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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n2153rn

Journal
Berkeley Review of Education, 7(2)

Author
Felix, Eric R.

Publication Date
2018-01-01

DOI
10.5070/B8bre7229718

Peer reviewed

Using Ethnography to Understand How Policy Reform Influences the Transfer Process at One Community College

Eric R. Felix[1]

University of Southern California

Abstract

A critical function of community college is providing students with pathways to a bachelor's degree through transfer. Although students hold high aspirations of transferring, their rates of success are extremely low. In California, policymakers have used legislation as a primary mechanism of addressing transfer inefficiencies in the state's tiered higher education system. This article explores the ways that recent state-level reform policy SB-1440 (Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, 2010)—intended to streamline the transfer process through Associate Degrees for Transfer—affected existing practices, practitioners, and transfer-seeking students at one community college. Employing an ethnographic approach, this study highlights the interaction between the existing context and policy mandates that reshape campus transfer culture. The findings indicate that, although the transfer policy reform was intended to improve transfer pathways for students, there was a disconnect between students' aspirations and the state higher education institutions accepting these Associate Degrees for Transfer. Additionally, there was a misalignment between campus practitioners' efforts to implement transfer reform and students' awareness of improvements. To compensate for this disconnect, students formed a student counter-space. These findings suggest the need for transformative higher education policy, built upon concepts of transfer infrastructure, to improve college opportunities and outcomes for students across the state.

Keywords: community college, transfer, students of color, higher education, college access, ethnography

Anna[2] is studying to become an elementary school teacher at Sotomayor Community College (SCC). Her friend Evelyn wants to be a criminal analyst like on *CSI: Crime*

Scene Investigation. Both are Latinas, second-year students, and graduates from the local high school. Evelyn plans to earn her associate degree so that she can start working immediately, before potentially transferring to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Anna wants to get her associate degree as well, but insists that she will transfer to the local university to get her bachelor's degree and credential to become a teacher. Anna enrolled at SCC because her older sister also attends the institution, and her family thought it would be a practical and affordable option. As our conversation around transfer goals unfolds, Anna shares, "I really haven't thought about the whole transfer thing" or "how to get my bachelor's."

These stories share much in common with the accounts of a significant portion of students in community colleges who seek to transfer. My conversations with Anna and Evelyn were held at one of the six green tables available in the inner quad area of the student services building at SCC. As we talked about their educational goals and transfer plans, we sat 20 feet away from the transfer center entrance. Inside the transfer center, there were three staff members, including a student worker, a program assistant, and the transfer center director. The walls of the center were filled with colorful posters highlighting various colleges and universities from across the country. Partly covering the walls were three bookshelves lined with brochures, fliers, and other information about applying, transferring, and obtaining financial aid. It was mid-fall semester when I visited. Inside the center, staff discussed upcoming workshops and classroom visits to remind students of the looming fall transfer application deadlines.

As I continued with my interviews, Anna's and Evelyn's experiences were similar to those of other students whom I spoke with at SCC. They told stories of entering community college with aspirations to attain their bachelor's degree to become a teacher, journalist, or mathematician, but facing numerous barriers in actualizing their goals. These barriers were informational and institutional, such as not receiving timely transfer resources, having to navigate complex transfer pathways, or lacking practitioners on campus to support them through the process (echoing findings from Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, Marquez, & Park, 2006). The stories from SCC mirror national patterns in transfer aspiration and attainment. Nationally, 80% of students who begin in community college intend to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree, but after 6 years only 17% are successful (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

To address low rates of transfer success, state policymakers across the nation have enacted various reform policies, such as curricular redesign, common course-naming, and system-to-system articulation agreements (Kisker, Wagoner, & Cohen, 2012). The most recent reform strategy has called for developing associate degrees designed specifically for transfer, which provide students with built-in guarantees, including full articulation of course credits, upperclassmen status, and prearranged major courses to more quickly complete a bachelor's degree (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016). States like New Jersey, Arizona, Washington, and California have adopted this approach in the hope of streamlining the

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[2] Names of study participants have been changed throughout.

transfer process between in-state public systems that improve time-to-degree and affordability for students in community colleges (Kisker et al., 2012).

In California, where this study takes place, community colleges are the primary point of entry for first-time freshmen. Serving over 2.1 million students across the state, nearly three-fourths of all undergraduates in California are in the community college system (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017a). Of those millions of students, it is estimated that over 60% aspire to transfer, but less than 25% do so after six years (Moore & Shulock, 2014). With such high discrepancy between the percentage who aspire to transfer and those who do, it is critical to examine the role that state policy, community colleges, and four-year institutions play in creating transfer pathways to the baccalaureate.

Purpose and Research Questions

In this article, I draw on ethnographic data—specifically the voices of 10 students and four practitioners—to understand the influence of one transfer reform policy and how its implementation has shaped students' ability to transfer from community college to four-year institutions. Using a sociocultural lens, I aimed to understand how California's Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) policy, enacted through the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2010 (SB-1440), reshaped an institution's transfer culture, practices, and ability to serve students who are seeking a bachelor's degree (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). I entered SCC in 2014 with the explicit purpose of studying the implementation of California's version of this reform effort, focusing particularly on how students were benefiting from the espoused "streamlined transfer process" (ADT Website, 2016).

SB-1440 attempted to reduce the complexities of transfer for students through the creation of the ADT. The ADT focused on creating clear pathways with defined curricula at both the community college and four-year institutions. The program was designed so students could take a prescribed 60 units at each institution, reducing excess credits and ideally moving students more quickly toward graduation and lowering their educational cost (Moore & Shulock, 2014). Additionally, ADT recipients were provided certain guarantees, such as priority admission, junior standing, and a structured upper-division plan for the top 25 transfer majors—hence, the state's official tagline of "A Degree with a Guarantee" (ADT Website, 2016).

Early childhood education is one of the most popular majors in which an ADT is available, and thus Anna—whom we met in the author note—was one of those students who might be affected by the new ADT policies. She will need to transfer to a college that awards bachelor's degrees and teaching credentials and could, therefore, take advantage of the policy reform on her campus.

With increased demand for higher education and less space to enroll students, the transfer function becomes more constrained in its ability to move students from community college to four-year institutions. It is thus necessary to explore how higher education policy—such as the creation of ADT—may improve the transfer process in community colleges, spaces where historically marginalized students are overrepresented and underserved (Malcom, 2013). This policy is especially pertinent, as the ADT

guaranteed students placement at a California State University (CSU) campus, which are four-year institutions in California's public higher education system, but considered more open-access in comparison to the University of California system.

Therefore, the following questions guided this study:

1. How did external transfer policy (SB-1440) align with the campus context in which it was embedded?
2. In what ways did SB-1440 influence the campus culture around transfer?
3. How did the implementation of SB-1440 reshape existing transfer practices?

Review of Transfer and Articulation Policies

Community colleges have increasingly served historically marginalized students in higher education, such as first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized[3] students. Malcom (2013) asserts that the rise in racially minoritized students over the last 40 years has rendered the community college as the de facto "minority-serving" sector of higher education (p. 22). Students seeking a bachelor's degree find themselves entering community college as a necessary first step to accessing a four-year institution. Of all the educational credentials, research finds that a bachelor's degree is still paramount to upward social mobility, offering significant economic advantages (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), as well as increased health, happiness, longevity, and civic engagement (Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008; Torche, 2011). Community colleges are thus considered centers of educational promise for those seeking postsecondary educational opportunities and the benefits of mobility that educational attainment provides—especially for those seeking to transfer (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Torche, 2011).

Community College and State Transfer Agreements

For those seeking a bachelor's degree when starting community college, improving the transfer function is crucial to revitalizing access to four-year degrees. The transfer function is viewed as a bridge for community college students seeking upward educational and social mobility (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Dowd, 2007). Any student—regardless of prior academic achievement—can begin at a community college, work toward completing lower-division curricula, and apply those academic credits toward a bachelor's degree once transferred. The transfer function, in theory, should therefore allow students to move seamlessly from a community college to a four-year institution. Yet, in practice, the transfer function has not worked as intended, and has become more complex and unclear over the years (Ignash & Townsend, 2001; Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). Over the last decade, research has indicated a decline in transfer rates from

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[3] The term *minoritized* is used instead of *minority* throughout this paper to signify that persons are not born into a minority status but are subordinated and rendered into minority positions by US social institutions (Harper, 2015).

community colleges to four-year institutions (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006; Kisker et al., 2012; Levin & Kanter, 2013; Townsend, 2007).

To improve the transfer function, policymakers in many states have turned to *articulation agreements* that formally coordinate the process of standardizing curriculum and credit transfer between higher education institutions (Kintzer, 1996). These agreements serve as the primary tool to facilitate transfer between institutions, and reinforces the transfer function as a central priority between different segments of the higher education system (Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). Articulation agreements create more meaningful coordination between higher education segments by developing common general education (GE) course patterns, recognizing transferable prerequisite major courses, and minimizing loss of credits during the transfer process (Roksa & Ketih, 2008). Articulation agreements are categorized into three types: local agreements between regional institutions, agreements within higher education systems, and state-mandated policies (Anderson et al., 2006). Institutional participation ranges from entirely voluntary to legally binding, depending on the type of articulation agreement. The nature of the agreement further impacts the effectiveness of these policies from state to state (Kisker et al., 2012).

Implementing Transfer Reforms

In recent years, articulation policies have increasingly followed state-mandated reform models known as "Transfer Associate Degrees" (Kisker et al., 2012; Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). Similar to traditional articulation agreements, these state-mandated policies allow students to earn an associate degree and seamlessly transfer into a state university with junior status. Over the past 10 years, states such as Washington, Ohio, Arizona, and New Jersey have adopted statewide policies promoting these transfer degrees as innovative articulation agreements. State lawmakers have pushed these reforms to simplify the transfer process through predefined curricula, guaranteed credit transfer, reduced course repetition, and a limit of 60 units or less to complete a bachelor's degree once a student arrives at the four-year institution. Through these efforts, students, institutions, and states can benefit by decreasing time-to-degree, lowering costs for both the state and students, opening up more enrollment spots within public institutions, and improving the use of state appropriations (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2017a).

Between 2001 and 2012, six states adopted statewide transfer policy, such as California's ADT, yet recent research has shown these as having only "limited demonstrable impact" on transfer for students (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016, p. 156). The impact of these efforts has been mixed, with some research pointing to slight gains in degree attainment and transfer rates (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017), whereas others have found no benefits related to the transfer reform (Anderson, 2012; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016). Recent data suggest the modest success of SB-1440, as the number of students transferring with ADTs and graduating with four-year degrees appears to be larger than students transferring via traditional pathways (Taylor, 2015; Moore & Shulock, 2014). Despite these improvements, the data do not indicate that students who have typically faced more significant disparities in transfer have benefited from the

enacted reform (Baker, 2016). Indeed, recent research finds that those student groups who already successfully transfer are the ones who most benefit from the policy change (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017).

Delays in noticeable impact are one result of the complex process of implementing these statewide transfer reforms. Once the policy is passed in any given state, each higher education segment must agree on and vet, through shared-governance processes, the pre-defined curricula. In Arizona, this meant that the 21 state community colleges developed transfer associate degree pathways known as "AZTransfer" in alignment with the three four-year institutions in the state. For California, this was a reform effort that included 112 community colleges and 23 CSU campuses.

Once higher education segments agree on transfer curricula, community colleges must create transfer degrees for any preexisting major covered by the plan. For example, if an ADT in sociology is created, all community colleges offering an associate degree in sociology are theoretically required to create the transfer-degree equivalent. At the institutional level, each campus is responsible for incorporating these new transfer pathways into their orientation, advising information, marketing materials, and other support resources for transfer-aspiring students. At the practitioner level, counselors and others involved with transfer need to become aware of the new degrees and see them as prioritized pathways—a change that often competes with longstanding pathways and preferred local options. Transfer policy trickles down from the state to each campus and to individual staff, where students need to become aware of ADTs, decide to take the exact predefined curricula, and accumulate the credits to transfer. This example of how transfer policy flows—from the state to the student—shows the drawn-out implementation process and time needed to see a difference.

California Context and SB-1440

California's public higher education system is divided into three segments established by the Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960. Each segment supports a systemic framework providing low-cost and universal access to higher education (Johnson, 2010). The University of California (UC) system, with 10 campuses— designated the state's highest academic and research level—is tasked with the goal of educating the top 12.5% of high school graduates (Johnson, 2010). The CSU system provides broader access to bachelor's and advanced degrees at 23 campuses, which admit the top 33% of graduating high school students. The California Community Colleges (CCC) system has an open-access mission, providing academic and vocational education for "any student capable of benefiting from instruction" (California State Department of Education, 1960, p. 48).

Of the three, only the CCC was established with the idea of equal treatment and equal access to individuals seeking postsecondary educational opportunities ranging from vocational training to certificates, transfer, and associate degrees (Kerr, 1963). An essential component of the CCC system is transferring students to the other two California higher education segments. Specifically, the Master Plan stated that "the transfer function shall be recognized as a central institutional priority of all segments of higher education" (California State Department of Education, 1960, p. 37). As laid out by

the plan, community colleges were established to provide access to postsecondary education and the opportunity for transfer into the more selective public institutions.

California's higher education system has faced growing student demand without significantly increasing the number of college and university spots available (Newfield, 2008). Given this unmet need, a larger number of first-time students seeking a bachelor's degree now first enroll in open-access community colleges rather than at baccalaureate-granting CSU or UC campuses (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). In the fall of 2015, California's public higher education system enrolled over 2.26 million students, of which 70.2% enrolled at community colleges, 21% at CSUs, and 8.8% at UCs. In addition to noting the vast number of students who enroll in community colleges, it is crucial to note that community colleges enroll over 70% of the students of color in California who are currently in the public postsecondary system (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017a), further clarifying who attends and is truly served by community colleges.

Though California's Master Plan articulates an ostensibly seamless transfer pathway for students who are not initially eligible for a CSU or UC, transfer narratives depict the process as incredibly complex and difficult to achieve. Students, practitioners, and researchers often use descriptors such as "logjam," "puzzle," and "maze" to describe the California transfer pathway (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2011; Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012). Understanding state policies and institutional structures that facilitate transfer success for students is vital considering the highly concentrated enrollment of racially minoritized students.

Researchers have previously documented the complexity that students face when seeking to transfer from community college to either of the four-year segments in California (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solórzano, 2015; Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015a; Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012), noting that demand for higher education and unmet need for student spots at both CSU and UC campuses has deteriorated the intended transfer function between the three state systems. This breakdown across systems has created a bottleneck for students seeking to transfer out of community college and attain a bachelor's degree (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Moore & Schulock, 2010). The most recent state-level data available shows that fewer than 40% of California community college students transfer out of community college after six years of coursework (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017). These rates of transfer are even lower when disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status. Looking at the 2008–2009 cohort after seven years of enrollment, the average transfer rate was 38%, and Latinx[4] and Black students faced the greatest barriers to transfer with rates of only 29.2% and 34.3%, respectively (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2017). Additionally,

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[4] Latinx is used in this article as a gender-neutral term replacing Latina/o to highlight the fluidity of gender identity. The preference for Latinx is to empower students that are trans* and gender non-conforming, while pushing the binary identity positions in academia. The term Hispanic is not used interchangeably, but only as a descriptor of formal categories such as Hispanic-Serving Institution (see Garcia, 2017).

extensive documentation by policy advocates shows that the low transfer rates have remained flat over the last decade and represent a persistent obstacle to economic opportunity for students and the state (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015b; Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012).

Legislating the Transfer Process in California

State policymaking plays a crucial role in improving coordination between the three higher education segments, increasing students' ability to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. California has a long history of enacting incomprehensive policies with mixed results, usually addressing only a specific aspect of the transfer process between the state higher education segments. One policy addressed curriculum among the three systems (AB-1725, 1988), and another focused on local transfer agreements (SB-121, 1991), and a few have reprioritized the Master Plan's emphasis on the transfer function among the segments (AB-617, 1991; SB-724, 2005).

Following the transfer associate degree model from other states, in 2010 California policymakers enacted SB-1440, requiring state-mandated articulation between the CCC and CSU systems. Unlike previous policies that focused on individual aspects of the transfer process, SB-1440 took a more comprehensive approach to addressing curriculum requirements, unclear transfer pathways, credit acceptance/redundancy, and time-to-degree completion (Moore & Shulock, 2014).

The goal of SB-1440 was to create a streamlined college transfer pathway across the state. The policy specified four mandates: (a) the creation of ADTs; (b) guaranteed "junior status" admission into the CSU system for any community college student who met the ADT requirements; (c) priority admission for a student to their local CSU, as well as on the basis of their CCC major; and (d) prohibition of any CSU from requiring transfer students to repeat similar courses completed at the CCC level in fulfillment of ADT requirements (Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, 2010). These four goals necessitated wide-reaching changes across the 113 CCCs and 23 CSUs. The new degrees also had a clever tagline—"a Degree with a Guarantee"—which was meant to catch the attention of transfer-seekers and advertise the new transfer pathway.

Since the passage of SB-1440, there have been multiple state-mandated implementation assessments of the policy by the Legislative Analyst's Office and other research groups. Initial reports released in May 2012 described the implementation of SB-1440 as "far from meeting the intent of the legislation," but "gaining notable progress" (Taylor, 2012, p. 3), while a more critical assessment stated that progress "missed the mark" (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2012, p. 10). A report by the Public Policy Institute of California (Moore & Shulock, 2014) shared concerns about the slow and delayed implementation process. As has been documented in Arizona, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington (Kisker, Wagoner, & Cohen, 2011), reports on California's ADT plan found that the primary focus of implementation had been the measurable outcomes of the policy, such as the number of transfer degrees created, improved time-to-degree, enhanced transfer rates, and greater degree completion (Anderson et al., 2006; Roksa & Keith, 2008).

It is important to note that SB-1440 only mandated transfer exchanges between the CCC and CSU systems. The more selective and research-oriented UC system has

constitutional autonomy and is therefore not legislated in the same manner as the CSU or CCC systems. Language in SB-1440 could only request that the UC develop a transfer pathway similar to the one offered by the CSU. Similarly, independent colleges and universities were not impacted by the policy. The state's top research institutions were ultimately protected from legislative mandates, an issue that played out in this study and, I find, diminishes transfer pathway restructuring and benefits to students (Baker, 2016).

Despite these policy assessments, the research literature still lacks work that focuses on the cultural microprocesses of how transfer reform enters and flows through an environment, reshapes institutional practices, and structures student opportunities. This study begins to fill that gap, examining policy reform from within the institution, exploring how practitioners modify their practices, and questioning whether students benefit from efforts to change and streamline the transfer process.

Conceptual Framework

In this paper, I take a sociocultural approach to understanding educational policy and its implementation (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014; Sutton & Levinson, 2001), focusing on structural and cultural contestations embedded within a policy venue (i.e., community colleges) and highlighting the interaction between existing context (e.g., institutional culture, campus priorities) and policy mandates (i.e., developing ADTs, promoting ADTs to students) that reshape campus practices. Specifically, I draw on the theory of policy as practice (Shore & Wright, 1997), which highlights the ways that social actors (e.g., transfer-aspiring students, transfer center practitioners, and others), shape and engage the policy as it flows through the environment (Levinson et al., 2009; Zoch, 2017). Rather than taking a strict implementation analysis approach that investigates what works, this work accounts for the complexity of policy as it affects people and places, and how they, in turn, affect unfolding implementation (Honig, 2006; Sutton & Levinson, 2001).

Applying this approach, I explored one community college as a policy venue that exists within a broader, surrounding community. The sociohistorical context of the institution shapes the characteristics of the educational setting, including the mission of the college, and its curriculum, organizational culture, response to policies, and student demographics. As a place, community colleges are not only the physical buildings that represent the space, but also administrators, staff, and students who create and recreate a culture that statewide policy is meant to penetrate (Shaw & London, 2001). This article joins other educational studies that use a sociocultural lens (Chase, 2016; Zoch, 2017) to interrogate the relationships between policy, places, and people, and examines how those interactions influence the implementation and outcomes of policy reform (Koyama, 2015).

Method

In this study, I employed ethnographic methods (Sutton & Levinson, 2001), which were complementary to my sociocultural approach to policy analysis. In educational research, these methods have been used to help understand urban schooling (Cammarota, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999) and educational reform in schools (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Zoch, 2017). In higher education, ethnography is a useful tool

for learning, in detail, about a diverse range of complex social phenomena that exist on college campuses (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Iloh, 2016; Shaw & London, 2001). Iloh (2016) found that ethnography affords the researcher a patterned way of knowing through direct and sustained interaction with individuals, in the context of their daily lives, over an extended period of time. Ethnography allowed me to embed myself in a community college campus and collect rich data that described the complexity of social life, enabling me to tell a story that described the experiences of those in that setting.

The findings reported in this article are part of data collected over 7 months of learning about the transfer culture at a large, urban California community college where I focused on understanding the implementation of a newly enacted transfer reform policy, SB-1440, and its perceived influence on campus practitioners and transfer-aspiring students. I used a form of compressed ethnography (Levinson, Cade, Padawer, & Elvir, 2002) that focuses on engaged, continuous fieldwork to understand policy and practice within the context of particular educational environments. Participant observation, interviews, and detailed fieldnotes encompassed the primary means of data collection. I began analysis the first day in the field, and wrote reflective memos (Luker, 2010) following each day of data collection through the entirety of the project.

Research Context

SCC is located in an urban area of Southern California and is one of the 112 community colleges in the state. The campus is situated in an urban, low-income, immigrant community. The service area for the community college is mostly represented by Latinx residents (68%) with a higher poverty rate (20.5%) than the county (13.7%) and state (11.5%; US Census, 2012; SCC Strategic Plan, 2015). The institution was established in 1945 and is one of the highest-enrolling postsecondary institutions in the state and country with a 54,000 annual student headcount (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2016).

As with many community colleges, SCC enrolls a large number of students of color. In 2014–2015, when this study took place, over 90% of SCC attendees were students of color: 76% were Latinx, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Black (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017b). Additionally, many of the students enrolled were also first-generation college attendees (75%), low income (68%), or living in close geographic proximity to the campus (84%).

For many of the students with whom I spoke, SCC was their preferred postsecondary option after high school because it was close to home and affordable. Other students conveyed that it was their only option, as they did not have the grades or resources for more selective or out-of-area institutions. What they may not have known was that their campus had been described as "intensely segregated" with "extremely low transfer rates" for Black and Latinx students by UCLA's Civil Rights Project (Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012). At SCC, the overall transfer rate was 25%, but only 20% for Latinx, 22% for Filipino, and 5% for Black students compared to 40% for white and nearly 45% for Asian students, the highest-performing minoritized racial group (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017a). As a microcosm of higher education, SCC represents the vital role that community colleges have in educating our society, and the new transfer reform offered the potential to improve outcomes for students, especially

those who have been historically underserved, marginalized, or excluded from postsecondary opportunities.

Participant Selection Process

During my initial site visit with the transfer center director, I provided my approved Institutional Review Board documents and outlined my research project.[5] The director served as my lead participant, allowing me to observe the transfer center and recruit students and staff for my study. I used both purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify staff and student interview participants (Creswell, 2007). Through purposive sampling, I selected campus staff who were involved with the transfer center, implemented policy reform, or advised transfer-aspiring students. I identified six practitioners—four agreed to participate—who could share their experiences working with transfer students and their involvement with SB-1440 on campus. The first four students selected for the study were asked to participate when I observed them at the transfer center. I later asked these students to help identify additional students who would be interested in talking about their transfer aspirations. This request of the initial student group allowed me to interview an additional six students. Of the latter interviews, three were classmates of my initial participants and three were identified as members of a newly formed campus transfer club. The combined insights—from staff overseeing the transfer reform and students who potentially benefited from the policy—provided me with a deep understanding of the case. Participants in the study helped me understand how the creation of ADTs and attempts to simplify the process influenced SCC's transfer culture and practices on campus.

All four administrators were Latinx: three were female and one was male. Half of the administrators attended SCC and successfully transferred out. Ten students participated in the study: seven were Latinx, two were Asian American, and one was African American. All students were under the age of 30, and they ranged in enrollment patterns from fulltime, first-semester students out of high school, and a part-time, fourth-year student who had recently submitted transfer applications. Eight of the participants were first-generation college students, and all but one student had a first-choice school and intended major for transfer.

Data Collection

After my initial visit in October 2014 with Anna and Evelyn, I returned to the college every 2 weeks, spending four to five hours per visit through April 2015. Overall, I conducted over 60 hours of observations and interviewed 10 students (see Table 1) and four administrators (see Table 2). As data collection progressed, the role of student voice increased, and I drew more heavily on their experiences with transfer preparation and knowledge of the new ADTs available on campus. I interviewed students to uncover how

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[5] The campus did not have additional IRB requirements.

they received information from the college about SB-1440 transfer changes, developed awareness of the new transfer degree, and took advantage of the "degree with a guarantee." I interviewed campus staff to get a general sense of transfer practices and policies at SCC, their perspectives on SB-1440, and their role in policy implementation.

Table 1
Student Participant Demographic Information

	Years at SCC	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	College Generation	Preferred Four-Year	Intended Major
Anna	1	Female	Latinx	1st Generation	CSU Northridge	Early Childhood Education (X)
Cassandra	4	Female	Latinx	1st Generation	UCLA	Sociology (X)
Daniel	1	Male	Latinx	1st Generation	UC Berkeley	Human Development
Evelyn	2	Female	Latinx	1st Generation	Undecided	Criminology or Forensics (X)
Grace	2	Female	Asian American	1st Generation	UCLA	Nursing
Joey	2	Male	Asian American	Mother: Assoc. Degree	LMU/CAL	Political Science (X)
Martin	3	Male	Latinx	1st Generation	UCSB	Communications (X)
Michel	2	Male	African American	Father: College Graduate	LMU/UC Berkeley	Mathematics (X)
Miriam	1	Female	Latinx	1st Generation	Stanford	Engineering
Rick	4	Male	Latinx	1st Generation	USC	Psychology (X)

Note. (X) indicates ADT-eligible.

As I reflected on the data, I realized that students frequently did not know about the transfer process, generally, or about the benefits of the new ADT, specifically. For this reason, I decided to continue using the semi-structured interview protocol, but determined that I would offer an optional follow-up meeting focusing on the additional information and resources available to help students meet their transfer goals.

Observations for this study were conducted primarily in the transfer center, with the exception of a few times when I sat in the courtyard area directly outside the center. I focused my observations on both the interaction of students and staff within the center, and on the circulation and flow of students outside of the space. In addition, I observed a transfer success conference, transfer staff meetings, academic senate meetings, and other campus events. I also conducted an environmental scan (Kinzie & Mulholland, 2008) by

walking through the campus, visiting every building and photographing messages, posters, and images related to transfer. By the end of the study, I had photographed and documented over 70 flyers, ads, and bulletin board postings for use as empirical evidence of the observable phenomena under study (Harper, 2015; Pauwels, 2010). I used these as cultural artifacts to help me understand SCC and see the existing transfer culture on campus (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009). By scanning the visual environment, I was able to recognize how transfer, in general, was represented on campus, as well as how the newly available ADTs were marketed.

Table 2
Staff Participant Demographic Information

	Years at SCC	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Educational Background	Title
Ms. Carrasco	3	Female	Latinx	Attended SCC	Transfer Partnerships Coordinator
Mr. Cruz	6	Male	Latinx	Unknown	Institutional Researcher
Ms. Liera	8	Female	Latinx	Attended a CCC	General Counselor
Mrs. Velazquez	14	Female	Latinx	Attended SCC	Transfer Center Director

Data Analysis

While collecting in-depth, qualitative, ethnographic data, I began the analytical process as a simultaneous activity (Iloh, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This concurrent strategy allowed me to conduct a preliminary analysis of the collected data, whereupon I began identifying emerging insights and themes, refining the collection process once back in the field, and building a more comprehensive understanding of the case (Hatch, 2002; O'Reilly, 2005). My goal throughout this process was to inductively find connections between what practitioners were doing to improve transfer, and what students perceived to be the institutional support for their educational aspirations. Following each day of data collection, I wrote extensive fieldnotes to help me reflect on how the data related to my research questions and to describe any emerging insights (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). These fieldnotes helped me build and write reflective memos that captured thoughts and interpretations that were emerging from interviews and observations (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), and to explore and identify themes across various participants and observations. The analytical strategy of memoing helped me think about how the data fit together and shed light on thematic findings.

Trustworthiness, Positionality, and Bounding the Study

As a researcher, I have taken various steps to ensure that my methodology, collection strategy, analysis, and interpretations are credible, accurate, and trustworthy. To establish

trustworthiness in this study, I focused on researcher reflectivity and considered researcher bias (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher bias relates to one's subjectivity, or how an individual's values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of a study (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher reflectivity seeks to acknowledge how an investigator may influence the setting or individuals being studied.

With both of these hazards, I reflected on my subjectivity as a researcher, considering how I might bias the research or data. In addition to reflecting on researcher bias, as validation strategies, I triangulated data, member-checked interview transcripts, and searched for discrepant evidence throughout the analysis process (Creswell, 2007).

Positionality of the researcher and gaining access. As a Latinx researcher, my ethnic and academic identities were assets during fieldwork. Over 60% of the students enrolled at SCC were Latinx, and many of them were also first-generation college students who lived within a few miles of the institution. Like these students, I am Latinx, first-generation, and attended my closest postsecondary institution as a commuting student. These experiences gave me an insider status that allowed me to gain access to students, practitioners, and campus-specific groups and activities. I felt accepted, and the ease with which research participants were willing to share their educational experiences and transfer aspirations was a great asset. At the same time, my academic researcher status provided legitimacy for my presence on campus and the distance needed to conduct ethnographic work with both students and staff (Park, 2011). As Park reflects, there is a need to be "critical, yet empathetic of students, while trying to shed light on their experiences" (p. 199).

As a former college admissions counselor, my professional training also provided valuable insights but could not be allowed to influence the data or results. I therefore consistently focused on my research purpose, foregrounding my role as a researcher. After data collection, I was able to give back to students through an optional meeting to discuss their educational goals and transfer options.

Bounding the study. As a single-site ethnographic case study, some design elements bound this work. First, SCC represents only a microcosm of the vast number of community colleges in the state of California and across the country. It is an illustrative case of a larger-sized institution that primarily enrolls racially minoritized students. Yet, the data collected and its representativeness is limited to institutions with similar characteristics, structures, and demographics. The implementation process is complex and context-dependent, owing to a distinct campus culture, particular student demographics, and the individuals tasked with implementing transfer policy; my findings, therefore, may not be generalizable beyond the research site and participants.

Second, this study mostly reflects the experiences of students who were enrolled fulltime, matriculated directly after high school, were under 30, and aspired to transfer from community college. Across the state, 42% of community college students are older than 30, and 22% are not seeking to transfer to a four-year institution (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017b). The students in the sample may also present a particular orientation that may not be shared by others on the SCC campus, notably the aspiration to attend highly selective public (e.g., UCLA, UC Berkeley) or private (e.g., Loyola Marymount University, Stanford) institutions.

Findings

The goal of this study was to understand how new state reform efforts have reshaped transfer practices at SCC for students aspiring to attend four-year institutions. In what follows, I detail three relevant and recurring themes that emerged from my analysis. These themes are supported and illustrated with quotes from students and staff participants taken from individual interviews, observations, and informal conversations collected over the course of 7 months of fieldwork.

The first theme describes the institutional culture at SCC, in which the new transfer policy is embedded. Institutional culture is operationalized to include elements like the environment, mission, values, leadership, and how these affirm transferring (Felix & Trinidad, 2017; Shaw & London, 2001). The second theme highlights the disconnect between observed transfer practices and students' awareness of them. The third and final theme reports how a subset of participants responded to the transfer disconnect at SCC, described in theme two, by creating their own peer transfer network. Each theme also explores how the specific context of SCC influenced the implementation of SB-1440. I particularly focused on how practitioners utilized the new ADTs, and how students became aware of and potentially benefited from these degrees.

Theme I: Institutional Culture, Transfer Champions, and Policy Implementation

I used observations, interviews, and an environmental scan to describe the institutional culture related to transfer and how that context was reshaped by the new transfer reforms. The data showed the efforts taken by individual staff members to make transfer visible on campus. Walking around campus, it was hard not to notice the various posters, signs, and marketing efforts that promoted transferring to four-year institutions.

The first visible sign when walking toward the student services building—a space that included the transfer center, career center, and counseling center—was the "Start at [SCC], Go Anywhere!" slogan. It was an easily identifiable physical representation of the transfer program; the sign itself was about four feet wide and two feet high. Next to it were additional posters describing upcoming events like the "Student Transfer Conference" and "Latino Book Festival." I asked Mrs. Velazquez, the transfer center director, about the "Start at [SCC], Go Anywhere!" phrase, and she clarified that "it tries to embed our vision for [SCC]: a college that helps all students achieve their current and future dreams. We are here to provide an initial education and help them get to the next level, whatever that may be."

Similarly, when conducting an environmental scan of the campus, I found that most buildings—whether the science and technology center, writing center, or library—had a transfer-oriented bulletin board. Some of the bulletin boards were outdated (when I was on campus these displayed information from 2012 and 2013), but during my fieldwork, they were replaced with newer, bigger, and updated versions. These bright new boards showcased the school's colors, official insignia, and mascot to attract students to the posted information. In large font, "Transfer Center" ran across the top, with "Come in and Ask Us About Transferring," and a collage of images of diverse students below. The lower half of the board provided general information that would stay relevant over time.

Many of my student interviews were held in the library, as that building gave me access to group study rooms. As I walked from the transfer center to the library, along the path I saw signs with messages like, "The First to Attend College? Keep Going!" or "[SCC] Is Only the First Stop, What's Next?" followed by the transfer center's location. These signs were found throughout campus and provided information and outreach for the transfer center.

When I asked Rick, a third-year student, about these signs around campus, he shared that:

> it helps to know about different things, just walking around and seeing all this information about transfer . . . you kinda can't get away from it [laughs]. But you have to know about navigating the system in order to get there.

This student highlighted how posted aspirational quotes, upcoming workshops, and pictures of successful students at their new institutions created a visual commitment to transfer on campus. These signs were symbolic artifacts of the institution's culture and evidence of attempts to reach students—albeit, in subtler, passive ways—that transfer was possible for them.

The transfer center and its staff also conveyed and reflected on this institutional culture. One of the first comments shared with me by the transfer center director Mrs. Velazquez was, "We are trying to change the mindset so that everybody is looked at as a transfer student." She described how, over the past three years, SCC intentionally worked toward prioritizing transfer through new collaborative policies and programs. She elaborated on this shift in institutional culture:

> Two years ago, our interim president, now current president, dedicated a million dollars to create a first-year completion program, to serve 500 students with the intent to create transfer-ready students. Many of our students come from [local feeder high schools], and although they come with good GPAs, they don't always place well during assessment. This new transfer program helped with the getting through math and English courses, provided a career guidance counselor assistant, and additional support for when life happens. We model it after our Latino culture, so family members are included in the program. We hired more personnel for the program during the second cycle and added personal development/student success courses. So that's one huge effort of getting our students through the transfer pathway.

Mrs. Velazquez raised three points of interest. First, transfer prioritization was coming from the president (i.e., the top of the institution). Second, that prioritization was backed up with a significant investment of fiscal resources. Last, the effort seemed to be tailored to Latinx students—the largest ethnic group on campus—and the challenges that they faced in the transfer process.

Students also recognized that a community had gathered around helping them transfer. Grace, a student planning to attend UCLA for nursing, shared how the campus and staff were transfer-focused, always providing resources for navigating the system. She told me:

The transfer center offers programs with other schools, like the [summer partnerships]. They take a group of students, and they take them over the summer to experience a week's stay at UCLA. They offer different opportunities to visit different campuses and explore where it is that you will be living in. Not only that, I feel like everywhere you go here at [SCC], they have a transfer mindset cuz that's what they want, not to kick us out of here, but they want us to move on to better and bigger things.

This opportunity allowed Grace to stay at a four-year institution and explore the campus, drop in on classes and, most importantly, see herself there as a student. She also mentioned that she perceived SCC's mindset to be strongly transfer-oriented. In speaking with Daniel, he added that being a work-study student provided another dimension to the culture of transfer on campus. He shared,

I work here at [SCC], so [it's] opened a lot of doors up for me. It's just, [supervisors are] always pushing you to do better and do your best because, at the end of the day, they want to see me transfer. Yeah, I'm an employee here, but they always tell me, "You're a student first, so focus on what you have to do to transfer, and when you get there, we're gonna be there supporting you."

From Daniel's experience, we see that his supervisors took an interest in his educational goals and were committed to seeing him transfer out of SCC. As campus employees, Daniel's supervisors tried to serve as a student resource, even though they were outside the transfer center. Students at SCC highlighted the importance of interacting with specific programs and people, and the value of receiving support from them in their aspirations to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree.

Transfer champions on campus. Mrs. Velazquez described how, before the current president shifted priorities, SCC created a transfer culture solely by relying on "transfer champions." However, with the shift in policy, there were now more campus-wide efforts that supported and facilitated opportunities for students to actualize their goals of earning a bachelor's degree through transfer. This finding echoes Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon's (2013) research on campus practitioners as transfer agents and champions (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) in promoting transfer access. The term *transfer agents* refers to authority figures who directly help students formally navigate the complicated transfer process (e.g., transfer center staff, honors program advisors, or general counselors) by taking an active role in facilitating opportunities for minoritized student groups (Pak et al., 2006). Transfer champions, on the other hand, are campus administrators and faculty who are broadly committed to equity, embrace responsibility for helping students navigate the process, and ensure educational opportunity and success for minoritized students (Pak et al., 2006). In trying to understand the idea of transfer champions, I asked staff members what characteristics helped students identify these transfer-oriented practitioners on campus.

A crucial element of this shift was moving from small pockets of transfer-minded practitioners to a campus-wide culture, where a transfer mindset permeated all spaces: campus classrooms, the library, general counseling, and the student center. As Mrs.

Velazquez shared, this shift also occurred at the level of perception, reframing ideas such as "transfer advising was only for transfer counselors" or "oh transfer, that's what the transfer center does." At the same time, SCC sought to hire and develop more transfer champions to improve the campus-wide culture for promoting transfer.

In this instance, hiring and engaging faculty and staff who successfully navigated the transfer process created a new institutional transfer culture. Mr. Cruz, an institutional research analyst, clarified, "We hire people who want to serve our community, that come from it, and know the struggles and aspirations our students have." Mrs. Velazquez, the transfer center director, was a prime example of an effective transfer agent, as she formerly attended SCC and transferred to UCLA. Tellingly, in a transfer meeting that I observed, three out of the four staff members in attendance were community college transfers themselves. Student Daniel spoke about this, sharing that his favorite professors were "the ones who actually went to community college themselves." He then elaborated on Ms. Carrasco, saying, "I know she actually came from [SCC] and went to Berkeley, [so] it makes a difference when they know the struggle of going to community college." Ms. Carrasco oversaw the transfer partnerships on campus, working closely with UCLA, UC Berkeley, and Loyola Marymount University (LMU) to expand summer programs and admissions support for transfer-aspiring students.

A well-known challenge for community colleges is their limited capacity to serve the thousands of students on campus (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014; Webb, Dantzler, & Hardy, 2015). Allen and colleagues (2014) found that students' perceptions of advising quality was a primary factor in transferring. The students in this study point to the role that some counselors—though not all—act as transfer champions. These select practitioners went above and beyond the basic services available on campus. For example, regularly scheduled appointments have a 30-minute cap, and drop-in advising maxes out at 15 minutes. Given these time constraints, it can be challenging to have conversations about educational goals, transfer interests, and particular pathways available (such as the ADT). Yet Ms. Liera showed the critical relationship that counselors have with students at community colleges. Rather than cutting students off at the 30-minute limit, she tried to provide a space for continued conversation, but this type of effort and support was not commonplace.

A delay in expanding a campus-wide transfer culture. Recognizing the important role of individual transfer champions, Mrs. Velazquez made an effort to institutionalize transfer advising across campus by training faculty to embed resources in syllabi, classroom conversations, and course content. This attempt to expand campus-wide transfer efforts, known as the "Faculty Transfer Advisor" program, provided in-class information and support for students. This approach was well aligned with Bensimon, Dowd, Alford, and Trapp's (2007) finding that faculty members can be key in creating the expectation of transfer when they make information available in the classroom, incorporate transfer-related content into the curriculum, and equip instructors with specific information and resources about the transfer process.

Mrs. Velazquez hoped that the program would improve the "limited resources of the campus"—including the student to counselor ratio of 1750:1—to provide transfer information. Ms. Liera, a general counselor, believed that the program was successful for the three semesters it existed. She stated, "It was another way to reach students. It didn't

lighten our caseload, but helped with sharing information and referring students to us." Traditionally, community colleges have used a drop-in counseling model, in which the responsibility of seeking educational counseling is on students (Bailey, 2017). This program was an attempt to meet the students where they were: in the classroom. Wondering whether the program would expand beyond faculty to classified staff or other personnel, Mrs. Velazquez clarified that the advisor program at SCC was eliminated after three semesters, not because it was ineffective, but because "it became too complicated with [the] collective-bargaining agreement; some felt that allowing faculty to 'advise' students on transfer stepped on the responsibilities of counselors who do the same."

The institutional culture and individual practices uncovered during my time at SCC exposed efforts to not only make transfer visible, but a reality for students. The partnerships being built with four-year institutions, the intentional hiring of former students who successfully transferred, and the attempts to create campus-wide advising were signs that transfer was highly prioritized even before the arrival of SB-1440 and its mandates to develop new ADTs.

The culture in which transfer reform is embedded. A goal of SB-1440 was that institutions quickly adopt the 25 state-established ADTs and make those the preferred pathway to transfer on campus. However, the theory of action driving this transfer reform failed to recognize that each community college had a history, culture, and developed practices regarding transfer, and that this new external mandate might be either complimentary or potentially misaligned with how a campus already operated. At the time of this study, SCC complied with the implementation of SB-1440 and developed 12 out of 25 ADTs available for implementation. Statewide, campuses launched between 3 (minimum compliance) and 22 (high performance) of the developed ADTs (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2012). At community colleges, the primary spaces for developing these ADTs were in the academic senate and curriculum sub-committees. The senate meetings that I observed were highly contested, with members representing various SCC sub-cultures. The increased presence of noted transfer champions—like Mrs. Velazquez—was needed in critical areas such as the academic senate (i.e., decision-making body), budget committees (i.e., funds-transfer programs), and classrooms to strengthen recently passed transfer reform policies. As research demonstrates, *who* is doing the work is one of the key aspects of implementing educational reforms (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane et al., 2002).

Policies are not self-enacting, meaning they take on the culture of the institution within which they are embedded and the beliefs of the individuals overseeing the reform's implementation (Dowd, 2007). A primary concern noted by the SCC transfer staff during the implementation of their ADTs was the potential disruption of local transfer agreements long established with other universities. As documented by the Public Policy Institute of California (Moore & Shulock, 2014), many community colleges were hesitant to implement SB-1440 because they felt that local transfer agreements already worked. Once enacted, SB-1440 mandated that ADTs be the preferred transfer pathway. Ultimately, SCC developed the required number of ADTs, but did not change their advising practices or marketing efforts to emphasize the new transfer pathways. This was driven by an awareness that many students at SCC sought transfer to UCs or

private institutions rather than the CSU system, which ADTs were streamlined to provide. Counselors' understanding of this was confirmed in speaking to my participants about their preferred transfer destinations, as 9 out of 10 hoped for somewhere other than a CSU.

Although the transfer commitment was visible, and the college was moving forward with creating new transfer opportunities via the ADTs, students in the study perceived a lack of institutional support for reaching four-year institutions. For these students, there was an important difference between simply making transfer visible on campus and providing necessary high-touch support like advising, mentoring, and follow-up. What follows is a discussion of the misalignment between institutional transfer efforts and students' perceptions of and experiences with them.

Theme II: The Disconnect Between Transfer Aspiration and Attainment

The students I spoke with possessed strong transfer intentions. Cassandra wanted to study sociology at UCLA, Miriam planned to be Stanford-bound for engineering, Rick was taking his prerequisites in hopes of attending University of Southern California (USC), and Joey had LMU's political science program circled as his next destination. Although they intended to transfer, many of the students I interviewed felt unsupported by SCC and the existing transfer efforts on campus. Although the first theme revealed a growing transfer culture, as I spoke with students, most of them shared that they needed more interaction with counselors, faculty, and other transfer champions who could help them explore potential next schools, understand the right classes to take, decide where to transfer, and provide application support.

All of the students in the study articulated an intent to transfer from SCC and attain a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution. Despite this aspiration, most mentioned that they had not yet visited the transfer center or begun the process of mapping out their path to transfer. With this finding, it is important to remember that SCC has a counseling ratio of 1750:1, double the ratio of the statewide average (719:1), making it incredibly difficult to reach and counsel every student. As a staff member put it, "We just don't have the capacity to help every student, but we try." Daniel shared, "It takes a long time for one counselor to know your name. I remember, before, I think I went to four different counselors before [Ms. Liera]." In addition, counselors on campus were not only tasked with advising students on transfer, but also with addressing matriculation issues, financial aid, course selection, and much more.

Although Rick talked about walking around campus and seeing information about transfer and not being able to get away from it, the students in my sample also perceived the campus and transfer efforts as lacking and unsupportive, especially in their interactions with counselors at SCC. They felt that counseling was an unfriendly environment, and unpredictable depending on the counselor to whom a student was assigned. This disconnect between institutional efforts and student experiences created three responses: Students (a) had negative experiences with counselors, which they shared with peers; (b) did not see the value in counseling; or (c) preferred to rely on peer support. Evelyn, the only student in my study who did not share a first-choice campus for transfer stated, "It's hard as the first one from my family. There's really no guidance for me, so it [has been] difficult for me to navigate cuz I had to learn on my own who to

speak with. Luckily, I joined some clubs and spoke to other people and networked. That's what helped me." Evelyn exemplifies the third response, relying mostly on peers to navigate the transfer process.

Which counselor and where? Joey graduated high school in June of 2012 and enrolled at SCC in the fall of 2014, after taking a year off before starting college. Speaking with Joey, he was set on studying political science. In high school, he was involved with Model United Nations, and he had spent the previous summer interning with a global policy think tank. In our conversation, I asked if he had spoken with a counselor about his transfer plans. He shared,

> I should be trying to go see the counselors and trying to set up appointments to ask them all these things I have questions about . . . [but] I was just asking my friends and stuff, who seem to be more knowledgeable. Because some of them are really knowledgeable.

I then asked if he had visited the transfer center. He replied,

> Only a couple times. And that was like this year [laughs]. Prior to this year, I had never gone to the transfer center. First time I went was like a month and a half ago because they were having the little LMU event over at Santa Monica. So I had to go to the transfer center to sign up for that trip. And then there were a couple summer programs coming up. So I needed to turn in paperwork for those ones. So I really wanted to enroll for these things to LMU. Even though it wasn't actually in the transfer center [laughs]. It was a little booth set up outside the transfer center.

In this case, Joey was interested in being connected with programs that could make transfer a reality. He wanted to use SCC as a bridge and utilize its institutional efforts to further explore his goal of attending LMU. At the same time, Joey felt that his peers provided more knowledge with regard to transfer than the SCC counselors. I asked Joey to elaborate on why he decided not to seek out counselor help. He explained,

> I guess maybe things aren't organized in a way that it's easier for people to find out where to get certain information . . . we have counselors, we have like the transfer center, general counseling, special counselors. Do I go to the counselors to find out this information? Or am I supposed to go to the transfer center? It's easier to ask a friend than go to a counselor.

Joey spoke to the confusion that arises from the specialization of counseling on campus. At SCC, counselors provided specific types of information to students, based on their office location. In this structure, students needed to know—but perhaps were not always fully aware—that seeking counseling at one department over another could yield different advice and information. Cassandra perceived counselors in a similar way, but rather than inter-departmental differences, she noticed contrasting support between the SCC's main campus and its regional center. She shared her initial experiences with counselors, both at the regional center and with on-campus general counseling. Cassandra

started SCC at the regional education center about 12 miles south of the main campus. She described,

> There were times where I would go and feel like I'm wasting their time. Counselors expect you to come with the questions. As a student, yes, it is your homework to advocate for yourself, but what if you don't know what to ask? As a first-generation student, you don't know what the process is like. And you don't want to open your mouth and say that wrong thing because you just don't want to feel stupid. And I've felt that way.

Listening to Cassandra and Joey allowed me to begin piecing together my observations with what I learned from my study participants. Although there were counselors throughout SCC, the experience, support, and information they provided were dependent on their location. Most of the students shared that counselors at the regional center or general counseling were not as helpful as counselors in other spaces, such as the Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOP&S). Cassandra shared how she experienced this difference:

> The only counselors I [felt] like they cared were the ones from EOP&S. Ms. Liera, she's amazing. She really goes out of her way to give you all the resources. For counseling, it's usually 30 minutes, right? So after the 30 minutes, they don't need to serve you anymore, but she really goes over, like 40 minutes, close to an hour. If you need more help, she tells you when's her lunchtime, you just email her, and she'll meet you during her lunch. You know, regular faculty don't do that or like counselors in general counseling.

Cassandra raised an interesting point, one where "amazing" counseling experiences were dependent on the practitioner, particularly if they were in a specific department like EOP&S or in the general campus advising center. This relates to the earlier finding that, despite efforts to shift policy, SCC's transfer mindset existed only in pockets, rather than as a campus-wide culture. Miriam and Daniel also discussed differential treatment based on where they sought counseling support. Daniel shared how he appreciated joining a Men of Color Academy, with a dedicated counselor for students in the program. He shared, "It's totally different when you just have a counselor and can talk with them anytime you want." Miriam elaborated on this idea, sharing that the mathematics, engineering, and science achievement (MESA) counselor was different from those in general counseling:

> The people there, I just don't know how to ask the questions in a way . . . it's hard for me to explain what I need and I just feel that I can't ask many questions cuz they get annoyed, so I avoid the counselors and ask my friends . . . But, with MESA, it was friendly and open, and [the counselor] has great advice, especially cuz she specializes in STEM.

The student experiences in this study raise concerns that the type and quality of counseling at SCC were highly variable. Further, experiences like Miriam's in MESA or Daniel's with the Men of Color Academy illustrate that students connected to specific

programs benefited from more individualized counseling, opportunities to meet beyond the usual 30-minute window, and continuous support along the transfer pathway. For other students who interacted solely with at-large campus support structures, counselors were limited on time and transfer information. Navigating transfer through the right systems was difficult, often intimidating, and yet critical for SCC students.

The misalignment between a transfer policy's intent and students' aspirations. One of the first interviews I conducted was with Michel, a Black male studying mathematics. When I asked him about wanting to transfer, he responded, "Yeah, I'm just trying to get out of here, but I haven't mapped it out." Michael had been at SCC for three semesters, balancing 30 hours of work and a full course load, yet he had not spoken with a counselor or transfer center staff member since attending an orientation session during his first week on campus. As he was studying math—which had an ADT under the new reform policy—I was interested in his perspective. I asked if he had heard of the degree with a guarantee, to which he replied, "What's that?" Before answering, I showed him some of the images and flyers that were part of the college's marketing and outreach efforts. He shared that he had not seen those images either, affirming my growing sense that these visual efforts were passive attempts to increase awareness and get students to visit the transfer center. I described SB-1440's policy features and then shared that it was only for the CSU system. Later in the interview, Michel clarified that he wanted to go to UCLA or LMU, but was thinking of other schools, too, stating, "It might be helpful to know about it if I go to [the local CSU]."

Michel spoke of community college as a place from which to escape, one requiring a map to succeed. His use of the "trying to get out" metaphor provided me with a way to visualize the transfer process as a labyrinth, where both transfer-sending and receiving institutions fail to provide a clear pathway to move from one place to the next, and the student is stuck navigating unknown terrain. In this metaphor, the transfer process is seen as an arduous process that requires students to navigate through a field of barriers, dead ends, and complex pathways. These structural obstacles were exactly what the transfer reform policy was trying to address through simplified course requirements. The ADT required a clear and specific set of courses, approved and guaranteed to transfer for credit at the receiving four-year institutions. An added benefit would be receiving junior-standing and avoiding credit-loss, additional problems associated with transferring to a four-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

For Michel and other students in the study, two aspects of the new transfer policy limited its success: lack of information available on ADTs and the constraint that the pathways only lead to the CSUs. Of the 10 students interviewed, seven were majoring in areas with an available ADT, yet of the two who were open to transferring to a CSU, only one was familiar with the new ADT. Students' transfer aspirations did not align with the reform being implemented on campus, making the improved pathway to the CSUs meaningless to them.

Transfer students seeking different paths to the four-year degree. I spoke with 10 students of color, all of whom aspired to attain a bachelor's degree. As previous research suggests, community college students have high aspirations for degree attainment but need support in actualizing this goal (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Webb et al., 2015). Eight of

my study participants stated that they intended to directly transfer to a nearby four-year institution after earning a certificate or associate's degree. Although most of our interviews were conducted only feet away from the transfer center, only five interacted with a counselor anywhere on campus, and only four had actually visited the transfer center. These students' experiences point to misalignment between the transfer resources available and these students' needs. My conversations related to the ADTs highlighted the general lack of awareness about these pathways, but more specifically, the lack of relevance, since students in the study aspired to attend non-CSU institutions and thus would not utilize the new transfer degrees.

On the campus, implementation of this transfer reform focused on developing the ADTs, but not necessarily on marketing them heavily, incorporating them into transfer resources, or making them counselors' preferred pathway when working with students. This implementation was based on compliance, rather than trying to use the new ADTs to improve the transfer experience. The state would have needed to dedicate new fiscal resources to build capacity for students to truly benefit from the new transfer pathways created by SB-1440. This would have enabled SCC to hire more counselors to decrease the 1750:1 student-counselor ratio, as well as allow students to interact with counselors beyond the prescribed 30-minute window. With limited opportunities to meet students and advise them, counseling priority was on more critical matters such as placement, developing an educational plan, and covering financial aid questions. As Ms. Liera said, "We try to get to know students, learn what they want to study, see if their educational goals align with what courses they took, and help them plan for transferring, but there's just a limitation to what we can do." In addition, counselors like Ms. Liera were familiar with existing transfer pathways (e.g., local agreements, the state's Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum), and provided that information with ease, so covering the newly developed ADTs was not high on their list of ideas.

Theme III: The Transfer Student Counter-Space

While the institution was developing the mandated new ADTs, some students on campus felt a disconnect from campus transfer efforts. As a response to the perceived lack of support and resources, in the fall of 2014, a group of students created the "SCC Transfer Club." In interviewing the founding leadership, I discovered that this club was a reaction to the divide between students' perceptions and the institution's efforts regarding transfer support. The club was created as a counter-space, a place where students could create a helpful environment and foster their own research without feeling inferior if they asked the wrong questions about transferring (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). As a peer-led initiative, the club was an opportunity to meet twice a month and share resources, provide peer motivation, and encourage fellow students in the transfer process. This student-initiated club began around the same time that I began my fieldwork, and I had the opportunity to interview four members of the club whom I have already introduced: Cassandra, Miriam, Joey, and Martin.

Cassandra started SCC in 2010, three years after graduating high school. As an undocumented student, she found herself working full time to fund the tuition at community college. Once the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy passed, Cassandra could attend SCC full time and take classes on the main campus. As she put it,

the club was a response to students feeling left out of the programs and services that the campus provided. She shared that,

> Working students, nighttime students, and people with children . . . don't have access to the transfer center and to all these different essential resources that you need to transfer, you know? It's basic information that you need, and they don't have access to it because, by the time they come, it's closed.

In response, "the mission of this club and the reason why we created it was because we want[ed] to create like a student support group [where] we could help one another."

Cassandra initially reached out to the transfer center about developing the club, but staff were not very encouraging. She recalled,

> We went to the transfer center, and we talked to the staff, we told [them], "oh, I want to start a club," and my intention has always been to like have a close connection with the transfer center. I mean we haven't built the connection that I want to you know. But [they] directed us towards PUENTE. Like, "Oh there's another club that is doing this so why don't you just join them?"

Although PUENTE's mission is to increase the number of students who transfer to four-year colleges and provide a culturally relevant focus for Latinx students, most participants need to start with pre-transfer English. The students in the transfer club ranged in ethnic backgrounds, academic preparedness, and fulfillment of pre-transfer criteria. Students like Cassandra, Joey, and Miriam had already taken their transfer-level mathematics and English courses, and wanted a supportive space for those closer to submitting their applications. Although Cassandra found the exchange with the transfer center dismissive, she persisted with the idea and formalized the group with the help of an outside mentor who attended UCLA. SCC Transfer Club's mission statement read:

> The [SCC] Transfer Club is a student-led group that exists to provide current community college students with guidance, encouragement for academic excellence, and leadership skills to pave their journeys towards a top tier four-year institution. Our mission is to help students navigate the college system by providing networking opportunities, academic advising, peer mentoring, tutoring, and information about scholarships and internship opportunities.

Joey's intention in creating the club was to make something "for the students, by the students," offer a space on campus to mutually learn about transfer, bring in peers who recently started at four-year institutions, and move along the transfer pathway in solidarity. Additionally, Cassandra emphasized the need to learn about schools like UCLA, UC Berkeley, and Stanford to explain why the phrase "top tier" was included in the mission statement. She added that, usually, transfer information on campus was about going to the "local four-year" or "the place nearby," but that transfer club members aspired beyond the regionally located CSU campuses.

In the spring semester, the club had six board members, and the general membership was between eight and 10 students. The club was a community of peers who shared

common struggles, experiences, and knowledge about transfer strategies. Dowd and colleagues (2006) confirm the importance of peers in reducing informational barriers and sharing coping strategies during the transfer process. Martin, the student council representative, shared,

> I know that this club is necessary. It's a really good idea considering that [SCC] has one of the lowest transfer rates in all of the area. Of the district, we have one of the worst transfer rates, so I think whatever we can do to increase that, it's probably necessary.

These transfer-aspiring students, cognizant of SCC's low transfer rates, took the initiative to develop a space where peers encouraged and supported each other along the process.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal some of the complexities of transfer from community colleges and the related reform policies. The stories shared by the students spoke to a misalignment between institutional transfer resources and their own transfer aspirations. Although the campus had a strong commitment to making transfer processes visible, these marketing efforts were not enough; students wanted deeper interactions with practitioners on their path to a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, the practitioners whom I interviewed spoke of their commitment to supporting students and shifting the campus culture to a place where all students were seen as transfer-bound. Yet, the size of the campus, high student-to-counselor ratio, and other constraints related to advising may have rendered these individual efforts invisible to most students at SCC. Students in this study relied mostly on peer support and selective advising to help them reach their transfer goals. A few shared their negative experiences with counselors, and others were vocal about the differential transfer support received based on the specific department they visited. Many of the students shared that they relied on peer support over practitioners to get through the transfer maze, so much so that a student-led transfer club was created.

As for the implementation of the ADT, SCC staff were compliant in developing the ADTs, but only saw them as an addition to the many transfer options already established and available. Although the transfer reform improved the pathway between community colleges and the CSU system, this was not the journey that students in this study wanted to take. With ambitions of transferring to UCs or private institutions, these students found the creation of ADTs irrelevant to their transfer path. When looking at both practitioner experiences and student perceptions, I found that the ADTs provided new pathways to unwanted destinations. These findings call on policymakers to reformulate the reach of reform efforts, and on campus practitioners to use policy to improve opportunities for transfer-aspiring students (Felix, Trinidad, Ching, & Bensimon, 2017).

Accordingly, I raise implications and provide recommendations to better align policy and practice to support the transfer aspirations of community college students. First, I argue that there is a need for comprehensive state policy reform that incorporates all segments of baccalaureate-granting institutions (e.g., UCs and privates) to improve transfer pathways. This is evident from my study participants, only one of whom aspired

to go to a CSU, while the rest aimed for schools like LMU, UC Berkeley, or Stanford. Second, this study describes ways that practitioners at community colleges could better assess and become aware of students' perceptions and use of transfer support staff and services. To address these issues, I see a need to move from focusing on transfer culture to a more robust notion of transfer infrastructure. In addition, I call for campuses to encourage formal and informal peer networks and social spaces to support transfer.

What Would a Transformative Transfer Policy Look Like?

With SB-1440, the first step of implementation was to develop new degrees that provided students with additional benefits when transferring to CSUs. The next challenge was to reach out to students about the availability of these "degrees with a guarantee." At SCC, SB-1440 and the ADTs were interpreted as just another pathway available for students, but were not, as the policy intended, understood as the preferred pathway.

Two major factors challenged the implementation of SB-1440 at SCC: (a) lack of resources and (b) pre-existing transfer pathways and programs at the local level. The policy was designed to reform the complex transfer process through ADTs, but was limited to being "carried out in the normal course of program development and approval and shall not represent any new activities or a higher level of service on the part of community college" (Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, 2010, p. 93). As such, institutions were not given additional fiscal resources to fully develop these new degrees. At the time of the study, only eight (out of a possible 25) ADTs had been developed at SCC. To benefit from the policy, students needed to both major in one of the eight ADT-eligible disciplines and intend to transfer to a CSU; only one student in my study would have been able to take advantage of the streamlined transfer pathway.

Furthermore, many community colleges were satisfied with the local articulation agreements already in place with CSUs, UCs, and private institutions, and would have preferred to focus on these, rather than using finite resources to implement a new policy. One counselor stated, "The ADTs are unclear and confusing to students . . . it's more beneficial to push local pathways already established." This was significant, as both staff and students in my study pointed to non-CSU institutions as preferred transfer destinations.

SB-1440 was visibly implemented and developed at several different levels. At the ground level, implementation required community colleges to develop and approve ADTs that aligned with statewide transfer pathway models. The second level of implementation required schools to promote and market the ADTs to students as the preferred pathway to transfer. Based on the experiences of Ms. Carrasco, the transfer coordinator and a principal actor in developing the policy, the first implementation goal was to develop degrees, get them approved by the chancellor's office, and then put them in the catalog. Whether a student would take advantage of the new transfer degree pathway (the secondary level) was not a major concern. Subsequently, many of the students in this study were unaware of the new ADTs and the simplified pathway created by SB-1440. This speaks to a crucial gap in the advising process; knowledge of pathways shared by counselors is one of the strongest predictors of transfer (Webb et al., 2015), and students could not utilize the ADTs if counselors were not talking about them.

Many of the practitioners and students focused their sights on a UC campus, known for their higher rates of graduation, employment opportunities, and pipelines to graduate school (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). This could also reflect the personal experiences of key staff like Ms. Carrasco and Mrs. Velazquez who themselves attended SCC and transferred to UCs. After observing a transfer meeting during the fall application period, I wrote, "It seems like the counselors in the center have a 'shoot for the moon, land amongst the stars' approach." In this sense, transfer center counselors motivated students to prepare for highly selective institutions and, if it did not work out, hoped they could still get into broader-access institutions. Although it is essential for practitioners to set high expectations, counselors also need to provide the full set of options available to students, including options like the newly formed ADT pathways to destinations like the CSUs.

Based on my findings, the policy reform did not align with the high expectations that counselors and students had regarding transfer; focusing just on CSU campuses was seen as limiting students' transfer options. A transformative policy would require all sectors of postsecondary education to develop clearly articulated pathways with community colleges. This type of policy would require integrating the reform across all three segments, especially the more selective and most desired systems and campuses (Dowd et al., 2006). Recognizing these intricacies of implementation helps us understand not only how a policy is put into practice, but also how policy impacts the people who interact with that policy, and the policy's resulting programs and benefits (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Transfer Programs and Services for Whom?

As previously discussed, SCC is a campus with over 50,000 students and a student-to-counselor ratio of 1750:1, leading to various advising challenges. Structural changes and resource allocations are vital to improving counseling services on campus. My observations and interviews provide a narrative in which students were hesitant to utilize counseling and transfer services based on previous negative experiences and perceptions shared by their peers. In this case, institutional transfer efforts were more of an absence than a presence for the students in the study. Students shared their struggles and experiences working with counselors at the regional center, confusion with counselors across departments, and exchanges that made them feel stupid for not having the so-called right questions to ask. A subset of the students responded to the perceived lack of support at SCC by creating a transfer club.

Although community colleges provide varying levels of transfer services, it is essential to understand how students experience them. Rather than subscribing to student-deficit notions of "they just don't care to come," or "they don't ask for help," institutions need to become aware of the experiences and perceptions that keep students away from departments and spaces that are intended to support them (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009). Institutions should provide more integrated training for effectively serving transfer-aspiring students. Students in this study were most comfortable with counselors in specialized programs or offices. It may be helpful to understand the types of professional development provided to these staff, how staff and students interact in these spaces, and what information can be shared across other counseling departments on campus.

Similarly, institutions and departments should strive to include student voices in future decisions related to transfer programs and practices.

A Move Toward Transfer Infrastructure

In recent years, scholars have developed models and recommendations to improve transfer in community colleges (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Castro & Cortez, 2017; Jain et al., 2011; Pérez & Ceja, 2010). These have primarily focused on institutional and student-level factors that enhance a transfer culture to improve outcomes (Castro & Cortez, 2017). Elements of transfer culture include having an institutional commitment to facilitating transfer opportunities for students (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004; Shaw & London, 2001), developing a shared belief that all students can transfer (Jain et al., 2011), and embedding key transfer information into everyday practices (Wood, Nevarez, & Hilton, 2011).

This work found a need to go beyond notions of transfer culture to improve the success rates for students. Drawing on public policy and urban planning, it may be necessary to explore the role of infrastructure in building capacity to improve transfer success (Carter et al., 2015; Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). A focus on transfer infrastructure requires that key stakeholders, including policymakers (i.e., legislature), government agencies (i.e., boards of education, higher education coordinating bodies), social institutions (i.e., community colleges, four-year institutions), and individuals (i.e., students, community advocates) come together to not just share information but to develop a shared vision and pool resources to expand transfer pathways in substantive ways.

In developing transportation corridors (i.e., new highways, high occupancy lanes), it is not enough for drivers to desire less traffic or an easier commute. Policymakers, transportation agencies, and residents need to collaborate to actualize these aspirations. Similarly, improving the transfer function in higher education requires a combination of policymakers, institutions, and practitioners working together to expand capacity at four-year institutions, streamline new pathways, and support students in their journey toward those destinations. Building on the data in this study, we might further theorize on the concept of transfer infrastructure to think about overlapping spheres of influence. Key factors include the roles of policy reform in restructuring transfer, institutions in implementing these new pathways with fidelity, and practitioners in informing and advising transfer-aspiring students to take advantage of these improved roads to the baccalaureate.

Whereas transfer culture focuses organizational dynamics within a community college, transfer infrastructure calls for coordinated efforts between institutions, systems of higher education, and policymakers to improve the pathways to and capacity at four-year institutions. As with the implementation of SB-1440 at SCC, a new road to four-year institutions is of no use to students if they are unaware of the opportunity or if it leads to a destination they are not interested in.

Empowering Peer Support Structures

From the stories that students shared, it was evident that they strongly aspired to transfer, but needed navigational and informational capital to achieve their goals. Most students relied on peer support or selected counselors located in categorical programs. If students are reticent to access institutional transfer efforts, it might be necessary to restructure what services, programs, and counseling look like on campus. As it stands, the students were more comfortable with peer support than counseling. Practitioners need to find ways to empower these pockets of peer support found on campus.

This empowerment can include additional resources and funding to create student-led transfer workshops, conferences, and university visits. In addition, there should be improved communication and alignment between institutional and student-led transfer efforts. The transfer center can provide resources and training for groups like the SCC Transfer Club and other student groups that support undocumented students, nighttime students, and students who attend regional campus centers. It is important for student-led efforts to gain the nuanced information that trained counselors have, as well as to tap into social networks (e.g., admission officers, special admit programs). The students in the transfer club shared that they wanted to develop a strong transfer culture on campus, one in which faculty and counselors moved from asking "Do you think you want to transfer?" to "Where do you plan to transfer to?" The next step in improving the transfer culture at SCC will be developing congruence between the efforts of campus staff and the perceived importance and relevancy of those efforts to students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goal of this study was to expand understanding of the ways that policies are embedded in an existing context and how they reshape transfer practices. Through this inquiry, I found that the campus expanded its efforts to make transfer visible, but fell short of meeting students' expectations for support. The impact of the newly implemented ADT was diminished as practitioners relied on preexisting transfer pathways and students aimed to transfer to institutions not included in the streamlined process. Given these misalignments, students on campus created their own transfer club to provide peer support to navigate the application process and ultimately attend top-tier institutions.

Transfer-aspiring students should be able to benefit from wide-reaching policy efforts that simplify pathways across all segments of higher education. Similarly, reforms need to build the capacity of institutions to support practitioners who share critical information and resources with students. Along this line, educational research can help elucidate the ways that both policy and practice influence student transfer success. For policymakers, it is crucial that transfer articulation reforms apply to all systems of higher education, particularly selective public and independent institutions. Recent research from Texas suggests that one way to expand transfer pathways is through financial incentives for institutions that build transfer partnerships across systems (Bailey, Jenkins, Fink, Cullinane, & Schudde, 2017). Incentives for transfer could be provided in similar ways to how workforce development funds are awarded by state and federal agencies. It is important to institutionalize transfer advocacy efforts for practitioners, given the limited

resources available to serve students. Some community colleges have explored peer transfer advisors as a way to decrease the high student-to-counselor ratio. Additionally, experiences at SCC suggest that institutions should map out all the places on campus where advising happens and assess the level of support and service provided.

Community colleges exist as centers of educational promise, providing all students with the opportunity to transfer to a four-year institution. Because community colleges serve high numbers of students of color, it is important to examine policy reform implementation, asking how transfer pathways can be improved in community colleges.

This work was grounded in my goal to improve access to postsecondary education and my belief that improving the community college transfer process can increase access to four-year institutions and baccalaureate attainment—as well as the social and economic benefits tied to such a degree. If we are to fulfill the promise of mobility and transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions, it is vital that we understand the state policies, institutional structures, and student dynamics that facilitate transfer success. For those seeking a bachelor's degree, improving the transfer function is crucial to improving access to a four-year degree when starting at a community college.

When aiming for improved transfer success, we must hold realistic expectations of what a single policy can accomplish, particularly when a policy reform only addresses transfer barriers between very select elements of the higher education landscape. SCC provides a glimpse into the complexities and realities of legislating the transfer process and gives us a better understanding of the difficulties at each step of the reform process. In particular, this case study sheds light on the long and arduous process of improving transfer culture in community college. In this effort, we see the time it takes for policy to travel from the state capital to college campuses; for institutions to comply with mandates and integrate the changes into their structures, programs, and practices; for practitioners to market the changes and advise students on the new transfer degrees; and, ultimately, for students to become aware of and benefit from the streamlined pathways that the policy makes available.

What SCC ultimately highlights is the misalignment between well-intended transfer reform and student aspirations for their studies after community college. It is imperative that policies seeking to improve the transfer function do so in ways that provide access to all four-year institutions, particularly high-resource ones like the UCs and private institutions. Only then will state reform efforts seeking to improve the pathways to transfer genuinely serve California's thousands of first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized community college students.

Author Biography

Eric R. Felix *is a Ph.D. candidate in the Urban Education Policy program at the University of Southern California and a research associate with the Center for Urban Education. His research examines the role of higher education policy in addressing educational inequities for racially-minoritized students, particularly within the community college context.*

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