

Challenges with Implementing HB 2998

Problem Statement

Higher education institutions are highly decentralized organizations, especially in Oregon where each public community college and university is governed by an independent board. Community colleges and universities determine course offerings, general education, graduation and major requirements based on the priorities of their departments and institutions, leading to variance in common majors across the state. Higher education institutions, via curricular committees and faculty senates, have the authority to develop general education, major, and institutional requirements based on institutional mission, essential foundational and disciplinary knowledge required for program coherence at various levels of degree achievement, student-employer-region-state needs. The benefits of this variance/diversity reflects mission differentiation but also makes credit transfer challenging and approximate rather than simple and singular. During the first 18 months of work on the implementation of HB 2998, several barriers to implementation have been identified and are detailed below. These barriers are organized by type.

Authority

1. The authority to determine curricular content resides with the faculty. This means that each higher education institution or department can set curricular requirements that are different from those of similar departments at other universities or community colleges. What this means for the development of Major Transfer Maps (MTMs) is that when departments that are outliers are unwilling to change their requirements, it leads to MTMs that build extra credit into them by requiring all students take the course(s) required by one institution. Where there is little agreement about courses or content, it can also lead to MTMs that are so general as to be unhelpful for students. While HB 2998 clearly articulates the requirement that community colleges and public universities develop unified statewide transfer agreements, it does not provide a clear path towards resolving institutional disagreements.

Workgroup Design

2. MTM workgroups were designed to bring together faculty and advisors with disciplinary expertise in order to build consensus about what knowledge and courses are required for a student to enter a university as a junior in the major. In some instances, these individuals are not sufficiently empowered, even with consultation with their home institutions, to represent their departments and to negotiate changes to major requirements that would bring requirements into greater alignment.

3. Major requirements exist alongside general education requirements. MTM workgroup members are experts in their disciplines, but do not necessarily have expertise in or authority over, institutional general education requirements. One of the barriers to creating common MTMs is variance in general education requirements across the seven public universities. While Core Transfer Maps (CTMs) were intended to help streamline general education credit transfer, CTMs are only a 30-35 credits subset of general education. Therefore, when we are trying to build an MTM, we often have to look at additional general education requirements across universities.

Curricular Variance

4. Courses with the same course number and title do not contain the same content across all community colleges or universities. This leads to situations where MATH 111 taught by Linn-Benton Community College will transfer in as equivalent to the Oregon State University course with the same number, while MATH 111 from Portland Community College does not because it does not cover all of the same modules. HB 2998 explicitly states that community colleges and public universities shall develop unified statewide transfer agreements that “enable a student to transfer from a community college to a public university without the loss of academic credit or the requirement to retake a course at a public university that the student has successfully completed at a community college.”

5. Where there is agreement about skills and content students must master, there may still be differences in which courses contain those skills and content. This applies to course sequences, especially in the sciences. When the content is organized differently across terms, and students transfer mid-sequence, they may need to retake the entire sequence (this is the case for Biology). A non-sequenced example is that all business programs expect their students to develop skills with Excel, but that content is in a range of different courses.

6. Departments in the same discipline at different universities do not have a shared vision on what skills students must master by the junior year. Business departments, for example, do not agree on what level of math is necessary for entry to the major or graduation from the university. For example, University of Oregon and Oregon State University's schools of business emphasize financial analysis, which requires calculus. However, Eastern Oregon University does not have a finance track and therefore does not require calculus.

7. Some university faculty have expressed concern over the rigor of community colleges courses and wish to maintain the practice of accepting two community college courses as the equivalent of one university course, or three community college courses as the equivalent of two university courses. This issue has been addressed. It is also clear that it is not permissible under HB 2998.

Capacity and Sustainability

8. Rural and/or small community colleges are not able to offer all the courses identified in the MTMs due to lack of available faculty and/or low enrollment. A student enrolled at a small college will need to transfer earlier, or enroll in more than one institution, to complete MTM requirements.

9. Higher education institutions writ large, and departments specifically, depend on student enrollment and tuition for support. There is the perception that greater acceptance of community college courses may lead to lower enrollments in courses at universities and decrease their available funds and consequently undermine their sustainability.