

Transfer Leaders Speak: Keeping Students on the Transfer Path during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond



In a spring 2021 survey of California Community College students exploring the impact of COVID-19 on their transfer journey (see sidebar), the RP Group identified colleges where students felt highly satisfied with the transfer support and communication they were receiving during the pandemic.¹

To better understand what these community colleges were doing to effectively meet transfer students' needs during this period of disruption, we conducted follow-up interviews at five² of these institutions. These conversations revealed...

- **New challenges impacting students' transfer success resulting from COVID-19**
- **Adaptations to keep students on their transfer path during remote instruction**
- **Considerations for improving students' transfer outcomes as the pandemic evolves**

This brief summarizes these interview insights, offering transfer practitioners and higher education leaders practical ideas for advancing transfer student retention and completion during these turbulent times.

The RP Group's *Through the Gate* Research Initiative

This effort focuses on identifying ways to increase transfer for a "high-leverage" group of community college students: those who are close to transfer but have not yet made it to university. Through the Gate launched in 2016 with funding from College Futures Foundation.

The RP Group's current *COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Student Transfer* study (2021) builds on our original *Through the Gate* effort and includes...

- A spring 2021 statewide survey of nearly 8,000 California Community College students who completed ≥ 45 transferrable units as fall 2020
- Focus groups with students who both made it through the gate to university during this time as well as those who postponed or abandoned their transfer plans
- Interviews with transfer practitioners at colleges rated highly by students in the statewide survey for their transfer services during the pandemic

Find more information about *Through the Gate* at www.rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate.

¹ Find detailed methodology and findings in *The Impacts of the Pandemic on Students' Transfer Journey: A Technical Report from a Systemwide Study of California Community College Students* at https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/ThroughtheGate/TechnicalReport_The_Impacts_of_the_COVID-19_Pandemic_on_Students_Transfer_Trajectories_FINAL_Sept2021.pdf?ver=2021-10-07-130542-473.

² The RP Group interviewed transfer leaders at Berkeley City College, Cuesta College, College of San Mateo, Norco College, and Santa Ana College. While all fell within the upper quartile, we did not simply select the top five institutions rated highly by students as we wanted to ensure diversity in college size and location.



COVID-19 Created New Challenges Impacting Transfer Student Success

Community college transfer leaders observed that the pandemic generated new obstacles for transfer students, community colleges, and universities alike in an environment already fraught with systemic barriers and unacceptable outcomes for different student groups. Themes included...



Students required greater empathy and support from transfer personnel. Students needed more time to complete steps in the transfer process, increased “hand-holding,” and extra connection. Heightened mental health needs also presented new issues, at times revealing the college’s limited capacity for supporting students’ emotional wellness.



Colleges struggled in the move to remote delivery of all services and supports, including mobilizing personnel and rapidly shifting systems, processes, and practices to ensure student access, engagement, and success in a fully online environment.



Students and universities had reduced connection, despite university efforts to reach out to community colleges and their students. Students experienced diminished contact with prospective transfer destinations due to the lack of campus visits by university representatives and on-site university tours for community college students due to COVID-19 restrictions.



Students faced additional issues accessing the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems. These transfer leaders noted that pre-pandemic, students experienced challenges getting in to high-demand CSU and UC institutions and programs. Some interviewees reported these difficulties only intensified during the pandemic.

New perceived barriers included the increased number of overall applications to the CSU and UC systems (for both transfer and non-transfer students) – creating more competition. And some highly qualified students were rejected by CSUs and UCs due to small errors on their applications – sometimes hard to catch in the remote setting (despite stepped up support).



A Strong Student-Centered Foundation Helped Community Colleges Adapt

Pre-pandemic, these five colleges had identified key priorities and embraced systems, practices, and infrastructure designed to strengthen students’ transfer experience and increase equitable outcomes (see sidebar, p. 3). Once COVID-19 hit, these transfer leaders recognized that keeping students on the path toward their bachelor’s degree required continued innovation and evolution of these supports to address both persistent and new issues impeding students’ retention and success.

These colleges were able to pivot quickly because they were already implementing student-centered practices and considering how to scale and integrate these approaches with other institutional priorities.

New pandemic-era strategies included...



Leveraging technology to rapidly move transfer resources and supports online, in some cases shifting all services to remote delivery; examples included:

- Adoption of new platforms such as Zoom, Cranium Café, and Microsoft Teams
- Development of revamped interactive websites to support students' self-service
- Regular "drop-in" hours online, increased appointments and advanced scheduling, and more flexible availability of transfer center staff during extended hours



Deploying robust communications to the entire campus community, with a specific focus on student-facing campaigns to increase awareness of the continued availability of transfer services and supports; approaches included:

- Use of student email, social media, and learning management systems (LMS) (e.g., Canvas)
- Weekly and monthly transfer student newsletters
- Interactive workshops and on-demand resources (e.g., short videos, live sessions, guides)
- Creative, student-friendly marketing materials
- Messaging to all campus departments about the availability of online transfer resources and help



Developing new programmatic approaches to meet students where they are and address unique challenges experienced both because of remote service delivery and increased stress due to COVID-19; strategies included:

- Individualized university application assistance and review sessions, by appointment and drop-in
- Increased transfer practitioner involvement in student clubs and learning communities to offer graduated support over an extended period
- Development of an appointment system for one-on-one sessions with top transfer destinations
- Robust workshop series to walk students through each component and step in the university application process – broken down into smaller "pieces"
- YouTube transfer ceremony celebrating students' acceptance to university

Student-Centered Transfer Supports Utilized Pre-Pandemic

- Expansion of transfer center capacity through student workers, partnerships with college personnel, and alumni engagement
- Use of technology solutions (e.g., customer relations management (CRM) and learning management systems (LMS)) to engage transfer students at key milestones
- Early introduction of transfer awareness through onboarding activities
- Transfer planning embedded throughout students' academic experience
- Relationship development with top destination universities, particularly competitive programs in the region



All Segments Must Step Up to Strengthen Transfer Student Success as the Pandemic Evolves

Improving students' transfer outcomes – especially for historically underserved groups – remains a top priority for many community college campuses and California's higher education systems. The pandemic will only continue to complicate this call to action.

These transfer leaders offered the following ideas for increasing transfer student success as the pandemic evolves, including suggestions for California's community colleges, universities, and higher education systems. While many of these suggestions relate to COVID-19 impacts on transfer students' march toward their bachelor's degree, others correlate to issues pre-dating the pandemic.

Community Colleges: Demonstrate an Institutional Commitment to Students' Transfer Success

Directly connect equity initiatives, guided pathways redesign, and students' transfer success. Show how these efforts relate to each other in terms of goals and strategies and to make the case for increased investment in transfer resources and supports.

Develop a shared sense of responsibility for student transfer across the institution, beyond the transfer center function. Clearly define how each employee's work directly contributes to improving transfer students' outcomes.

Expand college capacity for supporting transfer students. Meeting the needs of all students interested in transfer – which will likely continue intensifying due to the pandemic – will require more capacity than the "skeleton crew" many colleges currently maintain. Increase transfer center staffing and pursue creative solutions for advising transfer students.

Take a high-touch approach to re-engaging disproportionately impacted (DI) transfer students. Recognizing that the pandemic has affected enrollment for DI populations more intensely, deploy specific strategies for reaching out to these student groups, re-activating their transfer planning, and incentivizing their participation in transfer activities.

Iterate on pandemic-era adaptations to meet transfer students' needs. The transfer leaders interviewed for this study reported a greater uptake of their services in the remote environment. Yet, not all virtual supports were universally successful – highlighting the opportunity to embrace hybrid approaches and continue assessing which innovations to sustain and for which students.

Universities: Directly Connect with Community College Transfer Students to Assure Their Transition

Help students understand the true cost of attendance and financial assistance options. In our study, we found the pandemic has intensified students' worries about financing their education and juggling personal responsibilities outside of school, CSUs and UCs can work with community colleges to inform transfer students about funding options and basic needs supports, ensure they understand financial aid award letters, and know the steps for accessing aid once received.

Reassure students about their preparedness for upper-division coursework. Transfer students have expressed increased concern about their readiness for university-level work, especially given the movement to online learning during the pandemic, which led to them having questions about course rigor. Communicate with transfer students about what to expect at the university post-transfer to bolster their confidence.

Make the application process more student-centered and transparent. Clearly communicate to students what to do after they apply and upon acceptance. When denying an application, provide students detailed information about why they were denied, what specific issues need resolution before re-application, and how to appeal or reapply.

Higher Education Systems: Strengthen Intersegmental Coordination to Boost Bachelor's Degree Completion for Transfer Students

Make transfer more affordable for community college students. Increase both student access to and the amount awarded through state financial aid programs, including the UC Blue and Gold Opportunity Plan and CSU Cal Grant programs.

Increase CSU and UC capacity for transfers to better address the heightened and unpredictable student demand (including non-community college transfers), more rigorous requirements for certain majors, and overall availability of “seats” at key destinations.

Develop intersegmental data sharing agreements to track transfer outcomes. Allow community colleges to monitor where students apply in the CSU and UC, where they are accepted, and where they ultimately attend.

Looking Ahead

These recommendations emphasize keeping the transfer student experience at the center of decision-making and prioritizing and investing in the infrastructure required to increase equitable transfer outcomes. Implicit is the need for collaboration among transfer practitioners and instructional and student services leaders — both within California’s community colleges and universities and across our higher education segments. Together they must integrate holistic transfer support across students’ journeys to help them reach their goal: a bachelor’s degree.



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