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## Inside the UC System's New Focus on Transfer Students

By *Vimal Patel* DECEMBER 02, 2018

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The governor meant business.

After a scathing audit found that the office of Janet Napolitano, the University of California's president, had mismanaged finances, including keeping a reserve of undisclosed money, Jerry Brown threatened in May 2017 to withhold \$50 million from the university until it met the auditor's recommendations.

There was also another, perhaps more complicated, condition to releasing the money: The university had to increase its share of transfer students.

Two campuses in particular, Santa Cruz and Riverside, had to make "good-faith efforts" to quickly improve in this area. The governor wanted a freshman-to-transfer-student ratio of 2 to 1. At the time of Brown's threat, Santa Cruz's ratio was 3.3 to 1 and Riverside's 4.4 to 1.

Universities, especially competitive ones, are striving for more diversity. [Community colleges](#) offer a natural place to start. They promise a pathway into the middle class for veterans, single parents, those who need an affordable education, and anyone else who didn't or couldn't have the traditional college experience.

And California has been a pillar in its commitment to these students. The vast system of 115 community colleges, which serve 2.1 million students, is one leg of California's vaunted [higher-education master plan](#). But according to Brown, the universities were falling short of their promise to the state's community-college students — and hurting the state's coffers as well. That is because transitioning a community-college student successfully toward a four-year degree costs less than educating a student only at a four-year campus.

There is a bigger picture too. Legislators and the governor are concerned with bolstering the state's capacity to weather a [recession](#) without increasing income

inequality or hindering economic mobility, says Laura Hope, an executive vice chancellor in the California Community Colleges chancellor's office.

"When the next recession comes along," Hope says, "a lot of Californians without bachelor's degrees are going to find themselves in a really relentless economy. If they don't have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to adapt, they won't survive. The last recession taught us this."

No one at the universities seems to disagree. But leaders worried about whether they could improve their transfer-student numbers as quickly as Brown wanted. The \$50-million threat rattled administrators at the Santa Cruz campus. They say they care deeply about student success, and admitting transfer students if they aren't prepared to succeed at Santa Cruz wouldn't be good for anyone.

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In recent years, Santa Cruz had elevated student success by creating what administrators call major preparation requirements. These course lineups had the goal of holding transfer students to the same standards before entering a major as those who started at Santa Cruz as freshmen. The primary goal, says Michelle Whittingham, associate vice chancellor for enrollment management at Santa Cruz, was to make sure transfer students wouldn't flounder and would finish up their programs in a timely manner. The requirements led, however, to a dip in transfer students.

Could Santa Cruz find a way to balance its commitment to student success with increasing its share of transfer students? Would something, somewhere, have to give?

It's fair to wonder, given Governor Brown's cudgel: Have the universities been taking a hard look at structural changes and rethinking admissions policies in a genuine effort to reach students who have been historically excluded, or is the new push more the product of meeting bigger numbers to placate powerful political pressure?

Both, says Khushnur Dadabhoy, director of Transfer Pathways at Bakersfield College. "They genuinely want the students," she says. "But again, they're the UC, so they want the best and the brightest and the ones they are sure will succeed and make their numbers look good."

## Beyond Admissions

The entire University of California was rethinking how to better [connect](#) with transfer students, but UC-Santa Cruz, under the governor's threat, couldn't wait around for those efforts to bear fruit. It had to develop a plan immediately.

There are no bad ideas, Whittingham assured the campus officials brought to the table to figure out a solution.

Still, there are always bad ideas. And Santa Cruz initially had some.

Bad Idea No. 1: To hit the two-to-one ratio, Santa Cruz could drastically decrease the number of freshmen it admits. But that would result in a major loss of tuition dollars. More important, it would be a devastating blow to the mission of access, and it wouldn't be in the spirit of Governor Brown's charge.

Bad Idea No. 2: Scrap the preparation requirements for majors. This would be one way to boost the number of transfer students. But abandoning the requirements would hurt the ability of transfer students to flourish for the short-term gain of meeting a quota, Whittingham reasoned.

"If we had simply dropped our major preparation requirements to meet a metric, and it then took both frosh and transfers longer to complete their degrees, is that really success?" Whittingham says. "This would have put both frosh and transfer in competition for the needed classes to qualify for their major. This would have cost them much more [money](#) and time and not been as cost effective for the state."

Instead, officials looked at areas where they were unnecessarily losing potential community-college transfers. They dropped a 90-credit requirement, Whittingham said. Now students would only need to meet the university's other requirements for transfer and major preparation without worrying about meeting the credit threshold.

Similarly, for students who have not yet declared a major, the university dropped its 2.6 GPA requirement to a 2.4, picking up some more students, though it's not exactly clear yet how many. "We thought it was a pretty low risk," Whittingham says. "Nobody is in this work to set anybody up to fail. Are we going to be monitoring this really closely as we go forward? Absolutely."

But to get to where the campus needed to be, more than a rethinking of admissions policies was necessary. Other areas to consider included outreach, recruitment, yield, and student success.

The university fanned out across the state. Staff members visited 92 percent of the state's community colleges, up from 79 percent the year before. They held 19 outreach events at which counselors explained the process for applying for financial aid. To increase yield — the share of admitted students who accept — administrators created workshops and a new scholarship for relocation expenses.

"It was critical we worked across the entire campus," Whittingham says.

## **‘Given a Chance’**

Like many community-college students, Sandra Ramirez has climbed uphill her entire life.

In high school in Massachusetts, the strain of being undocumented prevented her from even thinking about college. What’s the point?, she wondered. Was she even eligible?

Her immigration documentation eventually came through, but so did a dead-end job for a few years as a dental assistant. She needed the \$19 an hour to help her family secure a down payment on a home.

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Ramirez burned out. With the job. With the cold weather. She packed up her belongings, along with \$300 cash, and started driving, landing in San Francisco. She worked a variety of odd jobs to pay off debt while dabbling in classes at a local community college in the evenings, when she had the time.

She had a 3.1 GPA but didn’t think the University of California was for people like her, nontraditional students with a checkered educational history. Her plan was to apply to the local Cal State campus. It was a professor at her community college, City College of San Francisco, who convinced her that she had nothing to lose by applying to University of California campuses.

She was rejected from two, wait-listed for one, and accepted by Santa Cruz, along with the promise of generous financial aid. At her orientation at Santa Cruz, in July, the Latin American-studies major made the long walk from a parking lot to a building by the bookstore, and she cried the whole way.

"My dream was to go to school during the day, not work a full day and then go to school from 7 to 9," she says. "I felt like I had been given a chance."

Ramirez’s story illustrates a key challenge facing universities trying to tap into community-college transfer students. Many such students don’t come from college-going backgrounds and must be shown there’s a place for them at a university.

Several University of California campuses are now trying to show up in every corner and valley of the state. At Bakersfield College, a transfer-day event in October brought representatives from all of the system’s universities to the San Joaquin Valley.

Showing up matters, Dadabhoy says. Bakersfield isn’t a wealthy area. The college, in a farming community, serves a large immigrant population, diverse and often low

income. Having staff from, say, UCLA, interact with Bakersfield students helps them envision themselves at such a place.

"A majority of our students haven't really been out of this area," Dadabhoy says. "Maybe they went to Los Angeles to visit, but leaving the area is a daunting task. They just don't know what it's going to be like, and there's no one at home to tell them it will be OK."

## **A Systemwide Effort**

While Santa Cruz and Riverside are extreme examples of universities under intense political pressure to change, the desire to reach transfer students is being felt across the UC system.

Daniel Nannini has been watching the university's relationship with transfer students for more than four decades, starting when he himself was a community-college student who transferred to UCLA. He's now a transfer counselor at Santa Monica College, which boasts the most transfer students to the University of California of any community college.

His GPA, which he remembers hovering just below a 3.0, probably wouldn't get him into UCLA these days, he says. But the system is paying more attention to transfer students lately. One Santa Monica student fell just short of the needed credits to transfer to Santa Barbara, the result of her miscalculating while converting semester credits to quarter ones.

In a system that receives hundreds of thousands of applications a year, Nannini says, it's easy to move to the next applicant if all requirements aren't met. But this student received a call from a counselor explaining that she hadn't quite fulfilled the necessary requirements but that she met their spirit. The student is now a junior at Santa Barbara.

## **The Future of Enrollment**

"They took the extra effort to reach out to her and say, We'd love to admit you, but you're going to have to make up that unit or explain to us why you're a unit short," Nannini said. "That doesn't always happen. But now there's pressure to improve their numbers."

A lot of the UC effort boils down to demystifying the transfer process, says Hope, the community-colleges executive vice chancellor. "It's far too complicated," she says. "It disadvantages students who don't have the kind of cultural capital that students who go to the University of California right out of high school probably have."

In 2012, the California legislature mandated that the Cal State system and the community-college system develop special associate degrees for transfer, which guarantee students who complete the prescribed courses an associate degree along with guaranteed admission to a Cal State institution. Hope says the community-college system and the University of California are trying to develop a similar process.

In April, Janet Napolitano, the UC system president, and Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the community-college system, agreed to work toward an associate degree for transfer for the UC system. A program in physics and chemistry is being crafted, along with several others, and a working group is expected to start meeting soon to iron out the details.

Community-college students can currently initiate their own transfer admissions guarantees, or TAGs, into the UC system, but the onus for those agreements is placed on the students.

They tend to benefit "students who know what they want to do, but also students who are savvy," Hope says. "The students we serve in the community colleges are first-generation students, and they may not know what a TAG agreement is until they're done. If we have a more universal passport into our university partners, that will serve a lot more of our students better."

The efforts at Santa Cruz and Riverside have paid off. Governor Brown agreed that the campuses had made good-faith efforts to increase their transfer population, and released the \$50 million in May.

Whittingham says the freshman-to-transfer ratio at Santa Cruz fell to 2.7 to 1 in the 2017-18 year, and this year should be around 1.8 to 1. This year will see about 1,700 new transfer students, compared with 1,250 last year, she says. Riverside made an even faster transformation. It expects a ratio this year of about 2.2 to 1, down from 4.4 to 1 at the time of the governor's threat.

Many of Riverside's local community colleges historically had low transfer rates to the University of California. They serve lots of first-generation students who don't always have the resources to navigate the transfer process, says Emily D. Engelschall, director of undergraduate admissions at Riverside.

As at Santa Cruz, Riverside officials were skeptical of being able to markedly increase the share of transfer students. "No way" was Engelschall's first thought, she says.

"We're one of the more diverse UC campuses. That's something we add to the University of California. So being singled out on transfers when there are so many other things that we are successful at stung a little bit. But 18 months later, I'm very happy to have gone through that experience, and it was needed."

The playbook was similar to that of Santa Cruz: Communicate better with community-college counselors and potential transfer students and rethink admissions policies. Riverside also lowered its GPA requirement to 2.4 from 2.6, determining that coursework in preparation for a major was more predictive of success. Most important, perhaps, was strong leadership from the top and a campuswide commitment, Engelschall says.

"In my 18 years on campus," she says, "I've never really seen any initiative take hold as much as this one. Anytime you said 'two to one,' everyone knew what you were talking about."

The all-hands effort to get students in the door has unfolded alongside a conversation about how to better support the new students. At Riverside, a task force charged with figuring out how to ensure success for the incoming students was led by a graduate dean. The campus created a transfer center, a sort of one-stop shop for the needs of transfer students. Administrators are also monitoring how the students are doing. Preliminary data for the first quarter show little difference in success so far for the students admitted with GPAs under 2.6, Engelschall says.

The next couple of years will show whether UC, having kept its commitment to the governor, can keep its commitment to its rising stream of transfer students too.

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