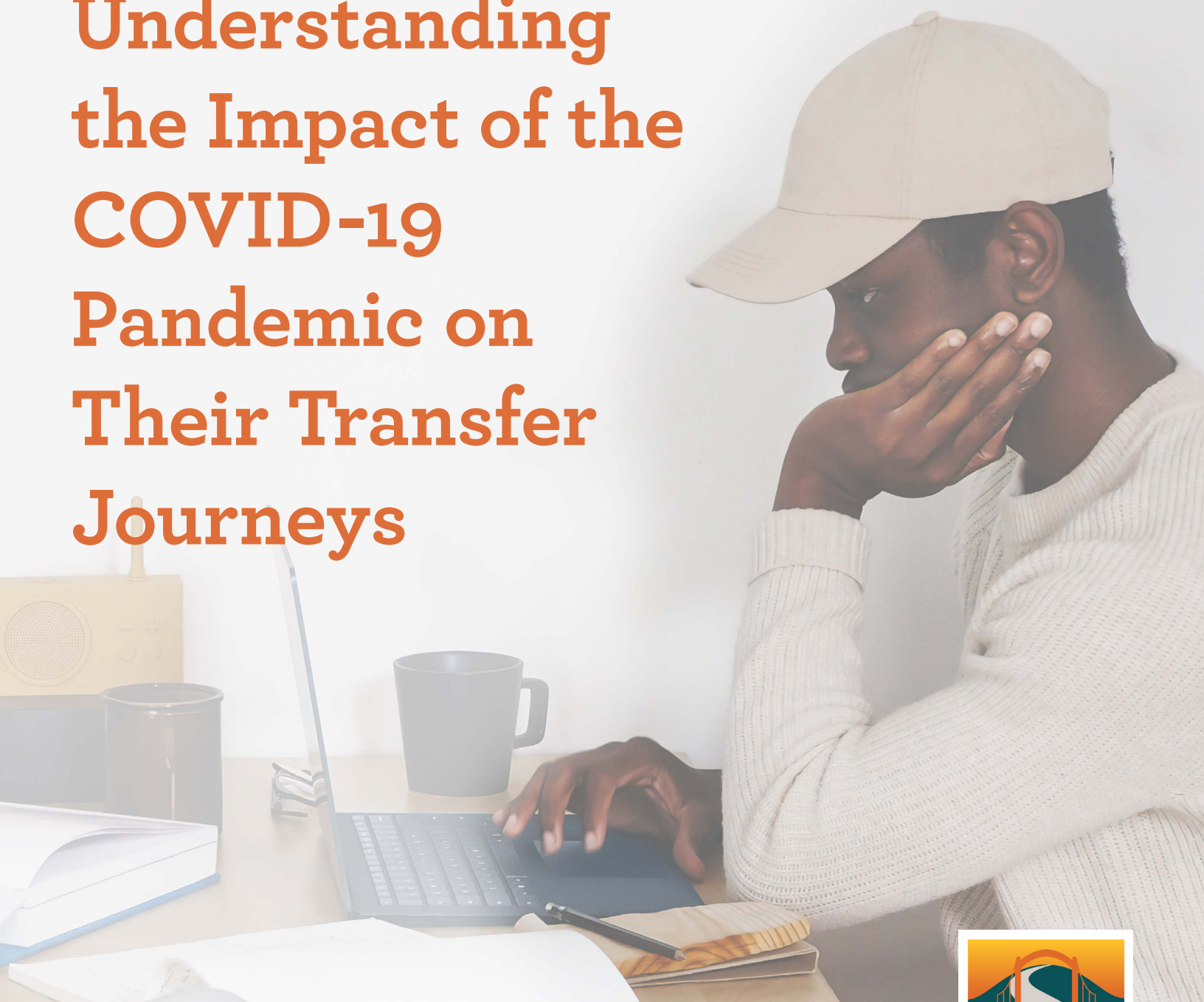


Students Speak: Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Their Transfer Journeys



Research made possible by generous funding from:



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October 2021

Introduction

In spring 2021, the RP Group surveyed nearly 8,000 “high-leverage” students attending California Community Colleges (CCC) — those who were close to transfer but had not yet made it to university — exploring the near-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their transfer experience (see sidebar). Our research examined:

- COVID-19’s effect on students’ transfer plans
- Issues faced by transfer students during the pandemic
- Student awareness and use of relaxed requirements made by California’s higher education segments, designed to support their transfer success
- Influence of key factors on students’ transfer capacity (identified by our original *Through the Gate* transfer study¹) during the pandemic and in the coming year

This brief offers highlights from this statewide survey and incorporates perspectives from follow-up focus groups, both with students whose transfer plans changed and who successfully made it to university. It also includes how the transfer experience of different student groups was uniquely impacted during this unprecedented time.

This research — along with other transfer studies conducted by the RP Group — emphasizes that **strengthening transfer student retention and success and closing equity gaps during the pandemic and beyond will require...**

- **Stepped-up adoption of student-centered transfer practices by the state’s community colleges**
- **Improved communication and involvement from the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC)**
- **Increased financial support and more flexible options across all segments for transfer students**

We offer each of these entities recommendations for supporting transfer students moving forward, drawing on student insights. For a more detailed analysis of the data, readers should view *[The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students’ Transfer Trajectories: A systemwide study across California Community Colleges](#)*.

“

There is no precedence for this type of ordeal that we are going through so no one has the authority nor answers on how life will continue or go back to ‘normal’ after this and because of it, every day will be a continuous unknown and could possibly be another hindrance to progression.

”

COVID-19 Impact on Transfer Student Survey Fast Facts

Number of California Community Colleges: 67

Participants: 7,894 students who had completed at least 45 transferable units as of fall 2020

Survey Period: March-April 2021

Find more information about the project, including COVID-19 Impact on Transfer project, including the Technical Report at <https://rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate/Resources-for-Educators>

¹ Find more information at www.rpgroup.org/through-the-gate.

Pandemic Impacts on Students' Transfer Plans

Many students surveyed indicated that the pandemic negatively affected their transfer plans — despite their considerable progress toward a bachelor's degree. Some students reported that COVID-19 derailed their plans altogether, even after they had been admitted to university.



40% of students indicated that the pandemic impacted their transfer plans



Reasons Students Changed Their Transfer Plans...

- Putting their transfer plans on hold until things are back to normal / Not wanting to pay university tuition for an online experience
- Changing their education path / Deciding that transferring is no longer for them

Student Groups Most Likely to Change Their Transfer Plans

- Nonbinary gender
- Native American/Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- Age 18-25

“

I did not want to pay full tuition to only attend virtual classes. I want to be able to use the campus facilities safely.

”



Get Students Back on Their Transfer Path

- Community colleges can contact students who have achieved at least 45 transferable units but exited before transferring, determine what information and assistance they need, and connect them to appropriate resources and support to resume their educational journey
- Community colleges can monitor (via surveys, focus groups, analysis of outcomes data) how the pandemic continues to impact students' transfer plans and determine what ongoing interventions may be needed

Issues Experienced by Transfer Students During the Pandemic

Many students reported having difficulty accessing transfer-related resources during the pandemic at both the CCC and university, and shared concerns about their university readiness due to questions about the rigor of their online community college courses.



40%

of students found it harder to access counselors and advisors

33%

of students found it difficult to access both community college and university transfer center staff

Student Groups Most Likely to Experience Difficulty Accessing Transfer Support Professionals

- Native American/Alaska Native
- Nonbinary gender

“

For the transfer center, it's almost impossible to get an appointment. Any time I tried to contact them, [I was told the] appointments are full and to call another time, and waiting to connect to the transfer center takes almost one hour.

”



Issues students faced during the pandemic and concerns they have looking forward...

- Challenges getting in touch with transfer professionals — both at their community college and prospective universities — and receiving conflicting information from different personnel
- Fears that they had not actually learned course material and would be unprepared for university-level work — especially in hands-on disciplines — due to relaxed course expectations



Increase Access to Transfer Resources

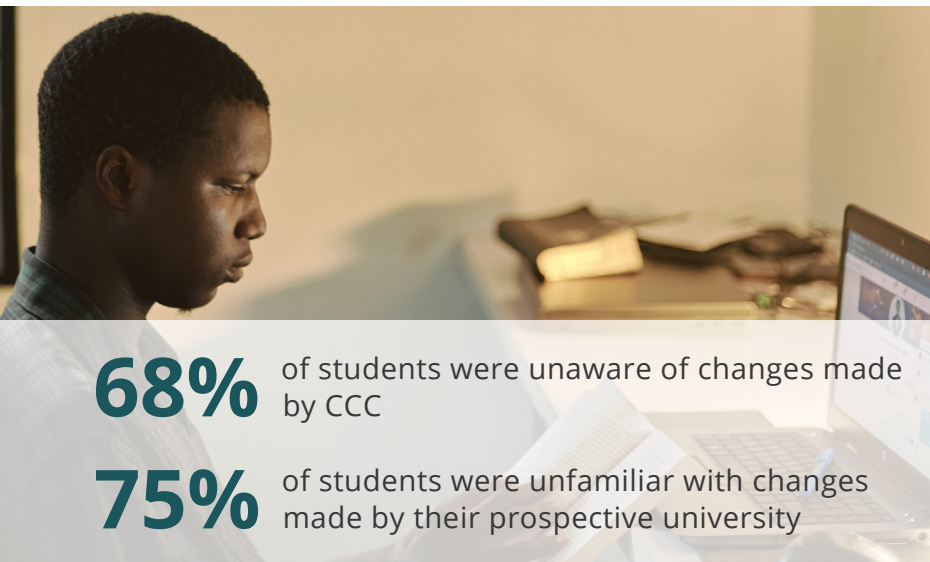
- Community colleges can better communicate with transfer students by utilizing multiple channels (e.g., email, social media platforms, college website, student organizations, key transfer courses) and ensuring information is clear, concise, comprehensive, and student-friendly
- Universities can counsel students on university-level expectations and where to go for academic support post-transfer, including connecting them with successful transfer students

Track Learning Outcomes

- Community colleges planning to deliver a significant proportion of their courses online can measure and continually monitor learning outcomes to reassure students that the quality of their virtual education aligns with that in on-campus offerings

Student Awareness of Relaxed Transfer Requirements

The vast majority of students surveyed were unaware of policy and practice adjustments made by the CCC, CSU, and UC systems to mitigate pandemic impacts on their progress toward a bachelor's degree.



68% of students were unaware of changes made by CCC

75% of students were unfamiliar with changes made by their prospective university



In focus groups and open-ended survey questions, students voiced that while they did not leverage these options, the availability of these options served as a sort of safety net.

Student Groups Least Likely to Know about Relaxed Requirements

- White
- Native American/Alaska Native
- Ages 25+

“

They offered an extension to choose P/NP. I did not use the P/NP option because I am getting all As in my classes so far, but it's nice to know that the option to choose is still available.

”

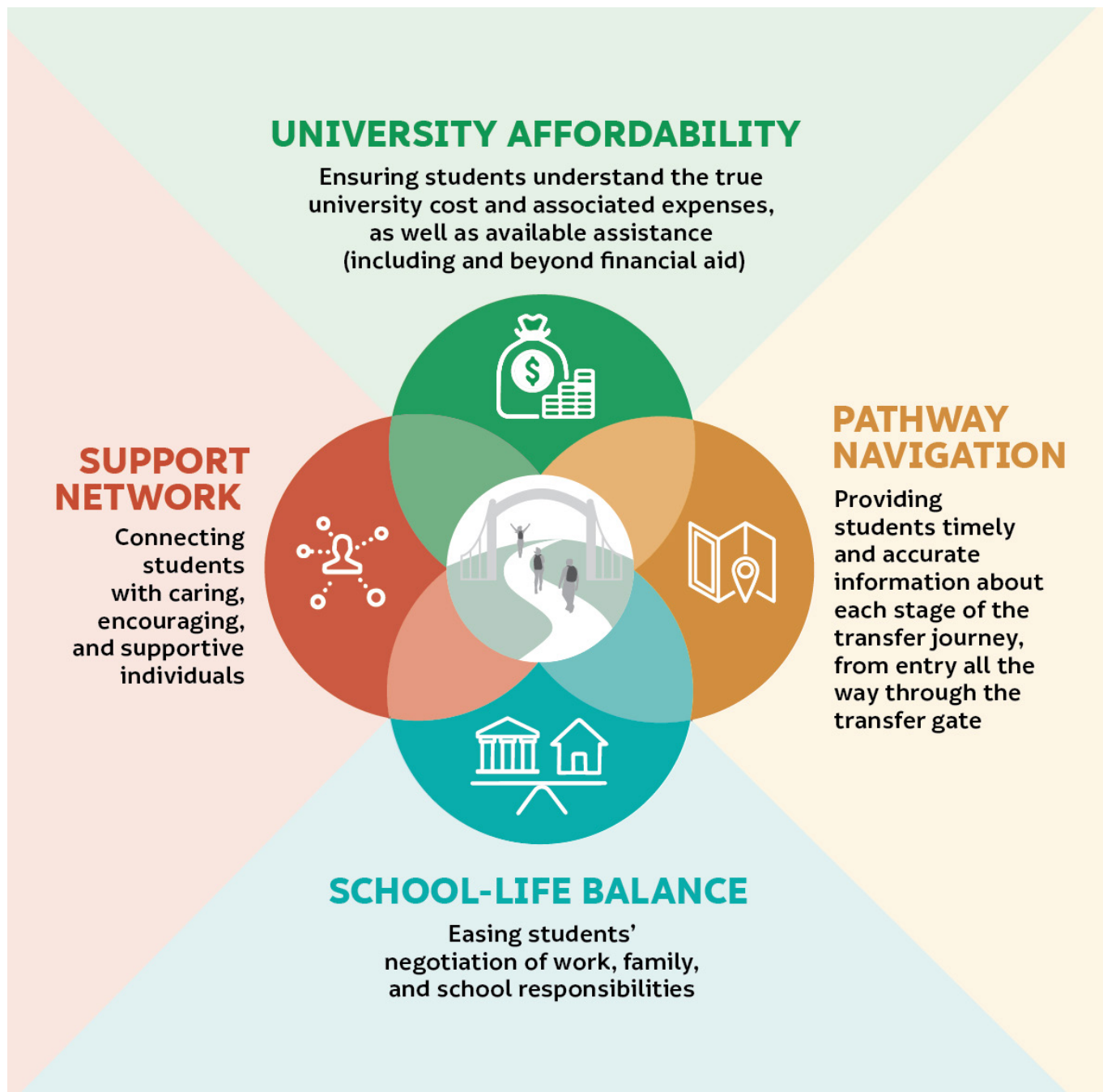


Maintain Student Access to and Awareness of Relaxed Transfer Requirements

- California's higher education systems consider maintaining policy and practice adjustments given the continued effects of the pandemic on students' transfer progress and success
- CCC, UC, and CSU systems can increase their communications efforts to reinforce that these relaxed requirements are viable options for students seeking to transfer
- Community colleges and universities can directly message students to increase their awareness of these options using student-centered channels (e.g., social media, student organizations, key transfer courses, campus visits, virtual tours)

Continued Relevancy of the Student Transfer Capacity-Building Framework during the Pandemic and Beyond

Our Through the Gate study ([link](#)) identified four key factors that impact students' transfer capacity: Student Transfer Capacity-Building Framework. The current study sought to determine how these four factors are currently impacting students' transfer experience and how different student groups are experiencing the factors over the course of the pandemic.



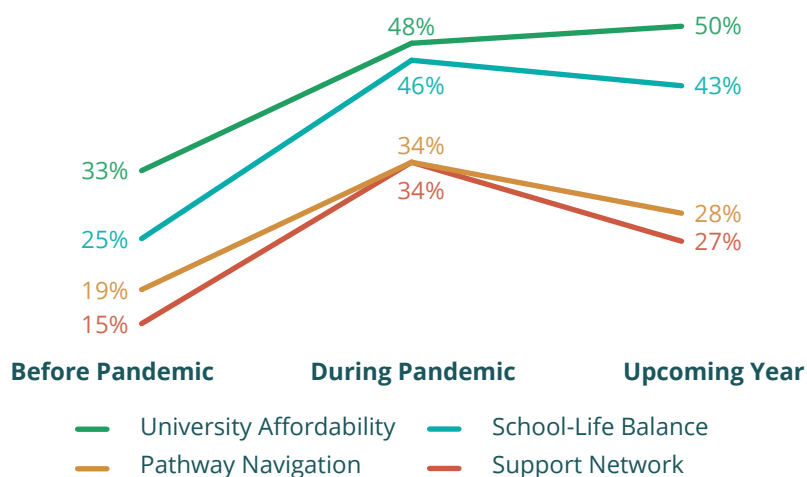
Impact of Key Factors on Students' Transfer Capacity during the Pandemic and Beyond

Students' struggles with all four factors identified in the RP Group's Student Transfer Capacity-Building Framework increased during the pandemic (see figure below).

While students reported that they expect some of these issues to improve as COVID-19 wanes, **worries about paying for college are on the rise**. Half of students anticipated that University Affordability will significantly impact their transfer success this upcoming year.

At the same time, the **percentages of students close to transfer indicating each factor was "very challenging" remain above pre-pandemic levels**, most substantially for School-Life balance, with certain student groups expressing greater concern about each issue compared to their peers.

Percentage of students finding each factor "very challenging"



“

The uncertainty as to how next year will be is what is causing the most stress. I am currently working at a warehouse to afford food and pay bills, but I work [the] graveyard shift. Not knowing if school will be back in person really stresses me out because I am unsure on whether to find a new job that will fit my future schedule or keep the one I have.

”

Further analysis shows that over time, some student groups experience these factors more acutely – especially in the current COVID-19 context:



University Affordability

University Affordability remains especially challenging for Latinx, Middle Eastern, female, nonbinary, first-generation, and older (50+) students.



School Life Balance

Older (26+), female, and nonbinary students view School-Life Balance as substantially more challenging than before the pandemic. Middle Eastern students saw a sharp increase in the degree to which School-Life Balance challenged their transfer progress.



Pathway Navigation

East Asian students found navigating transfer pathways to be increasingly challenging when most other racial/ethnic groups indicated they expect this challenge to decline as they look ahead to the coming year.



Support Network

The gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students in experiencing challenges accessing a Support Network has grown over time from before the pandemic until now.



Provide Holistic and Integrated Transfer Support across Students' Community College Journey

Community colleges can...

- Assess which of these factors are impacting transfer students' retention and success the most; disaggregate by focal student groups
- Ensure transfer students receive timely information and strategic support from the time they connect with the college, all the way through their transition to the university; provide services and resources at key junctures and to specific populations based on need
- Engage all personnel in supporting students toward their transfer goal—transfer professionals, counselors, advisors, classified professionals, administrators, instructors, and librarians

CCC, CSU, and UC can...

- Jointly ensure students understand (a) how much it will cost to attend university, and (b) how to secure financial assistance for all expenses (e.g., tuition, books, housing, food, transportation, child care), including and beyond financial aid
- Work together to develop timely, reliable, streamlined communications that ensure students have a warm handoff from one phase of their educational journey to the next
- Extend the flexibility offered during the pandemic after students return to in-person instruction and ensure that students know of such flexibility

Related Resources

Be a Transfer Advocate: How Faculty Can Strengthen Students' Transfer Success

Be a Transfer Advocate: How Student Support Professionals Can Help Students Address University Affordability Concerns

Looking Ahead

This brief provides an early glimpse into the experiences of students navigating transfer during the pandemic. It is clear that the upheaval of the past year and a half has negatively impacted some students' transfer progress and success. Further, this research shows that students' increased concern about University Affordability and School-Life Balance, as well as intensified issues with navigating their transfer paths and accessing a Support Network, will likely continue even as colleges and universities attempt to return to in-person instruction and support.

Moving forward, it will be critical to assess the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on the educational trajectories of students well on their way to transfer and determine what supports this high-leverage population will need to attain their academic goals in this period of prolonged disruption. Monitoring the impact of recent increases in California's higher education budget as well as new efforts to continue simplifying transfer pathways to the CSU and UC systems will also be key to understanding how students' concerns about all factors called out in the Student Transfer Capacity-Building Framework — especially University Affordability and Pathway Navigation — evolve, if not, abate in the coming years.

Through the Gate Transfer Study Overview

The RP Group's Through the Gate research initiative focuses on identifying ways to increase transfer for a "high-leverage" group of community college students: those who are close to transfer but have not yet made it to university.

Through the Gate launched in 2016 with funding from College Futures Foundation. Current projects include *Understanding COVID-19's Impact on Student Transfer* (2021, funded by the ECMC Foundation and College Futures Foundation) and the *African American Transfer Tipping Point Study* (2020-2022, funded by the Lumina Foundation).

Colleges Participating in the *Transfer Experiences in the Wake of COVID-19* Survey



The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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