

# FROM COUGAR TO JAGUAR

Coastal Bend College leaders detail how their Rural College Promise program reimagined transfer responsibility.



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COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES HEAR A FAMILIAR story in conversations with local community members: A student successfully completes their coursework and earns an associate degree only to stall or stop after transfer. Credits don't always apply cleanly, the cost rises more than expected, and the momentum built at the community college begins to fade.

These challenges are especially present for rural students. Geographic distance limits four-year options, transportation and housing costs quickly add up, and students face uncertainty about whether continuing to a bachelor's degree is realistic for them. For many, transfer represents not just a change of institution, but a leap into the unknown. This reality raises a critical question for boards to consider: Is successful transfer really the end of a community college's responsibility, or should student success be defined by what happens next?

Most transfer agreements are designed to make sure credits transfer from one institution to another as required coursework rather than electives. They rarely account for whether the credits actually help students finish a bachelor's degree on time or at an affordable cost. Simply put, the agreement works on paper and provides a pathway for students, but it does not guarantee access or progress towards completing a bachelor's degree.

After students transfer, the sending institution often considers its role complete. Advising, financial support, and support services typically stop at the point of transfer, even though many students

may still need help navigating a new institution. As a result, no single institution feels fully responsible for what happens next. Rural students face even less choice for attending a four-year institution within a reasonable distance. The lack of choice can restrict academic options, limit competitive pricing, and force students to relocate if their preferred major is not offered locally.

Even when tuition rates are known, students often experience sudden increases in total costs after transfer. These can include higher tuition, loss of financial aid, new fees, housing and transportation expenses, and reduced access or more competitive jobs for part-time work. For many students, these unexpected costs become a barrier to continuing toward a bachelor's degree.

As discussions around transfer outcomes continued at Coastal Bend College (CBC), it became clear that this challenge could not be addressed through academic agreements alone. The issue touched the college's mission, long-term affordability commitments, and responsibility to rural students who had limited postsecondary options. While administrators could design pathways and negotiate partnerships, trustees were uniquely positioned to consider whether the institution's definition of student success truly aligned with its values.

With the expansion of Promise programs statewide, Coastal Bend College initiated conversations with South Texas College (STC), a regional peer institution that currently offers applied bachelor's degrees, to explore a new model of partnership.

CBC will launch its Cougar Promise program in fall 2026, while STC has operated a Promise program since 2022. Rather than developing a traditional transfer agreement, the institutions designed the Cougar-to-Jaguar Rural Promise Model to function as a coordinated Promise-to-Promise pathway. This model ensures guaranteed affordability, clearly defined eligibility requirements, and aligned advising from entry through bachelor's degree completion. Students who begin at CBC under the Cougar Promise will be able to transfer into an STC bachelor's program while continuing to benefit from STC's Promise program.

Because most of STC's bachelor's degrees are offered fully online, CBC has established on-campus laboratory and support spaces that allow students to complete upper-division coursework while remaining physically connected to a CBC campus. The central principle of this initiative is continuity of institutional responsibility. Students are not viewed as having exited CBC upon transfer, but rather as continuing students who remain supported through advising, facilities, and student success infrastructure.

For the Board of Trustees, this partnership reframes transfer not as an endpoint, but as a continuation of CBC's commitment to student success through degree completion. Trustees played a critical role in approving the partnership framework, ensuring that the model aligns with the college's mission, and confirming that financial and legal responsibilities are clearly defined. As the model was presented, trustees had to engage with several key questions, beginning with financial sustainability and whether the commitment could be maintained over time without creating unintended budget concerns. The board also had to consider risk and accountability to ensure that roles, responsibilities, and expectations between partner institutions were clear and enforceable.

To provide effective oversight, success will be monitored through a small set of practical indicators that reflect student progress beyond transfer. These include whether students continue enrolled after they move to the receiving institution and whether they persist toward bachelor's degree completion.

Before authorizing the Cougar-to-Jaguar Rural Promise Model, trustees asked for clear information to support decision-making. This included enrollment projections to understand potential scale, cost assumptions to assess long-term sustainability, and eligibility criteria to ensure the program aligned with CBC's mission. Trustees also examined how advising responsibilities would be coordinated and how student support would continue for students after transfer.

Boards considering similar models may find several lessons useful. First, transfer agreements alone are not affordability strategies. While articulation is important, access to a bachelor's degree requires explicit

attention to cost, advising continuity, and student support after transfer. Second, Promise programs do not need to end at the associate degree. With thoughtful design, they can be extended through partnerships that preserve momentum and reduce uncertainty for students.

Third, rural context matters. Colleges serving geographically dispersed students may need to think differently about partnerships, online delivery, and local support structures. Finally, shared accountability must be defined clearly. Trustees should expect roles, responsibilities, and measures of success to be articulated before approving new models.

By approaching transfer as a governance issue rather than a handoff between institutions, boards can help ensure that student success is measured not only by where students go next, but also by whether they ultimately reach their educational goals. In an era where boards are increasingly asked to define success beyond enrollment and completion metrics, Promise-to-Promise models offer one way to align mission, affordability, and long-term student outcomes.



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