

Pre-Transfer Experiences of Internationally Educated Community College Students

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Introduction and Project Background

Since 2021, the Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has sought to examine community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC) using a multi-method approach including large-scale qualitative data and those from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Through a series of research briefs reporting data from multiple institutions across the state, we have shared findings on student navigation through the complex transfer ecosystem, experiences during the college transition process, and predictors of successful university transfer on a more macro scale. See our prior reports: <https://sites.google.com/uncc.edu/uncctransferresearchproject/home>

While the experiences and outcomes of our current participants paint an important picture about transfer in NC and yield recommendations for policy and practice, we know that not all subgroups of students experience transfer in the same way. The current phase of our project is to tell the stories of students within important vertical transfer student subgroups to explore the nuanced experiences of specific populations seeking to transition to a university. This report describes the vertical transfer journeys of

internationally educated students (IES), defined as students who were born outside of the United States (U.S.) and completed their secondary education outside of the U.S.

Literature and North Carolina Context

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) is the third largest in the United States with 58 colleges of varied enrollment size, location, and student demographics which influence the nature of international educational experiences.¹ International students (non-U.S. residents) make up less than 1% of NCCCS enrollment, similar to national proportions.² There is limited research on the vertical transfer experiences of immigrant and international community college (CC) students; however, the literature does show important findings on CC students completing high school outside of the United States, including higher CC completion and credit earning, without a higher likelihood of vertical transfer.³ Additionally, transfer outcomes have been found to be different among those coming from different regions of the world.⁴ With relatively sparse literature on international student vertical transfer, prior research on international CC students' experiences more generally also guides this work. Recent findings have shown how international students experience stress in a new culture⁵ and both challenges⁶ and benefits⁷ with advising services. The present study brings together the CC and vertical transfer experiences to better understand the steps that IES traverse toward the pursuit of a baccalaureate degree.

Current Study and Participants

The study presented in this report combines data from two sources to describe the identities and experiences of IES seeking to transfer vertically in North Carolina.

- The qualitative data are from a statewide longitudinal study designed to understand NC transfer students' pre- and post-transfer experiences. In this report, we focus on a subsample (n=6) of pre- and post-transfer students attending NC CCs or baccalaureate granting institutions (BGIs), all of whom identified as being born outside the U.S. and completing their secondary education outside of the U.S.
- The quantitative data originate from a dataset encompassing administrations of the Community College Student Survey of Engagement (CCSSE)⁸ from 2017 to 2019 to over 11,000 students across 24 NC CCs. For this report, we used two criteria to identify the analytic sample (n=208): those who affirmed their status as "international students or non-resident aliens" and also indicated transfer as a goal for attending a CC.

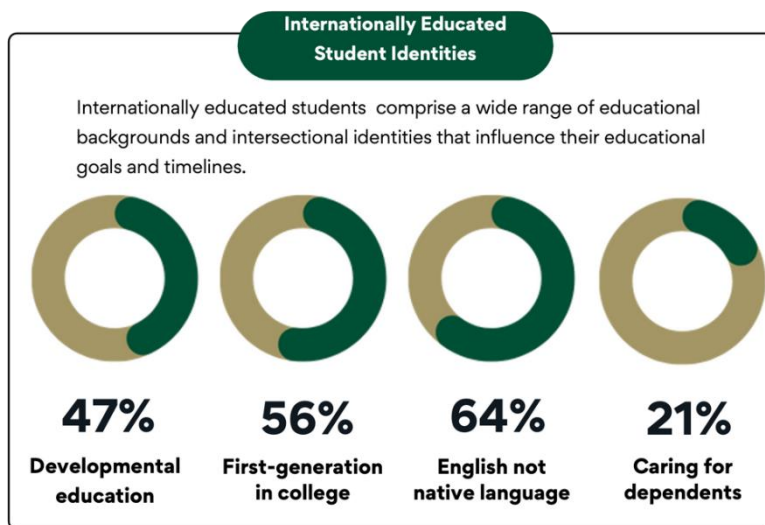
Findings

We found that IES hold intersecting identities that inform and influence their advising and engagement behaviors throughout the vertical transfer process.

Finding #1: Internationally Educated Student Identities

IES identities are diverse and represent a wide range of social identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, country of origin), linguistic abilities, and other prior educational experiences that inform their educational goals. IES identities, thus, can inform their choice to begin their journey at the CC as well as decisions regarding transfer such as timeline and choice sets.

Saba, a Pakistani woman attending a CC and pursuing an Associate in Applied Science (AAS), spoke about the differences between how others perceive her identity as an Asian woman as compared to the parts of her identity which she held more salient.



... a lot of people think, I think, because of Asian ... that I'm good at math. Even my professors thought about it. I am normal at math. I'm not good at math. And my parenting standpoint, I think I am, I don't know, I'm good I think. I love being a parent and I love being a student too as well...But now it's especially because of studying, is just kind of a little bit juggled up because now the way I used to spend time with them, like more movies time and sleepover time or play time is just become really less and less. Now I barely get time to read them a story, little bit spend time with them.

Students from international backgrounds encountered stereotypes and microaggressions based on their race and ethnicity, country of origin, and perception of linguistic abilities. They also confronted challenges based on the U.S. political climate, particularly given the vulnerability of their temporary status.

Omer, a Sudanese student from Qatar pursuing an engineering degree at a public BGI, explained that his reason for transferring prior to earning an Associate in Engineering (AE) was predicated by the U.S. political climate. His identity as an international student from the Middle East largely informed his decision to transfer. Omer saw international students deported during the previous government administration, and his parents wanted him to have attended a “major university” rather than a community college if having to return home. Ultimately, Omer’s decision to transfer prior to earning an AE was shaped by both foreign national policy and familial messaging that demonstrates a stigmatized view of community colleges.

As in Omer’s case, we found that family both near and far significantly influenced IES educational plans. Nancy, a Chinese woman attending a public BGI after transferring from the CC without a credential, shared that her father was guiding her career choices, encouraging her to pursue a degree in statistics. Alternatively, Micky, a Vietnamese student attending a public BGI, stated that her parents were supportive of her career choices, despite what she regarded to be the norm in Asian culture where “parents would expect you to take science major like engineers, doctors, nurses, or something related to [a] science subject.”

IES represented global diversity as well as gender, educational backgrounds, and migration experiences that shaped their goals and transfer aspirations.

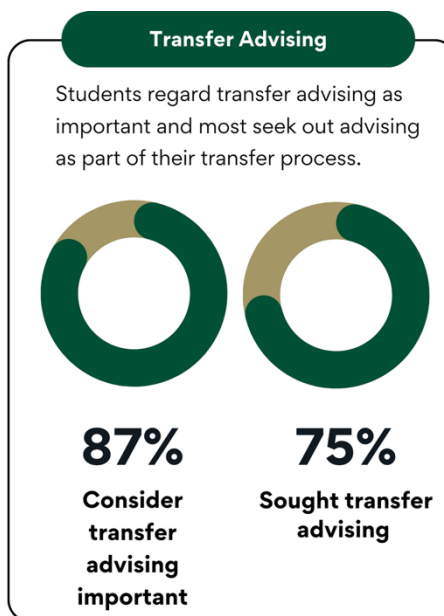
Finding #2: Use and Importance of Advising Services

Most IES survey respondents considered transfer advising as an important or very important factor, and 75% had sought out transfer advising at least once in their CC tenure. Students had varying experiences with transfer advising, such as Saba, whose career goal was to become a Certified Public Accountant. When the research team first spoke to Saba in Spring 2021, she was enrolled in an AAS program, pursuing an accounting degree with plans to transfer. In Spring 2022, Saba had come to the realization that many of her credits would not transfer to her school of choice, a public BGI. When the research team asked Saba if her timeline had changed, she shared:

...it did change a lot for me because I was in the wrong program, that doesn't transfer. It happened to me. I didn't know that. So, I was an Associate in Finance and Accounting and it was not supposed to be transferred. Only Associate in Arts or Science can be transferred. So, I have to switch it to Associate in Arts. And that's not what I'm trying to finish it. With this semester is going to be, I will get Associate in Arts but I will have 90 credits on my hand.

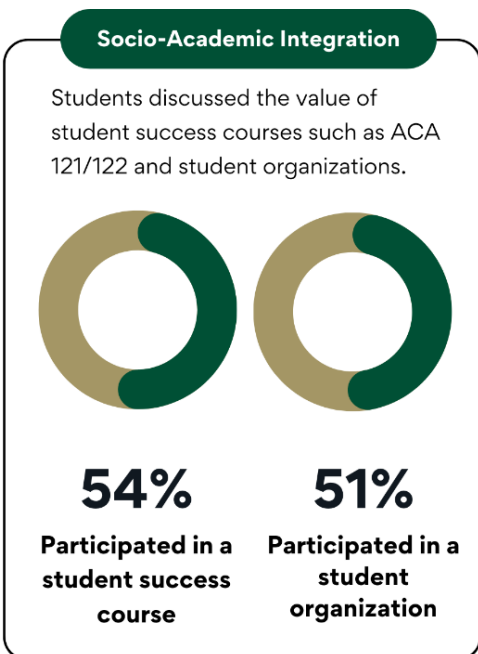
Although Saba had frequented an academic advisor at the CC, she was “misguided,” and noted that she had shared with the advisor that her plan was to earn a bachelor’s degree to ultimately become a CPA.

Advising services enhance IES success and engagement in their education with community colleges prioritizing early connections between IES and faculty/advisors for effective navigation.



Finding 3: Socio-Academic Integration

In their assessment of combined social and academic (i.e., socio-academic) integration opportunities, particularly around student organizations and student success courses (e.g., ACA 121, ACA 122), student responses were varied. Approximately 54% of IES survey respondents reported completion of a student success course and 51% reported some level of participation in student organizations. Nancy, a Chinese student who attended a CC at the height of COVID in 2020, described the value of the international club.



Yeah, halfway through 2020 we started an international club at [CC] and I was the president. It was a little hard during pandemic and since not all students are in [the city] and we couldn't really meet up. Some of them are back in Africa and in different countries. So, that club died in the end, but we did have meetings once every two weeks for a few solid months. And we would talk about our experience and just to help each other get through COVID. So, I did find a community and I was able to be the president for an extended time and made some friends that I actually never met in real life.

Nancy’s connection to other international students during the COVID-19 pandemic when many students faced social isolation allowed her to maintain a network of peers with similar backgrounds and interests. Other students like Josue, who immigrated from the Dominican Republic, spoke distinctly about relationships to other students and student groups that were connected through culture, nationality, and language. Josue shared that he guided another Dominican student through the CC because of how much that early support helped him in his process.

As a matter of fact, I'm the only Dominican I met there. I met another Dominican when I graduated, because they emailed me. For me, they helped me to help them to show them that what would be the life of [the CC], kind of like having this first experience and not being overwhelmed, especially when they don't speak the language that much. It helped me a lot.

Next, while over half of students in the quantitative sample completed a student success course such as ACA 121 or ACA 122, IES in the qualitative sample reported varied responses about the utility of the course in preparing them for the transfer process. Some students described ACA 121 and ACA 122 as

helpful in establishing a foundation for learning about various careers and developing a “transfer mindset.” Omer, a post-transfer student, highly valued the transfer information and instructor support that he received in ACA 122.

...and my ACA professor always told me that, "Okay, you should have a plan what college you trying to go to?" ... You never know whether you going to get accepted during college or not. So I was like, "I got to have a contingency plan, no matter whether they accept me or not, so let me just make this." And I was like, "Could I do this or not?" And he was like, "Yeah, you could do it. But that would be more hectic for you because now you're trying to match different universities all together, like different requirement all together in one requirement."

Other students like Sahid, an adult learner and pre-transfer student from Senegal, explained that the course instruction was not suited for his identities as an adult learner. He described conflict with the instructor who did not regard his global and real-world experiences as key knowledge bases. Overall, experiences in the student success seminars were varied, yet students valued the career orientation and knowledge about the technical aspects of the transfer process.

Implications and Considerations

CCs serve a diverse group of IES with aspirations beyond the CC credential. It is unclear how federal policy and legislation will affect enrollment of international, immigrant, and refugee students in the coming years. This report highlights how IES identities are influenced by factors like immigration recency, citizenship status, and migration plans. The data also illustrate how advising and socio-academic integrative activities like student success courses and clubs shape IES experiences. Additionally, IES experience some of the same challenges as all other transfer students in terms of selecting the correct program for transfer. We offer the following considerations to CCs and BGIs that serve immigrant and international students:

- Faculty and administrative staff within CCs can serve international students by understanding the factors that promote a sense of belonging and student academic achievement to benefit recruitment and retention.⁹ These efforts should include culturally responsive advising and high-value interaction with faculty, student peers, and staff.¹⁰ Institutions should also recognize the legal and familial pressure that IES may be facing outside of their campus life.
- Many IES and their families navigate U.S. higher education systems with little knowledge of the important and nuanced choices that are needed for success in the vertical transfer process. One such choice is the decision to pursue an AAS or a more transfer-oriented degree, such as an AA, AS, or AE. IES participate in and highly value advising, which is an important leverage point for institutions to guide students. Early guidance for students and families through accurate advising, information sessions, and structured experiences such as ACA seminars can help to demystify efficient transfer pathways for those from international education backgrounds. In addition, the UNC System's recent work to develop a universal format and location to share transfer guides for each of the public university campuses is one example of an effort to help all students navigate transfer more effectively.

Acknowledgements

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