

Video: Increasing Community College Transfers



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Most students who enroll in the California Community College (CCC) system hope to transfer and eventually earn a bachelor's degree. For low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students, CCC is the main point of entry for higher education, and improving transfer rates can go a long way to improving the economic mobility of all Californians. However, transfer rates are low—19% of all students who declare a transfer goal do so within four years, and 28% do so within six.

On September 29, PPIC researchers Marisol Cuellar Mejia and Hans Johnson outlined obstacles to community college transfers along with reforms that may improve outcomes. The main barriers to progress are earning enough transferable units and completing transfer-level English and math, particularly math. While students who take transfer-level math during their first year have higher transfer rates, few reach this early milestone.

In addition, gaps in equity occur. “Even though there is not a significant difference in the share of students who declare a transfer goal among racial and ethnic groups, we start to see equity gaps appear early on,” Cuellar Mejia said.

The passage of AB705 improved access to gateway courses and mandated that colleges use high school records for placement. This reform led to 96% of students enrolling in transfer-level English as their first English course and 78% enrolling in transfer-level math. But beyond enrolling in courses, students must pass them. And it appears that better access has also led to better outcomes across all groups. For example, among African American students completion rates almost quadrupled.

Policy and state officials must take these increases into account moving forward. “After AB705, with big increases in students passing gateway courses, if they go on to complete other courses we can expect an increase in transfer of up to 70%,” Hans Johnson said. More transfers raise concerns about capacity.

Higher education systems need to work more closely together, both Cuellar Mejia and Johnson noted. Some students apply to transfer and are turned away. With certain University of California and California State University campuses impacted, these institutions cannot accept all students. The state has a role in assuring universities have both the physical and operating capacity to help transfers succeed—not only enough space but also enough faculty. Finally, affordability is often an issue for students even when transfer is an option.

Johnson said, “The great thing about having over 100 community colleges is that we see all these different approaches. But we lack consistency. We have enough information to help tailor a consistent and systematic approach across community colleges.”

Amid the pandemic, community colleges were forced to go online and the number of students who withdrew from classes spiked. However, with the economic downturn, more students may be considering community college as their first step towards a bachelor’s degree.