

## Seamless Educational Pathways: Insights from the CO-PALS Transfer Project

With dedicated interest in offering viable two- to four-year transfer opportunities to community college students, in early 2014 the [Colorado Community College System](#) and [Colorado State University Global Campus](#) began partnering on the *Colorado Policy, Analytics, and Learning at Scale* (CO-PALS) pilot project. Encouraging increased retention and transfer rates among at-risk Career and Technical Education students who might not otherwise complete their associate's degree and consider transfer, the project focused on developing strategies to build awareness of baccalaureate opportunities and support students in their transition into articulating degree programs.

Funded by the Colorado State University (CSU) Venture Capital Fund, the pilot supported an underlying initiative launched by the CSU System Board of Governors to increase innovation and promote collaboration in higher education and aligned with Colorado Community College System (CCCS) strategic goals of offering seamless transfer opportunities; providing opportunity for students to succeed through quality, cutting edge educational services; and increasing partnerships with other higher education institutions.

The CO-PALS project was managed by the CCCS administration office, which conducted project awareness, supported the community colleges in development of transfer strategies and program implementation, coordinated and conducted navigator professional development, collected implementation data, and interfaced with the Colorado State University Global Campus (CSU-Global) community college outreach coordinator to align newly developed practices and analytics. Participating community colleges included two in the Denver Metro area – Arapahoe Community College and the Community College of Aurora as well as two rural institutions – Trinidad State Junior College and Lamar Community College in Southern and Southeastern Colorado respectively. The colleges aligned with CSU-Global staff to implement outreach and transfer strategies.



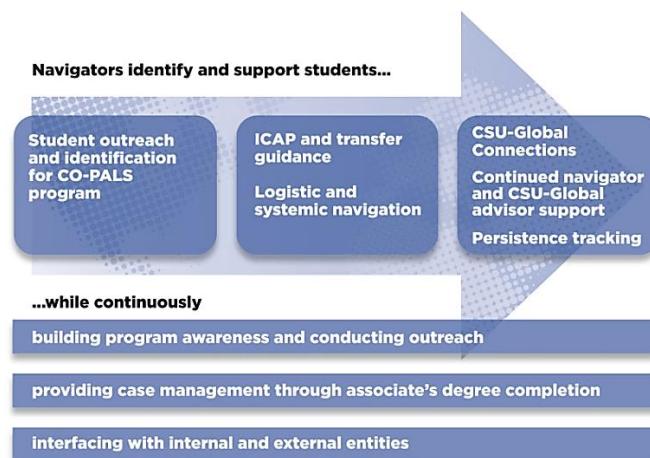
***CO-PALS Organizational Model***

Six key strategies were employed to develop and implement seamless transition strategies. **Community college transfer navigators** built program awareness; conducted student outreach; provided intensive educational case management; guided students through individualized career and academic planning (ICAP); and facilitated transfer processes. A core group of **CSU-Global advisors assigned to in-coming CO-PALS students** provided individualized transcript evaluation, enrollment guidance, and student support services to foster

smooth transition and academic success. **Community college navigator and CSU-Global advisor relationship building** focused on maintaining processes to help ensure a smooth transition processes. To offer credit transfer ease, CSU-Global and the colleges revised existing and developed new **Career and Technical Education (CTE) articulation crosswalks**. Understanding the need for **manageable education costs**, CSU-Global offered a tuition guarantee lock-in and a 10% tuition discount scholarship through baccalaureate degree completion. CO-PALS students became eligible for the tuition lock-in upon completion of 30 credit hours of their associate's degree through one year after graduation from the community college. And, in order to increase awareness of the CSU-Global transfer opportunities for CTE students at non-participating colleges, the CCCS administration office conducted **statewide outreach** to inform other colleges in the System.

Development and implementation of the transfer navigator role and services was essential to the CO-PALS project. Drawing from earlier CCCS career and college navigator programs, the CO-PALS navigators honed their role by modifying core practices and developing systemic and logistical processes to create seamless transfer opportunity. To support execution of their work, navigators received significant professional development leveraged by partnerships maintained by CCCS and CSU-Global. Training consisted of: core duties and services; data collection; CSU-Global student orientation, portal functions, and advising services; *CollegeInColorado.org* planning tools; labor market information; motivational interviewing; postsecondary and workforce readiness and program of study concepts; academic advising; interest inventory and value assessment interpretation; prior learning assessment; student self-efficacy, goal-setting, and time management; and ethics in counseling. In addition, the navigators attended a Colorado Association for Career and Technical Education (CACTE) state conference, where they received professional development in leadership skills; micro-messaging; career guidance strategies, and CTE best practices.

With frequent navigator-student contact in mind, developing and implementing a focused outreach and support process was important for program success. The graphic below illustrates the CO-PALS process from a chronological perspective. With underlying, ongoing awareness building, interface with campus service areas, and case management, navigators conducted outreach and identified students for the program, provided comprehensive advising and ICAP guidance, and coached students in the transfer process through "hand-off" to CSU-Global advisors. The navigators then followed up with both students and the advisors.



### ***CO-PALS Outreach and Seamless Transition Process***

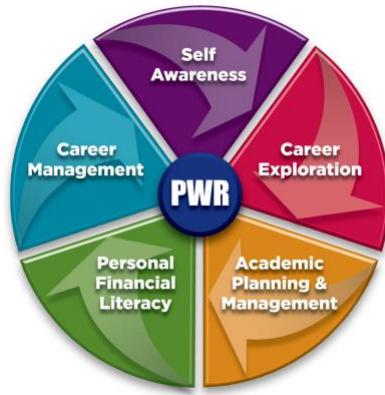
CO-PALS awareness building among administrators, faculty, enrollment staff, and advising professionals was essential for the program. The navigators provided promotional material, sent informational email messages, held face-to-face meetings, participated in student support events, and facilitated deeper connections with the CSU-Global outreach coordinator. Student-focused outreach practices varied at each college. To reach wide audiences, the navigators placed notices on learning management systems, posted announcements around the facilities, and emailed informational messages to targeted populations (online-student groups, program-specific students, “30+ credit hour completion” students, incoming freshmen, undeclared major students, TRIO students, and alumni). Interactive strategies were numerous. Navigators visited CTE program students; conducted meetings with student organizations; called scholarship recipients, honors students, and transfer students directly; facilitated evening information sessions; shared information during testing site exit interviews; manned transfer and career fairs; and conducted themed ICAP workshops. A particularly successful and sustaining effort was facilitating a transfer club. Though varying by college, external awareness-building vehicles consisted of linked college web sites to CSU-Global CO-PALS landing pages; Facebook posts and Twitter feeds; local newspaper and newsletter articles; meetings with local workforce centers, businesses, county commissioners, community organizations, and a local chamber of commerce; an interview with a local radio program; visits to local high schools and adult education centers; and presentations at state conferences.

Interfacing with campus service areas and external entities, the navigators supported students with one-on-one comprehensive advising to help students mitigate academic, affective, and logistic barriers. Together, they assessed core values and interests; accessed campus and community resources; set career and academic goals; developed time management, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy skills; and implemented seamless transfer supports.



### ***Transfer Navigator Interface***

Dovetailing on Colorado’s best practice of implementing ICAP at the secondary education level as well as in CCCS college transition projects, holistic ICAP was employed in the CO-PALS project with a focus on *meaningful career conversation* and *career literacy skill development*. Navigators applied an adult learner approach, breaking down the process into six essential components. With the central goal of students developing *Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness* skills (PWR), navigators initiated the ICAP process with student



### ***Components of Individual Career and Academic Planning for Adults***

self-awareness building, as synthesis of personality traits, aptitudes, values, and prior life experience informs and supports the subsequent components. In addition to receiving direct navigator support, the majority of CO-PALS students created accounts on *CollegeInColorado.org* – a State-managed online career and college planning tool – accessing interest inventories, work value sorters, labor market information, financial literacy tools, etc., and developing an online ICAP portfolio.

Two important navigator objectives of ICAP were to foster student understanding of the importance of identifying realistic career and related academic goals, as well as to instill the practice of revisiting the ICAP process periodically to ensure academic and career “fit” as a student evolved during their academic career. Considered essential to effective ICAP facilitation, the navigators guided students through the ICAP development process utilizing *motivational interviewing* and *micro-messaging* methodologies.

To further support the navigators’ work, a database was designed specifically for CO-PALS student record-keeping and tracking. Via the database, the navigators were able to document student goals (academic program, credential, transfer, and career), recruiting and counseling strategies, as well as follow student progress through a case management tracking system that included appointment-scheduling, student progress tracking, and navigator notes functions.

During the course of the project, the navigators had determined that prior to their work, many administrators, faculty, and student services staff at their colleges were unaware of CTE student transfer opportunities with CSU-Global. Therefore, it became evident that a statewide awareness building and outreach effort from the Colorado Community College System administration office could be beneficial for the nine non-participating colleges. Through this effort, CCCS CTE program directors gained knowledge about the articulation opportunities and disseminated this information to secondary and postsecondary administrators, faculty, and counselors. Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO) assistant program directors worked with the CSU-Global outreach coordinator to organize promotional activities at leadership conferences. CO-PALS program and articulation crosswalk information was disseminated and discussed at statewide instructional staff conferences. Student services directors and registrars received and discussed program and articulation information at statewide meetings. CO-PALS presentations were delivered at state and local conferences and System career and transfer advisory committee meetings. And CO-PALS program information was disseminated to external entities, including the Colorado Department of Higher Education, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, and the Colorado Department of

Education's Office of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness and Office of Adult Education Initiatives. Awareness building also took place at the national level via a session at the 2015 American Association of Community Colleges national convention, where the CCCS project manager, CSU-Global community college outreach coordinator, and ACC transfer navigator presented a CO-PALS overview.

In order to identify lessons learned and promising practices, the CCCS office conducted an internal analysis of the CO-PALS pilot from the community college perspective. Quantitative and qualitative information was collected via survey responses and monthly/quarterly reports by navigators and site coordinators; student survey responses; and the CCCS CO-PALS database.

The analysis revealed the following challenges, as expressed by local site coordinators and navigators: limited time to fulfill navigator duties with only .4 – .5 FTE allocations; lack of project buy-in from some administrators; lack of interest/participation from some faculty; difficulty with obtaining complete intake information and/or consent forms with some students; implementation of *in-depth* ICAP processes and/or activities with some students; student follow-through with some navigator-guided events (student no shows); lack of student commitment to transfer due to life barriers; student hesitancy with the online learning format due to limited internet and/or computer access (rural students); and student hesitancy with the online learning format due to fear of failure.

**Program successes:** The majority (78%) of student respondents agreed that they benefited from ICAP support by the navigators; 80% expressed that community college transfer navigators and CSU-Global advisors were helpful in making the transfer process smooth and seamless; and 92% supported the suggestion that community colleges support a transfer navigator position in the future. Local site coordinators and navigators concluded that the CO-PALS program was effective in increasing 1) awareness of CSU-Global transfer opportunities across campus, 2) understanding of the transfer process among the transfer student population, 3) understanding of the role of the navigator and ICAP for adult learners, 4) a two-to four-year transfer culture on campus, and 5) communication with CSU-Global staff. They also reported efficacy in updating and/or developing new articulation crosswalks and in meaningful navigator professional development.

Related to developing transfer navigator practices not previously undertaken, local site coordinators shared their thoughts on having the opportunity to staff a transfer navigator. They reported that outreach efforts resulted in better understanding of CSU-Global programs, adjusted advising practices, and new and revised articulation crosswalks. One reported having gained a great deal as a college by having this position on campus and appreciation for being able to experiment with "what worked to meet students' needs and increase visibility of transfer support on campus by having this dedicated employee for students to consult during their transfer process." Another wrote that the position "fills a much needed gap" at their college, which "should be continued in order to support students who are considering transfer but unaware of the processes, to build awareness of transfer options, and to provide targeted interventions to students to allow for more seamless transfer along with higher retention and completion rates." And a fourth site coordinator expressed the importance of having a dedicated transfer positon to "customize the experience of each student's transfer process to achieve individual goals."

Site coordinators were asked to describe observable changes in their college's two- to four-year transfer practices. They reported an increase in the type of transfer-related events; an identified need in Student Advising to dedicate significant time with students in developing a transfer plan; increased recognition on the part of faculty and student advisors of a staff person to whom they could refer students for transfer support; increased understanding by faculty and

staff of the benefits of transfer processes; a better understanding of how to market with deadlines specific to targeted groups; and gained trust and credibility with faculty to support transfer.

When asked if the participating colleges planned to continue any aspects of the CO-PALS model after the close of the grant, one site coordinator reported their inability to continue without the CO-PALS resources and that they anticipated a significant decline in transfer rates without having a place to go for tailored, supportive services. One intended to find a way to continue funding the navigator position. Another responded that comprehensive advising is incorporated into their student success department, and continuing with these supports would positively affect retention, completion, and transfer. And one site coordinator reported intent in offering two- to four-year transfer strategies through other initiatives.

Navigators were provided opportunity to identify successful support strategies in the program that contribute to a greater understanding of an effective two- to 4-year transition model. Responses included: open dialogue with faculty involved to create articulation crosswalks; regular meetings with other two-year transfer professional staff to discuss challenges and successes; creating a transfer club to promote community among transfer students and disseminate information; adult ICAP development with effective navigator guidance tools; frequent communication with the CSU-Global outreach coordinator; branded web pages and promotional materials that outline articulation crosswalks and transfer processes; relationship building among navigators and CSU-Global staff; regular follow-up by CSU-Global staff; and an extended community college visit by the CSU-Global outreach coordinator to build relationships with administration, faculty, and advising staff.

Results from the statewide awareness building and outreach efforts were significant. The CSU-Global community college outreach coordinator formed relationships with CCCS CTE and CTSO program directors. At the participating colleges, many existing CTE-related articulation crosswalks were reviewed and revised, and the number of new CTE-related crosswalks developed was doubled. Four colleges that did not have a connection with CSU-Global formed relationships with the CSU-Global outreach coordinator, resulting in development of 67 new articulation crosswalks (collectively). And the CSU-Global community college outreach coordinator, becoming more widely known throughout the process, deepened relationships with community college student services staff, developed relationships with academic department leadership, and was asked to join advisory boards.

Though collecting transfer data was a challenge at the colleges due to the “coming-and-going” of students throughout the project, data that was determined concrete indicated promising results. During the course of the navigator services phase (May 2014–May 2015), navigators identified 150 students who confirmed a goal to transfer to CSU-Global. Of those, 108 committed to receiving comprehensive support by the navigators, 46 submitted CSU-Global’s “Letter of Intent” to transfer, 14 transferred, and 85 were in the “transfer pipeline” with confirmed interest in transferring upon completion of their associate’s degree. (Because navigator outreach and support services ceased in May 2015, it no longer became feasible to track students at the colleges.) On the receiving end, CSU-Global transfer data confirmed 73 enrollments by students from CO-PALS colleges between July 2014 and June 2015 and an additional 92 between July 2015 and April 2016 (May and June were not fully reported at the time of developing this article). This data is specific to students who completed their last community college course within fewer than 2 years of applying to CSU-Global). Notably, CSU-Global experienced a 30% increase in transcript submissions between 2014-15 and 2015-16 (count: 360 to 467) and a 16.4% increase in enrollment between the two years (count: 298 to 347). Data disaggregated to include only CO-PALS colleges identified a change of transcripts

received from 85 to 118, an increase of 39% and an increase of students enrolled from 73 to 92, a 26% increase. This clearly shows the transfer opportunity awareness on these campuses and the pipeline that has been created due to the CO-PALS project.

As evidenced by the promising results, the CO-PALS project, while short in duration, should be considered a valuable program to consider for further development. It clearly laid a foundation for future seamless transfer programs, offering responsive student support and transition strategies that serve to inform similar initiatives. With the ever-increasing need to support students in their pursuit of academic pathways and career success, the strategies developed and employed throughout CO-PALS created a model to implement transfer opportunities for years to come.

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