

# CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES: LOST IN THE PATH TO A BACHELOR'S DEGREE



The Education Trust–West

**Analysis of California Community College data reveals appallingly low transfer rates for all students throughout the Golden State, and widening gaps in transfer rates between students of color and their peers.**

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THE MASTER PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The California Community College (CCC) system serves 2.7 million students – about four times as many students as the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems combined. By design of the California Master Plan for Higher Education, the CCC system is comprised of 112 colleges within California's three-tiered public higher education system. California Community Colleges are charged with many missions. Of those, providing an alternate pathway to a bachelor's degree via the transfer option is one of the most critical – particularly for students of color, first generation students, and low-income students who may not have other viable options for accessing a four-year college degree.

Although the California Master Plan for Higher Education built in the transfer pathway as part of the state's commitment to higher education access, the spirit of that commitment is not being honored. The transfer pathway is woefully failing large proportions of community college students, and ultimately, the future workforce of California.

This brief looks at the transfer rates of community college students in California who have shown intent to transfer to a four-year institution as defined by the California Community College Chancellor's Office (see "About the Data").

## NEED FOR MORE COLLEGE GRADUATES

At the national level, President Obama called on our nation to produce 8 million more graduates on top of the current rate of students expected to graduate from college by 2020.<sup>1</sup>

At the state level, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) recently projected that California will face a shortage of a million bachelor's degree holders for the workforce by 2025.<sup>2</sup> PPIC's projections also suggest that 41 percent of jobs in California will require at least a bachelor's degree, but only 35 percent of adults in California will hold that credential.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, we have reached a pivotal point in our country and in our state where the lack of college graduates can no longer be ignored. We cannot meet our state's workforce needs through the high school to 4-year college pathway alone. The community college transfer pathway must, without a doubt, play an increasingly critical role in ensuring that we have an educated and competitive workforce.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/09/remarks-president-higher-education-and-economy-university-texas-austin>

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Hans; Sengupta, Ria. "Closing the Gap: Meeting California's Need for College Graduates." Public Policy Institute of California. April 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Hans. "Higher Education in California. New Goals for the Master Plan." Public Policy Institute of California. April 2010.

## TRANSFER RATES FOR ALL STUDENTS WHO SHOW INTENT TO TRANSFER ARE STAGGERINGLY LOW, PARTICULARLY FOR CALIFORNIA'S STUDENTS OF COLOR

For many California high school students, the community college system is the most realistic and accessible higher education option due to a variety of factors: family or personal finances, inadequate academic preparation, need to stay close to family, and/or aspirations of improving their chances of being admitted to the four-year college or university of their choice. In fact, in 2008, 31 percent of California's public high school graduates enrolled directly into a California Community College-- 61 percent of whom were students of color.<sup>4</sup>

Many students are given the message that the community college system is the gateway to a bachelor's degree, and that after two years of coursework, they can transfer to a four-year institution.

Unfortunately, the harsh reality is that after two years, only 6 percent of those students who show intent to transfer are actually able to do so (Figure 1). For the students of color who represent a vast majority of our state and future workforce, the transfer rates from community college to four-year institutions are even worse. Among Pacific Islander and African-American students, a mere 4 and 5 percent transfer after two years, respectively. Among Latino and Native American students, only 3 percent transfer after two years.

**FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER RATES FOR STUDENTS WHO SHOW INTENT TO TRANSFER BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2003-04 COHORT)**

Race/Ethnicity	2 Yr	3 Yr	4 Yr	5 Yr	6 Yr
Latino	3%	9%	17%	25%	31%
Native American	3%	10%	20%	25%	30%
Pacific Islander	4%	13%	22%	29%	34%
African-American	5%	12%	21%	29%	34%
Filipino	6%	13%	24%	32%	37%
White	6%	16%	28%	38%	43%
Asian	10%	24%	38%	50%	56%
Unknown	7%	17%	28%	37%	44%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>41%</b>

While the systemwide transfer rate increases to 26 percent after four years and 41 percent after six years, those increases are not the same for all students. In fact, the transfer rate gap between white students and students of color actually widens over time.

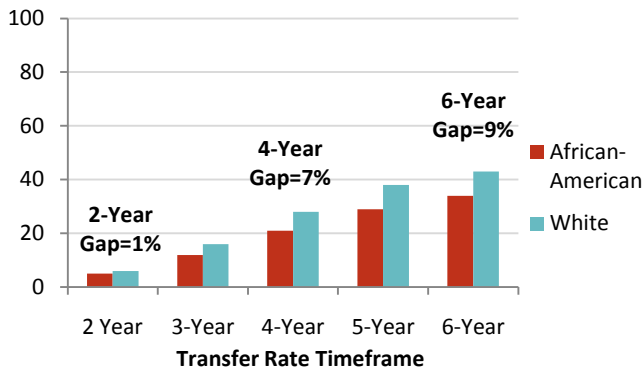
- Among African-American students, the African American-white transfer rate gap that begins at 1 percent after two years, widens to a 7 percentage point gap after four years, and to a 9 percentage point gap after six years (Figure 2).

<sup>4</sup> California Postsecondary Education Commission. Accessed from <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/> on September 22, 2010.

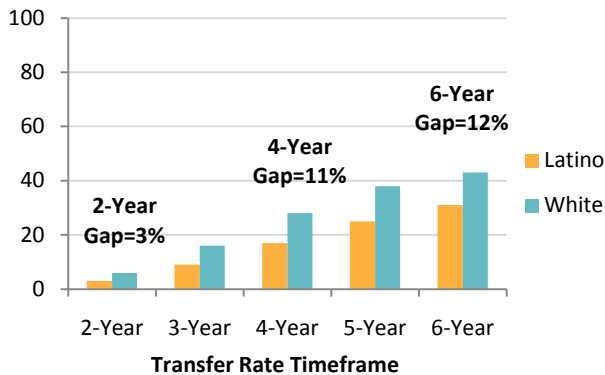
- Among Latino students, the Latino-white transfer rate gap that begins at 3 percent after two years, increases to an 11 percentage point gap after four years, and to a 12 percentage point gap after six years (Figure 3).

The gaps are similar for Pacific Islander and Native American community college students. The bottom line is that for students whose academic goal is to transfer to a four-year institution, waiting six years to do so is simply intolerable. Far too many of our students are not making it through the transfer pipeline in an acceptable timeframe, or at all.

**FIGURE 2: AFRICAN AMERICAN-WHITE TRANSFER RATE GAP GROWTH OVER TIME**



**FIGURE 3: LATINO-WHITE TRANSFER RATE GAP GROWTH OVER TIME**



#### ABOUT THE DATA

The transfer rates used in this brief were obtained from the Transfer Velocity Project as provided through the California Community College Chancellor's Data Mart.

The Transfer Velocity Project calculates transfer rates by tracking cohorts of first-time college students for six years to determine "behavioral intent to transfer." Behavioral intent to transfer is defined as: (1) having completed at least 12 credit units; and (2) attempted a transfer-level math or English course after six years (n=124,462 students for 2003-04 cohort).

Only students who fit the "behavioral intent to transfer" criteria are included in the denominator. The numerator is the number of students who transferred to a four-year institution (public or private) within a series of timeframes (2 years, 4 years, 6 years, etc.). Given the 6-year cohort methodology, the 2003-04 transfer rates used in this brief represents the most recently available transfer data to date.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Challenge 1: Poor academic preparation.** Far too many students attend high schools that fail to prepare them for college coursework and are ending up in remediation courses at the community college level. Overwhelmingly, students of color are overrepresented in remediation courses, where high failure rates are the norm.
  - ✓ **Recommendation:** K-12 institutions and community colleges should immediately engage in an open and purposeful dialogue to identify areas of misalignment in content, skills, and expectations. This is especially pertinent for those institutions that serve large proportions of English Learners, low-income students, and students of color.
- **Challenge 2: Confusing transfer pathways.** The pathway to transferring from a community college to a four-year institution often involves unclear and inconsistent course requirements that discourage and frustrate students.
  - ✓ **Recommendation:** Streamline the transfer process by creating a set of consistent course requirements that are accepted by the UCs, CSUs, and other four-year institutions that will eliminate wasteful and duplicative course taking.
- **Challenge 3: Lack of a broad-based, student-centered transfer culture.** There are many California Community Colleges that have relatively high transfer rates, and do so because they have built an institutional culture that is centered on getting their students to four-year institutions. However, there are many community colleges for which a transfer culture is severely lacking.
  - ✓ **Recommendation:** Adapt and apply best practices learned from community colleges that have high transfer rates to strengthen the transfer culture, including targeted support services, concerted institution-wide messaging and advising, and strategic partnerships with four-year institutions.
- **Challenge 4: Lack of higher education accountability that focuses on student outcomes.** Higher education has not been held to the same level of accountability as K-12 institutions. There are no systemic repercussions for failing to transfer large proportions of students to a four-year institution for whom that is the goal. Further, a funding model based on whether students enroll, and not whether they complete or transfer, creates a culture of complacency and an environment of perverse incentives.
  - ✓ **Recommendation:** Set statewide goals around college transfer and completion. Re-examine community college funding structures and consider a more accountability-based funding model that takes into account student outcomes (i.e. transfer and completion rates) and indicators of progress towards those outcomes.
- **Challenge 5: Inadequate access to useful data.** Community colleges currently lack capacity and access to the college-specific data they need to understand where their achievement gaps are and what can be done to close them.
  - ✓ **Recommendation:** Invest in growing the capacity of community college data systems in ways that aim to provide leaders and instructors with the college-specific tools needed to understand where gaps in learning and academic progress are occurring.