

Navigating the Path Ahead: Investigating First-Year Students' Transfer Concerns

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Texas Success Center



Talent Strong
Texas Pathways

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Introduction

A significant portion of first-time community college students, between 50% and 83%, aim to earn a baccalaureate degree (CCCSE, 2023; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Taylor & Jain, 2017), but only one-third of those who intend to transfer to four-year institutions do so, with fewer than half completing their degree within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Velasco et al., 2024). Completion rates are particularly low among underserved groups, including low-income, Black, and older students. States with larger populations of these groups often see higher baccalaureate degree completion rates than the national average (Velasco et al., 2024). Addressing these trends is critical as baccalaureate attainment remains the clearest path to the middle class in the United States (Strohl et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges in the higher education system, with community college vertical transfer students declining by 19.7% in Fall 2022 compared to Fall 2019, and a broader dip in public four-year freshman enrollment (Causey et al., 2023). Enrollment in community colleges has started to recover as of Fall 2023, but it remains below pre-pandemic levels. In Texas, the three-year transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions has also remained low, from 12.1% of the Fall 2013 cohort of first-time-in-college (FTIC) students transferring to 14.4% of the Fall 2020 cohort of FTIC students, suggesting there are important factors to be identified and addressed among community college students intending to transfer (Flores, n.d.). One such factor may be the growing skepticism about the economic value of a college degree portrayed in the media. This skepticism, coupled with high student debt levels and increasing interest in apprenticeships, suggests more students are seeking alternatives to traditional college routes (Belkin, 2023; Bernard, 2022; Carnevale et al., 2018; Marcus, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2016). Apprenticeship programs have seen a 64% increase over the past decade and help address labor shortages while offering job training (Department of Labor, 2021; Dickler, 2023). These trends underscore the need to address inefficiencies in the transfer pipeline so students who start at community colleges have clear and effective pathways to baccalaureate attainment and the middle class.

Community colleges are increasingly adopting approaches like Guided Pathways, which focus on aligning programs with clear career goals, and offering technical and vocational programs with stackable credentials that allow students to earn short-term certifications and later pursue further education (Bailey et al., 2015; Daugherty, 2023). In Texas, the Talent Strong Texas Pathways guided pathways strategy supports Texas community colleges to design efficient and effective pathways based on students' post-completion goals—that is both academic transfer and workforce pathways—with holistic supports so that all students can earn credentials of value that allow them to either transfer or enter the workforce (Texas Success Center, n.d.). The new community college funding policy in Texas (House Bill 8, 88th Texas Legislature) emphasizes outcomes like credential completion and university matriculation, rather than traditional enrollment metrics, highlighting the importance of improving transfer success and providing appropriate funding for community colleges working to improve these outcomes (Texas Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).



With so much on the line in Texas and across the nation related to improving baccalaureate attainment, hearing directly from transfer-intending community college students is critical. This study investigated perceptions of transfer-intending students currently enrolled at a mid-sized suburban community college in Texas. The study focused on understanding the transfer goals and concerns of currently enrolled, transfer-intending community college students in their first year of studies. This study investigated the following research question: *What barriers do current transfer-intending community college students perceive as threats to university matriculation?*

Literature Review

Understanding the perceived barriers to successful transfer from the perspective of pre-transfer students is crucial for ensuring community colleges effectively serve as pathways to upward economic mobility in an ever-evolving job market that demands skilled workers (Blumenstyk, 2020; Bondy, 2020; Carnevale et al., 2013; Koropecjy et al., 2017; Strohl et al., 2024). To improve transfer outcomes for community college students, collaboration between institutions and state policymakers is crucial. Effective policies, such as articulation agreements, dual admission programs, and common course numbering can streamline the transfer process and support student success (Bragg, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2021; Nahlik et al., 2024; Wickersham, 2020; Wyner et al., 2016). However, challenges to implementing promising practices for improved transfer persist due to inconsistent articulation agreement processes, difficulties in understanding transfer requirements, and unclear information provided to students (Anderson et al., 2006; Cohen, 2003; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007; Nicholas et al., 2021; Roska, 2006, 2009; Roska & Keith, 2008; Xu et al., 2018).

Articulation agreements are intended to ease the transfer process, but their effectiveness is inconsistent (Anderson et al., 2006; Cohen, 2003; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). While institutional-level agreements tend to be more practical, they often lack detailed, course-level specificity (Nicholas et al., 2021; Schudde et al., 2021). Statewide agreements aim to address these issues but can still lead to confusion and potential credit loss for students. Another partnership tool, dual admission programs, where students are guaranteed admission to a university upon completing an associate degree provide early engagement with university programs (Jabbar et al., 2021). These programs have been shown to improve transfer rates and academic success by offering structured guidance, early academic planning, and reducing anxiety about the transfer process (Jabbar et al., 2021; Lazarowicz & McGill, 2022). Some states, including Texas, have implemented statewide transfer programs that minimize credit loss by standardizing associate degree curricula. As with any policy or procedure, messaging must be clear, complete, and consistent to prevent information asymmetry, which can negatively impact student transfer success (Grote et al., 2024; Mowreader, 2024; Roska, 2006, 2009; Roska & Keith, 2008; Thomas & McFarlane, 2018).



In addition to institutional and state policies, institutional transfer support programs such as automatic transfer scholarships, orientation, academic support services, and transfer centers that offer personalized advising and workshops improve transfer readiness and confidence among students, which are critical to achieving smooth transitions (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Grote et al., 2024; Nahlik et al., 2024). A strong transfer culture at both community colleges and four-year institutions is essential, especially for underserved and first-generation students. Building supportive relationships between students, faculty, and administrators helps students feel more connected and confident in their transfer plans (Dunn, 2015; Handel, 2007). Students' individual experiences, such as their support networks, financial literacy, and life events, also impact the transfer process. Students with strong support networks tend to fare better, while financial concerns and unforeseen life challenges can impede their progress (Jabbar et al., 2021; Reeping & Knight, 2021; Rumann, 2010; Yost, 2023).

Methodology

Participants in the study were current Texas community college students that self-identified as transfer-intending, were within their first year of study post-high school, and completed no more than 12 semester credit hours of dual credit coursework. Participants were recruited via campus flyers, targeted e-mail invitations, and announcements in first-year experience courses. Interested participants scanned a provided QR code linked to a short electronic form that gathered information to screen for needed participant characteristics. Qualified prospective participants were contacted by the researcher to join the study. This method allowed for scheduling flexibility and created an environment for meaningful dialogue between the researcher and participant to promote a deeper understanding of student transfer concerns.

Five participants engaged in 60-minute semi-structured interviews that were then transcribed via Microsoft Teams (Carspecken, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview protocol for this study was developed based on a review of existing research and in consultation with John Fink of the Community College Research Center. Insights from Kelly (2009) and Towers (2020) informed the creation of background and rapport-building questions. Pope (2022) contributed to the development of questions on external commitments and academic and social integration. Questions regarding students' use and need for campus support were adapted from Cruz (2023) and Kelly (2009). Finally, Salas (2014) and Zinke (2019) influenced the concluding questions aimed at understanding student perceptions of their educational experience and future transition.

Data was reviewed immediately after each interview session to ensure transcription and observations were accurately recalled. Buenaflor's Conceptual Framework for Transfer Efficacy, which emphasizes individual, social, transfer, and contextual factors, served as a holistic lens for the analysis providing insight into how community colleges and universities can better support transfer-intending students' needs (Buenaflor, 2023). Analyses was performed through open and Axial coding, focusing on transfer impact factors identified in the literature review. Next, Grounded Theory was employed to explore transcripts for other emergent themes. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to validate data and ensure participant feedback was conceptually sound (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldana, 2021).

Findings

Three themes of transfer concerns were identified from participant interviews – financial ambiguity, lack of information, and college-life balance. Financial ambiguity included specific concerns such as estimating cost of attendance, locating financial aid opportunities, and how to pay for the increased cost. Participants also reported confusion in starting and completing the transfer process and were apprehensive about successful course transfer that would make students feel as if they were “starting over” at university or, for those pursuing more competitive programs, what would happen if they did not get accepted into their desired program. Finally, college-life balance was a common theme that manifested in a variety of ways. Students expressed concerns about regular long commutes, the impact of these commutes coupled with course availability on their home and work responsibilities.

Some participants candidly expressed their need for face-to-face courses when discussing course scheduling and commuting concerns. The students wanted to transfer and continue their education but sought clearer pathways and better institutional support to do so. It should be noted that though skepticism in higher education is a common theme in the media, this did not seem to be a concern of the students in this study. Overall, participant concerns center around the need for clear and comprehensive communication about four-year institution costs, processes, and four-year institutional resources to help students navigate the constant juggling of their various roles and responsibilities outside of their education.

Recommendations

Student voice continues to be a key element in developing and providing the ideal student experience, including preparing students for successful matriculation to four-year institutions. It is imperative that community colleges regularly engage students in conversation about their experiences to understand current needs, how well current institutional programming and partnerships are meeting those needs and provide direction and prioritization for improvements. Pre-transfer students could benefit from workshops to help anticipate the various costs and understand jargon as they investigate transfer institution affordability. Community colleges should further address these concerns through collaboration with four-year partners to provide transparent information on expected costs and transfer financial aid opportunities.

The need for transparency and consistency is also evident in the realm of course transfer and applicability. Program specific, two- and four-year institution articulation agreements are needed for coursework applicability and co-enrollment opportunities should be considered to ensure student completion is not delayed due to pre-requisite sequencing. Lastly, community colleges should consider extending student services to alumni who are enrolled in four-year institutions. This can remove the commute barrier and help students maintain access to familiar resources as they continue their educational journey.

In summary, improving transfer outcomes involves addressing institutional policies, enhancing information clarity, creating supportive transfer cultures and advisement. Regular student and other stakeholder communication about these areas enables institutions to help students navigate the transfer process successfully and reduce barriers to baccalaureate completion.



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Appendix A.

Prospective Participant Information Interest Form

1. (Text Box) What is your full name?
2. (True/False) I am 18 years of age or older?
3. (Text Box) What is your [Institution Name]'s student ID number?
4. (Text Box) This is my ___ semester at [Institution Name] after high school.
5. (True/False) I am planning to transfer to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree.
6. (Yes/No) I would like to participate in a 60-minute or less or interview about my career, educational, and transfer plans. My completion of the interview will result in my name being placed in a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card. The winner will be notified via the phone number and email address provided on the form below.
7. (Text Box) [Researcher Name], the researcher conducting this study, can contact me at this email address.
8. (Text Box) [Researcher Name], the researcher conducting this study, can contact me at this telephone number.



Appendix B. Informed Consent

Study Title: [Insert Study Title Here]

Researcher: [Insert Researcher Name Here]

Affiliation: [Insert Institutional Affiliation(s) Here]

Contact Information: [Insert E-mail Address and Phone Number Here]

Introduction and Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by [Researcher Name] from [Institution]. The purpose of this study is to [Insert Study Purpose Here]. Your participation in this study will involve taking part in a semi-structured interview, which will help us understand student concerns about the transfer process and completing a bachelor's degree.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to engage in an interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. During the interview, the researcher will ask you a series of open-ended questions related to transferring and you are encouraged to share your thoughts and experiences. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams, and with your permission, the conversation will be recorded to ensure accuracy.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. If you choose not to participate or wish to stop the interview at any point, you may do so without affecting your relationship with [Insert Institution Name Here] or any other entities involved in the study.

Confidentiality:

The information you provide during the interview will remain confidential. The recordings of the Microsoft Teams meetings will be deleted as soon as the accuracy of the transcripts is confirmed. Your transcribed responses will be anonymized, and any identifying information will be removed from the data. The data collected will be securely stored and only accessible to the research team. Findings from this study may be published or presented at conferences, but your identity will not be revealed.

Risks and Benefits:

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal, but it is possible that some questions may cause discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you may choose to skip a question or stop the interview. While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute to a better understanding of student transfer needs and may help inform future [Insert Institution Name Here] programming or policies.



Compensation:

Participants who complete the interview will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact [Insert Researcher Name] at [Insert E-mail Address and Phone Number].

Consent:

By signing below, you are indicating that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form, and you agree to participate in this study. You understand that your participation is voluntary and that you can withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C.

Interview Protocol

Pre-Interview

To facilitate notetaking, I would like to record our conversation today as discussed during scheduling. As a brief reminder, only researchers on the project will be privy to the files, which will eventually be destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form created to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the Informed Consent form provided to you during scheduling?

Thank you for agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you, to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who plans to transfer to a four-year university to complete a bachelor's degree. My research project focuses on learning more about what factors contribute to a student's decision to transfer to a four-year institution with the goal of completing a bachelor's degree and what barriers, if any, concern you. My study does not aim to evaluate you on your goals, opinions, or experiences. Rather, I am trying to learn more about how students arrive at the decision to transfer and what challenges, if any, you believe lie ahead in completing that journey.

1. Tell me about your career and educational goals.
 - a) Probe: What role does your family or extended support network play in your career and educational experiences and decisions?
 - b) Probe: Why did you choose that career and/or educational goal?
2. What factors contributed to your decision to transfer to a university?
 - a) Probe: Can you tell me why that transfer path career option appealed to you?
 - b) Probe: Why did you choose that university?
3. What will the transfer process look like?
4. Are you planning to get an associate degree before you transfer? Why or why not?
5. What institutions are you considering transferring to? How many institutions do you plan on applying to and why?
 - a) Probe: What characteristics about the institution made it a desirable transfer destination?
 - b) Probe: Are there any barriers you are facing in planning to transfer?
 - c) Probe: Is an institution providing dedicated resources for students of color a factor in your choice of institution to transfer to? Why or why?

6. How often do you visit an advisor to discuss issues related to transfer? Are you required to meet with your advisor, and if so, how often?
7. Do you know whether your credits will transfer? If so, how do you know and how many will?
8. How do you feel about transferring to a university?
 - a) What have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced in going to college and seeking a bachelor's degree? How have you dealt with them? What has helped you stay in college, or commit to completing your degree?
9. Who are the top three people or resources you would go to for questions or support in the transfer process? Can you tell me why these are your top three?
 - b) Probe: Are you a part of a program, community, or group that provides support for students who want to transfer? If so, how has this supported you?
 - c) Probe: Do you know of programs, communities, or groups that support transfer students of color (e.g., PUENTE)? If so, are you a part of these organizations and how have they supported you in your transfer journey?
10. What advice would you give to students who want to transfer?
11. How can institutions better prepare for students who want to transfer? How can your institution better support your transfer journey?
12. Is there anything else that you have not shared that may be helpful to my understanding of your experience?

Post-Interview

Thank you for sharing your time, journey and aspirations with me today. Would it be alright if I reached out again should I have any follow up questions?

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The Texas Success Center supports the Texas Association of Community Colleges members' efforts to improve student success and directs Talent Strong Texas Pathways – a statewide strategy focused on building capacity for community colleges to design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all students. For more information, visit tacc.org/tsc.