

First-Generation Students and Vertical Transfer: A Multi-Method Analysis of Transfer in North Carolina

CARMEN SERRATA
SANDRA L. DIKA
MARK M. D'AMICO
RYAN A. MILLER

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE

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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 quantitative data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Through a series of research briefs using 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 first-generation college students or those for whom neither parent has completed a bachelor's degree.

Literature and North Carolina Context

Longitudinal and national studies on the postsecondary experiences and educational outcomes of first-generation college students (FGCSs) conclude they are less likely to enter college and complete a bachelor's degree program.^{1,2} FGCSs are often racial minorities, low-income students, and/or non-native English speakers, which correlate with lower academic outcomes and postsecondary success.³

Numerous studies on FGCSs have theorized their unique transfer experiences, including student-related academic and personal challenges and institutional barriers.^{4,5,6} The FGCS transfer literature, to date, largely explores post-transfer institutional connections, family dynamics, navigating transfer complexity without family knowledge or institutional support, and ongoing struggles with finances and affordability. Recent NC data indicate that 74% of Hispanic children, 64% of Black children, and 60% of American Indian children live in households where neither parent has completed a college degree.⁷

Current Study and Participants

The study presented in this report combines data from two sources to describe the identities and experiences of first-generation college students seeking to transfer vertically in NC.

- The qualitative data are from a statewide longitudinal research study designed to understand NC transfer students' pre- and post-transfer experiences. In this report, we focus on a subsample (n=72) of pre- and post-transfer first-generation college students attending NC CCs or baccalaureate granting institutions (BGIs). The sample includes a diverse student demographic (29% Black/African American, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 42% White, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, 44% 25 years or older, and 32% with dependent children at home).
- The quantitative data originate from a longitudinal dataset that merged student responses on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) with demographic, transcript, transfer, and completion data from three NC CCs. For this report, we used two criteria to identify the analytic sample (n=821): those who affirmed that neither parent had earned a baccalaureate degree and also indicated transfer as a goal for attending a CC. The sample represents a diverse cross-section of students (24% Black/African American, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 55% White, 32% 25 years or older, 30% dependent children at home).

Findings

First-generation college students attending CCs with transfer intention and post-transfer students at BGIs shared common strategies for navigating the vertical transfer process and leveraged communities of practice both within and outside of their institutions.

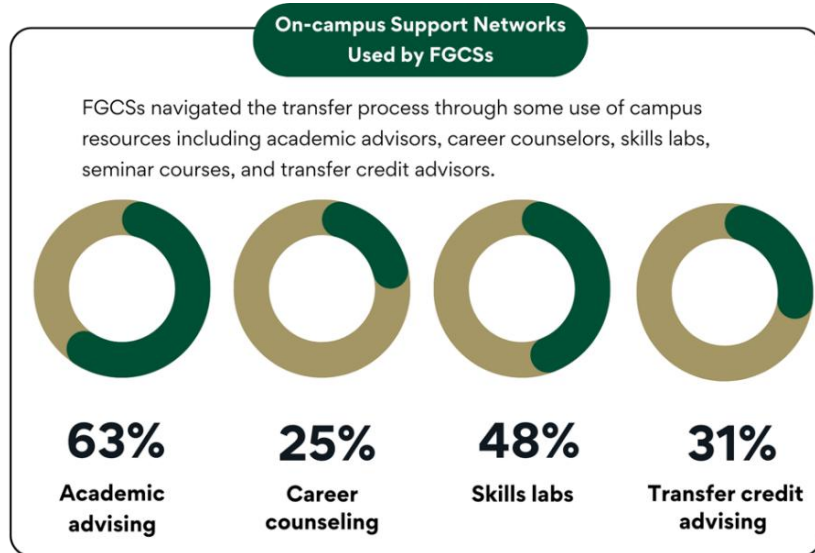
Finding 1: Leveraging On-Campus Communities of Practice

FGCSs at the pre- and post-transfer phase navigate the transfer process through use of campus resources that serve as their communities of practice, often places and people that provide support tailored to their identities as first-generation college students. These communities of practice included academic support services such as TRIO programs, seminar courses (e.g., ACA 122), and advising and other staff offices.

In the quantitative sample, transfer-seeking FGCSs indicated strong use of academic advising (63%) and low-to-moderate use of career counseling (25%), skills labs (48%), and transfer advising (31%), yet rated all of these services as important (see the figure below).

Ingrid, a pre-transfer student pursuing an Associate in Arts (AA) with the goal of launching a pastry business discussed the role of her professor in the student success course, ACA 122:

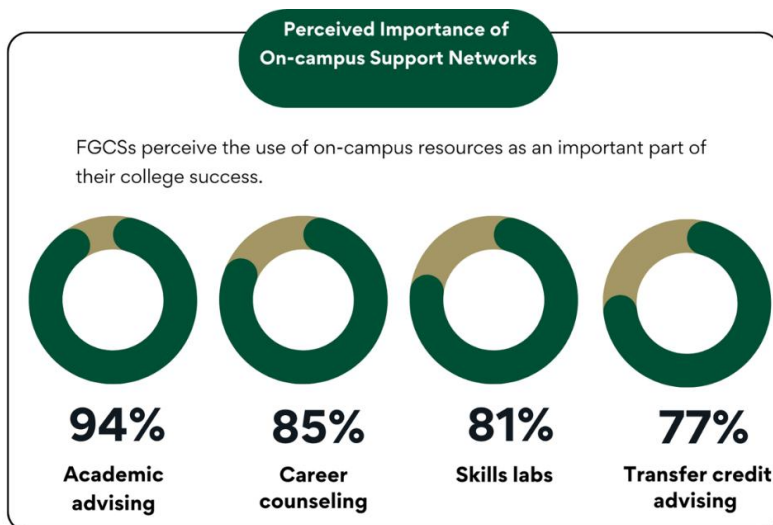
One of the courses that we had to do, it's like a general college pathway, set you up for success course called ACA. My professor really helped say, "Okay, here's the links that you need to click on to look at all the colleges to compare all their tuition, to look at the requirements." And she just helped say, "Here's the resources and this is how you utilize them," because sometimes whenever I'm just Googling things, it seems really, really messy. And I say, "Oh my goodness, I don't know where to find this exact thing that I'm looking for." And so she was a really, really important part in realizing that people are there to help set you up to transfer.



Like Ingrid, other FGCSs regarded student success seminars and their instructors as knowledge capacitors, enabling them to build on their transfer plans with relevant knowledge about credit transfer, BGI admission requirements, and career pathways and outcomes.

Other students like Joy, a post-transfer student who was pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at a public BGI, described the role of advisors in her decision to enroll at the public university.

They made it so easy for me. They were very prompt in all their responses. They knew my name. They didn't miscommunicate with each other, if that makes sense. They knew who I was. They knew what I wanted to do. They figured everything out on the back, all the sticky stuff that I know what to do. And they just supported me, and supported me with anything I had questions about.



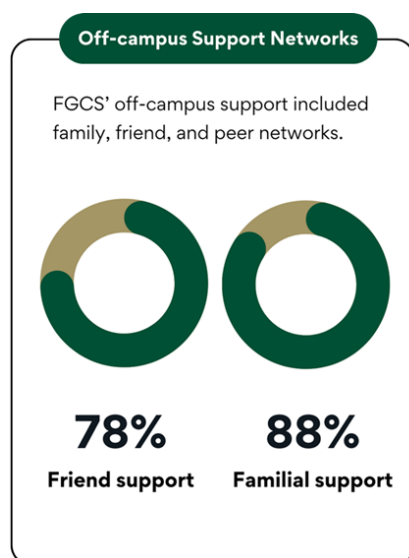
The role of program advisors who understood her knowledge gaps as a first-generation college student coupled with a belief in her capacity to succeed were critical catalysts for students like Joy.

While FGCSs perceive institutional supports as important (see figure left), they are less likely to use these services, underscoring the need to bolster these supports and resources with a greater emphasis on the needs of FGCSs.

Finding 2: Leveraging Off-Campus Communities of Practice

FGCSs weighed family, friends, and colleagues as key influences on their transfer goals (see figure below), expanding their communities beyond the college campus. For instance, in the quantitative sample, transfer-seeking FGCSs reported high levels of support from family and friends to attend the CC. Students were motivated by being the “first,” but also navigated the weight of the pressure and expectations that came with being the first in their families to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Students like Jude, a pre-transfer student pursuing an Associate of Science (AS) and planning to be computer science major, pieced together information from off-campus networks to create a mosaic of knowledge that informed transfer goals.

None of my siblings had gotten a Bachelor's, or actually pursued education after high school. They might've gotten an Associate's degree. I'm not really sure. But yeah, most of my family has never gotten a degree. The only one would be my cousin and she graduated from [public BGI] Yeah, that's a big motivation for me. In fact, that's one of the things that stresses me, because I have all that pressure of like, oh, I'm trying to be the first line. So that builds up at times, but at the same time, it's not really much stress, but it's more like motivation to keep me pushing forward.



Other students like Shay, a post-transfer student attending a private BGI and HBCU shared the influence of familial support.

The pros of it [being a first-generation college student] would probably be knowing I have a support system no matter what. My family, even though they may not have done it, they're always rooting for me to get it done. Me and my grandmother talk often and she's like, "Shay, I'm so proud of you." My mom literally, we talk every day, and every day it's something new.

Beyond motivation to succeed, these off-campus networks were often instrumental in helping students to expand their knowledge of resources in support of transfer. Leon, a pre-transfer student pursuing an Associate in Applied Science, received transfer-relevant information from his girlfriend who was attending a private BGI. Between his Year 1 and Year 2 interview, Leon used these information bites to inform his transfer to the private BGI:

I've used mainly my girlfriend. She goes to [private university] and she's connected me with advisors there. They've kind of told me what to do. And she's also told me that they have a first-generation advisor that's with you for as long as you go to [private university], they connect you with the programming that you're supposed to go to.

As a FGCS, Leon benefited from the peer support for transfer and the information that propelled his transfer. This information coupled with familial support were pivotal to his transfer outcome. While FGCS students shared the challenges of navigating the transfer process as the first in their families, familial support and motivation and information crowd-sourcing from friends, peers, and colleagues provided a foundation on which to build. On-campus communities of practice such as TRIO programs, student success courses, and advisors then added the framing to support their transfer plans.

Implications and Considerations

- Our findings have important practical implications in building awareness of how FGCSs draw on knowledge from spaces outside the institution (family, friends, work colleagues) to negotiate transfer policies and processes, and illuminate the need for both sending and receiving institutions to strengthen supports for these students. Family members are often supportive of FGCSs even if they have not earned degrees and may be unaware of correct or verified information relevant to the transfer process.

- Our findings also highlight how relational teaching and advising serve as social and transfer capital for FGCSs. Interactions with faculty, advisors, and support staff in formal and informal contexts are the conductors of vital transfer information.
- Students cited personalized and humanizing approaches—to be treated as an individual and referred to by name—as important. Even when relevant information about courses and transfer was available online, FGCSs found it helpful to have faculty and staff guide them to information and evaluate its relevance.
- Our study’s sample represents the racial, ethnic, age, and familial diversity of the FGCS population, thus building on asset-based views of their learning and developmental processes. FGCS access to higher education that includes support through the transfer process reinforces broader goals including social and economic mobility.

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