



## TACKLING TRANSFER



### [TACKLING TRANSFER \(/BLOGS/TACKLING-TRANSFER/\)](/BLOGS/TACKLING-TRANSFER/)

Elevating transfer work while sharing lessons and tools for success.

# Using Short-Term Improvement Cycles to Accelerate Progress on Transfer

Collaboration between a university and a community college in south Florida shows what happens when institutions focus on the work that “needs to be done right now.”

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If the pandemic has shown anything, it is that colleges and universities can make significant change -- like scaling online learning or implementing test-blind admissions policies -- much faster than they thought. Fortunately, there's a process that can make rapid change far more manageable than the haphazard experience many institutions had in spring 2020.

Short-term improvement cycles, pioneered for public purposes and developed over time by the [Carnegie Foundation \(https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/six-core-principles-improvement/\)](https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/six-core-principles-improvement/) and the [Institute for Health Care Improvement \(http://www.ihc.org/Topics/ImprovementCapability/Pages/default.aspx\)](http://www.ihc.org/Topics/ImprovementCapability/Pages/default.aspx), are commonly used in a variety of settings inside and outside education. In recent years, our team at Inside Higher Ed has been working with institutions to use simplified 90-day and 120-day improvement cycles to make some of the most vexing problems that negatively impact transfer students.

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improve the quality of problem solving, long-term goals and nearer-term [SMART goals](#)

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be broken down even further into the most important work that needs to be done right now. When institutions adopt this approach and have the right people at the table to carry out rapid improvement cycles, they can accomplish a lot in a short period of time.

We were particularly impressed by recent short-term improvement cycle work undertaken by Florida International University and Miami Dade College. So we asked Janie Valdés, the assistant vice president for enrollment management and services at FIU, to share more about her experiences leading transfer improvement efforts at one of the largest transfer-serving universities in the country. Valdés described [FIU's Connect4Success](#) (<https://admissions.fiu.edu/how-to-apply/connect4success/index.html>), a nationally recognized guided transfer pathway that emphasizes that success is co-owned by FIU and its transfer partners.

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*Good transfer work cannot be done in isolation; you must cultivate trusting, candid and balanced partnerships with your sending colleges. Time and again, our students have told us what they need to understand in the onboarding process: (1) how their credits transferred, (2) how to pay for college and (3) how to engage with peers -- in that order. We have worked diligently to address these needs.*

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Compared to many institutions, FIU is way ahead of the game when it comes to effectively serving transfer students. Guaranteed admission, joint events, advising by FIU Bridge Advisors housed at the three largest-sending partner colleges, and the issuance of an FIU student ID card all “affirm that a seat is waiting” for community college transfer students. And once students transfer, robust supports are in place to ensure they maintain and deepen their sense of belonging and purpose at FIU.

As a public Hispanic- and minority-serving institution, FIU has engaged in a range of efforts to understand and close equity gaps, expand Black and Latinx student participation in STEM programs, and promote a culturally responsive environment for students by engaging in ongoing, deep listening to students themselves. But for a university with such a robust track record promoting transfer student success, and in a state

<https://www.frontierset.org/>), FIU and MDC decided to focus on improving the transfer pathway for business majors. Based on a collaborative review of data and the use of a [self-assessment exercise](https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2yr_Aspen-CCRC-PA_TransferPlaybook_Essential-Practices_Assessment-Tool_2yr_08-01-2017.pdf) ([https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2yr\\_Aspen-CCRC-PA\\_TransferPlaybook\\_Essential-Practices\\_Assessment-Tool\\_2yr\\_08-01-2017.pdf](https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2yr_Aspen-CCRC-PA_TransferPlaybook_Essential-Practices_Assessment-Tool_2yr_08-01-2017.pdf)) included in the [Transfer Playbook](https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.html) (<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.html>), the teams from FIU and MDC found that students were meeting and exceeding the minimum GPA required for admission, but they were not completing prerequisites prior to transfer. The teams decided to focus on that because completion of prerequisites is critical to progression in upper-level courses and minimizes the risk of students graduating with excess credit hours, which in Florida carries a surcharge.

The cross-institutional team engaged in the short-term improvement cycle uncovered outdated information in transfer guides, brochures and websites. They developed and rapidly executed a multipronged strategy to update information and ensure both advisers and students were able to access the information they needed. Specifically, they 1) collaboratively redesigned a College of Business Transition Workshop for MDC advisers, 2) redesigned and delivered a transition workshop for MDC business majors, 3) updated all resources available online, and 4) created a new one-page business advising guide with transfer tips and milestones. And they did all this in three months.

Importantly, while the cross-institutional team was working on improving communication around updated admission and degree requirements to all constituents, they also identified a key opportunity to resolve a long-standing pain point for transfer students. Miami Dade allows students to complete a computer literacy requirement through a competency-based assessment, but FIU required an actual course for MDC transfer students. For MDC students, this added credits, time and money. Based on targeted advocacy work undertaken by the team involved in the FIU/MDC improvement project, FIU's College of Business agreed to substitute the MDC assessment for the prerequisite, allowing students to complete more prerequisites prior to transfer. This unanticipated consequence of an improvement cycle that was initially focused on improved communication represented a major win for students and a new pride point for FIU and MDC. The team left the cycle excited about what they accomplished and motivated to keep tackling the hard issues. As Julie Alexander, vice provost for academic affairs at MDC, said,

*We surprised ourselves at the amount of progress we were able to make in 90 days. Taken in "bite-sized" chunks, we were focused and able to remove known roadblocks that have been in place for years. Implementing a three-phase initiative, 30 days for each phase, we set a path to corr*

When we asked Valdés to reflect on the value of using a short-term improvement process to accelerate progress, she said,

*It felt like we were a rapid response team -- we were highly focused and efficient. The process forces you to be organized and accountable. Each of our team members also had strong networks at our respective institutions, which allowed us to move quickly through data collection, environmental scanning, planning and execution. I was surprised at the simplicity and utility of the process. We learned how much we could accomplish during a short period of time when we have quality data, clear goals and dedicated team members who can execute. We also left the project with more questions and plans for future projects.*

In the coming months, the Tackling Transfer partners will be sharing a small, user-friendly tool kit for building high-quality short-term improvement cycles aimed at accelerating progress on vexing problems of practice. In the meantime, we encourage transfer partners to explore what might be gained from taking longer-term goals and breaking them into smaller pieces of work, grounded in data and oriented around a shared sense of purpose. We know that doing so can strengthen muscles for collaboration and deepen the trust required to remove barriers to transfer student success.

Read more by [Alison Kadlec](#)



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