

# Community College Men of Color Aspiring to Transfer: Navigating Systems, Supports, and Societal Norms

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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 interview data and quantitative data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Through a series of 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 men of color from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds in higher education.

# Literature and North Carolina Context

Men of color from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds have a national baccalaureate degree attainment rate of less than 20%.<sup>1</sup> While North Carolina continues to make progress in terms of key national transfer benchmarks overall (e.g., community college transfer rates, transfer with a degree, transfer baccalaureate completion rates, cohort completion rates), the state continues to lag behind some of the measures particularly for Black and Hispanic student groups.<sup>2</sup> Prior research has documented some of the challenges faced by men of color with recommendations for providing support.<sup>3</sup>

Historically underrepresented student populations include Latino, Black, Southeast Asian American, and Native American students. In NC, the baccalaureate attainment rates for men of color over the age of 25 are lower across the four historically underrepresented groups than White men<sup>4</sup>, thus highlighting inequitable educational outcomes that can hinder social and economic mobility. With the *myFutureNC* goal of 2 million individuals aged 25-44 with a degree or credential by 2030, the state will likely not reach this level of attainment without efforts to enhance higher education outcomes among men of color.

## Current Study and Participants

The study presented in this report combines data from two sources to describe the engagement experiences of historically underrepresented men of color seeking to transfer vertically in NC.

The quantitative analysis utilized a statewide 2017-2019 CCSSE dataset from 24 community colleges in NC, focusing on a subsample of 1,096 men of color who indicated transfer as their primary reason for attending community college. The sample included 50 American Indian or Alaska Native men, 103 Asian men, 384 Black or African American men, 295 Hispanic or Latino men, 2 Native Hawaiian men, 4 Pacific Islander (non-Native Hawaiian) men, 43 men identifying as "Other," and 215 men identifying as two or more races. This brief provides insights into the educational experiences of men of color in community colleges, particularly those with transfer aspirations.

The qualitative data are drawn from a state-wide longitudinal research study designed to understand NC transfer students' pre- and post-transfer experiences. This report features a subsample of 10 men of color from racially minoritized backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education. The sample included five African American or Black men, four Latino men, and one Southeast Asian man. Participant identities included seven first-generation college students and five who were first- or second-generation immigrants. All students in this sample were attending NC community colleges and had plans to transfer to a baccalaureate granting institution. The research team interviewed 6 of the 10 participants twice over a period of two years.

## Findings

### Finding 1: Accepting Support but Unwilling to Burden Others

In prior reports, we have highlighted the role of families in providing direct and indirect forms of support for students, particularly those who are first-generation college students. The findings from the quantitative analysis revealed that while families do offer support to students, this support is largely non-financial. Specifically, 51% of respondents indicated that their families are supportive of their educational pursuits, which was very similar to family support levels reported by white men. However, the proportion who reported receiving financial support from their families was lower among men of color compared to white men (28% vs. 38%).

For men of color in this study, perceptions of familial support were largely influenced by social and cultural norms of masculinity. Students described having key roles as financial contributors to the

household income and expressed concern for the financial burden of college. In addition, students were reluctant to accept financial assistance from family, even when families offered support. Chris, an 18-year-old African American man explained the burden of cost and familial support:

*My mom and my stepdad don't even have \$30k, or \$10k, or even \$5k to give me to go to college. I got to do this all me. I don't have to do it all me. My mom wants to take out her 401k to help me out, I just don't want her to sacrifice her retirement.*

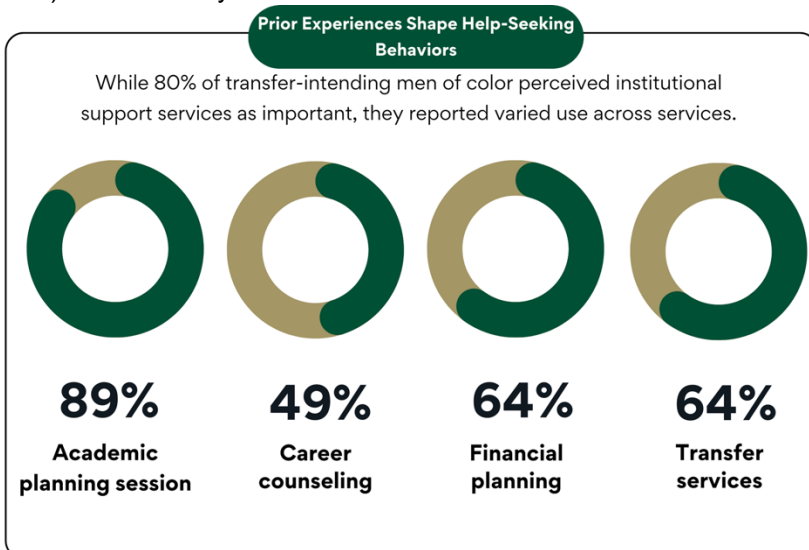
While men of color pride themselves on being able to fund their education without assistance from family, they were receptive to nonfinancial support from family such as advice on college choice. Ronald, an 18-year-old African American man described familial advice about transfer:

*Oh, my uncle, he was significant with me. He made sure that, he told me, "Go to," he said, "Go to [CC] first and then transfer over." He gave me advice on how I should complete my education, and he stuck with me the whole years I was here. He made sure that I was turning in my assignments and he would always check up on me and make sure... He went to a community college I think somewhere in North Carolina. He went there so he knew about it.*

For students, like Ronald, familial support and encouragement, particularly from male role models, were instrumental to the development of their transfer plans.

## Finding 2: Prior Experiences Shape Help-Seeking Behaviors

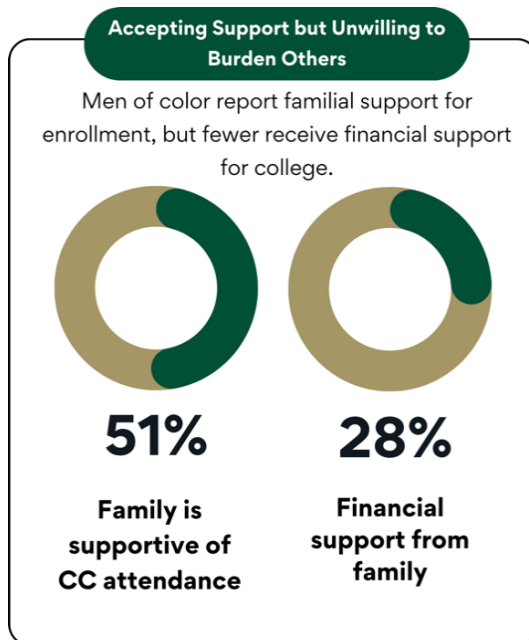
The quantitative analyses further explored how the participants (men of color) in CC utilize and perceive advising services, particularly academic advising/planning, career counseling services, financial advising, and transfer advising, as they navigate transfer journeys. Data show that participants actively engage with available support services, although the extent of utilization varies by service type. Specifically, 89% of respondents reported attending at least one academic planning session. For career counseling services, 49% had participated in at least one session, compared to only 33% of white men. Nearly two-thirds (64%) indicated they had attended at least one session related to financial planning. Lastly, 64% of



respondents reported utilizing transfer advising services at least once.

Additionally, in the case of each type of support, more than 80% reported that the services were important, thus demonstrating the value of college-based services.

Despite perceived importance of services, men of color in the qualitative sample discussed the challenges of navigating college and the complex transfer landscape were exacerbated by cultural norms



that included a fear of failure, some reluctance to seek or trust the help received, and the ideas of what it means to be a man.

Darrell, a 24-year-old African American man who started at a university, but transferred back to a community college, shared that his decision to attend the CC was predicated on a fear of failure and what he perceived as prior missteps:

*After taking so many years off, I just felt that I always wanted to finish. I always wanted to finish, but I was scared of failure because I didn't feel stable. I went through a lot in the past few years, and so I wanted to make sure I was stable before I started. So, I first started by figuring out what I wanted to go for...*

Darrell was hesitant to return to college until he had a clear career plan and is now actively pursuing a degree in criminal justice due to the promise of available jobs in the field.

Another student, Craig, a 19-year-old African American man, described the negative influence of K-12 teachers on his educational journey:

*Because I've had two teachers tell me that I'm not going to pass the class, genuinely like, "If you take the test, oh, I don't have high hopes for you." ... There's a difference between being realistic and putting them down. They weren't like, "All right, because of your actions this semester, you don't have a great margin of success here. Now we might want to think about classes for the summer." No, they was just straight up like, "You're not going to be successful."*

Unfortunately, Craig did not have a positive experience in school before college, which now makes him reluctant to seek help from the college he attends.

In a few cases, prior experiences such as military service and employment counteracted negative educational experiences, giving students the confidence and inspiration to fully engage and accept the information received from institutional agents. Gerardo, a 20-year-old Latino man described how he developed his disposition to seek help:

*Yeah, that was all after the military, I realized... Well, in the Marine Corps we had, of course, our sergeants and staff sergeants, and I realized that they served a purpose instead of just yelling at us and just trying to shape us into Marines. I realized that they're really just our mentors, that they're supposed to see themselves and us, instead of them just seeing Marines. So, I took that into a deeper meaning and was thinking like maybe my counselor is just another sergeant or staff sergeant, in other words. They're just trying to help us get to a higher [education].*

## Conclusion and Implications

Overall, men of color in the present study had complicated relationships with education and societal influences. Although the survey data showed relatively high levels of participation in services, the qualitative data showed that prior experiences and concepts of masculine norms resulted in a questioning of formal education and related services. This phenomenon provides great opportunities for higher education, in that students will actively engage with services provided. The challenge, however, is in trust building with men of color and in some cases re-building trust when students have had negative experiences in their prior education. Many of the men of color initiatives noted in the literature provide the safe spaces and affinity groups that work to provide support in a trusting community. However, the changing higher education landscape could put many of these initiatives at risk of termination if they are deemed DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programming. Thus, higher education institutions may need to meet students' unique needs through mainstream offerings.

Additionally, men of color who participated in interviews displayed a level of independence, in many cases financial independence. While independence can lead to a level of self-efficacy that will serve students well in the long run, the complexity of navigating university transfer may place self-navigating



students and those less willing to place trust in systems at a disadvantage to those who more actively engage in informational supports for transfer students.

Higher education has the potential to improve the vertical transfer outcomes for men of color by (1) helping to build trust through welcoming higher education environments, (2) making information more transparent about how to navigate transfer pathways in terms of programs and affordability, and (3) strengthening connections between college and career.

## Acknowledgements

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## Suggested Citation

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<sup>1</sup> Huerta, A. H., Romero-Morales, M., Dizon, J. P., Salazar, M. E., & Nguyen, J. V. (2021). *Empowering men of color in higher education: A focus on psychological, social, and cultural factors*. Pullias Center for Higher Education. <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/empowering-men-of-color-in-higher-education-a-focus-on-psychological-social-and-cultural-factors/>

<sup>2</sup> Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya, M., Jenkins, D., & LaViolet, T. (2004). *Tracking transfer: Community college effectiveness in broadening bachelor's degree attainment*. Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute, and National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED641305.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Felix, E. R., & Gonzalez, A. (2022). Using institutional planning to support men of color in community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 46(4), 257-271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1841043>; Rodriguez, S. L., Blaney, J. M., Vasquez, M. C., & Salinas, C., (2021). Latino men and masculinities: A multi-institutional study of community college transfer experiences. *Community College Review*, 49(3), 262-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211002898>; Romero-Reyes, J. (2025). "More than a workshop": Perspectives from first-generation and low-income men of color participating in a community college men of color initiative (advance online publication). *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2024.2441276>;

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2023). Selected Population Profile in the United States. *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Selected Population Profiles, Table S0201*. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSSPP1Y2023.S0201?t=451:Education:EducationalAttainment&g=040XX00US37>