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Barriers for California Community College Transfer Students

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Research Question:

What barriers are affecting California Community College enrollments and transfer rates? Is the COVID-19 Pandemic influencing student rates, or is it a long-brewing issue? What is current legislation aiming to access higher education?

Background

Transferring from a California Community College to a four-year institution is known as a more affordable option for higher education. There is a large gap between students who desire to transfer and those who do. According to the Public Policy Institute of California and their report "[Increasing Community College Transfers: Progress and Barriers](#)," only 19% of students to transfer do it within four years and 28% in six years. Among the gaps, equity is a significant issue as Latino and African American students represent a large part of those who want to transfer but only represent 35% and 5% of those who transfer within four years. Although it is affordable, the transfer process is a challenging feature. In the past few years, significant effort has been made to make transferring more affordable and accessible. Educational improvements have eliminated pre-requisite remedial courses that make it possible for students to progress towards transferring, [increasing eligible transfer students by almost 50%](#). The [California College Promise Program](#) gives students who are first-time, full-time, and California residents free tuition for two years. The Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) and Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) aid the transfer process, but many barriers still make transferring difficult or confusing.

AB 928

[AB 928 \(2021\)](#), known as the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2021, establishes the Associate Degree for Transfer Intersegmental Implementation Committee (ADTIIC), the operation now in charge of the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT). Their priorities are to recommend to the Legislature to streamline the ADT transfer process. They aim to establish a streamlined and merged low-division pathway for CSU and UC systems. This is to try and not complicate the transfer process, not to elongate the time to achieve a degree and to save students from taking more units than necessary.

Barriers

In my research, there were six identified major barriers for transfer students that still exist or have made it harder in the last few years to transfer on time (two years): rural areas, COVID-19, a siloed education system, financial issues, the confusing pathways, and not enough counselors of support systems.

Rural

Many students who attend community colleges come from rural areas with many issues making it harder to transfer, especially within two to four years. Toni Schiffmaier, a student, student leader, and recent graduate, identified issues such as internet and PG&E shutdowns contributing to difficulty in taking classes and engaging in online classes. While some larger colleges offer satellite campuses in neighboring remote areas, the satellite campuses only offer a limited amount of courses forcing rural residents to drive farther for some classes, making it unmanageable to transfer quickly. Schiffmaier cited having to drive 30 mins and sometimes an hour to sister colleges to take certain courses. This made taking more units in a semester was unmanageable, and some students needed help to commit to the gas and price commitment.

COVID-19

COVID-19 did contribute to the confusion on transfer requirements. All the community colleges and their services moved to an online setting leaving many unable to access the ever-changing climate of the pandemic. As well as, remote, asynchronous, or online platform is not everyone's

best learning style, making those who do not prefer it struggle with that way of doing classes. Max Barbosa, a recent transfer to a CSU, cited one of the difficulties during the pandemic was adapting to a remote platform for school. Some students hold off on continuing school during this time, as shown by the [20% decline in transfer and enrollment rates](#). There was also a larger gap in meeting basic needs during the pandemic, with many people choosing work over school, having issues meeting basic needs, and overall uninterest in an online format. Schiffmaier notes during her time as a student leader during the pandemic, one of the contributing factors to the decline was many students could not continue school due to the lack of access to basic needs.

Siloed System

California has a siloed higher education system in which the California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and the University of California all operate independently, and there is not often an incentive for them to work more conjoined. This makes it difficult for a singular or streamlined pathway for transfer students. Even within the community college, all 116 colleges operate differently. Schiffmaier noted that the community colleges worked independently during her time as a student leader, and there was difficulty in enacting things for all the colleges. Within a district, there was also hyper-independence that made it difficult for sister colleges to talk.

Financial

Although the California College Promise Program offers most students free tuition for two years, many financial commitments are still tied to attending college. Andrea Ayala, a recent transfer to a UC, cited textbook costs as one of the biggest financial burdens during her time at community college, communicating her frustration with some of her textbooks costing over a hundred dollars each, which were required to pass the class. The California College Promise Program also ends after two years, costing those who take more than two years to pay out of pocket. Ayala contributes that many STEM majors often take longer than two years due to the many courses they must take. Believing that extending the program to three or more years would

encourage and allow many more students to be able to transfer. As Schiffmaier mentioned, the lack of meeting basic needs, rural living costs, and the gas committee are all other financial issues outside of COVID-19. This makes it harder for nontraditional students, such as reentry students, student parents, working students, and low-income students, to be unable or struggle to complete college. Deborah Knowles, a student leadership advisor and once a transfer student, cites that as one of the many difficulties for students, especially nontraditional students, even before the pandemic.

Pathways

The most cited difficulty in transferring, especially in the first two to four years, is the confusion about the multiple transfer pathways and requirements necessary to transfer. The CSU has its transfer agreement with the Associate Degree for Transfer program, and the UCs use the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) as their lower division completion requirements for transfer as a Junior-level transfer. There are also college-specific graduation requirements for community colleges. Depending on the different colleges a transfer student wants to apply to, they must also complete the major requirements for each school and major they plan to apply for. This makes it difficult or nearly impossible for one to figure out all alone. Barbosa says he had much help from those who understood all the requirements to keep track of the courses he needed to transfer on time, believing that this was something he could not do. This is also the reason Ayala limited the schools she could apply to, as she believed it became too complicated to apply for both CSU and UCs. This is also the difficulty between CSUs and UCs, not to mention the transfer agreements and pathways for private schools. Many students had to take more units to accommodate the schools they applied to, sometimes taking more courses than necessary. AB 928 aims to tackle this confusion by creating one streamlined path. Many of the students and transfers I interviewed believe this would simplify transferring. The downside is that it would significantly down crucial and diverse classes a student may be exposed to in the current system. Knowles opposes the path set forth by AB 928 because it

makes education plans too cookie-cutter and does not encourage students to engage in other courses. Similarly, the [Academic Senate for California Community Colleges](#) opposes AB 928 for similar reasons and the fact that the ADTIIC committee only includes one faculty that represents the CCC. The [UCs also oppose](#) it because it represents a one-size-fits-all educational plan that does not reflect their educational goals for students. All these viewpoints matter because the barrier is the confusion, but the band-aid solution of having a cookie-cutter educational plan is unproductive.

Not Enough Counselors and Support Systems

While the current pathway is not the most effective and easy to navigate, it allows all entities to be independent; it fosters an environment that allows students to be more engaged in choosing an educational plan for themselves, and much more flexible than a four year. The second most cited barrier is the lack of support and counselors. There is a growing ratio of counselors to student ratio especially amongst larger colleges leaving many students to see a counselor ever so often. Barbosa says he's only met with a community college counselor twice during his time there, believing there was difficulty scheduling because he worked, they had limited availability, and the appointment slots were almost also taken up. Ayala has also organized her educational plan due to the lack of counseling and support, but many students could navigate the pathways and educational plans almost independently. The ratio gap could not accommodate the demand for appointments.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

The six barriers identified speak to many reasons why transferring is so hard. AB 928 is not fully the solution to helping students transfer. While it is more efficient, it reduces any sense of self from education plans in favor of quickness. If we continue with the confusing yet diverse pathway we have now, we must adapt to the counseling and support needed. More resources and money should be allocated to the ladder and accessible to higher education. Community college is one of the only ways for lower-income and nontraditional students to access higher

education. The current California College Promise Program should be more dynamic and account for students who cannot complete transfer requirements in two years and would benefit from an extra year or more in community colleges. Finally, the barrier that many face is access. There need to be more options to account for more situations and learning styles and increase access, such as more resources, courses, and support offered in person and online. We have come a long way in the transfer landscape, but there is much more to go to increase accessibility and raise the percentage of those who wish to graduate or transfer into those who do so.