

Improving Transfer from Community College to the California State University

California's community college system serves over 2.1 million students, with most expressing the intent to transfer to a four-year institution. But transfer rates are low—only one in five students transfers within four years. As California pursues a goal of 40% baccalaureate completion among working-age residents by 2030, optimizing this critical pathway will be essential. Even modest improvements could substantially increase four-year enrollment and degree completion.

CSU is the leading destination of community college transfers

Transfer students are a critical component of CSU's student body—more so than at the University of California or most public universities across the nation. Indeed, in fall 2024 transfers made up more than 43% of CSU's new undergraduate enrollment. But at most CSU campuses, transfers remain below the fall 2020 peak, putting pressure on the system's overall enrollment growth and threatening its ability to maintain programs and services.

CSU accepts CCC transfer applicants at very high rates: 91% are admitted to at least one CSU campus. Of those admitted, 65% enroll. Both acceptance and enrollment rates vary widely across CSU campuses. For example, the transfer acceptance rate at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is 21%, but more than 93% at CSU campuses such as Sacramento, Stanislaus, and Domingue Hills.

Many students struggle to transfer—or never do

Despite high acceptance and enrollment rates, successful transfer takes time and persistence. The typical applicant spends nine terms—more than four school years—in the community college system prior applying to CSU. Some applicants are able to apply for transfer sooner, especially those who meet key milestones—such as completing introductory transfer-level math and English courses and enrolling in at least 25 units—during the first year of college.

Persistence is critical. Many students—about 30%—apply in more than one term. Almost half of these students had all of their applications denied the first time around and were admitted at a later term.

However, many qualified community college students do not pursue a path to a four-year degree. For example, 21% of students who earned an Associate Degree for Transfer between academic years 2018–19 and 2022–23 never applied to CSU despite guaranteed admission. More than half of these students (32,500) do not appear to have continued on a path to a bachelor's degree.

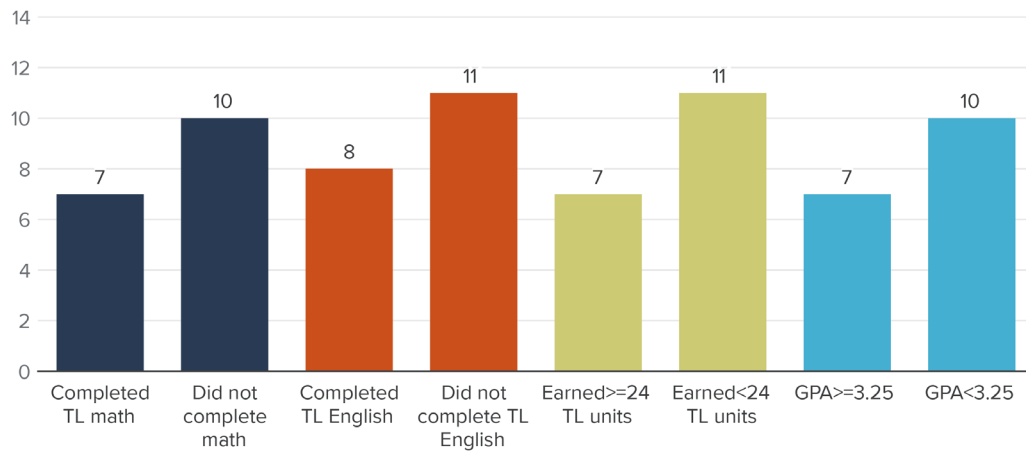
Similarly, about 62,700 transfer students (14% of admittees in our study sample, which spans 2018 to 2023) were admitted to CSU but did not end up enrolling in any four-year college.

Improving the transfer pathway

The good news is that when the transfer pathway works, it works. CCC students who successfully transfer to CSU achieve encouraging results: 76% of fall 2020 enrollees graduated within four years. However, 19% left the system without graduating, most of them within the first year after transferring.

Early momentum in community college matters

Median number of terms enrolled in community college



Source: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

Notes: Restricted to students who applied for transfer to CSU. For a term to be included in the calculation, the student must have had at least one enrollment in a credit course. Includes summer terms. We are excluding for this calculation the three community colleges in the quarter system.

Our findings point to four key opportunities for improvement:

Supporting early momentum matters. Helping students navigate and succeed during their first year, whether in the community college or after transferring to the CSU, should be prioritized. Ensuring community college students successfully complete transfer-level English and math in the first year can accelerate transfer-readiness. Better and more proactive advising, flexible scheduling, and increasing on-campus work opportunities could also help students enroll full time.

Understanding why admitted students do not enroll in CSU. We do not know why large numbers of well-prepared students fall off the transfer pathway. Factors such as college costs after financial aid, selectivity, and proximity are ripe for inquiry and innovation. Given that admittees 25 and older were overrepresented among those who did not enroll in any four-year institution, data on labor market outcomes for these students could help to identify ways to connect them to CSU.

Exploring campus-specific variation and student choice. Because there is high variation across individual CSUs in both acceptance and enrollment rates, the systems would benefit from a better understanding of challenges faced by specific CSU campuses and majors. Moreover, about 69,000 admittees to CSU in our sample decided to enroll in another four-year institution. Most (43,000) enrolled in UC, but many went to colleges with higher costs and lower graduation rates than CSU. Enhancing communication and support with prospective students throughout the matriculation process is one way to improve enrollment rates at CSU.

Ensuring more openings at the system's most selective campuses and on-demand majors. Despite improvements, some CSU campuses and majors continue to be impacted. Further consideration should be given to strategies such as flexible course scheduling, co-locating CCCs and CSUs through shared campuses or satellite centers, and enhancing online or hybrid degree programs. CSU's new systemwide strategic plan outlines important actions in several of these areas.

Ultimately, the biggest challenges in improving transfer from CCC to CSU are twofold. More California community college students must get to the point of applying to a four-year institution. And both CCC and CSU must work to ensure that students who have become transfer-eligible are able to successfully navigate the transfer process.

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Source: Adapted by Lynette Ubois from [Improving Transfer from Community College to the California State University](#) by Marisol Cuellar Mejia and Hans Johnson.