Low-Income Transfer Students: Paths to Bachelor's Degree Completion

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This study explored the experiences of low-income students, defined as those who received a federal Pell grant, who successfully transferred from a North Carolina community college to a University of North Carolina System university identified as a high-performing partnership pair and the institutional practices and policies that affected their experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges enroll almost half of our nation's undergraduate college students totaling more than 7 million students annually (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2018). Of those 7 million community college students, over one third receive a Pell Grant, which is a federally funded, need-based grant determined through a student's completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (AACC, 2018). Low tuition and small class sizes attract many students to community colleges including those who plan to transfer to four-year institutions. It is often cited that 80% of students enter community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). However, despite these aspirations, only 14% of students attain a bachelor's degree within six years of entering the community college system (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Unfortunately, the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion is even lower for low-income transfer students (Adelman, 2006; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). This research suggests that students with low socioeconomic status are less likely to transfer from a community college to a university and when they do successfully transfer to a four-year institution, they are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree.

Low-income students make up a significant portion of the population of community colleges and they are at a higher risk of attrition (Adelman, 2006; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Long & Kurlaender, 2009); therefore, it is important that research examines barriers and discovers strategies to support low-income community college students seeking to transfer to a four-year institution to obtain bachelor's degrees. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of low-income students who transferred from a community college to a public university in North Carolina to understand how and why these students are able to navigate barriers that are traditionally faced by low-income students. Interviews were conducted with 25 students at three University of North Carolina System institutions and their experiences were analyzed as a case study.

KEY POINTS

» **Transfer Readiness:**
- o A vast majority of students had intentions of completing a bachelor's degree prior to entering the community college and the community college was essential to their preparation for the university. The bridge to the university that the community college provided was essential for preparation in different areas, such as academic, interpersonal, and practical, that were necessary for their successful acceptance and transition to the university.

- o An important factor in transfer readiness was gathering advice from peers, family, and other people at the community college and university. Additionally, parents and siblings who helped the student navigate, and in turn, acquired transfer student capital alongside the student, were especially advantageous.

» **Robust Support Systems:**
- o Support systems, emotional support from family members, and strength and drive from within were imperative for persistence with a connection to faculty in the classroom as the primary source of institutional support.

» **Varied Finances and Employment Experiences:**
- o Nearly all students in this study discussed their employment activities while enrolled in college. A vast majority of students (76%) worked while attending community college and a slightly smaller majority of students (64%) are working while attending a university. The consequences of frequent work included an inability to use support services or participate in extracurricular activities due to the necessity of working. This inability to fully integrate on campus was a disappointment and made them feel that they were not getting the full college experience.

- o Their experiences with work and finances were similar while at the community college, but they diverged once they transferred to the university. Once they had transferred to the university, participants in this study experienced the necessity of employment differently across the cases with some students not working, some working part-time, some working full-time, and some working multiple jobs.

- o The majority of students in this study, even nontraditional[1] students, were living at home with their parents while attending the community college, often working part-time, and were receiving financial aid packages covering all of their direct community college expenses. Living at home with their parents and receiving financial aid to cover the direct costs of the community college mitigated their low-income statuses and spared them from some financial worry.

- o A significant contributing factor to the need to work at a university was due to varying amounts of financial aid offered to the students, particularly institutional aid. While all students were considered low-income and received a Pell Grant at the university, other forms of financial aid and the amounts awarded to the students substantially differed, leading to a wide range of unmet costs. Students had to supplement their financial aid in order to cover all of their costs, and this was primarily accomplished through employment. Nontraditional students felt this burden the most, working multiple jobs and longer hours, and experiencing significant financial hardship.

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1 This study uses the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) definition of nontraditional students as those that meet one or more of the following criteria: (a) part-time enrollment; (b) independent status on the FAFSA; (c) employed full-time; (d) has dependents other than a spouse; (e) is a single parent; (f) obtained a GED or other nonstandard high school diploma; or (g) delayed postsecondary enrollment.

THE PROJECT

Partnerships between three pairs of community colleges and public universities in North Carolina that resulted in higher-than-expected bachelor's degree completion rates were identified by Bartek (2020). This study then used qualitative inquiry to explore the experiences of low-income transfer students at the three UNC System universities that had successfully transferred from the partner community college. These schools were not part of the North Carolina Promise Tuition Plan. Through one-hour interviews with 25 students conducted during the fall of 2019, experiences that built resilience and contributed to transfer success of low-income students were explored.

Three major themes emerged from the data analysis process: **(a) the importance of transfer readiness and preparation**; **(b) support systems are recognized and valued**; and **(c) employment experiences varied despite similar outcomes**. Across the cases, students shared common educational goals and actively took steps to become ready for transfer. A vast majority of students had intentions of completing a bachelor's degree prior to entering the community college and the community college was then essential to their preparation for the university.

Transfer Readiness and Preparation

A significant factor in transfer readiness was the acquisition of transfer student capital from different sources including family, peers, the community college, and the university. Students experienced preparation in different forms, such as academic, interpersonal, and practical. One student remarked:

> *I feel like going into community college first, and taking those classes, then transitioning here really helped. If I had just transitioned here from high school, I probably would have failed or become really overwhelmed. I think that going to community college before the university is such an essential thing. It's an easy step for you. So, it's not like you're in high school and you took a giant leap, and you don't understand anything and it's overwhelming. It's tiny steps in order to get there. It's really worth it.*

Another student agreed:

> *The community college…was a big help with that [transitioning to the university]. With their classes, and the way they taught us, and the way I got used to it, I feel like it transferred over, so I was okay. I wasn't freaked out a lot, or I wasn't as scared.*

Though not an intentional type of preparation, similar to academic and interpersonal preparation, additional time spent at home while attending the community college was necessary for many students to prepare themselves to leave. Many traditional-aged students in this study were disinclined to leave home immediately after high school. Along with other considerations such as finances, some students chose to attend a community college due to their desire to stay at home with their families. One student explained:

> *I was really happy that I got into the school but at the same time I was like, 'Oh my god, I have to move away from my family.' I was in between happy and I have to leave now... I think it was just because I had never been away from my family in this way. And then financially also, I think that was maybe the biggest reason financially. It was just going to be too much for me to handle.*

While students came to the university with different levels of preparation, community college experiences and home life provided all participants with the knowledge they needed to apply to the university experience.

Support Systems

Along with transfer readiness and preparation, support systems were imperative for all students in their transfer planning and acclimation to the university. Connection to faculty in the classroom and support from institutional agents were the primary sources of institutional support. Emotional support and mentoring relationships from various sources, as well as strength and drive from within, were also common factors leading to persistence. One student said:

> That's one praise I'll give to professors is that when situations have come up or arose for me specifically, I've been able to go to them and explain what was going on. And nine out of 10 times, they'll extend the deadline or whatever it is that I need. They really do build relationships with their students and that's something that's really cool to experience, especially coming here with no support system knowing, that your professors are on your side.

Another student spoke about their internal drive:

> When it comes down to it, at the end of the day, I'm the one who has to write the answers down. So, I've got to be my biggest supporter.

One commonality among institutions was the importance placed on advising and mentoring by the students. The students remembered and recounted their advising experiences clearly and in detail, even those that were from numerous years ago. One student remarked:

> She would meet with students one-on-one and she would ask your career goals, where you want to go, your major, and she would print it off. She gave everyone a sheet and she would mark off the classes that you've already taken and what you would end up having to take here [university]. So that was really nice, having that help.

Other students admitted it could be frustrating at times:

> I really didn't have a guarantee that my classes would transfer. I was just told, "should, probably will. Good luck. No one knows." I was talking to my advisor at [institution] and she said, "If you don't complete your degree, we can't guarantee all of it does [transfer to university], but if you do complete your degree, it should transfer." So, I never really had confirmation by either end.

Along with support from faculty and institutional agents, all students received some emotional support from others. Overall, students had fairly robust support systems with parent emotional support being the most common and present for a majority of the students. Many discussed their parents' excitement and encouragement for them to transfer, particularly those who are first-generation and will be the first in their families with a bachelor's degree.

> My mom and my dad have been huge helps in reinforcing "This is what you're supposed to be doing"…While they can't support me financially, they're definitely there emotionally, especially when I'm in the midst of wanting to quit.

Employment Experiences

Nearly all students in this study discussed their employment activities while enrolled in college. A vast majority of students (76%) worked while attending community college and a slightly smaller majority of students (64%) are working while attending a university. Their experiences with work and finances were similar while at the community college, but they diverged once they transferred to the university. The majority of students in this study, even nontraditional students, were living at home with their parents while attending the community college, often working part-time, and their financial aid packages were covering all of their direct community college expenses. Living at home with their parents and receiving financial aid to cover the direct costs of the community college mitigated their low-income statuses and spared them from financial worry. Once students transferred, a significant contributing factor to the need to work was due to varying amounts of financial aid offered to the students, particularly institutional aid at the universities. While all students were considered low-income and received a Pell Grant at the university, other forms of financial aid and the amounts awarded to the students substantially differed, leading to a wide range of unmet costs.

The consequences of frequent work included an inability to use support services or participate in extracurricular activities due to the necessity of working. Directly stemming from the inability to integrate on-campus was a disappointment and dejection that they were not getting the full college experience. One student noted:

> All I do is go to school and work. Now graduating, my biggest regret was not getting involved as much. Making more friends was always something I wanted to do, but I just couldn't.

Another student shared a similar situation:

> Other than my small work-studies which were on campus or part of my internship, I didn't work at the community college. Here at the university I've had to work. Balancing work now and school, it's definitely taken away from me doing all the extracurriculars, which I do want to do, but I just don't have the time anymore. That's a little bit of a struggle…So that's probably the main challenge that I've had here is just knowing that there's a huge experience that I could be having.

The participants who were enrolled at one university were more frequently awarded large amounts of institutional aid through a specific transfer program, which worked as their most significant protective factor mitigating their low-income status. The participants at the other two universities rarely received enough financial aid to cover their full need. Therefore, most of the students had to figure out ways to supplement their financial aid to cover all of their expenses. Students worked to accomplish this. Nontraditional students worked significant hours and faced the most financial struggle.

FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON PRACTICE

For Community Colleges:
1. Target recruitment efforts toward those that may choose to attend a community college because they are not ready or do not want to leave home.

    a. Many higher education professionals assume students attend community colleges for two main reasons: lower cost and open enrollment. These assumptions influence marketing, support services, and even interactions with the students. However, many traditional-aged students in this study were disinclined to leave home immediately after high school and discussed feelings of apprehension and sadness at the prospect of living away from their parents rather than issues focused solely on easy access and cost.

    b. Admissions or recruiting staff members should examine their relationships with area high schools and make sure counselors have information about how remaining at home is a reason for attending the local community college.

2. Integrate social, leadership, and communication skill building into transfer advising and student activities.
    a. Mentor programs, where community college students are paired with a faculty or staff mentor, can provide opportunities for skill building while also fostering the development of institutional agents. Community colleges should establish and expand mentoring programs, and require or strongly encourage faculty and staff to participate, regardless of their role. In order to do so, colleges would need to include mentoring as part of the job duties and provide time during the workday for this to occur. Determine two to three areas that should be a focus during the mentorship relationships. Small amounts of funding could be provided to each mentor in order to allow them to expose students to new cultural or academic experiences, which is important to build campus knowledge, identify resources, and build strategies to successfully navigate the institution.

    b. The community college should strengthen transfer advising by examining the the flow of information between faculty, the institution, and the student. Determine the two or three things that matter the most when faculty are doing transfer advising so they can better answer transfer-related questions.

For Universities:
1. Include financial aid advising as part of transfer pathway programs so that students are aware of available funding and can make appropriate decisions.

2. Expand programs for low-income students that award institutional aid to meet their full financial need through the examination and rerouting of existing non-need-based funds and ensuring stability to the students through a guarantee of funding from year-to-year. This will allow students to reduce the number of hours they may need to work each week. Automatically consider all students for non-need based aid. Make financial aid and scholarship awareness as part of application process. Consider adding a pop up box with resources or information about aid while filling out the application materials. Collaborate with the advancement foundation to establish more transfer scholarships.

3. Prepare students that their financial aid situation may be different than what they experienced at the community college. Consider having a representative of the university financial aid

office give information sessions at the community college or provide regular "office hours" for community college students applying for transfer.

Partnerships (Community Colleges and Universities):
Form advising partnerships between community college advisors and university advisors, which are paramount to the success of transfer students. Advisors from both community colleges and universities need to be given time and a platform to connect and build relationships with each other in order to share information and better serve students. Community colleges should examine the top transfer destinations in their geographic area and make intentional efforts to connect advisors, such as in-person networking events or online videoconference sessions. Leadership at the institutions should support these activities by allowing advisors to devote work time to this and providing financial support for the events. When information is shared, the student is better advised specific to their transfer destination, and their transfer process may be more seamless. Additionally, establishing networks of advisors can assist in handing off students from community college advisors to university advisors in a more unified way that also gives the student the reassurance of a personal contact.

CONCLUSION

This study provides important information about how low-income community college students successfully transferred to universities in North Carolina and maintain the path toward bachelor's degree completion. Tailored transfer advising that is a collaborative effort between community colleges and universities and focuses on building student agency and connection to the institution can help students thrive.

<div style="background:red;color:white">ABOUT THIS BRIEF</div>

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