

Strengthening California's Transfer Pathway

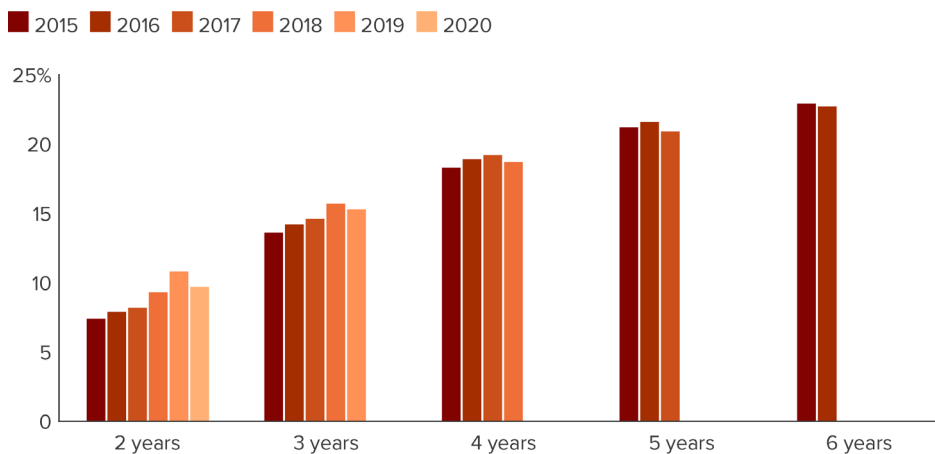
With 1.8 million students, California Community Colleges (CCC) are often the primary point of access to higher education for low-income, Black, and Latino students. Given the role of community colleges in creating a strong pipeline of college graduates, improving transfer rates to four-year colleges has become an increasingly important policy goal. Students who transfer have high rates of earning a bachelor's degree, which in turn is associated with higher lifetime earnings and greater economic mobility.

Despite recent progress, transfer rates remain low and disparities persist

In the last several years, transfer rates have improved, but they remain far too low. Among transfer-intending students, about 19 percent transfer within four years of initial enrollment and 10 percent do so within two years. Racial disparities are also large: one in four Asian and white transfer-intending students transfer within four years, compared to less than 16 percent of Black and Latino students.

Transfer rates are very low

Share of transfer-intending students who successfully transfer within different time frames, by CCC entering cohort



Source: Authors' calculations using MIS data and the CCC National Student Clearinghouse data match.

Notes: Transfer counts are restricted to students who successfully completed at least 12 units as a non-special admit student in any college in the system and who were enrolled in the system in the year prior to transferring to a four-year institution.

Some good news is that transfers from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups have risen dramatically at the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU). In particular, the share of Latinos among UC transfer enrollees has almost doubled between 2001 and 2022, while more than doubling at CSU. However, despite this progress, Latino transfer students remain underrepresented, especially at UC. Latinos make up half of transfer-intending community college students, but only 26 percent of UC transfer enrollees (47% of CSU transfer enrollees).

Similarly, regional disparities are more prevalent at UC. For example, the share of transfers to UC from the San Joaquin Valley (3%) and Inland Empire (6%) falls significantly below their share of the community college population (10% each). This trend is driven largely by community college students from these regions being less likely to apply to UC.

Positive trends are emerging among recent transfer students

One promising development is that students who successfully transfer are increasingly likely to do so within two years of initial enrollment. Among students who transferred in 2021–22, 31 percent did so within two years, up from 21 percent in 2015–16. All major racial/ethnic groups saw progress, but gains were largest among Asian students (15 percentage points) and smallest among Black students (2 points). For white and Latino students, the increase was 12 and 9 points, respectively.

Recent programs and policy changes may be streamlining the process for successful transfer students. For example, a greater share of students are transferring with an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), a two-year degree pathway that guarantees admission to the CSU system (up 11 percentage points between 2015–16 and 2021–22). In addition, a higher percentage are completing transfer-level math and English in their first year (up 14 and 17 points, respectively) and starting community college while still attending high school (known as dual enrollment; up 4 points). Both these trends give students early momentum toward completing key milestones for transfer.

Ongoing collaboration is key

With several recent reforms underway, California is at a critical juncture for transfer. Higher education institutions must continue to work together so that more students can attain a bachelor's degree—and all the benefits that it brings.

Four-year institutions must do more to reach out to transfer-eligible students and encourage more students to prepare for transfer:

- ▶ **Create a universal transfer pathway.** UC should consider adopting the ADT pathway; even one with additional requirements for UC would provide students with more options when transferring.
- ▶ **Evaluate existing approaches to transfer.** Assessing the reach and efficacy of existing transfer initiatives is key to identifying what works best and what should be replicated or scaled up.
- ▶ **Expand dual admission programs.** UC and CSU have developed pilot programs that guarantee admission to some entering community college students. In the future, dual admission could eventually be made available to every transfer-intending student entering the community colleges.

Community colleges must focus on reducing the barriers that students face in completing the requirements for transfer to their desired four-year institution and major:

- ▶ **Continue to address pandemic-related challenges.** Enrollment declines will affect transfer volumes in the near term, and possibly the long term. Advising, counseling, and support services should focus on keeping students enrolled and bringing students who left back to college.
- ▶ **Use proven, student-centered course placement strategies.** Ongoing work to ensure that all students not only start directly in transfer-level math and English but successfully complete these courses could help many students transfer faster. Achieving more equitable results in this area would require implementing a broader set of student supports.
- ▶ **Ensure that eligible students successfully transfer.** Colleges should provide additional support in completing financial aid and university applications for students who have earned ADTs or who have completed 60 units (including math and English) but who have not yet transferred.
- ▶ **Work with university officials.** Articulation agreements can help smooth the transition to a four-year college. In particular, campuses that are far from four-year colleges should work to establish partnerships allowing students to earn a bachelor's degree by taking university courses locally.

By increasing the number of students who transfer to four-year institutions, California can preserve higher education's critical role as a ladder of economic mobility and ensure that college graduates fully reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the state's youth.

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Adapted by Vicki Hsieh from [Strengthening California's Transfer Pathway](#) by Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Hans Johnson, Cesar Alesi Perez, and Jacob Jackson.