

Transfer Seeking Behaviors of North Carolina Community College Students

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About the Project

The Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte is conducting an exploration into community college (CC) transfer student behaviors and outcomes in North Carolina (NC). For instance, we have learned that just over 40% of North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) transfer students to University of North Carolina (UNC) campuses follow a primary feeder pattern (i.e., transferring from a CC to the most frequent transfer destination university, often the closest university). Thus, the majority of NCCCS to UNC students transfer to a university outside of the most frequent pattern.¹ In addition, we have learned that higher percentages of students transferring from CCs in economically distressed counties (as compared with less economically distressed counties) transfer with Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees more typically associated with workforce preparation than transfer,² and those students typically earn baccalaureate degrees at lower rates than those with more transfer-oriented associate degrees (e.g.,

Associate in Arts/Associate in Science).³ These and other preliminary findings have shown the need to explore further the behaviors and experiences of CC transfer students in NC.

With support from the John M. Belk Endowment and in an effort to inform discussions about how NC can reach the myFutureNC attainment goal of *2 million by 2030*, we are engaging in a multi-year effort to capture quantitative and qualitative data that will help us better understand transfer students' experiences.

Background

Nationally, CCs serve as the access point for many seeking to obtain a bachelor's degree; however, less than 15 percent of students who begin at a CC earn a bachelor's degree within six years.⁴ As such, existing literature has sought to understand partnerships, instructional practice, articulation, and other related barriers and facilitators.^{5,6,7} Additional work is needed to explore "transfer seeking behaviors" that advance or impede student progress toward a bachelor's degree.

In NC, efforts including the Comprehensive Articulation Agreements between the NCCCS and both the UNC System as well as the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities have set a path appropriate for many students completing relevant degrees, yet there is much we do not know about how students engage with these and related policies.

Concepts like socioacademic integration⁸ and transfer capital⁹ are associated with knowledge and experiences needed to navigate the CC-to-university (vertical) transfer process. And additional research on the roles of faculty and staff¹⁰ may be particularly influential for transfer self-efficacy¹¹--students' belief that they can successfully transfer. Recent studies have linked frequent interactions with CC faculty and other institutional agents to student learning,¹² academic success and persistence among Latinx students,¹³ and satisfaction among Black female students.¹⁴ Given that advising interactions, targeted programming, and faculty relationships are linked to successful vertical transfer, this brief explores the experiences of students in NC CCs in terms of their engagement in "transfer seeking" behaviors and the relationship with student characteristics and institutional transfer performance.

Data Source and Participants

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is a national survey that examines effective educational practices and student behaviors correlated with student learning and retention. Respondents are randomly sampled at the classroom level from a sampling frame of all credit-bearing classes. Our dataset included student responses from 24 NC CCs that participated in 2017, 2018, or 2019. The participating colleges are representative of the population of 58 CCs in terms of disciplinary focus (high transfer, high career, or mixed); however, rural colleges are underrepresented (47% of population, 25% of sample).

We limited our analysis to 3,374 students (Table 1) who indicated vertical transfer as a goal of attending college and had been studying at their CC for three or more terms, a sufficient time to acquire relevant experiences. Because the study sample is limited to those who have expressed vertical transfer intent, comparable system-level data are not available, but when compared to the NCCCS enrollment in credit-bearing curricula (2019), our sample overrepresents full-time students (74% vs. 55%) and students aged 18-24 (74% vs. 46%), while underrepresenting students who identify as Black or African American (15% vs. 21%).

TABLE 1*Demographic Profile of North Carolina Community College Transfer Seekers Completing the CCSSE (N=3,374)*

| Characteristic | Categories | Frequency |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Age | 18-24 | 2,507 (74.3%) |
| | 25-39 | 695 (20.6%) |
| | 40+ | 167 (4.9%) |
| Enrollment | Full-time | 2,478 (74.4%) |
| | Part-time | 896 (25.6%) |
| Gender identity | Men | 1,425 (42.3%) |
| | Women | 1,862 (55.3%) |
| | Other | 25 (0.7%) |
| | Prefer not to respond | 53 (1.6%) |
| Racial or ethnic identity ^a | American Indian, Alaskan Native | 59 (1.8%) |
| | Asian | 115 (3.4%) |
| | Black or African American | 426 (12.7%) |
| | Hispanic or Latino | 313 (9.3%) |
| | White | 2,036 (60.6%) |
| | Other | 51 (1.5%) |
| | Two or more race/ethnicities | 241 (7.1%) |
| | Prefer not to respond | 115 (3.4%) |

We identified four specific transfer-relevant indicators in the CCSSE:

- Discussing career plans with faculty
- Developing an academic or transfer plan in the first year of study
- Use of transfer advising services
- Participation in a student success program

We were also interested in student engagement as a predictor of persistence, so we looked at each of the CCSSE student engagement benchmarks reported:

- Active & collaborative learning (class participation, student interaction, learning outside class)
- Student effort (time on task, preparation, use of student services)
- Academic challenge (challenging activities, quantity and rigor of academic work)
- Student-faculty interaction (about academic performance, career plans, course content)
- Support for learning (perceptions of support, use of advising and counseling)

^a Survey respondents could choose all that apply among eight categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, White, and Other. "Two or more" indicates the respondent checked two or more among these eight. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander are not reported due to subgroup size below n=10.

Data Analysis

We sought to describe transfer seeking behaviors and engagement based on enrollment intensity and institutional transfer performance.^b Due to the nature of the sample, we focused on descriptive statistics to provide a profile of participants' reported behaviors and perceptions. Our aim with this preliminary look was to display findings to show general patterns of behavior disaggregated by institution, enrollment intensity, and demographics. Upcoming work on this project, discussed further in the conclusion of the paper, will involve student-level analysis showing potential predictive relationships between transfer-seeking behaviors and student outcomes.

First, we disaggregated the data for full-time vs. part-time and by transfer performance as reported on the NCCCS dashboard (Table 2). A baseline level is determined for the state and then institutional transfer performance levels are calculated overall and by demographic groups. We classified institutions as having equitable transfer performance if all demographic groups (based on gender, race/ethnicity, age, and enrollment intensity) performed above the state baseline, and inequitable transfer performance if any group performed below the baseline.

TABLE 2

Transfer seeking behaviors and student engagement of NC community college students by institutional transfer performance and enrollment (N=3,374)

| Type | Indicator | All students (N=3,374) | Institutional transfer performance | | Enrollment intensity | |
|---|--|------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | | | Equitable (n=2,004) | Inequitable (n=1,370) | Full-time (n=2,478) | Part-time (n=896) |
| Transfer seeking behaviors (yes/no; frequency & percentage) | Discussed career plans with faculty | 2,789 (82.7%) | 1,658 (82.7%) | 1,131 (82.6%) | 2,084 (84.1%) | 705 (78.7%) |
| | Developed academic/transfer plan in first year | 2,298 (68.1%) | 1,363 (68.0%) | 935 (68.2%) | 1,718 (69.3%) | 573 (64.0%) |
| | Sought transfer advising | 1,876 (55.1%) | 1,163 (58.0%) | 725 (52.9%) | 1,447 (58.4%) | 429 (47.9%) |
| | Participated in student success program | 1,727 (50.9%) | 1,014 (50.6%) | 713 (52.0%) | 1,324 (53.4%) | 403 (45.0%) |
| Student engagement (scale of 0-1; mean and standard deviation) | Active and collaborative learning | 0.433 (0.172) | 0.434 (0.173) | 0.432 (0.171) | 0.447 (0.172) | 0.393 (0.166) |
| | Student-faculty interaction | 0.516 (0.198) | 0.515 (0.196) | 0.516 (0.199) | 0.531 (0.198) | 0.474 (0.190) |
| | Student effort | 0.487 (0.159) | 0.486 (0.160) | 0.489 (0.159) | 0.500 (0.157) | 0.452 (0.160) |
| | Support for learning | 0.503 (0.207) | 0.499 (0.204) | 0.509 (0.210) | 0.516 (0.205) | 0.467 (0.205) |
| | Academic challenge | 0.637 (0.166) | 0.640 (0.166) | 0.631 (0.165) | 0.648 (0.164) | 0.605 (0.165) |

^b NCCCS Transfer Performance Metric Definition: Among community college associate degree completers and those who have completed 30 or more articulated transfer credits who subsequently transfer to a four-year university or college during the fall semester, the percentage who graduate prior to or remain enrolled in a four-year college or university the following fall semester. (<https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/analytics/dashboards>)

As a follow-up (Table 3), we examined two indicators directly referencing transfer (transfer planning and transfer advising) disaggregated by age, gender identity, and racial or ethnic identity. We focused on reporting frequencies and percentages to provide a descriptive summary.

TABLE 3

Transfer planning and advising behavior by age, gender identity, and racial and ethnic identity (N=3,347)

| Characteristic | Categories | Developed academic/transfer plan in first year | Sought transfer advising |
|---|--|--|--------------------------|
| Age group | 18-24 (n=2,507) | 1,715 (68.4%) | 1,463 (58.4%) |
| | 25-39 (n=695) | 463 (66.6%) | 327 (47.1%) |
| | 40+ (n=167) | 111 (66.5%) | 82 (49.1%) |
| Gender identity | Men (n=1,425) | 992 (69.6%) | 823(57.8%) |
| | Women (n=1,862) | 1,255 (67.4%) | 1,006 (54.0%) |
| | Other (n=25) | 13 (52.0%) | 17 (68.0%) |
| | Prefer not to respond (n=53) | 26 (49.1%) | 25 (47.2%) |
| Racial and ethnic identity ^c | American Indian or Alaskan Native (n=59) | 39 (66.1%) | 30 (50.8%) |
| | Asian (n=115) | 90 (78.3%) | 86 (74.8%) |
| | Black or African American (n=426) | 312 (73.2%) | 252 (59.2%) |
| | Hispanic or Latino (n=313) | 244 (78.0%) | 162 (51.8%) |
| | White (n=2,036) | 1,341(65.9%) | 1,105 (54.3%) |

Primary Findings

Transfer Seeking Behaviors and Engagement

- Most students discussed career plans with faculty (83%) and developed an academic or transfer plan in their first year (68%). About half utilized transfer advising (55%) and student success programs (51%).
- Students reported the highest perceived engagement with academic challenge (0.64), with somewhat lower perceived active and collaborative learning (0.43).
- There was little variation in reported behaviors and engagement based on institutional transfer performance. One notable exception is that a larger proportion of students at institutions with equitable transfer performance reported seeking transfer advising (58%) than their counterparts at institutions with some transfer performance inequity (53%).
- The most variation was seen between full-time and part-time students. Full-time students were more likely to engage in transfer seeking behaviors and have higher levels of engagement.

^c Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander are not reported due to subgroup size below n=10.

Demographic Disaggregation of Transfer Planning and Advising Behavior

- Students across ages were similarly likely to develop an academic or transfer plan (66-68%). Students 18-24 were more likely to see a transfer advisor (58%) than those 25+ (47-49%).
- Men and women reported similar behavior for transfer planning (67-70%) and advising use (54-59%) with men reporting slightly higher for both. Students with a gender identity other than man or woman or who preferred not to indicate gender identity showed mixed but generally lower levels of transfer planning and advising, though the numbers in the sample were too small to draw definitive conclusions.
- Some interesting variations occur within and across racial and ethnic identity groups. For all but one group (other), students were more likely to have an academic plan than to have sought transfer advising; thus, many are relying on information from other sources. The difference was most substantial for students identifying as Hispanic or Latino (26 points) and significant for students identifying as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, White, and two+ groups (10-15%). Students identifying as “other” racial/ethnic group reported the lowest incidence of having an academic plan (52%) while roughly half of American Indian or Alaskan Native and Hispanic or Latino identifying students had not sought advising. Asian identifying students were by far most likely to have sought transfer advising (75%).

Implications

- **Advising for Impact:** Considering that NC’s comprehensive articulation agreements work most smoothly when students know their transfer destination and major by the end of their first 30 credit hours, it is somewhat concerning that only about two-thirds of prospective transfer students have developed a transfer plan in the first year, and just over half have met with a transfer advisor. There may be additional opportunities to ensure that students are engaging in their planning as early as possible with guidance from institutional agents.
- **Serving Adult/Neotraditional and Part-Time Students:** Given their lower rates of early transfer planning and advising, services may be perceived as less accessible to neotraditional (25+) and part-time students. Institutions should ensure that hours and modalities accommodate the schedules and consider the responsibilities of working students.
- **Striving for Equity:** Institutions must stay vigilant to help potentially marginalized student groups overcome any systemic barriers to successful transfer. A transfer sending culture¹⁵ must include transfer planning and advising services with diverse and culturally competent staff who can connect with marginalized gender and racial or ethnic groups.

Next Steps

The data in this brief represent a preliminary descriptive look into transfer seeking behaviors across demographic groups and related to an institution-level outcome metric (transfer performance). To contribute to NC conversations on transfer student experiences and engagement, our next steps include a study that links CC student enrollment and transfer outcomes to their reported engagement on the CCSSE with partner CCs in NC that have agreed to match CCSSE, institutional, and National Student Clearinghouse data. We will be able to explore relationships among engagement-related predictors, transfer intent, transfer advising, and CC student outcomes, and plan to release those findings later in 2022.

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