Montana Legislative Audit Division
Performance Audit Summary

Transfer of Credits

December 2004

Introduction

In February 2001 the Legislative Audit Division provided information to several legislators concerning transferring of college credits between Montana University System (MUS) units. Although problems with transfers did not appear widespread, legislators continued to receive student complaints about timeliness of decisions and poor communication between institutions. Based on this information, the Montana Legislative Audit Committee requested a performance audit to examine the processes and procedures used for transferring student credits.

Audit Scope

Audit scope focused on the following audit objectives:

- Determine if institutional procedures provide a predictable process for students to transfer credits.
- Determine if the Board of Regents (Regents) - MUS transfer evaluation policies assure consistent and equitable treatment of students.
- Determine if transferring between nursing programs can be improved.

Transfer of credits is intended to be a system-wide process rather than an isolated management procedure on specific campuses; therefore audit objectives and testing were directed at MUS management of the transfer of credit process as a whole. We focused on the overall framework created to manage transfer of credits. Audit work concentrated on primarily four areas of degree study: nursing, engineering, business, and education.

Conclusion: Current Process Is Not Predictable for Students

When a new MUS governance structure was implemented in July 1994, student expectations and perceptions also began to change. Students perceived they were enrolled in a coordinated and consistent statewide delivery system for higher education. Our audit work found this perception does not reflect current practice. All MUS institutions have developed independent transfer of credit processes. Campus policies and interpretation of Regents policies vary. Procedures to direct the process and ensure timely decisions for students are not in place at all institutions. Communication of methods used is not occurring on a statewide level. We found the transfer of credit process has not been standardized to reflect a system-wide perspective. This has several inconsistencies for students including:

- Timeliness of transfer evaluations varied extensively. We found decisions on the acceptance or denial of credits could take place within one day or in some cases, years after the transfer.
- When conducting file review we found decisions on why credits did or did not transfer were often not documented. Throughout the MUS, reasons for credit acceptance or denial was only noted in eight percent of the files.
- We found transfer evaluation decisions in faculty advising files, advising center files, department files, registration files, and admission files. Transfer evaluations were also documented in numerous ways including faculty notes, x's or dashes on a transcript, or codes on Banner. In some cases we were unable to interpret the documents due to faculty turnover.

The Regents Should Define Standard Procedures to Promote Predictability

Defined procedures for timely decisions, process documentation, and centralized student information provide more predictability for students. These procedures could focus on strengthening the administration of course transfer decisions. We found existing campus practices, as well as other state standards, could be incorporated into developing these statewide procedures.

Management Information Needed for Regents' Decision Making

Management information is necessary to make informed decisions and provide guidance in the transfer process. Current information collected relies upon annual institutional surveys of transfer students. Although campuses have actively sought feedback from students for these surveys, limited information is gathered. Therefore, the Regents do not have the information needed to make informed decisions on unifying the transfer process throughout the MUS. ***By using trend data and comparative statistics the Regents will be able to make the necessary decisions that promote system unity as well as equity for transferring students***.

Core Requirements Should Be Clarified and Monitored

The Regents adopted a policy and general education core guidelines to establish a framework of academic courses at each unit that would transfer throughout the MUS. Each campus has developed its own interpretation of this policy and procedures for transferring general education courses. This has created inconsistencies and confusion on this policy. In addition, steps have not been taken to assure all institutions have adopted or complied with these requirements. ***The Regents should clarify requirements in this policy and monitor compliance at the units to improve a student's ability to transfer within the MUS.***

Policy Needed for Two-Year Credit Transfers

There is limited policy from the Regents regarding transfer of credits from two-year institutions. It is up to each institution to discern whether Regents' policies apply to two-year credit transfers. With limited Regents guidance, each program has developed independently resulting in programs with widely varying credit requirements and distinct differences in transferability of seemingly similar courses. ***The Regents should develop policy for transfers for two-year degrees.***

Academic Policies for Transfer Needed

To account for limited policy guidance in certain areas, campuses have developed their own policies in the transfer process, which are not necessarily consistent. ***We believe the Regents should take a leadership role in promoting consistency in the transfer of credit process*** by strengthening their transfer of credit policies relating to outdated coursework, transfer of a GPA, and course grades.

MUS Nursing Programs Have Unique Transfer Challenges

This audit was conducted in part due to questions and concerns related to transfer of credits between MUS nursing programs. Audit findings indicated all of the reviewed degree programs had similar issues in the areas of process controls and Regent policies. However, we found there are unique challenges to the nursing programs that require further review and more specific guidance.

Despite Standard Curriculums, Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) Transfers are Problematic

Although interviews with MUS nursing instructors indicated major differences exist between curricula offered in LPN programs, we did not identify major differences during our review. To examine the different programs, we developed a matrix (page 36) highlighting each program curriculum. Although the matrix indicates some differences exist, overall, we found LPN curriculum does not differ considerably among programs/campuses. Curricula of the five MUS LPN programs are closely related and teach comparable content per Board of Nursing guidelines. ***Despite similarities, transfer of credits does not occur as expected between LPN programs.***

Number of Credits Required in LPN Programs Also Problematic

We found the number of credits required for LPN programs ranged from 45 to 70 credits. This type of credit variances impact program cost for students. If a student graduates from an LPN certificate program with 45 credits and another student graduates from another LPN program with 70 credits, the first student could pay on average approximately $3000 less.

Transfers From LPN Programs to RN Programs Also Unpredictable

Only one program (MSU-Great Falls College of Technology) has all nursing-related coursework accepted to the MSU-Bozeman RN program. This is the only program offering a "transferable" AAS degree. Although this program has lower credit requirements than three of the other LPN programs, 41 of the required 65 credits will transfer to the Bozeman RN program. The number of credits accepted from other LPN programs ranges from 0 to 12 credits.

MUS Leadership for Nursing Programs is Needed

Audit work concluded the majority of MUS nursing transfer issues are with the design of the LPN programs and how those program credits transfer within MUS. ***We believe the Regents should take a direct approach to address the current design of the LPN programs.*** To aid in consistency among nursing programs, LPN program standardization could be developed in the areas of minimum number of credits required, type of degree awarded, and systematically fair transfer agreements.

For a complete copy of the report (04P-06) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to lad@mt.gov; or check the web site at http://leg.mt.gov/audit.