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To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

From: Breaunna Alexander, CSU Student Success Network

Topic: Supporting the Success of Transfer Students of Color by Strengthening Your Transfer-Receptive Campus Climate

Developing a transfer-receptive campus climate within the [California State University \(CSU\)](#) could better support students of color in successfully entering and graduating in a timely manner. Despite higher education administrators' and researchers' projected decline in enrollments at the CSU as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 23-campus system experienced a slight uptick in enrollments during the fall 2020 semester.¹ California community colleges had been expected to see increased enrollments, as has been the trend during past recessions, but instead experienced precipitous enrollment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community colleges have been a primary entryway to higher education for students of color. Native American, Alaskan Native, Black, and Latinx communities have experienced the largest declines in community college enrollments during the pandemic nationally.² Prior to the pandemic, 48 percent of students from low-income backgrounds attended community college, but only nine percent of those students graduated from a four-year institution within six years of transferring to that institution nationally. When disaggregated by race, 21 percent of White community college students graduated from a four-year college or university within six years, compared to 13 percent of Latinx and 10 percent of Black students, respectively, nationally.³

[The Knowledge Center](#) is an online resource created by the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#) that provides curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center \(EdInsights\)](#) at [Sacramento State](#), an independent research center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.



Community college students of color face challenges in transferring to, continuing through, and graduating from four-year institutions in a timely manner, as a result of:

- unclear or inconsistent articulation of credit hours across institutions, both among community colleges and colleges and university campuses;
- campus climates at the university that prioritize creating connections to the campus for first-year students over other student groups;
- having their academic abilities questioned or undermined by key individuals (e.g., teachers, professors, counselors) throughout their academic journey; and
- key individuals lacking an understanding of students' intersecting identities (e.g., student parents, commuter students, justice-involved students).

CSU campuses can take two crucial steps in seeking to improve persistence and completion for transfer students, specifically transfer students of color, by explicitly identifying these students as an institutional priority and validating transfer students' sense of belonging.

Key Findings From the Literature

Explicitly Identify Transfer Students of Color as an Institutional Priority

Supporting transfer students of color from enrollment through graduation is critical for the CSU system to advance equity among its student populations as transfer students are often comprised of low-income, first-generation college attendees from Black and Latinx communities.⁴ Based on a literature review, it appears that CSU campuses, divisions, and academic departments could improve their campus climate for transfer students of color by identifying this population as an institutional priority, focusing on eliminating racial equity gaps among transfer students and between transfer and non-transfer students, and communicating this priority both campus-wide and to transfer students themselves. Some options for CSU faculty, staff, and administrators to consider include:

- Improving collaborations with community colleges by:
 - establishing a more visible presence on campuses to create relationships with and provide guidance and assistance to potential students in navigating the requirements of the university, including access to key resources and information (e.g., CSU advisors positioned to provide advising services at partner or local community colleges);⁵
 - clarifying the transfer pathway in the following ways, so that more students can successfully transfer with junior status:
 - clarifying the major prerequisite courses to take at the community college;ⁱ

ⁱ This memo is focused on actions CSU faculty and staff can take within their roles to support successful transfer, rather than on the importance of articulation agreements or practices associated with the AD-T. For information on the AD-T, see for example [Trial and Error: California Students Make the Best of an Improving Yet Complex Transfer Process](#).



- suggesting extracurricular activities to community college students that could support students in successfully transferring to and succeeding at the CSU;
 - establishing channels of communication for colleagues across the institutions to proactively communicate about programmatic changes (e.g., major requirements, suggested course sequence); and
 - reviewing, maintaining, and updating degree pathways consistently to ensure accuracy.
- Supporting students before, during, and after they transfer to the CSU by:⁵
 - creating and hosting a transfer orientation, but also include mechanisms for delivering this information to students who may be unable to afford or attend this orientation (e.g., creating a virtual orientation, tours, webinar sessions to provide the necessary information for students who may not be able to attend in person);
 - For example, San Diego State University hosts a free transfer summit before orientation to highlight high impact practices available on campus.
 - communicating the value of transfer students' experiences through the transfer student orientation by creating a welcoming climate for these students (e.g., by employing former transfer students to lead and answer questions during the orientation, including faculty and staff speakers who also identify as former transfer students, making information readily accessible to potential transfer students online); and
 - offering robust onboarding and regular advising by professional staff rather than peer mentors to transfer students in order to better address the complexity of these students' transcripts and questions.
 - Helping students understand institutional processes and language (e.g., acronyms for programs, buildings, colleges within the institutions);
 - Addressing the financial difficulties of transfer students by offering more financial aid such as scholarships specific to transfer students;
 - Identifying the success of transfer students as an integral part of institutional plans (e.g., in mission statements, equity plans, strategic plans);⁶
 - Disaggregating and examining data, both at the institutional level and within colleges across the institution, on transfer students (by race, income, and first-generation college attender status) to better understand and support these students. For example, disaggregated data can be used to:
 - combat deficit-thinking among colleagues about these students' academic ability
 - show that transfer students are not a minor or insignificant population; and
 - identify the equity gaps that exist within the transfer student population and between transfer and non-transfer students;⁵ and
 - Encouraging colleagues to become transfer agents and transfer championsⁱⁱ by seeing and identifying how colleagues are meeting their goals by focusing on transfer students.

ⁱⁱ The terms “transfer agents” and “transfer champions” were coined in [Transfer Access to Elite Colleges and Universities in the United States: Threading the Needle of the American Dream](#).



Validate Transfer Students of Color Sense of Belonging

Research suggests that identifying transfer students of color as an institutional priority is not sufficient in creating a welcoming climate on campus for these students. It is also important to support their sense of belonging academically, and CSU faculty, staff, and administrators in positions of authority can serve key roles in validating transfer students' identity as college students and in supporting their overall academic success. In particular, transfer students who develop positive relationships with professors, program directors, or deans also gain support in developing academic confidence, overcoming internalized negative views of themselves as students, and accessing important resources and information.⁷

One of the best ways for campuses and departments to support incoming transfer students of color in building positive relationships is by inviting their participation in undergraduate research. In particular, engaging transfer students in research activities during the summer before their first university term supports them in building early relationships among peers, faculty, and staff.⁸ Research shows, however, that engagement in undergraduate research at any time during their university experience can support the retention of transfer students and other student populations who may be at greater risk for not graduating, primarily because it builds mentoring relationships.⁹

Other strategies for CSU faculty, staff, and administrators to consider in validating transfer students' sense of belonging include:

- setting high academic expectations in courses and programs, clearly identifying what these expectations are, and providing guidance and supports to help students meet these expectations;⁶
- ensuring that curricula and language used in the syllabus, textbooks, and other materials reflect the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of students in the course and program;⁹
- including transfer-specific resources in the syllabus;
- considering cost when selecting textbooks and other course materials;⁹
- creating a welcoming environment for transfer students to feel comfortable in seeking you out for academic and personal support (e.g., sharing your own transfer identity, if relevant);⁶
- serving as advisors for transfer student organizations and/or supporting transfer student events; and
- creating a transfer student center on campus that provides resources (e.g., advising, peer mentoring, peer tutoring) and assists these students in navigating the university and building connection and community at their university.



Implications

Supporting transfer students extends beyond helping them navigate the transfer process and includes providing ongoing support—resources, information, and relationships—throughout their university experience. CSU campuses and departments can begin providing academic and personal support to transfer students before they enter the university. Through collaboration with community colleges, CSU faculty, staff, and administrators can provide prospective transfer students with consistent, clear, and accurate information about course taking, the admissions process, the availability of and applying for financial aid, and provide examples of high impact practices or out-of-class opportunities that may be of interest to these students. For transfer students on their campus, CSU departments and programs need to prioritize the success of these students as a key component of their equity efforts. In addition, faculty, staff, and administrators need to validate transfer students' sense of belonging by creating a welcoming, receptive, and supportive environment.

Reflection Questions

For faculty, staff, and administrators interested in developing or strengthening their campus environment for transfer students of color, we offer the following questions for reflection:

- How does our program, department, and campus gather information about and feedback from transfer students, to better understand them, including the challenges they face on our campus? Are there colleagues on my campus who gather data about these students, analyze and share that data, and use the resulting information to better support these students?
- Are there professional development opportunities provided on campus related to this population of students (e.g., better understanding who these students are, strategies for better supporting these students)? Do these opportunities focus on transfer students more generally and/or transfer students of color?
- How are we reaching out to prospective transfer students before they apply to our campus? What community colleges are we not including? How do we support transfer students between the time they apply and enroll on our campus? Do we know who is not attending or seeking out our services? How could we reach these students better?
- Do transfer students have all of the information they need before enrolling? Is that information accurate? Do we have an orientation dedicated to transfer students? Is it mandatory or optional? If students do not attend, how do we ensure they have access to the relevant information and resources offered to them during the orientation? Are there better or different ways to communicate this information to transfer students?
- How do we continue to provide support to transfer students after they enroll? What opportunities are there to increase our communication and to build relationships with these students (e.g., through engagement in undergraduate research opportunities, faculty mentor programs, transfer student centers or services)?

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- Is supporting transfer students a campus-wide priority? How so? If not, how can I encourage my department, my colleagues, or my campus to identify transfer students as an integral population to support? How can I support my program, department, and campus in prioritizing this student population? How can others or I become transfer allies and advocate among colleagues?

Resource List

The following resources provide additional information about strategies referenced in this memo:

- Suggestions for higher education leaders and policymakers to improve transfer policies: [“Transfer and applicability of credit: call to action;”](#)
- Details around enhancing the transfer pathway: [“San Francisco State University and City College of San Francisco partner to expand student transfer opportunities”](#) and [“Newsom’s proposal would create “dual admission” program for community college transfer students;”](#)
- Tools for creating opportunities for cross-institution collaboration to better support transfer and graduation outcomes for students: [“Tackling transfer: a guide to convening community colleges and universities to improve transfer student outcomes;”](#)
- Strategies for creating a transfer-friendly campus: [“7 ways four-year colleges can support transfer student success”](#) and [“Tips for a transfer-friendly culture from a transfer enrollment expert;”](#)
- Examples of how colleges have pivoted to supporting prospective transfer students during the COVID-19 pandemic through virtual tours, orientations, webinars: [“UC San Diego Undergraduate Admissions”](#) webpage, [“Cal State University, Fullerton Division of Student Affairs Outreach and Recruitment”](#) webpage, and [“Los Angeles City College’s Transfer Center”](#) webpage;
- Step-by-step guide: [“How to create a transfer-centered website;”](#)
- Examples of transfer student centers from across the University of California and CSU systems: [“Transfer Student Center” for the University of California, Berkeley](#) webpage and [“Transfer Student Center” for CSU Monterey Bay](#) webpage; and
- Strategies and direction to support the development and maintenance of a transfer-receptive campus climate: [“Power to the transfer: critical race theory and a transfer receptive culture. Perspectives on access, equity, and diversifying pathways in P-20 education.”](#)

Limitations

This memo provides an overview but not a comprehensive review of all existing research on this topic. It does not provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We searched for literature from within the CSU and from California more generally, but where these sources were not available we included



other pertinent studies, such as research out of state. Due to these and other limitations, the CSU Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as “best practices,” and the strategies presented may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.

One qualitative research study conducted with students is included. The study’s findings were not disaggregated by race or ethnicity, but these characteristics informed the study’s sample. This limits our ability to examine the transfer experience from the students’ lens and raises this as a potentially important area of focus for future research.

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ENDNOTES

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