TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS SERIES

Including Racial Equity as an Outcome Measure in Transfer Research

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Racial inequity is extensively documented in American education yet thus far research identifying the problem has had little impact on changing institutions and systems. Since Coleman's (1966) seminal report on *Equality of Educational Opportunity* exposed systematic disparities between the achievement of White students and students of color, the ubiquity of racial disparities in American education that span from preschool enrollment to the attainment of doctoral degrees has been identified but has not resulted in needed change. Recognizing this, we focus our research with a racial equity lens on one of the most critical student transition points in the P-20 pathway — the transfer of students from community colleges to universities. This Data Note reports on a methodology that we are using to measure the transfer performance of two- and four-year institutions based on the retention and completion of aggregate and disaggregated student groups.

Research using large-scale national datasets reveals the pervasiveness of the problem of low transfer rates but offers limited information about the underlying reasons for why transfer processes fail, especially for students of color. The tendency to treat transfer, as well as transfer research, as a race-neutral endeavor, masks understanding of the extent of inequity that is occurring in the transfer process and ways in which systems and institutions may be adversely impacting the outcomes of minoritized students. Research that overlooks patterns of inequitable outcomes also diverts us from centering transfer within an explicit equity agenda that has the potential to create more equitable transfer outcomes. This Data Note describes the state of current research with regard to measuring equity in transfer and describes our methodology for identifying variation in the performance of transfer partners, according to equity-focused measures.

WHY MEASURING RACIAL EQUITY IN TRANSFER IS IMPORTANT

Studies employing multilevel modeling find that "student characteristic" variables such as race, ethnicity, age, and first-generation student status are just as important or more important, in aggregate, to student transfer than conventional institutional or policy and practice variables (Calcagno et al., 2008; LaSota & Zumeta, 2015; Taylor & Kauppila, 2016). These results align with research that shows demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, and income predict bachelor's degree attainment while institutional factors have more limited impact (Kopko & Crosta, 2015; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2009). These concerning results point to the need for educational institutions, both community colleges and four-year receiving baccalaureate institutions, to adopt more impactful transfer policies and practices to address persistent inequity.

Our work extends previous research on transfer by scholars who use their methodological expertise to not only study but more directly address racial inequities in transfer (see, for example, Bensimon & Dowd 2009; Castro & Cortez, 2016; Dowd, 2011; Hagedorn, Cypers & Lester, 2008; Lanaan &

Jain, 2016). These scholars are using the results that their research generates to work directly with community college and/or university practitioners to implement changes intended to improve transfer outcomes for students of color. Their work integrates an intentional focus on student populations of color in an effort to unmask barriers and challenges that negatively impact these students' educational experiences and outcomes. However, not all transfer research integrates a deliberate racial equity lens, as highlighted in Bensimon's (2017) recent critique of several widely-disseminated reports on transfer and remediation. For example, Bensimon notes that the *Transfer Playbook* (Wyner et al., 2016) makes no mention of racial inequity as a factor that is relevant to transfer. Although the *Playbook* recognizes a number of practices that could contribute to equitable outcomes, including creating pathways that support high-quality instruction with student-centered advising, the report is based upon data that does not allow for race-based disaggregation and analyses. This limitation is a result of using the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) dataset, which lacks data on measures of race and ethnicity, necessarily limiting the ability to conduct analyses that could measure equity relative to outcomes. Moreover, the sampling design also excluded students who move between more than two higher education institutions, sometimes labeled "swirling." This omission is problematic because "swirlers" make up an estimated 45% of the community college students who transfer (Shapiro et al., 2015). In addition, a recent study of transfer in one state shows a higher probability that swirlers are students of color (Soler, 2017).

THE HIGH-PERFORMING TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS STUDY

Our research seeks to address what Crisp and Nunez (2014) have called the "racial transfer gap" in the transfer literature by adding to the extant research that examines how transfer reforms address racial equity (e.g., Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). This study includes multiple states in a mixed-methods design to understand how student transfer happens between two- and four-year institutions. The study begins by identifying institutional pairs where transfer students, and particularly transfer students of color, demonstrate the highest transfer outcomes in the state. This approach works to identify dimensions of the transfer performance of pairs of institutions relative to other pairs, but it does not necessarily indicate that the transfer student outcomes meet an exemplary standard. To this point, using our methodology to study transfer, we have found few pairs of institutions where students of color as a group are retained or graduated at rates equal to the White student group. This concerning result contributes to our desire to further test and refine our methodology. In this Data Note, we present our current analytical approach and consider future research plans.

DATA SOURCES AND SAMPLE

Using a unique dataset collected for the Credit When It's Due[1] study, we examined the outcomes of students in three states who had completed a transfer from a two- to a four-year institution.[2] For this Data Note, the analytical cohort of the three states have 16 pairs, 20 pairs, and 36 pairs, respectively, with each pair having a minimum of 300 students who had transferred between the sending institution (SI), typically a community college, and the receiving baccalaureate institution (RBI).[3] Whereas there are some differences in the datasets by state, the timeframe for students transferring to the university was between 2008 and 2012; the latest date for student outcomes examined for this analysis was Spring 2014.[4]

The CWID dataset includes racial and ethnic variables and also identifies swirlers, intentionally addressing the limitations of some previous transfer research. In our study, it is essential to include these variables in order to understand transfer outcomes of retention or degree completion for students of color, and for students who demonstrate non-traditional college attendance patterns (many of whom are also students of color). For example, over 50% of the transfer students in one state had more than one recorded SI. Had these students been excluded from our analysis, we would have been unable to examine their transfer outcomes.

[1] For more information on the Credit When It's Due Initiative and it's outcomes please visit http://www.uw.edu/ccri/research/transfer/

[2] Three states were chosen for our initial research because of the completeness of the data available and the relative sameness of the available variables included in the CWID datasets in these states.

[3] To conduct our mixed-methods study, we identified pairs of institutions enrolling large numbers of students who appeared to be transferring between the institutions. Second, we selected pairs with a relatively large number of student transfers between institutional pairs so each institution would be expected to recognize transfer as part of its mission and may also have implemented policies and practices for transfer students of color. To this end, we set a minimum of 300 students transferring between institutions, and we ensured that this group included of a sizeable number of students of color.

[4] We fully recognize that 3 years or more, representing 150% of the standard two years to enroll at junior and senior university status would be optimal, but the longitudinal dataset does not extend long enough to capture 3 years for a sufficiently large enough group of students to use this design at this time.

DATA ANALYSIS

To conduct our analysis, we first employed a logistic regression model following the suggestions of Ehrenberg and Smith (2002), with the outcome variable of "earned baccalaureate or still enrolled." The model controls for each student of colors'[5] age, gender, Pell recipient status, and whether the student had taken remedial courses at the community college — all variables found to be important in previous work on college retention and completion. The final predictor variable in this hierarchical regression model was an interaction between the SI and RBI that a student attended. We defined higher-performing institutional pairs to be those institutions where the odds ratio of having graduated or still being enrolled was significantly higher than average. Using this methodology, we generated a list for each state of higher-performing pairs of institutions for students in aggregate.

FINDINGS

Results of this logistic regression revealed that high-performing pairs are mostly comprised of colleges and universities with high enrollments of White students. This finding is consistent with other transfer research that points to greater success rates for White students than students of color. However, this finding is also problematic because it suggests that, if race had not been included in the analysis, we would have biased the selection of institutional pairs to institutions where White transfer students are performing well. In fact, these higher-performing pairs may actually have a super-majority of White students and therefore offer little meaningful information about how students of color experience the transfer process, which is a primary goal of our research. Consequently, we conducted another analysis that specifically examined outcomes for transfer students of color, and we found humbling results. Indeed, none of the institutional pairs revealed equitable outcomes for transfer students of color compared to White transfer students. To better understand this result relative to the racial transfer gap, we delved even more deeply into the data.

Our findings confirm what previous quantitative studies have shown, namely that students of color are not served equitably by the transfer process. Whereas age, GPA and other variables are associated with transfer success (defined as retention or completion of the baccalaureate degree following transfer to a four-year institution), with varying degrees of success depending on an institutional pair, being a student of color was a negative predictor of transfer success for every pair.

Our findings also show that institutions with a relatively high proportion of higher-performing students are predominantly comprised of White students, which may be informative to understanding equity-minded transfer policies and practices. Acknowledging that past research has not considered race explicitly, this finding heightens our desire to gain a more nuanced understanding of the racial transfer gap and how institutional pairs work together to offer equity-minded approaches to the transfer process.

Other equity-focused results that emerged from our initial analysis include our identification of a relatively small number of "open-access" urban RBIs in each state with large numbers of transfer students of color that demonstrate promising outcomes relative to other pairs of institutions in the study. We also found high-performing pairs between rural RBIs and among SIs having a strong, often historic, focus on technical education. These findings point to the need to study institutional pairs that have traditionally received very little attention from transfer researchers if we are to identify ways to make transfer more equitable for students of color.

Our initial findings show wide variations between student outcomes and institutional pairs. For example, in one state, achieving a successful outcome ranged from a decreased odds of 41% to an increased odds of 149% based on the institutional pair and controlling for a range of student demographic characteristics. This suggests that the institutional pair may have a significant though largely unexplored (as of yet) influence on transfer student success.

One other finding that emerged from our analysis of institutional pairs highlights the extensive amount of mobility (or "swirling") among institutions. Specifically, in one state included in our study, over 50% of our sample attended at least two SIs prior to transfer. With 992 unique SIs represented in the data, the scale of the swirling phenomenon is enormous, and much greater than is accounted for in the higher education literature on transfer. Whereas many transfer students are traveling a well-worn path between geographically proximate institutions, this analysis suggests a large number of students are having a far more complex transfer experience than what has been reported in the extant literature on transfer.

CONCLUSION

Our research documents the racial transfer gap and makes clear that pairs of institutions have a substantial amount of

[5] Students of color were Latino, African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Native American or Alaskan Native. We also included Asian students who received a Pell grant at least one semester at the receiving baccalaureate institution

work to do to address this gap. By analyzing data in ways that reveal inequities among student groups it may be possible to uncover important barriers to racial equity in higher education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Bensimon, 2017). Our research also shows the diverse characteristics of high-performing and relatively equitably performing institutions that have received very little attention from researchers who have been studying transfer, and we suggest that these institutions deserve greater attention. Given the scope of racial inequity in transfer, we recommend that researchers adopt a racial equity focus to studying transfer that identifies opportunities for equity-minded transfer reforms. The findings presented here reinforce our motivation to apply a racial equity lens to research that improves transfer success for students of color.

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