



ISSUE BRIEF

From Community College to Selective Four-Year College

Experiences of Transfer Students

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Background

In the United States, most students start their college education in local community colleges. Of these students, a very small proportion ever transfer to a four-year, private selective college. This research focuses on understanding the factors that community college students consider when deciding where to transfer and explores the experiences of students once they have transferred to a four-year selective college. The ultimate purpose is to use the findings to help selective colleges better meet the needs of transfer students.

Methods

For this project, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 transfer-intending students at one community college and 15 students who had transferred to a selective four-year college from 10 different community colleges. We also analyzed publicly available data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the College Scorecard to understand the demographics of students at the community colleges local to the selective college.

Key Findings

Community colleges are key sources for selective colleges to make sure they are reaching academically eligible local students as well as doing their part to contribute to bachelor completion goals of states and localities. Community colleges give students a “second chance” to continue to build their skills, recover academically from challenging high school experiences or sports injuries, and imagine themselves in prestigious colleges. Two transfer students at the selective college said that in high school and early in their time at community college they never would have imagined attending the selective four-year. The prestige, cost, and status seemed out of reach for them. But as they gained skills and did well at their community college, their aspirations changed.

Though academically eligible, **community college students did not really consider applying to the selective four-year college.** They all mainly planned on going to the nearest California State University (CSU), which they said would be very much like attending their community college. For the students at the selective four-year, an individual invitation or a notice about a scholarship helped them to consider applying and ultimately attend the selective four year. Students **also needed help** navigating the application and understanding financial aid offers.

The **most important considerations in selecting a college were location, cost, flexibility, and comfort level.** Many transfer students want to be able to continue to live with family, to keep their current jobs, and to move from full- to part-time enrollment when family or financial needs become acute. A father who needed to take classes after his full-time work was done and kids were picked up from school said, *“Usually I work full time, and I take night classes. That’s my regular schedule. I work Monday through Friday, that’s basically 9 to 5, but I usually get off at like 3. And then I would go to school from like 6 to 9. Depends on the class. Sometimes they start earlier”* (CC114). Students at the local community colleges had a higher mean age than those at the selective college.

Students **valued many aspects of the selective college.** A number of students mentioned the small class sizes as well as the ability to get help and support. Four of the 15 interviewees at the selective four-year college said they just walked into the admissions office to get help understanding

their financial aid offer: “I ended up visiting (the S4Y) and also going to the Admissions office to kind of ask them to like, help me understand my financial aid and everything because I couldn't really understand it. And so I went in person, and they were very nice and very helpful in explaining it to me (S4Y208).” This personalization continued once enrolled, “A big difference I've noticed is really small class sizes. At least, that's the positive one—smaller class sizes. I can talk to teachers more. A lot of stuff that just stems off that” (S4Y205).

Culture shock and adjustment to the four-year meant that commuting was preferable for some students. One transfer student at the selective four-year college said, “It's just nice knowing that at the end of my last class I get to go home, you know, to my family. And honestly, I think if I had lived on campus I think I would be having a much worse time” (S4Y208). A number of transfer students struggled with the cultural and demographic differences between their community college and the four-year. For some this contributed to not feeling comfortable speaking up in class and students worried that this negatively affected their grades.

Most students were doing fine academically, though some struggled.

When asked more about the difference between the way courses were taught at his community college versus the selective four-year college, a Computer Science major said, “(at my CC) they kind of just walk you through the examples and explain everything. Once, everybody kind of felt that they understood, then they moved on (to a new topic). Here it was just like, Go go, go!” (S4Y207). He did not feel comfortable asking questions during class because he felt like he was the “only one” struggling.

For students who had transferred to the four-year selective college, **having to work plus school was extremely challenging.** The student who struggled the most was a business major who also had to support her parents, paying many of the household expenses as well as unexpected health expenses and car repairs. The student worked as much as she could, especially in the summer, but worried that she was behind their peers in getting the right types of internships and experiences to ultimately get a higher paying job.

Recommendations for Selective Colleges

- **Enrollment Management:** Selective colleges should reach out to community college students with offers of scholarships, assistance with applications, transparency around unit transfer loss or limits, and help with financial aid offers. College admission and financial aid assistance should be advertised and virtual meetings offered for prospective applicants. Building partnerships with community colleges and collaborative programming and community events and tours as well as access to academic programs will help the selective four-year college be more accessible and familiar to local community college students.
- **Institutional Research and Undergraduate Studies:** Annually examine and present to the selective four-year college campus current IPEDS data on local community colleges to help staff and faculty understand the demographics of potential transfer students. Inventory academic policies and necessary support if demographics are different.¹ Track the success of community college transfer students.
- **Student Services:** Orientation and summer bridge programs are helpful. Transfer students suggested an orientation only for transfer students as well as opportunities to tour campus and find their classes before the start of the term. Further, students asked for introductions and easy access to key people on campus that could help them navigate the school as well as check-ins with advisors often during the first year post transfer.
- **Academic Departments:** Determine transferable major courses at the community college for ease of transfer as well as consider dual enrollment options for prospective transfer students from local

¹ We recommend using the following report to to identify local community colleges: Sunny Chen, Emily Schwartz, Cindy Le, and Elizabeth Davidson Pisacreta, "Right in Your Backyard: Expanding Local Community College Transfer Pathways to High-Graduation-Rate Institutions," *Ithaka S+R*, 21 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.315695>.

community colleges. Invite enrolled transfer students in the major to mentor new transfer students and create courses that allow them to meet one another. Train faculty about the demographics of transfer students and in inclusive pedagogies.²

- **Career Services:** Transfer students need help to capitalize on the skills they have from all their previous work experience, but also assistance in getting the experience and opportunities necessary to transition to their desired career post graduation.

² See helpful guide books here: Joshua Wyner, KC Deane, Davis Jenkins, and John Fink, “The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two-and Four-Year Colleges,” *Community College Research Center, The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*, 2016, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/transfer-playbook-essential-practices.html>; Tania LaViolet, Kathryn Masterson, Alex Anacki, Josh Wyner, John Fink, Aurely Garcia Tulloch, Jessica Steiger, and Davis Jenkins “The Transfer Paybook: A Practical Guide for Achieving Excellence in Transfer and Bachelor’s Attainment for Community College Students, 2nd Ed,” *The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, The Community College Resource Center*, March 2025, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/transfer-playbook-second-edition.pdf>.