

Helping Community College Students

Climb the Transfer Ladder



Contents

When Aspirations Don't Match Actions	2
<i>Why Aren't More Students Transferring?</i>	3
<i>Early Advising Is Key</i>	4
Who Plans to Transfer	5
What Students Say About Their Plans Around Transfer	6
What Helps Students Know More About Transfer Plans	8
<i>Having a Program, Major, or Pathway of Study</i>	8
<i>Finding Useful Information on the College Website</i>	9
<i>Talking With Someone About Transfer Plans</i>	10
Why More Guidance Is Needed About Transfer	11
Questions for Consideration	13



When Aspirations Don't Match Actions

“The reason why I’m coming back to school is because I’m tired of being poor.”

This is how a CCCSE focus group participant responded to a question about why he decided to come back to community college after some time away. Community colleges offer students points of entry to a better way of life, and one of the most significant ways they do so is through low-cost accrual of college credit that can be applied to a bachelor’s degree upon transfer to a four-year college or university.

Obtaining an associate degree will no doubt provide most students with an economic boost—but completing a bachelor’s degree can be life changing. While an associate degree offers students median annual earnings that are 13% higher than those of a high school graduate, a bachelor’s degree affords students earnings that are 37% higher than those of students who end their academic journeys with an associate degree.¹

Most students who attend community college intend to transfer; in fact, in a 2022 data collection through the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*), 83% of respondents reported that they had plans to transfer to a four-year college or university (N=7,572). But according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, only 32% of community college students transfer—and of those who do, only about half earn a bachelor’s degree within six years.²

In the *SENSE* data collection, Pell recipients reported intending to transfer at the same rates as non-Pell recipients, but a closer look into the Clearinghouse data reveals that lower-income students are much less likely to actually transfer than their higher-income peers—25% vs. 41%.² *Therefore, the students who stand to gain the most from transferring and completing a bachelor’s degree are the least likely to do so.*

Why Aren't More Students Transferring?

Almost half (47%) of *SENSE* 2022 Cohort respondents said they did not know about transfer credit assistance at their college (N=31,149). Further, among students who reported knowing about transfer credit assistance services (N=15,983), only 24% reported having used the service.³ Even when looking at data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*), which is administered mostly to returning students, we find that 64% of respondents reported never using transfer planning services (N=197,931).⁴

“I told my navigator what I want to study, and I told her what school I wanted to transfer to, and I asked her what classes I should take at this college to transfer into the program I want to study at the college I’m transferring to. We sat there and signed up for the classes together. Then, a week later, I went to the actual college I’m going to transfer to, and I showed the navigator there the list. They told me that the list was not accurate, and so I had to change my classes.”

—Student

information about transfer prerequisites—which can differ institution to institution—such as GPA and course requirements. As a result, students often find that many of the credits they have accrued at the community college won’t transfer or don’t apply to the major they have selected.^{5,6}

Additionally, many community college students are not transferring into a four-year college or university with a clear vision of what they want to study. The Clearinghouse found that over half of transfer students change their major when transitioning to a new institution.⁷

What this all leads to for students is a loss of time and money, two things most cannot afford to waste.

Many community colleges have worked diligently to incorporate and increase transfer advising services and to form transfer partnerships with four-year colleges and universities. Yet the process can still be a challenging one to navigate alone—and the *SENSE* and *CCSSE* data illustrate that most students are not seeking help from those who would be best able to assist them. As such, they are often met with complex articulation agreements and confusing website information to make sense of without guidance.⁵ For example, students might lack

“My advisor has told me that specific colleges around this area accept a lot of the credits here. I also used a website called Transferology to look and see if my credits will transfer. There is one college about an hour away from here that’s a 99 percent match. That’s one of the colleges that my advisor has given me an e-mail to someone that I can talk to about transferring. It is a very comforting feeling that my classes will transfer. That way, I know I’m not wasting any time, I’m not wasting money, and I know that, once I transfer, I won’t have to retake classes.”

—Student

Early Advising Is Key

Some may question the value of students discussing their transfer goals with an advisor or college staff member during the first few weeks of their community college journeys. But if students intend to transfer—and the vast majority assert that they do—early conversations about their aspirations, as well as what it will take for them to attain those aspirations, will help them develop concrete academic plans related to their future goals.

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* virtual panel exploring transfer policies, several speakers asserted that advising is key to successful transfer, but not enough students access it early enough or take advantage of it at all. One of the panelists—John Fink, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center—said, “It’s too little, it’s too late, on the way out of community college instead of on the way in.”⁸

RESPONDENTS:

This report contains data from 8,836 entering students across 40 community colleges who responded to the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*) in fall 2022. *SENSE* is administered in the fourth and fifth weeks of the fall academic term and asks students to reflect on their experiences from the time they decide to enroll in the college through the end of the third week.

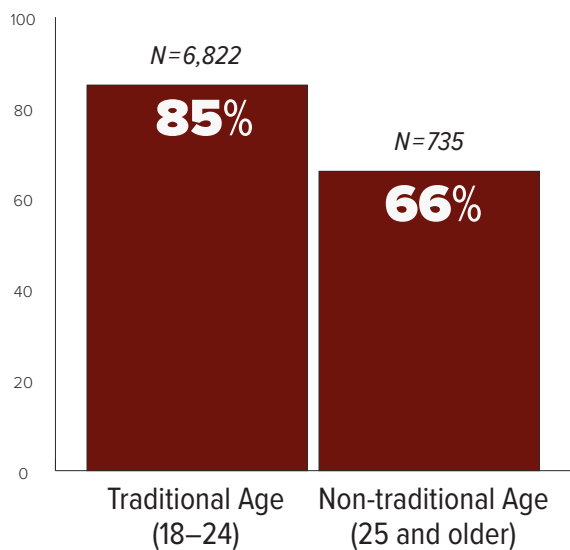
“So if a student does have a major in mind, what we will do then is refer them after they’ve completed the initial enrollment steps to academic advising and then they meet with an advisor who is assigned based on program of study. If a student truly is undecided beyond that point, they don’t have to initially declare a major and what that does is it triggers our Career and Transfer Services Office.”

—Advisor

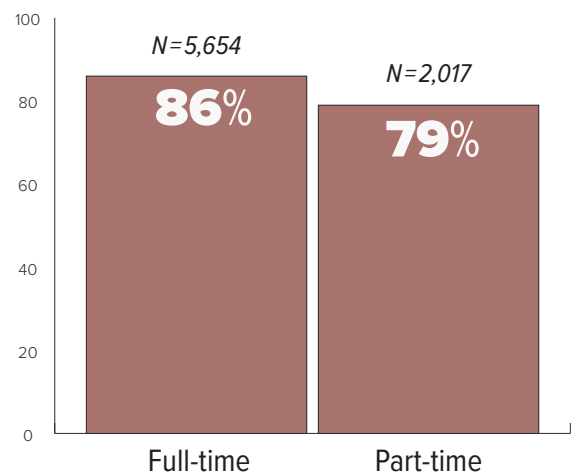
Who Plans to Transfer

Although *SENSE* data show that most community college students across all races, ages, and enrollment statuses intend to transfer (as shown below), national data suggest that students, regardless of these characteristics, are transferring at much lower rates than which they aspire to do so.^{7,9} For instance, only 23% of Native American students, 20% of Black students, 29% of White students, and 20% of Latinx students transfer within six years.⁷

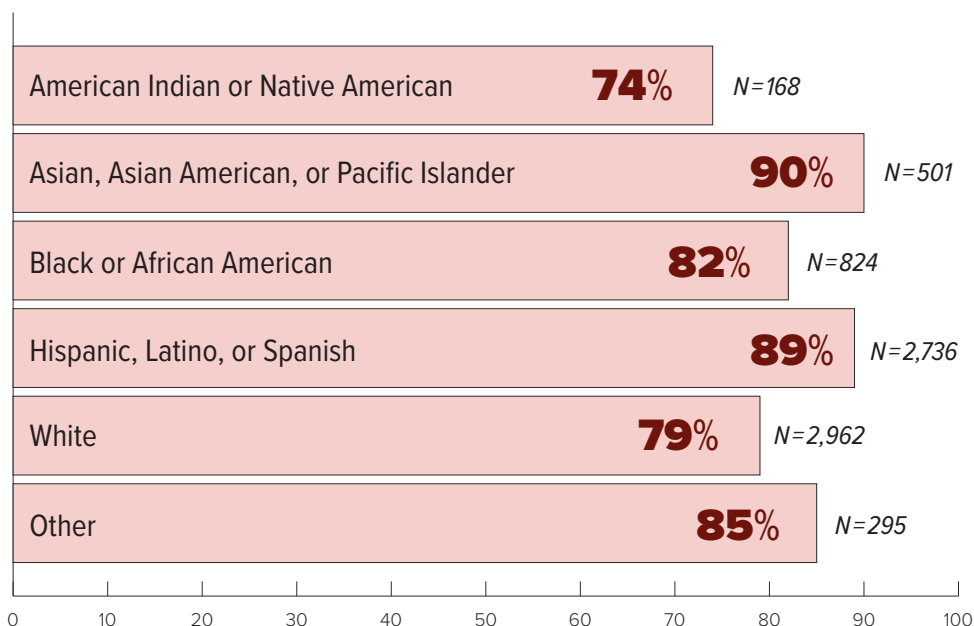
AGE



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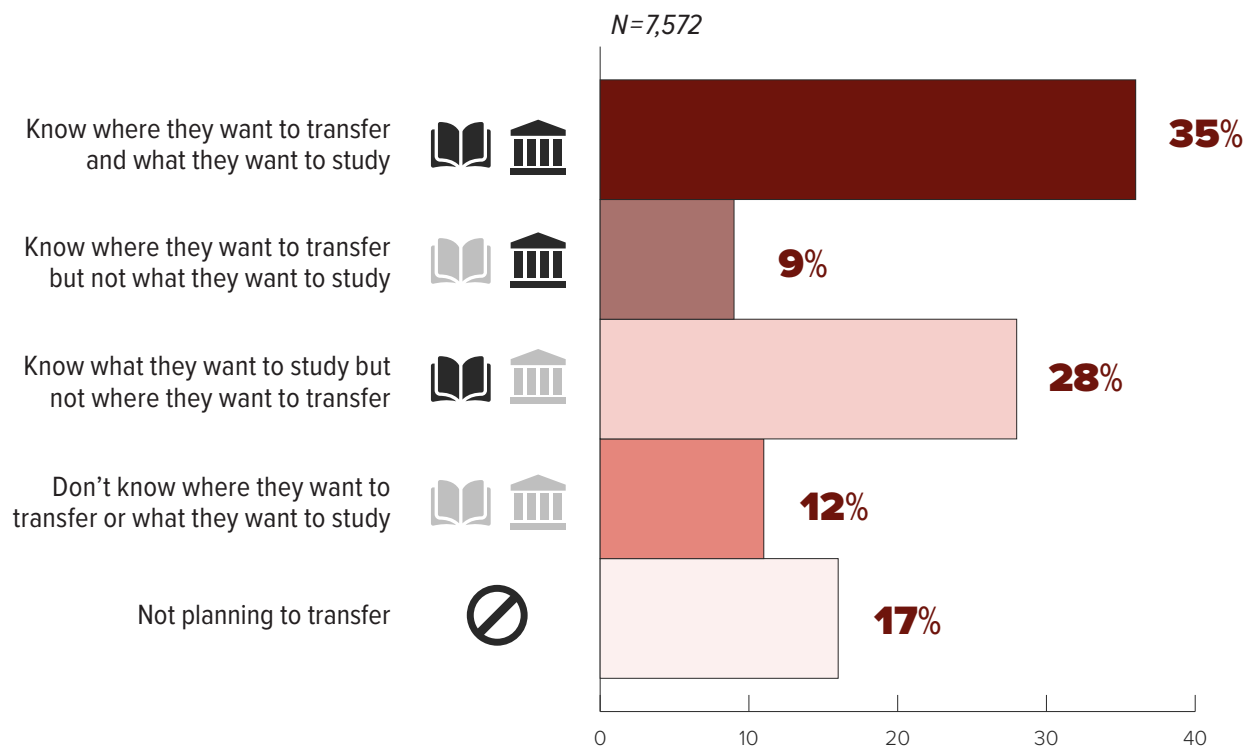
RACE/ETHNICITY



What Students Say About Their Plans Around Transfer

When students were asked what their intentions were regarding transfer plans, they responded with varying levels of certainty. The largest percentage of students knew where they wanted to transfer and what they wanted to study, but over half of respondents who indicated that they intend to transfer did not have a clear vision of their transfer journey.

Students' intentions regarding transfer to a four-year college or university

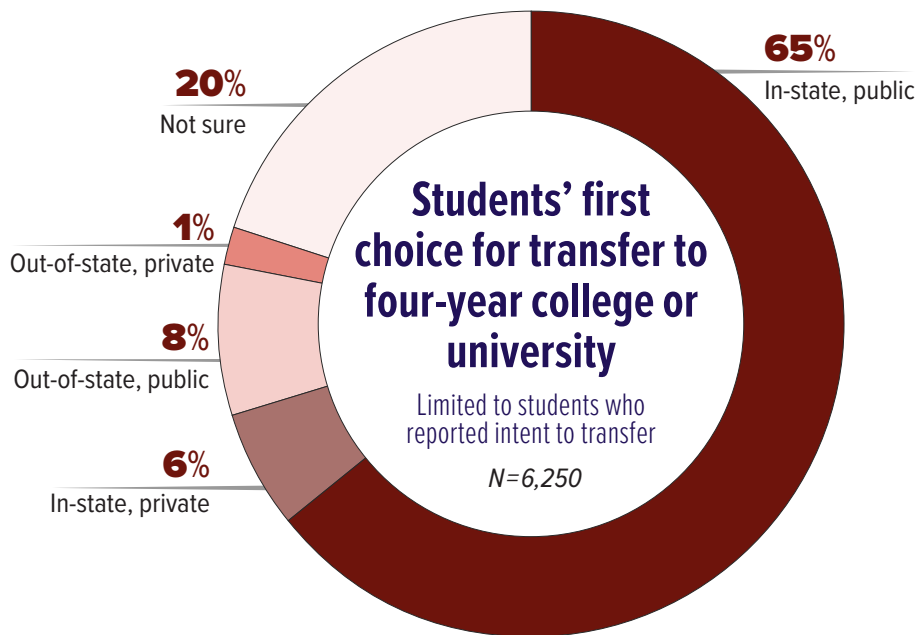


Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

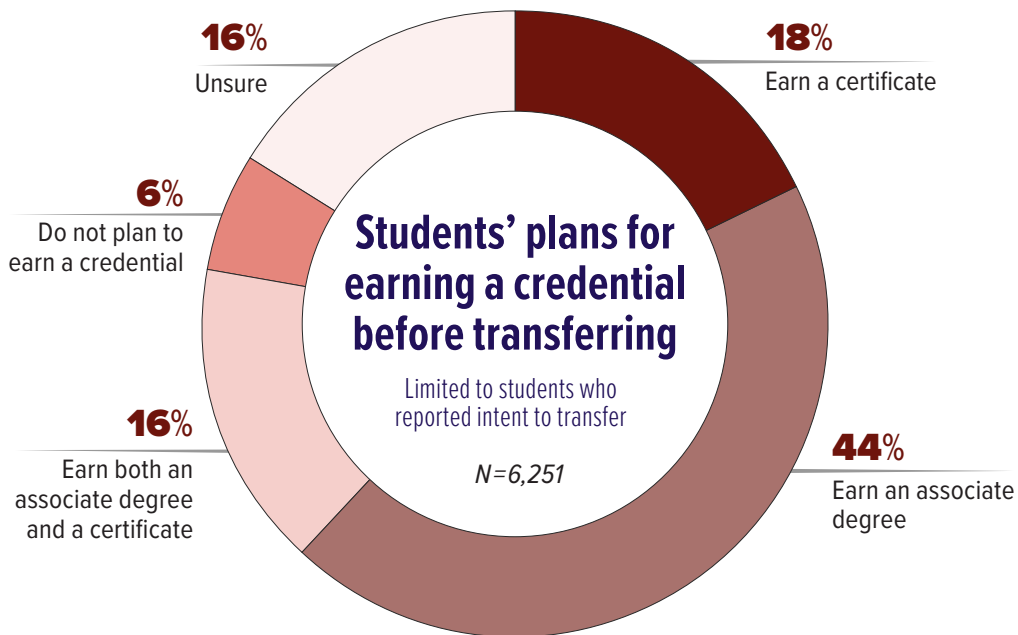
“Yeah, I do plan on transferring eventually, but I haven’t really had any conversations with anybody about transferring yet. I figure I’ll do that further down the line once it gets closer to it.”

—Student

While most respondents who reported that they intend to transfer identified an in-state, public four-year college or university as their first choice of transfer institution, approximately one in five students were unsure what type of institution would be their first choice.



Among students who intend to transfer, a large majority plan to earn an award at the community college before transferring.



What Helps Students Know More About Transfer Plans

Having a Program, Major, or Pathway of Study

Over 80% of respondents who indicated that they intend to transfer reported having decided on a program, major, or pathway of study.

Of those who said they know where they want to transfer and what they want to study, 93% had decided on a pathway of study at their community college. Even for those who reported that they didn't yet know where they wanted to transfer but did know what they wanted to study, 91% had decided on a pathway of study at the community college.

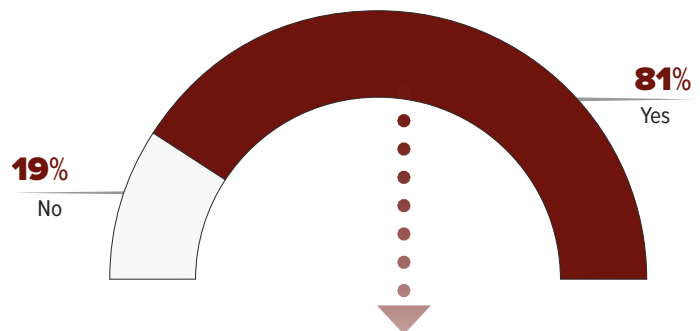
“Career exploration has become a huge part of that intake with new students. From the point of even checking in at our welcome desk, if there is even a hint that the student isn't quite sure why they're here, we refer them immediately to Career and Transfer Services.”

—Administrator

Have you decided on a program, major, or pathway of study at this college?

Limited to students who reported intent to transfer

N=6,290



93%
N = 2,651

of students who know where they want to transfer and what they want to study ...



50%
N = 651

of students who know where they want to transfer but not what they want to study ...



91%
N = 2,117

of students who know what they want to study but not where they plan to transfer ...



40%
N = 871

of students who don't know where they want to transfer or what they want to study ...

... had decided on a program, major, or pathway of study

Limited to students who reported intent to transfer

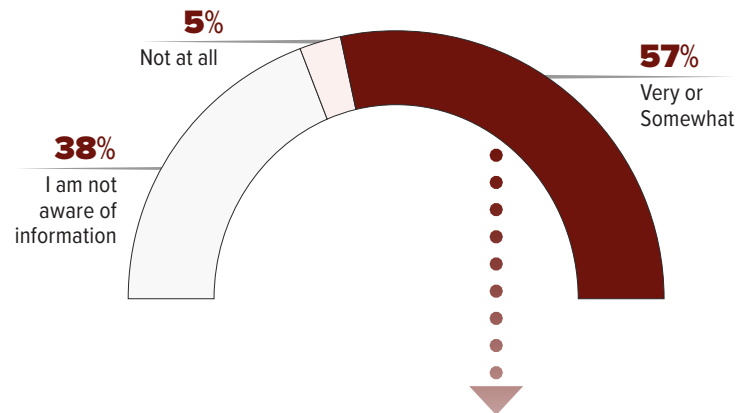
Finding Useful Information on the College Website

Many respondents who indicated that they intend to transfer reported that the information about transfer on their college's website was useful. But perhaps what is more important to note is that 38% of students said they were not aware of information on their college's website about how to transfer.

The students who knew where they wanted to transfer and what they wanted to study were more likely to find the information on their college's website *Very* or *Somewhat* useful than those who had less sure plans.

How useful is the information about how to transfer to a four-year college or university on this college's website?



Limited to students who reported intent to transfer
N=6,058







“My advisor actually gave me the tools that I needed to help me track my progress on my own. ... They have a website where you can ... look at which classes that you need ... so I go on that website and also go on my four-year college's website in order to track my progress, see what classes that I needed, and to make sure I'm not wasting my credits as well. I go on the website at least once a month.”

–Student

  **66%**
N = 2,556 of students who know where they want to transfer and what they want to study ...

  **62%**
N = 619 of students who know where they want to transfer but not what they want to study ...

  **51%**
N = 2,047 of students who know what they want to study but not where they plan to transfer ...

  **45%**
N = 836 of students who don't know where they want to transfer or what they want to study ...

... found the information on their college's website *Very* or *Somewhat* useful

Limited to students who reported intent to transfer

Talking With Someone About Transfer Plans

Less than a third of respondents who reported that they intend to transfer said a staff member or instructor had talked to them about the transfer application process.

Students who reported knowing where they wanted to transfer and what they wanted to study were almost twice as likely to have spoken to someone at the college about the process for transferring than were students who said they didn't know where they wanted to transfer or what they wanted to study.

However, 64% of students who reported knowing where they wanted to transfer and what they wanted to study had not talked to a staff member or instructor about the transfer application process—indicating that their plans might not actually be fully realized.

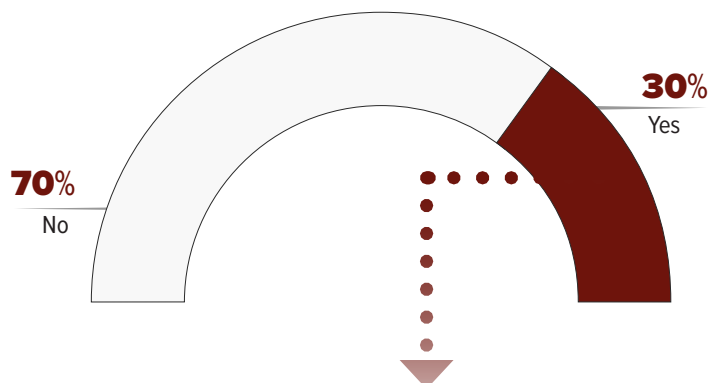
“They didn't really talk to me directly about ... what courses I needed to take, but they directed me towards a website of the university that I'd like to go to—their website that has all the prereqs and everything that I can take, and it has all the transfer credits and if the class transfers over or not.”

—Student

Has a staff member or instructor at this college talked with you about the application process for transferring to a four-year college or university?

Limited to students who reported intent to transfer

N=6,297



36%
N = 2,654

of students who know where they want to transfer and what they want to study ...



31%
N = 656

of students who know where they want to transfer but not what they want to study ...



26%
N = 2,116

of students who know what they want to study but not where they plan to transfer ...



19%
N = 872

of students who don't know where they want to transfer or what they want to study ...

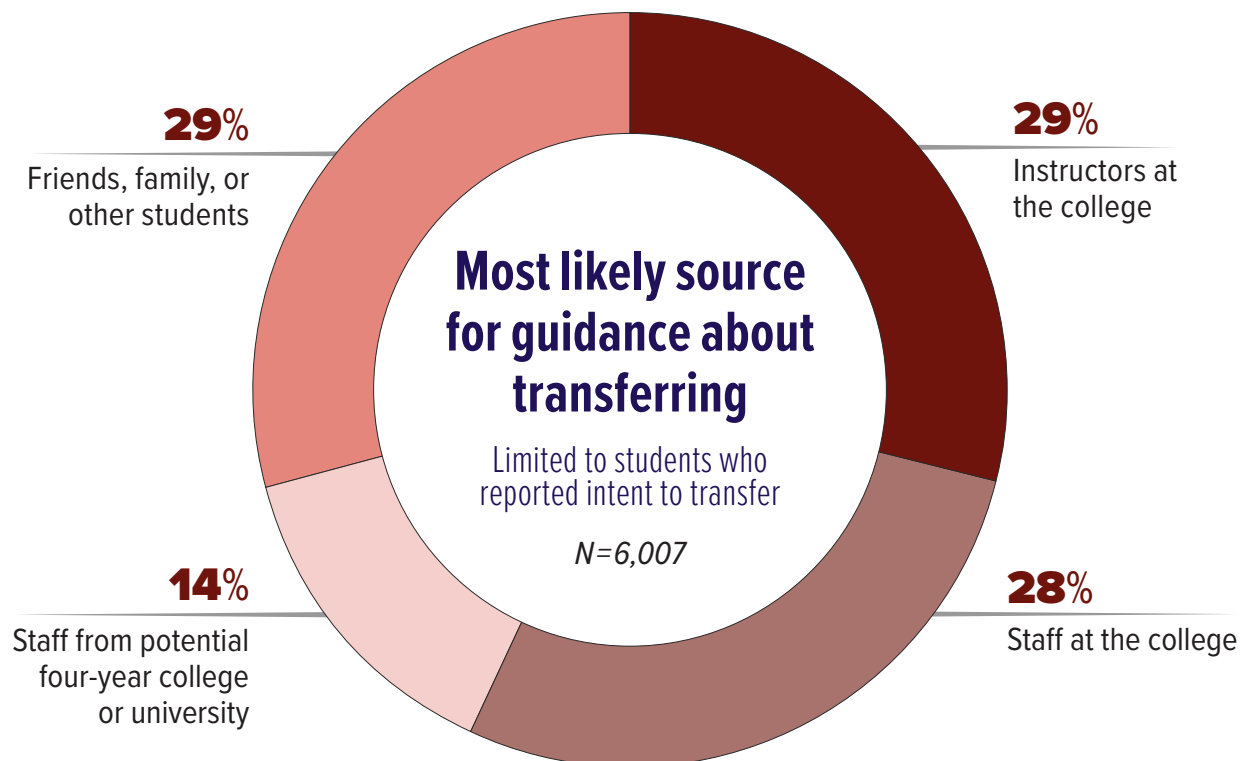
... said a staff member or instructor had talked to them about the application process

Limited to students who reported intent to transfer

Why More Guidance Is Needed About Transfer

When asked who they were most likely to rely on for guidance about transferring to a four-year college or university, roughly the same percentage of respondents said *friends, family, or other students* as those who said *instructors at the college or staff at the college*. The smallest group of students said they were most likely to rely on the guidance of someone who works at the potential transfer institution.

Older students were more likely than traditional-age students to rely on staff and instructors for guidance (67% vs. 56%). Traditional-age students were more likely to rely on friends, family, or other students for guidance (30% vs. 18%).



The data presented in this report illustrate that certain factors correlate with whether students who intend to transfer know where they want to transfer and what they want to study when they get there. The data also reveal that many students are not talking about their transfer intentions with faculty or staff at the college.

What we can't know from these data is whether the transfer plans students have are realistic. Even when students know where they want to transfer and what they want to study, do they know the requirements for transfer to their institution of choice? Do they know if their transfer institution and major plans are aligned? Do they know exactly what courses they need to take for the credits to count toward that major? What about those who reported knowing where they want to transfer but not what they want to study? Are they putting the cart before the horse? For the 65% of students who plan to transfer to an in-state, public university, do they know that meeting transfer requirements won't necessarily guarantee them admission into every institution in the state? We will only be able to know the answers to questions like these by talking to students early and often. By doing so we can help manage their expectations and provide them with crucial pieces of the transfer puzzle they may be missing.

“If I have a student that is planning to transfer to a four-year institution ... we have a list of transfer advisors from many local four-year institutions. Students can get in touch with that four-year advisor right away to ensure that all of the classes that they're taking at the community college level will in fact transfer into the bachelor's degree program at that four-year institution.”

–Advisor

“Transfer is very different depending on the student, so it takes a very holistic approach, and a very individualized approach for each student. The ideal is the earlier they know, the better, the more we can plan that out, but even with those later students, depending on the program, sometimes we can make it work smoothly.”

–Advisor

Questions for Consideration

FOR PRESIDENTS AND SENIOR LEADERS

- » Are our goals for student transfer reflected in the college's strategic plan?
- » Do we know which of our entering students plan to transfer? How do we collect this information?
- » When does someone at the college first talk with students about their transfer plans?
- » How do we track and share data with members of the college community about the students who intend to transfer? Are the data disaggregated?
- » Does our college have designated staff to lead transfer initiatives?
- » How do we encourage and train faculty and staff to talk with students about transfer opportunities?
- » How do we share transfer information on the college website? How do we know if the information on the website is clear and easy to navigate for students?
- » Have transfer pathways been developed for students interested in transfer?
- » Are our academic programs aligned with transfer outcomes?
- » Are our transfer-seeking students completing or transferring with excess credits?
- » Are we discussing transfer opportunities for our students with leaders at four-year colleges and universities?
- » Do we have permanent space designated at our college for four-year transfer partners to meet with and advise our students?

FOR ADVISORS, COUNSELORS, AND OTHER STAFF

- » How do we help new students explore career and transfer options and opportunities at the beginning of the academic year?
- » Does our advising include in-depth conversations about career goals, degree plans, transfer opportunities, and commitments outside of college?

- » Does every student in every program have a clear plan for program completion and employment or transfer?
- » Does every student who plans to transfer have a clear plan for transfer, including what they want to study, the college they want to attend, and the requirements for entering that program of study at that college?
- » Do all of our transfer-seeking students meet with an advisor every term?

•••► *FOR FACULTY*

- » Do we have the necessary knowledge to talk to students about transfer opportunities? If not, do we know where to direct students for support?
- » Are there classroom activities we can utilize to help students explore potential career interests so that they have a clearer idea of what they want to study?
- » What opportunities can we create for students to utilize transfer support services?

•••► *FOR TRUSTEES*

- » Are you aware of challenges the college is experiencing in its work with transfer-intending students? If not, how can you engage with the college president to learn more?
- » How are you supporting the college in its strategic planning around transfer?
- » How are you advocating for the college in the community about the transfer opportunities it offers students?

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CCCSE is a service and research initiative of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience based on insights that matter, CCCSE assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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