



POLICY BRIEF

Building Pathways to Transfer: Community Colleges that Break the Chain of Failure for Students of Color

In California, approximately 60 percent of all K-12 students are underrepresented minorities¹, and between 65 and 75 percent of these students who decide to go on to college enroll in the community colleges. A recent study showed that after 7 years only 17 percent of Latino and 19 percent of African American students who had intended to transfer to a 4-year college had actually successfully done so.² A major contributor to this problem is the high schools that students attend. Low performing high schools tend to under-prepare their students for post-secondary education, and the lowest performing high schools both in California and across the nation are disproportionately attended by low-income students of color. The low rate of college degree production among these students has tremendous implications for the social and economic well being of the state. A recent report projected that California will be one million college degrees short of meeting its needs by 2025. The situation is urgent. Yet the study described here found some reason for hope in a set of disproportionately successful community colleges.

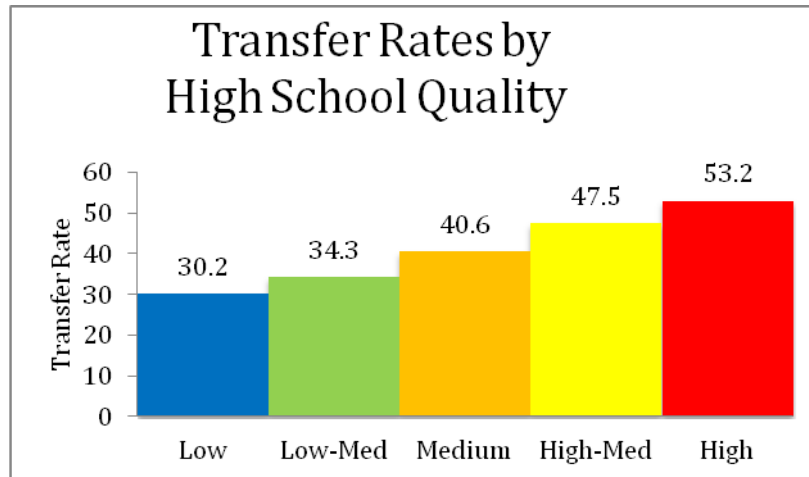
This study followed all freshman community college students in California who had demonstrated the intent to transfer from 1996, 1997, and 1998. Outcomes were assessed for each of the three entering cohorts after six years (2002-2004) and students were linked with their high schools of origin and the 4-year colleges to which they transferred. We divided high schools into five categories based on their API (California Academic Performance Index) scores, the proportion of students whose parents had a college degree and their level of minority segregation. The lowest quintile high schools had low API scores, few parents with BA degrees, and high minority segregation; the highest quintile high schools had the inverse.

Clearly, the quality of the high school resources was highly related to the chances of transferring to a 4-year college. And the likelihood of attending a high or low “quality” high school was strongly related to race and ethnicity. One third of Latinos attended high schools in the low resource category, as did 1 in 5 Black students. By

¹ Here we include African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos.

² Sengupta, R., & C. Jepsen (2006). *California's Community College Students*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.

contrast, only 1 in 25 Whites and 1 in 10 Asians went to such schools. At the other end of the scale, 1 in 7 Whites went to high resource high schools, as did 1 in 10 Asians. Only 3 in 100 Latinos and Blacks had the benefit of attending a high resource high school.



Some students, however, diverted from the usual pattern of low performing high school to low performing community college and attended a higher transfer college. Moreover, some community colleges demonstrated significantly greater success with students of color from low performing high schools than other community colleges. In this study, we set out to ask: (1) What causes some students to choose higher transfer community colleges than the college most students from their high school attend? (2) What do these higher transfer colleges do to effect better outcomes for students of color coming from these high need/low-performing high schools?

Lessons from Case Studies

Five colleges were identified as disproportionately transferring students of color from low performing/high needs high schools. It was to note that three colleges were disproportionately successful with Latino students, and two colleges with African American students, but none was equally successful with both groups. Two colleges were located in urban centers (both of these were most successful with African Americans), two in urban-suburban areas, and one in a rural area of the state. The colleges ranged in size from relatively small (9500) to large (32,000). Each campus had its own success story, and some probably would not qualify today as successful in transfer because of significant changes that have occurred on the campuses. Overall, there were more differences than similarities among campuses with respect to strategies for supporting the transfer function. However, there were five findings that stand out:

(1) The colleges that showed disproportionate success in transferring African Americans and Latinos from low performing/high need high schools were not necessarily those with strong reputations for transfer. One of the central findings in the literature on community college transfer is that “creating a transfer culture” is key. However, we were surprised to find that some colleges that are known for their transfer cultures did not come up in our data. It may be that creating a sense of family (belonging) for these students is more important than simply creating a more generalized transfer culture. What we saw in colleges that were successful with these students was, for the most part, a very specific dedication to this population, with culturally appropriate interventions and counseling strategies that were targeted to their specific needs.

(2) Community college outreach was in many cases the reason that students came to the college in the first place, and connected with appropriate services once there. Outreach from successful colleges convinced students that transfer was much more likely on their campus and redirected some students from low quintile schools that would have otherwise gone elsewhere. Notably, outreach counselors were often mentioned as the *only* real college counseling that students at these low performing schools received. Without the outreach counselors from the community colleges, students would have had little idea of either how or why to apply to college.

(3) Strong transfer counseling is the sine quo non of community college transfer, yet it is wholly inadequate and this is not always just because of resource limitations. At every campus that had been effective at transferring underrepresented students from low performing high schools, effective counseling was cast as the primary reason for this success. Yet, we were impressed by how many students *did not* receive these services and how many problems there were in delivering the services. Transfer centers – a cornerstone of the state’s strategies for increasing transfer—were usually too underfunded to contribute significantly to counseling students.

(4) Every campus immediately pointed to its special support programs for underrepresented students as key to increasing its transfer rate for these students. In an evident acknowledgement of the chronic problem of providing sufficient counseling to adequately support the transfer function, every campus we visited immediately noted their special programs as their primary source of support for ensuring success and transfer for low income and minority students. For all low income and minority students this was the EOPS and CARE programs that provide counseling, financial aid, and other support services such as child care (CARE). However, programs that specifically targeted Latino (Puente, Adelante) or African American (Unity, Umoja) students were touted as being most effective in pushing transfer for these students. Yet these programs generally reach only a small fraction of the students who could benefit from them.

(5) Developmental education is the elephant in the living room for transfer of minority students from low performing/high need high schools. Almost all students of color from low performing high school need some academic remediation when they enter community college and this impedes transfer. For example, among those students who initially test *just one level* below college level math and English, less than half will complete the courses they need to transfer (www.achievingthedream.org). In spite of the relative success of the campuses we visited, developmental education remained a challenge for all. But for more effective practices in developmental education, these campuses would undoubtedly be even more successful. Relatively little innovation in this area was seen at the case study colleges, with the exception of one that was experimenting with intensive review courses in English and math *before* testing students for remedial course placement and conducting diagnostic assessment to determine the specific areas of need for remediation and then providing students with modules targeting those specific needs rather than whole courses. It appears that these practices can significantly reduce the time that students are in a developmental education sequence³.

Overall Recommendations of the study

- I. It is critical to enhance and guarantee funding for Community College and Four-year College outreach to the most high need high schools in the state as their counseling is typically weak and these programs are often the only real preparation students receive for how to navigate college.⁴
- II. Careful evaluation of special programs targeted to Black and Latino students who seek to transfer needs to be conducted to determine their relative costs and benefits. Evidence suggests they may be the most effective tools to increase transfer for underrepresented students from low performing high schools, but they must serve more students. Investigate how they can be most cost-effectively scaled up.
- III. Different delivery models of developmental education that focus on reducing the time to eligibility for college credit courses need to be evaluated and structures that allow effective models to be disseminated need to be created. We found evidence of potentially successful models, but they need to be carefully evaluated and then disseminated if proven successful.
- IV. There should be increased attention to and research on campuses that do an effective job of transferring students of color from low performing high schools. Incentives for campuses to focus on the transfer of these students, in

³ Edgecombe, N. (2011). "Accelerating the academic achievement of students referred to developmental education." Community College Research Center Working Paper.

⁴ College Board reports that for 2007 California ranked 49th in the nation with 1 counselor for every 809 students, well above the national average of 467.

particular, should be put in place.

- V. Research needs to be focused on the issue of the poor transfer rates of African American students with a goal of identifying specialized programs and practices that can support this particularly vulnerable population in California's community colleges.

The full study, *Building Pathways to Transfer: Community Colleges that Break the Chain of Failure for Students of Color*, is available at:

www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu

About the Civil Rights Project

Founded in 1996 by former Harvard professors Gary Orfield and Christopher Edley Jr., the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles (CRP) is now co-directed by Orfield and Patricia Gándara, professors at UCLA, and housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. The CRP's mission is to create a new generation of research in social science and law on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the United States. It has commissioned more than 400 studies, published 13 books and issued numerous reports from authors at universities and research centers across the country. The Supreme Court, in its 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* decision, cited the Civil Rights Project's research.

###