of experience in higher education, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and through my experience as North Carolina’s state child care administrator. Both positions highlighted the necessity of aligning our systems of higher education to better educate our early childhood workforce in the most efficacious manner possible. Through this paper, I share my perspective, which I have used to guide me through successful negotiation and work on these issues.

## Goals for Articulation Agreements

At the outset, it is helpful to note the distinction between articulation and transfer of credit. Articulation is the goal: It highlights the establishment of institutional policies or other

structures that are implemented to encourage, facilitate, and monitor the student transfer process (Hezel Associates, 2009). Transfer of credit is the process of moving a student's credits across different institutions. This distinction is important because transfer of credit can be the simple course-by-course comparison of course descriptions, resulting in a minimum number of courses being accepted by a 4-year program from a 2-year program. Articulation is what we strive for because it includes the policies to encourage, facilitate, and monitor the acceptance of course credit across 2- and 4-year institutions.

Nonetheless, we must not assume that all articulation agreements are created equal. Some 4-year institutions have articulation agreements that delineate policies for transfer of credit, but these institutions limit the agreements to only a few courses. My experience leads me to support an articulation goal providing for at least 55 credit hours from the 2-year A.A.S. degree programs in early childhood education to the 4-year bachelor's degree programs in early childhood education, with 2 years of coursework remaining at the receiving institution.

## Benefits of Articulation Agreements

**Higher Education:** Not only are articulation agreements beneficial to the children enrolled in early care and education programs because of the higher education levels of their teachers, but good articulation agreements are cost-effective for a state's higher education system. A cost benefit analysis that I conducted in North Carolina indicates that in 2013–2014 the state contributed significantly less per student per year (\$6,189) in the community college system than for students in the 4-year system (Cassidy, 2014), as illustrated in Table 1. This means that the state saves this amount per year in tax dollars for each student who chooses a community college over a 4-year school.

**Table 1: Comparison of Annual 4-Year and 2-Year Tuition and Fees in North Carolina (2013–2014)**

2013–2014	Tuition (12 hours)	Fees	Tuition and Fees Total	State Contribution Per Student
Community college	\$858	\$65	\$923	\$5,549
4-year university tuition (average across 16 University of North Carolina campuses)	\$3,967	\$2,129	\$6,096	\$11,738

Source: Cassidy, D. (2014). *Cost Benefit Analysis: Using Community College Credit toward 4-Year Degrees*. Unpublished Manuscript, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

However, these savings—both for the student and the state—are not realized for students in early childhood education if they transfer to a 4-year program and do not receive full credit for their 2-year degree (Cassidy, 2014). As shown in Table 2, a student who completes his or her first 2 years of education at a community college results in significant personal as well as state savings, compared to a student who enrolls in a 4-year degree program as a freshman. The North Carolina savings in Table 2 represent the difference between the state’s contribution per student in Table 1 above, i.e. \$11,738 less \$5,549, for a total of \$6,189. The student savings has been similarly calculated by the author.

**Table 2: Annual Student and State Savings through Use of 2- and 4-Year Higher Education in North Carolina (2013-2014)**

Savings	Per Student	Per 1000 Students
<b>Savings</b>	2 years per student (based on enrollment in community college instead of NC 4-year institution)	Projected for 1,000 early childhood education (ECE) transfer students per year (approximately half of the total number of ECE transfer students yearly)
<b>Student Savings</b>	\$10,346	\$10,346,540
<b>State of NC Savings</b>	\$12,378	\$12,378,000
<b>Total Savings Based on 2-Year Enrollment</b>	\$23,824	\$23,824,000

Source: Cassidy, D. (2014). *Cost Benefit Analysis: Using Community College Credit toward 4-Year Degrees*. Unpublished Manuscript, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

A concern of many 4-year schools may be the loss of revenue if early childhood education students enroll in community colleges for their first 2 years, rather than attending a senior institution for 4 years. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the program has not experienced a decrease in tuition dollars because, as a result of high-quality articulation agreements, there has been a 300 percent increase in enrollment in the birth–kindergarten program. Therefore, the articulation agreements more than made up for the loss in revenue that occurred as a result of students completing their first 2 years at a community college.

**Diversity:** Another benefit at University of North Carolina Greensboro has been the increased enrollment of students of color in our program (UNC Greensboro, 2014). Students of color are disproportionately enrolled in community colleges, often because of the lower costs of 2-year degree programs. Improving articulation agreements has resulted in increased diversity in the program. Table 3 shows that 45 percent of the students who initially enroll as first year students at UNC Greensboro are African American, Hispanic or “other” compared to 57 percent of those who transfer in from community colleges. As a faculty member, I can see that the diversity of experience has notably changed the composition of our classes and the depth of discussions that occur.

**Table 3: Racial/Ethnic Composition of UNC Greensboro Students (Fall 2014)**

	European American	African American	Hispanic	Other
<b>Freshman</b>	109 (55%)	65 (33%)	14 (7%)	9 (5%)
<b>Transfer</b>	50 (44%)	58 (51%)	2 (2%)	3 (4%)
<b>Total</b>	159 (51%)	123 (40%)	16 (5%)	12 (4%)

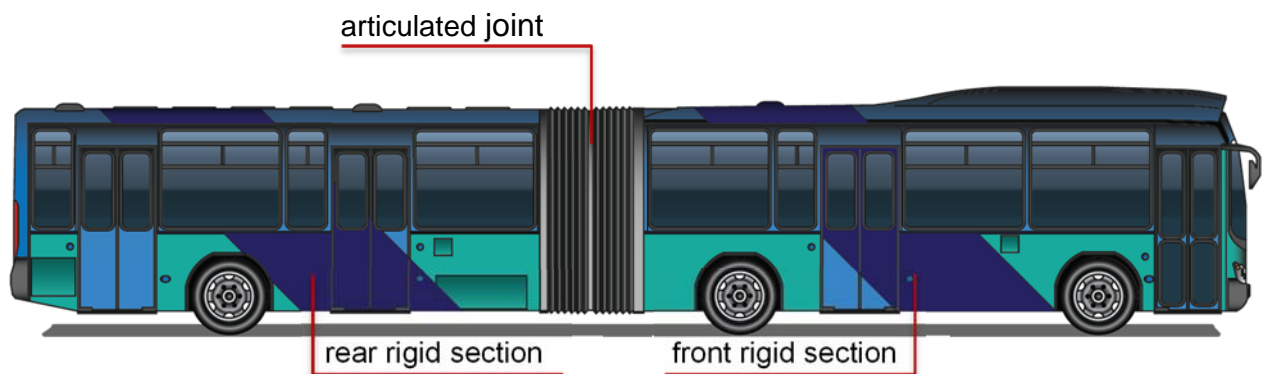
Source: University of North Carolina at Greensboro. (2014). Student Data Profile [Queryable database].

Retrieved from the Office of Institutional Research: <http://ire.uncg.edu/SDP/>.

# Jumping the Hurdles in Our Current System of Unarticulated Agreements



While there are benefits to high-quality articulation agreements, there are many hurdles remaining. We know that many universities have not embraced the notion of articulation and that this is a major hurdle. Using the metaphor of an articulated bus may help us see this more clearly. Following along with the drawing below, the university 4-year degree programs represent the “front rigid section,” while the A.A.S. degree programs represent the “rear rigid section.” The “articulated joint” of the bus is represented by the connecting flexible policies and procedures that make up high-quality articulation agreements. In this section we explore the hurdles, as well as ideas for jumping them and creating the “articulated joint” that is needed.



**Course Competencies and Course Numbering:** Course competencies has often been listed as an issue in accepting community college courses for credit at 4-year institutions. Community colleges often use course numbers equivalent to 100- and 200-level courses at 4-year institutions. Four-year programs often offer their courses in the major of early childhood education at the upper division. The argument then becomes that the 4-year

institutions cannot accept a 100-level course for a 400-level course—the rigor and complexity of the course is not equivalent.

I have seen this argument presented when the content of the course demonstrated the opposite, and the identical textbook was used for both courses. My strategy as a faculty member at UNC Greensboro was to approach the issue from a competency perspective rather than a course number position. That is, what are the competencies covered in the lower division course, and how do they match up with the competencies of the upper division course?

This is less challenging if both the 2-year and 4-year programs are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The alignment of these two accreditation programs enables alignment of course competencies. Indeed, it is also critical to think of the alignment as program to program rather than course by course. Many 2- and 4-year programs have different course organizations (e.g., a 2-year program may have some content in one course and some content in another, while the 4-year school has all of that content in one course), but overall the program competencies are comparable across the 2-year and 4-year programs. Program to program articulation would require accepting all of the credits from the community college and then merely designing a program completion at the 4-year school, which includes requirements such as student teaching in an approved setting and other teacher education requirements. Such a strategy has worked well in many states (see <https://earlyeducatorcentral.acf.hhs.gov/articulation-agreements> for state approaches to program to program articulation).

**General Education Course Requirements:** We see dramatic differences between 2-year degrees and 4-year bachelor's degrees. Because the receiving institution may require as many as 30–45 general education courses, it is likely that community college transfer students will be required to take some general education courses at 4-year institutions during their junior and senior years. The question becomes how to balance the number of



“in the major” courses taken with the number of general education courses taken in the last 2 years.

The most feasible strategy seems to be ensuring that those few general education courses taken at the community colleges transfer for general education credit at the receiving institution. Often, this demands communication between institutions at a statewide level. In North Carolina, usually it was an issue that could be resolved through communication, i.e. raising the question of why students were required to take a biology course that did not transfer when there was an equivalent course available that did transfer.

It is imperative that we do not create “upside programs,” where transfer students take all of their major courses at the community college and then in their last 2 years take only general education courses. This creates a situation where students are too “far away” from their methods courses when they do their student teaching. We must strive for a balance of early childhood education and general education courses for transfer students during their final 2 years at the senior institution.

**Perception Around Rigor: Are Community College Students Prepared to Transfer?** Many 4-year faculty members question how prepared community college A.A.S. students are for success in a bachelor’s degree program. This questions the rigor of the coursework and the quality of the faculty in the community college system. To test this assertion, I compared the grade point averages (GPAs) of senior transfer students to seniors who had enrolled as freshman at UNC Greensboro .Over a 5-year period, the average GPA was 3.27 for senior transfer students and 3.35 for those who had enrolled as freshman students (Cassidy, 2007). These data are very similar to data from 10 years earlier indicating identical GPAs of 3.22 for transfer and those who enrolled as freshman at UNC Greensboro as seniors (Cassidy, 2007). All students had lower GPAs as juniors than they did as seniors. However, on average, the transfer student GPA increased from 2.72 in the earlier study to 2.98 in the most recent 5-year period (Cassidy, 2007). These data indicate the success of the community college early

childhood education transfer students in 4-year degree programs and the rigor of the coursework and instruction.

**Degree and Program Types:** Although a lower hurdle, it is quite likely that the articulation agreements will need to be restricted to early childhood education (2-year) to early childhood education (4-year) degrees. The agreements are often built specifically by major and may not allow students to major in other options or departments. This is due to the specificity of the content and competencies. This does limit A.A.S. degree students from total flexibility with their community college degrees. Once they choose early childhood education as a career option at the community college, it does not allow the multitude of choices that a community college Associate of Arts (predominantly or entirely general education transfer courses) would allow. Most often, this is not a concern for students and indeed fits well with their career goals.

**Maximizing Actual Transfers of Credit:** It is important to ensure that we do not create agreements that look good upon first glance but do not stand up under scrutiny. For example, we might see the potential of 55–65 hours transferring, but find, on closer examination, that the student is still required to take another 80 hours or more at the receiving institution. Indeed, the credit hours accepted are often for elective credit and do not “count” for actual credit in the degree program. Such agreements can also be punitive to students. In North Carolina, there is a surcharge that is applied when a student reaches 140 credit hours that is 150 percent of the tuition for all hours over this total!

## Final Thoughts

As a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and former state administrator in North Carolina, I recognize firsthand the need for improved articulation agreements between 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions in early childhood education. It is essential that all young children have highly qualified teachers who possess the knowledge base to educate and nurture them. It is incumbent on all of us—2-year and

4-year faculty, state administrators, and early childhood leaders—to make it happen. Many states now have early childhood education professional development advisory committees as well as meetings of 2- and 4-year early childhood education faculty that enable these relationships to develop and allow for greater understanding of the goals and priorities of the programs. There is no one right way to get it done, but rather many approaches that lead to success. There is no question that developing professional relationships across institutions is the first step. For faculty across systems and early childhood education leaders, we must establish opportunities to meet on a regular basis. These relationships are essential for great articulation agreements and great teachers!

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Her credentials include a Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education from the University of Illinois and a Master's degree from the University of Illinois in Child Development. She has authored and co-authored dozens of reports and articles dealing with early childhood issues, particularly child care quality and the professional development of early childhood teachers and providers.