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EQUITABLE COLLEGE PATHWAYS

Advancing Equity With Effective Community College Transfer Pathways

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Preface

Over 50% of American students in our public schools are Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), or American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN). Tapping into their talent and ensuring their access to a college education is essential to our future economic power and the success of our multi-racial democracy. Despite the historical exclusion and current underrepresentation of many Americans in our colleges and universities, in June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States severely curtailed the use of race in higher education admissions, prohibiting the consideration of an applicant's racial status as part of that process.

Race-conscious admissions helped ensure America's colleges and universities were more diverse. Without it, there is a greater urgency for college leaders and policy makers to review current practices for equity, and to identify solutions that provide a fairer approach to preparing students for college, admitting them, and supporting their success. Towards that aim, the Campaign for College Opportunity is releasing a series of briefs, including this one, as part of our [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion and Empowering Action](#) initiative. The series will elevate practices that support the college preparation, admission, affordability, and success of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, ensuring America does not return to an era of exclusion in higher education.

INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO FOUR-YEAR TRANSFER — A PATHWAY TO EQUITY

This brief examines the community college-to-university transfer pathway and its critical role in increasing higher education equity. We review the major barriers created by institutional policy, ways college leaders can address these barriers to better realize the potential of transfer, and considerations for policy leaders seeking to promote equitable access to a bachelor's degree and beyond for community college students. We conclude with a focused look at California's associate degree for transfer (ADT), and the ways in which this new degree pathway is helping fortify the transfer pathway in the state. We then outline recommendations for policymakers at the federal, state, and institutional levels seeking to simplify transfer pathways for students in their colleges and universities.

Strengthening transfer paths for students matters because a significant share of undergraduates transfer to four-year institutions from a community college. **Every year, hundreds of thousands of students in the U.S. enroll in community colleges, with the vast majority — 80%, according to one estimate¹ — aspiring to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree.** Among the 1.4 million students entering a four-year college or university in fall 2022, 38% were doing so as transfer students. At private, nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, 27% of fall 2022 entrants were transfers.² One study of college graduates found that half of the nation's bachelor's degree recipients enrolled in a community college at



some point in the 10 years prior to completing their degrees.³ Upward transfer from a community college to a four-year institution is a distinct component of higher education and has long been envisioned as an accessible and affordable route to a bachelor's degree and beyond. As such, preparing students to transfer to a university through general education and lower-division, pre-major coursework has endured as a central component of the community college mission.⁴

A robust transfer pathway between community colleges and four-year universities is also critical to ensuring equity in higher education. Nationwide, community colleges are open access institutions, enrolling approximately 9 million students annually — nearly 40 % of all undergraduates —and providing an entry point to college for millions of students every year.⁵ Large numbers of students who are **Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN, as well as being low-income, English language learners, and from other minoritized populations enroll in community college.** For example, community college enrollments nationally represent 39% of all Black undergraduates, 48% of all Latinx undergraduates, 52% of all AIAN undergraduates, and 34% of all NHPI undergraduates.⁶

The community college transfer pathway holds enormous promise for closing national gaps by race and income in bachelor's degree attainment.

A bachelor's degree remains the predominant educational pathway to a living wage job, with Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science (B.A./B.S.)-holders earning, over the course of a lifetime, more than a million dollars more than their peers with only high school diplomas.⁷ Bachelor's degrees help their recipients have better health outcomes and life expectancy, and a better chance to build intergenerational wealth. A highly educated population also supports a vibrant, civically engaged democracy, with benefits to the state in terms of increased tax revenues and decreased social expenditures, as degree-holders use fewer government services. **Yet, nationally, only 28% of Black adults and 21% of Latinx adults over age 25 hold a bachelor's degree, compared with 42% of white adults.**⁸ Similarly, only 15% of young adults from the lowest income backgrounds complete a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared with 59% of their wealthier peers.⁹

Community college transfer pathways have immense potential for advancing equity in higher education by providing a route to a four-year degree for Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American or NHPI, and AIAN students, but this potential has been squandered. Misaligned policies and practices between postsecondary institutions create barriers for transfer students, with disproportionate impacts on students from minoritized backgrounds.



EXAMINING BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSFER AND THEIR DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT

The promise of the community college transfer pathway as a broadly accessible route to a bachelor's degree has yet to be realized, as evidenced by data on national transfer student outcomes. Too few transfer-intending community college students ever transfer to a four-year institution, with far fewer completing their bachelor's degrees, and barriers in the transfer process disproportionately thwart students from marginalized groups. Nationally, approximately 80% of new, associate degree-seeking community college entrants intend to transfer, but only 31% ever transfer to a four-year institution, and only 13% complete a bachelor's degree within six years.¹⁰ Moreover, the few students who successfully transfer and complete a bachelor's degree incur penalties of excess academic credits and extra time required to complete, relative to non-transfer students. One statewide study estimated that community college transfer students took an average of 24% more coursework than was required for a bachelor's degree program; Black transfer students who earned a Bachelor's Degree, however, did so with 38% more coursework than required.¹¹

Misaligned institutional practices and policies create barriers to successful transfer, limiting the potential of the community college transfer pathway to increase higher education equity. Achieving success for transfer students is complex for postsecondary institutions, which typically engage in dozens, if not hundreds, of transfer agreements with other sending and receiving institutions. Transfer students experience an overly complicated and ineffective transfer system through a set of barriers they must overcome — largely either on their own or with limited support from the sending or receiving institution.

For the community college transfer pathway to realize its potential for advancing equity, state and college leaders must remove major barriers to transfer student success that disproportionately impact students who are from marginalized backgrounds. Two of the most significant barriers are: the lack of clear transfer pathways, which places the burden of navigating complex systems on students and results in lost transfer credits and stymied progress; and the lack of comprehensive transfer advising and support, particularly for Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN transfer students.

UNCLEAR PATHWAYS AND LOST CREDITS STYMIE TRANSFER STUDENT PROGRESS

At the forefront of barriers encountered by transfer students are difficulties associated with credit transferability and a lack of, or unclear, transfer pathways. Nationally, 43% of credits are lost when students transfer, and students who transfer from community colleges to public universities lose 20% of their credits, on average.¹² Credit loss refers to credits a student takes prior to enrolling at the transfer-receiving institution that are evaluated but not accepted — and deemed not transferable — toward the student’s new degree program.¹³ These lost credits represent financial losses and time wasted for a transfer student, and ultimately result in reducing the student’s likelihood of completing a bachelor’s degree. Analyzing a nationally representative sample of community college transfer, one study found that community college students who were able to transfer most of their credits were 2.5 times more likely to attain a bachelor’s degree, compared to their peers who transferred fewer than half of their credits.¹⁴

To address credit loss as a barrier, states and colleges have established articulation agreements, many of which are based on “2+2” models, where students complete two years of lower-division coursework at a community college followed by two years of upper-division coursework at a four-year institution. Most community college transfer programs are designed as general degree programs, providing students with substantial flexibility to select their coursework to best align with their transfer plans. General transfer degree programs (e.g., associate of arts) are unstructured by design, and as a result, students must find their way through a maze of transfer credit articulation policies. Additionally, articulation agreements often use extremely confusing language; one estimate found that 69% of articulation agreements were written above the reading level of a college graduate.¹⁵

Given the complexity of the transfer system, it is unsurprising that fewer than one in 10 successful transfer students actually followed the “2+2” pathway.¹⁶ Most community college students attend

part-time, and many students transfer without first earning a community college degree or certificate. Transferring students follow myriad curricular pathways, enrolling in courses that are not part of their degree programs, repeating courses, or going between community colleges and four-year institutions as they progress toward bachelor's degree completion. Too many entering community college students who aspire to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree never transfer, never complete a bachelor's degree, and many of them never complete their education at community college, often leaving with student loan debt and no college degree.¹⁷

Without clear, structured transfer pathways designed by partnering institutions to set transfer students up for success, the community college transfer pathway largely replicates and reinforces existing inequities among those who do and do not have access to supports and a sophisticated understanding of transfer. Adding to the confusion, in place of a statewide or systemwide set of transfer criteria, community colleges and four-year universities must forge their own bilateral articulation agreements that outline transfer programs and which courses will transfer. One community college may have dozens of agreements with each of the four-year universities in the state, forcing students to take additional courses to ensure they are eligible to transfer to all four-year universities they are targeting.



LACK OF ADVISING AND SUPPORT FOR TRANSFERS LEAVE STUDENTS ON THEIR OWN

The lack of clear pathways through the transfer maze is exacerbated by the lack of advising and support to help students before, during, and after they transfer. When states and institutions do not design clear transfer pathways with aligned advising and support, it places an unreasonable burden on students to navigate the transfer maze on their own; the resulting barriers are most acute for students who are Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, AIAN, and from other marginalized groups. These students are more likely to be the first in their families to attend college and less likely to have the time and support they need to help them interpret and navigate the myriad transfer requirements.¹⁸

Community college students aspiring to transfer make sacrifices to go to college, often accruing significant financial costs in pursuit of a better salary and meaningful career. Too often, the necessary advising to help students achieve such a dream arrives too late in the process to truly make a difference. Community colleges commonly offer transfer advising to students, but it is generally up to the students to seek it out,¹⁹ and many community colleges do not help them develop an academic plan or monitor their progress on the plan.²⁰ A national survey of transfer-intending community college students found that only about half of them reported ever using transfer advising services.²¹

Community colleges are funded at lower rates compared to other public universities and thus have limited resources and staffing to systematically provide transfer advising and planning for students. Furthermore, since community college advisers are helping students explore and eventually enter bachelor's degree programs that their own colleges do not offer, the lack of four-year institutional partnerships in the advising process can limit community colleges' ability to adequately advise students before they transfer. Without such partnerships, advisers based at community colleges may struggle to stay abreast of the numerous, unique, and ever-changing transfer requirements at dozens of different universities of interest to their students.

Without adequate transfer advising that starts with students' initial college orientation, students must individually figure out complicated transfer requirements that align with a baccalaureate major at a particular university. Some transfer-intending students aim to simply “get their general education courses out of the way,” but are surprised to learn that not taking the right general education coursework required for their chosen baccalaureate degree program results in them having to retake similar courses after transfer and graduating from the four-year institution with a substantial number of excess credits.²² Excess credits are strongly correlated with higher stop out, or withdrawal, rates, as

excess credits lead to students' exhausting their financial aid, which pushes them to work more hours outside of class or to take fewer credits, or both. These compounded circumstances result in students feeling demoralized and out of options, stopping out before completing their degree.

In addition to all the hurdles community college students face navigating how to transfer to a university, they often face additional obstacles after transferring. Once transfers arrive at a four-year institution, they face a myriad of additional challenges from unreceptive university cultures, which create additional barriers for Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN students. Generally, transfer students report less academic and social integration — including less interaction with faculty, as well as feeling lower levels of belonging — compared to non-transfer peers at four-year institutions. Their shorter amount of time at a four-year campus means they are commonly excluded from institutional aid, scholarships, and enriching co-curricular opportunities, such as undergraduate research and leadership development.²³ Further, the stigmatization of community colleges, which often stems from generalizations that transfer students have less academic potential than non-transfer students, compounds the sense of exclusion for transfers.²⁴ Issues related to isolation, belonging, and stigma are magnified for Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN students transferring to predominantly white institutions, where the absence of visible diversity among the student body and faculty also contributes to transfers' feelings of social isolation or alienation.²⁵ Additionally, disparities in socioeconomic status, especially within selective four-year institutions, can elicit feelings of resentment among transfer students that stem from their perception of the privileges and elitist attitudes that they presume are prevalent among their new peers.²⁶





State and Institutional Approaches to Remove Barriers and Improve Transfer

State policymakers and leaders of college and university systems and of individual institutions have taken numerous approaches to remove barriers to transfer student success. These reforms range in scale and intensity — from statewide change to associate degree transfer pathways to streamlining transfer through intensive supports focused on a subset of transferring students from one community college to a specific four-year institution. Descriptive evidence from California suggests that state policy can positively improve transfer outcomes for racially minoritized students,²⁷ but there are not many examples nationally of race-conscious state transfer policies. More race-conscious statewide transfer reforms with rigorous evaluation to assess impact on Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, AIAN, and other racially minoritized groups is needed. Researchers have identified promising approaches to improving transfer by describing policies and practices among community colleges and their four-year institution partners that have achieved strong transfer outcomes.²⁸ Below, we discuss some of the more common and promising approaches being taken by states, college systems, and postsecondary institutions across the nation.

STATE OR SYSTEMWIDE ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

Over the past two decades, many states and college systems have established or revised state or systemwide transfer or articulation agreements to improve the transferability of credit across postsecondary institutions. These agreements stipulate statewide or systemwide transfer course

equivalencies (e.g., which course from a sending institution counts for which course at a receiving institution). Before statewide and systemwide policies, students would have to navigate an even more complex array of bilateral transfer agreements between individual sending and receiving institutions. As statewide and systemwide transfer agreements have been implemented and further developed, many have also included common definitions of general education requirements across public four-year colleges, common course numbering across two- and four-year institutions, or guaranteed transfer policies that automatically admit community college students into a destination four-year institution, provided they meet minimum requirements (e.g., a certain GPA) prior to transfer.²⁹

MAJOR-SPECIFIC TRANSFER PATHWAYS

One of the challenges with articulation agreements — even when organized at a state level — is that community college students may be able to have their credits accepted at a four-year institution, but not necessarily applied to their bachelor’s degree programs. As a result, students may be able to transfer their credits but then have to take additional, or excess, coursework to fulfill the requirements of their bachelor’s degree programs, often repeating coursework completed at the community college that the university would not accept as meeting a specific requirement. To address this challenge, states, systems, and partnering institutions have created major-specific articulation agreements that specify the exact pre-major, lower-division courses that prospective transfer students must take at the community college to gain access to their given major after transfer — with all of their credits not only



transferring but, critically, applying to their chosen bachelor's degree requirements. Creating major-specific transfer pathways requires collaboration with faculty and other academic leaders across two- and four-year institutions, and states such as Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington have organized faculty within shared academic disciplines across institutions to establish major-specific transfer pathways.³⁰ Similarly, California's ADT, the associate degree for transfer that provides students with greater structure to facilitate transfer and applicability of credits to bachelor's degree requirements, has increased transfer rates and decreased excess credits.³¹ Leaders in states that have implemented major-specific transfer pathways note that these reforms require further commitment from four-year institutions to broaden access to selective admission four-year majors and to reduce complexity in the transfer process students experience.

STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

Although national transfer outcomes are low and inequitable, some transfer partnerships between particular community colleges and four-year institutions have had very strong outcomes. In 2016, the Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute detailed in the Transfer Playbook three major components of effective transfer partnerships, drawn from their visits to six partnerships across the U.S. with the strongest transfer outcomes.³² First, effective partnerships prioritized transfer student success by dedicating substantial resources to supporting transfer students, including by making transfer success a core priority in strategic plans and by tracking transfer outcomes as a part of key metrics that assess institutional performance. Second, these partnerships organized faculty and academic leaders at both the two- and four-year institutions to create major-specific transfer pathways with aligned approaches to instruction to ensure that entering transfer students are prepared to succeed in upper-level program coursework. Finally, the partnering institutions collectively took responsibility for transfer student advising and support, from the point of community college entry to four-year degree completion. This support included helping students explore options early and create a transfer plan based on major-specific transfer pathways, monitoring students' progress, and promptly reaching out with supports when needed.

Strong transfer partnerships also extend transfer pathways to high school dual enrollment students, with a goal of broadening these students' access to a bachelor's degree. Large and growing numbers of transfer students begin their transfer journey in high school through dual enrollment coursework. As highlighted in a related brief in the Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion, and Empowering Action series, focused outreach and supports to racially minoritized communities to increase their college access

and success while in high school is a transformative strategy for increasing equity in bachelor's degree completion.³³

REDESIGNING COMMUNITY COLLEGE ONBOARDING AND ADVISING

Entering transfer-intending students at community colleges are typically enrolled in a general transfer program and advised to begin taking general education courses while they explore transfer options. For too many students, that is the end of the conversation, as they are not provided with further supports to create a transfer plan aligned to a four-year institution and their desired fields of study.

In response, there are now hundreds of community colleges across the country reforming advising and new student onboarding through the guided pathways framework for college-wide student success reform.³⁴ Common features of a redesigned guided pathways advising process include case management-style advising, additional advisers to reduce advising caseloads, and/or advisers organized by broad fields of study — such as an adviser for students interested in business and advisers for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors — who can provide more specialized advising to transfer students.³⁵

Moreover, community colleges are redesigning new student onboarding to better connect students early to a field of interest, rather than advising them to simply begin taking generic courses. For example, the “Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan”³⁶ framework for redesigning new community college student onboarding encourages colleges to examine how they can more effectively ask students about their educational and career interests, connect them to faculty and peers who share similar interests, strengthen teaching in introductory program coursework to inspire and invite them into academic programs, and help them build personalized educational plans toward their end goals.

A transfer student's primary goal is a bachelor's degree. As such, **four-year institutional partners play a critical role in supporting community colleges' onboarding redesign.** Instead of waiting for students to arrive at a university post-transfer, lamenting a lack of advising or preparation from the sending institution, effective four-year transfer partners must proactively collaborate with community colleges to help aspiring transfer students explore and plan their bachelor's degree pathway from the very start.

PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS TO MINORITIZED STUDENTS

General improvements in the community college transfer pathway — such as those to strengthen partnerships, major-specific articulation agreements, and redesigned student onboarding and

advising — are necessary but insufficient to close racial equity gaps in transfer outcomes. Targeted policies, practices, and supports are also needed for Black, Latinx, and other student populations that are disproportionately impacted by our underperforming transfer system. In California, the Umoja Community and the Puente Project are two examples of effective statewide investments in race-conscious and culturally-affirming supports for African American and Latinx students. Umoja focuses on African American community college students, providing mentorship and a supportive community with culturally relevant curriculum. The Puente Project primarily serves Latinx students in middle school, high school, and community college, offering academic counseling, a culturally relevant curriculum, and a cohort model to empower students and promote cultural identity. Both programs aim to create inclusive environments that acknowledge and address the lived experiences of these students in higher education. In order to increase racial equity in higher education through transfer, investments in supports specifically focused on minoritized students **and** general improvements to transfer partnerships, practices, and policies must be made.

DUAL ADMISSIONS

Dual, or joint, admissions programs offer incoming community college students concurrent or guaranteed admission at a partnering four-year institution to start them on a bachelor's degree program pathway from the point of community college entry. Students typically must meet a series of course prerequisites and maintain their academic performance, which is measured using factors such as their GPA, to eventually transfer into a university, and they are typically provided with related supports and access to university resources, advising, and events to create a seamless transition. One exemplar of this model that operates on a large scale is the University of Central Florida's (UCF) [DirectConnect](#) program. DirectConnect to UCF enrolls entering students at six partnering community colleges into transfer pathways aligned to specific UCF bachelor's degree and provides every DirectConnect student individualized coaching throughout the transfer process to facilitate admission to UCF and share academic, career, and financial advice. DirectConnect graduates account for a third of UCF's bachelor's degree graduates, and Black (13%) and Latinx (35%) students make up nearly half of DirectConnect enrollments—a substantially larger share compared to non-transfer entrants (8% and 29%, respectively).³⁷

Another example, recently profiled by [PBS NewsHour](#), is the [ADVANCE](#) partnership between Northern Virginia Community College and George Mason University (GMU). ADVANCE similarly enrolls community college students in transfer pathway aligned to a GMU bachelor's degree with a streamlined GMU admission process, access to GMU facilities before transfer, and individualized transfer advising along the way. DirectConnect and ADVANCE illustrate how improvements to the transfer student experience

can be made on a large scale through dual admissions programs, better delivering on the potential of transfer as an accessible and affordable path to a bachelor's degree.

CULTIVATING TRANSFER-RECEPTIVE UNIVERSITY CULTURES

Some four-year institutions have made strides in cultivating a campus culture that is more receptive to, and affirming of, transfer students.³⁸ Four-year institutions have created transfer-friendly campuses by increasing the visibility of transfers on campus, such as by recognizing transfer students' achievements, using data to correct common myths or other misunderstandings about transfer students, and creating inclusive and identity-affirming spaces for transfer students. In doing so, four-year institutions have used race-conscious language and supports to promote a safer and more inclusive campus racial climate for transfer students.

The [Center for Community College Partnerships](#) (CCCP) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in part organizes its programming and campus advocacy for transfer students around the asset-based Community Cultural Wealth framework, which recognizes the knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks of marginalized students as rich sources of cultural capital.³⁹ UCLA's CCCP supports transfers before, during, and after transferring through its investments in staff mentors (many of whom are former transfers themselves) located at both UCLA and at partnering community college campuses. CCCP offers a range of identity-based affinity groups and programming (e.g., summer transition programming, tailored supports for men of color, parenting students, and STEM-intending Black, Latinx, and other minoritized transfers), and campus advocacy to highlight transfer student success and combat community college stigmatization by promoting a transfer receptive culture.⁴⁰





The Associate Degree for Transfer— A Critical Ladder for California’s Transfer Students

Transfer is a critical component of California’s higher education landscape, with state policy explicitly calling for a third of California’s high school seniors to attend one of the state’s bachelor’s degree-granting institutions and the remaining two-thirds to enroll in the state’s community college system. Although transfer is built into the state’s 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, the process by which students earn the requisite credits at a community college, transfer to a four-year university and complete a degree has been anything but simple. Among students enrolling in 2014-15 (the most recent set of students for whom six-year outcomes are available), less than one in five (19%) transferred to a four-year college or university, with or without a degree, within six years of their initial community college enrollment.⁴¹ Students who enrolled in 2014-15 and earned a degree graduated with an average of 83 credits⁴² — even though the typical associate degree at the California Community Colleges requires 60 credits.

In 2010, recognizing the need to significantly increase the number of students who transfer and earn a degree, state policymakers in California created the ADT, which was championed by the Campaign for College Opportunity in coalition with student leaders, the California Community Colleges, and the California State University (CSU) system.⁴³

The ADT pathway contains several features designed to make the transfer process simpler and more transparent and to address the challenges discussed in this brief. These include curricula within each degree pathway that are broadly similar across campuses, in contrast to the curricula underlying traditional associate of arts or associate of science (A.A./A.S.) degrees that can vary widely from campus to campus; guaranteed admission to the CSU system, with a boost in GPA given to students applying to oversubscribed CSU campuses; and automatic junior standing at the CSU, with credit for general education courses taken at community college and no more than 60 credits required to earn a bachelor's degree at the CSU.⁴⁴

Since its creation, the ADT pathway has become the preferred pathway for students transferring from a community college to the CSU. Now, more than 40 major pathways have model curricula from which community colleges can build degree programs.⁴⁵ **Of all students earning associate degrees in 2021-22, roughly half (49%) earned an ADT,⁴⁶ but among students who transferred to the CSU, nearly 70% did so with an ADT.⁴⁷** This was more than double the rate from 2015-16. Increases were particularly notable among Latinx students, rising from 25% to 53%, while the share of Black transfer students who transfer with an ADT more than doubled, from 14% to 36%.⁴⁸ Between 2015-16 and 2021-22, the share of transfer students who enrolled in the CSU within two years of their initial enrollment at a community college rose from 21% to 31%, driven in substantial part by the growth in ADT conferrals over the same time period.⁴⁹

Students who transfer with an ADT do so with fewer excess community college credits and see higher two- and three-year completion rates after transferring to the CSU than their peers who transfer with A.A./A.S. degrees or those who transfer with no degree at all.⁵⁰ The benefits of the ADT also are evident on the post-transfer side. Students who earn an ADT before transferring are about 10 percentage points more likely to complete their bachelor's degrees than those who transfer with no degree or with a traditional associate degree. Among transfer students who successfully earn a B.A. or B.S., those who first earned an ADT complete their bachelor's degrees in less time and with fewer post-transfer credits than their peers.⁵¹

Recognizing these benefits, the California Legislature moved to strengthen the ADT by requiring colleges to enroll a transfer-intending student in an ADT pathway if one exists in the student's selected major at the campus.⁵²



Recommendations for State, Higher Education System, and Institutional Leaders

Strengthening the transfer pathway has taken on greater significance given the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic on higher education enrollments. Community college enrollments fell by as much as 20% at the height of the pandemic, leading to fewer students in the transfer system overall. If four-year colleges and universities are to maintain their own enrollments of transfer students, they will need to do all they can to support potential and enrolled transfer students.

We can realize the promise of the community college transfer pathway as a broadly accessible route to the bachelor's degree. By adopting the following recommendations and improving coordination between institutions that eliminate the unnecessary barriers and transfer maze that make transfer a complex endeavor for students to navigate, we can increase bachelor's degree completion and intentionally close gaps in transfer for Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, AIAN, and low-income students.



Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- ✓ Fund the Department of Education to create a competitive grant program that incentivizes state efforts to implement and scale best practices in transfer.
- ✓ Develop Department of Education guidance articulating best practices for states, systems, and institutions to improve transfer pathways.
- ✓ Elevate transfer as part of the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization; strengthening current provisions to add enforcement and incentive mechanisms to accelerate transfer reform.
- ✓ Increase maximum Pell Grant award amounts to cover a student's total cost of higher education attendance, supporting timely transfer and degree completion.





Recommendations for State Policymakers

- ✓ Strengthen the community college transfer pathway by establishing statewide and institutional transfer enrollment and success goals, with details for specific student subgroups that are disproportionately impacted by ineffective transfer systems.
- ✓ Create stronger on-ramps to transfer pathways by defining a statewide vision for equitable high school dual enrollment, and by funding dual admission models where transfer-bound students are recruited into community college on a bachelor's degree pathway in partnership with a four-year institution. These models should include aligned supports and advising from the partnering institution.
- ✓ Adequately fund community colleges to ensure institutions can provide additional resources for transfer students, including student success courses and strengthened advising and counseling.
- ✓ Fund the creation of transparent, student-facing websites that capture how transfer students fare at institutions (publicizing the average number of credits by institution/program of transfer graduates) to allow potential students to make more informed college choices.
- ✓ Examine and promote the use of disaggregated transfer student outcome data among state, system, and institutional leaders to understand how well Black, Latinx, AIAN, NHPI, and other minoritized populations are being served throughout the state in order to identify and adopt policies and practices to increase equity in transfer outcomes.
- ✓ Establish and maintain major-specific transfer pathways and ensure they are utilized and honored by community colleges and four-year institutions.
- ✓ Phase out institution-to-institution articulation agreements in favor of more comprehensive state- or system-wide transfer agreements including clear course equivalencies, shared general education requirements, common course numbering across two- and four-year institutions, and guaranteed transfer policies.
- ✓ Adequately fund state financial aid and transfer student-specific financial or institutional aid to improve transfer students' understanding that a bachelor's degree is financially within reach.

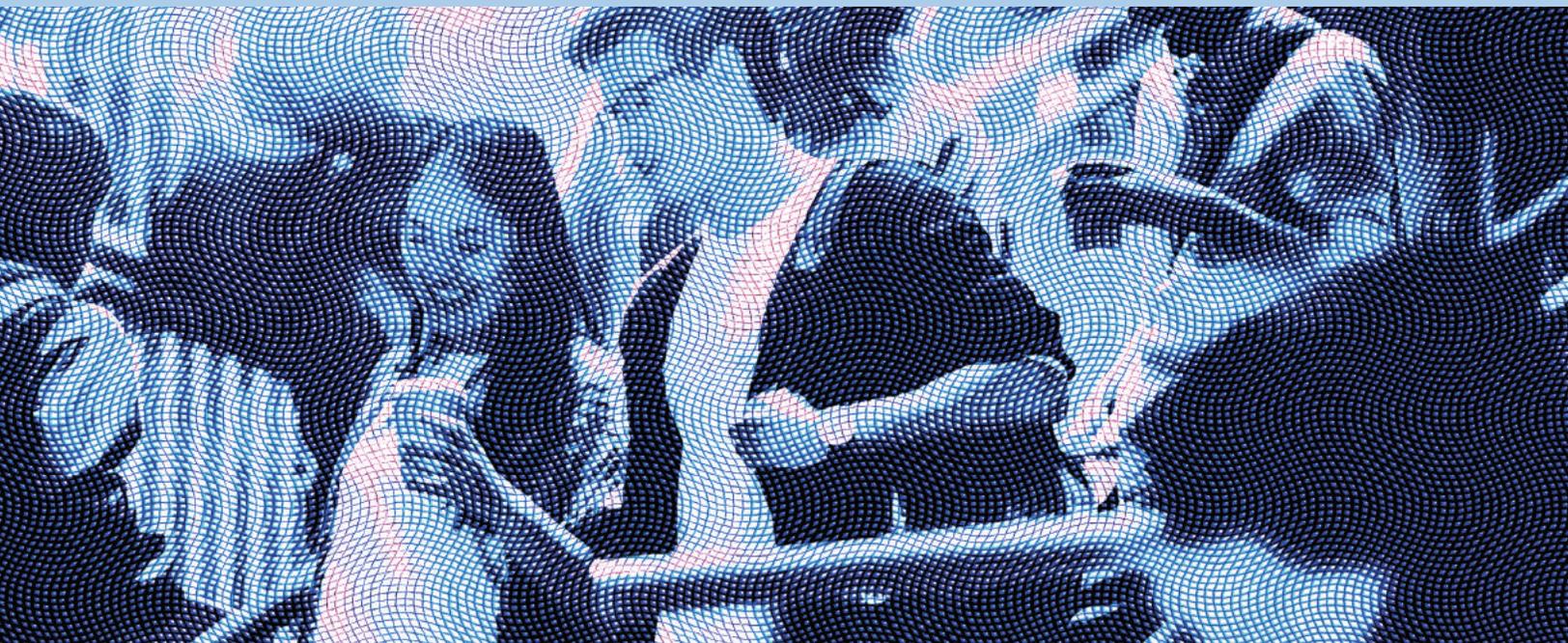


Recommendations for State Higher Education System and Institutional Leaders

- ✓ Select institutional leadership who prioritizes transfer and brings a track record of communicating the importance of transfer to their institutions' mission.
- ✓ Produce and utilize disaggregated data to understand whether current transfer policies serve Latinx, Black, underrepresented Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN transfer students and adopt transfer policies and practices that remove the barriers embedded in the current transfer system.
- ✓ Develop culturally competent communications strategies and products that reach transfer or potential transfer students. Tailor communications tools and outreach to today's transfer students, who face specific barriers to access and completion.
- ✓ Create clear and simple pathways that students can count on, work towards, and navigate with systems that allow students to determine whether a given course is transferable towards their intended major.
- ✓ Ensure credits transfer and are matched to the college major through strong articulation agreements, including associate degrees for transfer with guaranteed four-year admissions with junior standing not requiring students to graduate with excess credits.
- ✓ Facilitate and incentivize collaboration between community college and university faculty to improve the transfer pathway and ensure credit applicability.
- ✓ Fund early and regular advising to help aspiring transfer students explore transfer destinations and bachelor's degree majors and create a transfer plan in their first year at community college—with ongoing advising to help students continue exploring majors and refining transfer plans, register for coursework that will apply to their intended bachelor's degree, and stay on track as they prepare to transfer.
- ✓ Institutionalize guided pathways frameworks, which include case-management style advising, organizing advisors by broad subject areas to facilitate more specialized advising, and hiring additional advisors to reduce caseloads and provide more attention to each transfer student.



- ✓ Strengthen campus environments for incoming transfer students by utilizing an asset-based framework; this entails providing support to transfer students at every stage of the process by funding staff in both the receiving institution and partnering community college campuses, increasing visibility of community college transfer students and their contributions and accomplishments, and funding and welcoming identity-based affinity groups and programming.
- ✓ Ensure that four-year universities have the capacity to enroll incoming community college transfer students, and monitor disaggregated data on access to limited enrollment majors to promote fair representation of transfer students and racially minoritized transfers across all bachelor's degree programs.
- ✓ Expand equitable dual admission models, where transfer-intending students are recruited into community college on a bachelor's degree pathway in partnership with a four-year institution, with aligned supports and advising from the partnering institution.
- ✓ Promote welcoming, inclusive campus climates for transfer students by proactively counteracting racialized community college stigmas with increased visibility of transfer students' achievements and contributions to campus communities.





Conclusion

Between one-third and one-half of Latinx, Black, Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN undergraduates begin their higher education journey at a community college, and most of these students aspire to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, the pathway from the community college to the four-year college or university can be fraught. Community colleges and the universities they feed are often out of sync with one-another, requirements for transfer can be unclear and confusing, and students often lack the support that would help them successfully navigate the maze-like pathway.

Improving transfer is a collective challenge, and only through collective investments and actions can we fully realize the potential benefits of community college transfer in providing students, irrespective of race or ZIP code, a more accessible and affordable pathway to a bachelor's degree.

To learn more about California's experience with the ADT, visit the California Community Colleges' [I Can Go to College](#) website, and the CSU's [CCC-Associate Degree for Transfer](#) webpage.

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