

# North Carolina Transfer Student Voices: A Pilot Study Report

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REPORT NUMBER: CLTRR-2022-1

DATE: FEBRUARY 2022

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## Introduction and Project Background

The Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has been conducting preliminary explorations into community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC). We have learned that just over 40% of North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) transfer students to University of North Carolina (UNC) campuses follow a primary feeder pattern (i.e., transferring from a CC to the most frequent transfer destination university, often the closest university).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the majority of NCCCS to UNC students transfer to a university outside of the most frequent pattern. In addition, we have learned that higher percentages of students transferring from CCs in economically distressed regions of the state (as compared with less economically distressed regions) transfer with Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees more typically associated with workforce preparation than transfer and thus are not taking full advantage of the state's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA).<sup>2</sup> These and other preliminary

findings have shown the need to explore further the behaviors and experiences of CC transfer students in NC.

With support from the John M. Belk Endowment and enhanced interest in reaching myFutureNC’s *2 million by 2030* attainment goal, we are engaging in a multi-year effort to capture quantitative and qualitative data to better understand transfer student experiences.

## Current Study and Participants

We conducted a pilot study with interviews of 8 students (Table 1), recruited from two CCs and one public university. The goal of the interviews was twofold: (1) to learn more about how students experienced the transfer process (including transfer decisions, information, resources, and advising) and (2) explore how students’ social identities informed their transfer journeys. This report focuses on how students make transfer decisions, gather information, and engage in the transfer process. At the conclusion of this report, we offer implications and describe future directions for the larger project.

**TABLE 1 - PARTICIPANTS**

Name	Transfer status (credential sought or earned)	First-generation college student	Employment status	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
<b>Katrina</b>	Pre-Transfer (seeking AAS)	Yes	Part-time	African American	Woman
<b>Mila</b>	Pre-Transfer (seeking AA)	No	Full-time	White	Woman
<b>Thomas</b>	Pre-Transfer (seeking AS)	Yes	Part-time	White	Man
<b>Vera</b>	Pre-Transfer (seeking certificate)	Yes	Not employed	White	Woman
<b>Brenden</b>	Post-Transfer (no credential)	No	Not employed	White	Man
<b>Elisa</b>	Post-Transfer (earned AA)	Yes	Not employed	Latinx	Woman
<b>Kane</b>	Post-Transfer (earned AS)	Yes	Not employed	African American	Man
<b>Sabrina</b>	Post-Transfer (earned AE & certificate)	Yes	Full-time	Asian American	Woman

## Previous Research and North Carolina Context

Vertical transfer—students transferring from a CC to a baccalaureate-granting institution—is a goal of higher education; however, the transfer function has resulted in inequitable education outcomes.<sup>3</sup> More than 80% of students nationally who start at a CC have bachelor’s degree aspirations, but less than 15% complete a bachelor’s degree within six years.<sup>4</sup> The large divide between those who enter CC with intentions to transfer compared to those who successfully transfer points to a vertical transfer gap,<sup>5</sup> and the gap widens for students of color who enroll in CCs at disproportionately higher rates than their White

peers.<sup>6</sup> Prior research has examined the various factors that impact vertical transfer outcomes, including intentional institutional practices such as outreach, academic skill development, and academic advising.<sup>7</sup>

In NC, efforts including the Comprehensive Articulation Agreements between the NCCCS and both the UNC System as well as the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities have set a course for students pursuing traditional transfer degrees such as the Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS). However, in order for students to be most successful they must know their intended major and transfer university by the end of the first year (30 credit hours).<sup>8</sup> As well, a number of uniform articulation agreements with CCs and universities in selected program areas and institution-specific bi-lateral articulation agreements, though not the norm, show how pathways can be developed to optimize credit mobility and enhance transparency of requirements for students and advisors. It is important to note that 41% of NCCCS to UNC System transfer students in Fall 2021 made the transition before earning a degree<sup>a</sup> and many others earned AAS degrees that may not be part of uniform or bi-lateral articulation agreements, thus current agreements do not afford all students assurances of seamless transfer.

In the following sections, we show results from our pilot study describing how students interact with their institutions and policy through the transfer process.

## Findings

**TABLE 2 - FINDINGS**

**Finding #1 – Convenience, cost, and increased career aspirations informed students’ decisions to enter community college and subsequently transfer.**

**Finding #2 – Students’ identities shaped their transfer decisions.**

<p><i>“It’s a lot more economical to go to community college first and then transfer in as a junior or sophomore even.”</i>  <b>-Katrina, CC student seeking AAS</b></p>	<p><i>“I did intend to get my associate’s in science and then a couple of different semesters I dropped a class ... I was one class short and then I thought I’d just transfer.”</i>  <b>-Brenden, university student (no credential)</b></p>	<p><i>“I have two kids...they’re pretty much the reason that I’m gone back to school to get my education.”</i>  <b>-Vera, CC student seeking certificate</b></p>	<p><i>“There were a couple of people that said I was basically a unicorn because they want to see more Black men in STEM.”</i>  <b>-Kane, university student (earned AS)</b></p>
<p><i>“I just really liked the feel that the college had and the atmosphere of the teachers...it just felt right.”</i>  <b>-Vera, CC student seeking certificate</b></p>	<p><i>“I actually didn’t decide to finish my associate’s until I saw how close I was to it when I started back this past summer.”</i>  <b>-Mila, CC student seeking AA</b></p>	<p><i>“[My biggest influences] would definitely have to be my father and my mom, my mom told me to go ahead and go to college.”</i>  <b>-Thomas, CC student seeking AS</b></p>	<p><i>“I’m a part of the LGBT communities. So, when I chose the university, ... They just had really good things to support the community, so that’s why I chose the university.”</i>  <b>-Sabrina, university student (earned AE &amp; certificate)</b></p>

<sup>a</sup> <https://www.northcarolina.edu/impact/stats-data-reports/interactive-data-dashboards/>

**Finding #1: Convenience, cost, and increased career aspirations informed students’ decisions to enter community college and subsequently transfer.**

- Whether students entered CC immediately after high school or after several years in the workforce, they juggled multiple responsibilities and needed affordable higher education in convenient locations.
- Some students set goals to transfer early in their time at the CC and, in selecting a university, prioritized cost, program focus/availability, location, and time to degree over institutional reputation or availability of online courses.
- For several students, transfer was the goal from the beginning of their time in CC, although they were unsure if they would earn the associate degree prior to transfer.
- Other students were undecided or not aiming to transfer when they began, but ultimately chose to enroll at CC due to cost savings or a co-admission program.

**Finding #2: Students’ identities shaped their transfer decisions.**

- Relational identities<sup>9</sup> helped shape students’ transfer decisions. Phrases like “biggest impact” and “my inspiration” were used to describe the impact of relational identities on transfer journeys.
- Social or collective identities<sup>10</sup> shaped transfer decisions. Age, race, and gender were salient social or collective identities that served to motivate students along the transfer journey.

**TABLE 3 – STUDENT VOICES: HOW DO STUDENTS GATHER INFORMATION AND ENGAGE IN THE TRANSFER PROCESS**

**Finding #3 – Students primarily relied on themselves to navigate community college websites and receiving university websites to find information about admissions, transfer, and credit mobility.**

**Finding #4 – Students relied on a few key trusted people in the transfer process.**

<p><i>“I don’t like to ask a lot of people that do stuff for me, so I just Google it. I’ll go on [the CC] website or [the university’s] website.”</i></p> <p><b>-Thomas, CC student seeking AS</b></p>	<p><i>“I have some classes that didn’t transfer just because my major is electrical engineering and some of the [CC] classes I took for computer science...didn’t transfer.”</i></p> <p><b>-Sabrina, university student (earned AE &amp; certificate)</b></p>	<p><i>“Well, me and my fiancé are both doing the same track so we’ve been comparing notes as far as transferring and what’s required and what we need to do.”</i></p> <p><b>-Katrina, CC student seeking AAS</b></p>	<p><i>“[The transfer advisor at the CC] has been very helpful with providing any information or giving any resources that I need for the information, to find what I have to do to get the transfer and everything done.”</i></p> <p><b>-Vera, CC student seeking certificate</b></p>
<p><i>“I’m a bit stubborn and I never used my advisers enough [in community college] and I try to just find information myself.”</i></p> <p><b>-Brenden, university student (no credential)</b></p>	<p><i>“For the most part, most of the [credits from community college] transferred. I had a little bit more though, just because when I did finish my associate’s degree, I actually did another semester after that and I was trying to get my legal assistant diploma.”</i></p> <p><b>-Elisa, university student (earned AA)</b></p>	<p><i>“My cousin went to [this university] 20 years ago, but she said really good things about it and that’s why I chose this university.”</i></p> <p><b>-Sabrina, university student (earned AE &amp; certificate)</b></p>	<p><i>“So, my initial advisor [in community college] wasn’t much help. I remember signing up for spring classes after my first semester, and he was a biology teacher so I’m thinking, ‘Hey, what class do you want me to take? Can you help me settle things down?’ And he really didn’t help me do the things that I should’ve done.”</i></p> <p><b>-Kane, university student (earned AS)</b></p>

**Finding #3: Students primarily relied on themselves to navigate community college websites and receiving university websites to find information about admissions, transfer, and credit mobility.**

- Students searched online for information and were skeptical of the accuracy of some content leading them to seek out “legit” information on institutional websites, especially as they navigated both community college and university websites looking for up-to-date information about degree programs and requirements.
- Pre-transfer students hoped for the best and were confident most credits would transfer, while post-transfer students described an awareness of credits that would transfer and a rationale for courses they took that would not or did not transfer.

**Finding #4: Students relied on a few key trusted people in the transfer process.**

- Trusted people included close family members and advisors at the CC and/or receiving institutions. Students consulted with family members on their educational journeys, regardless of if, where, or when their family members attended college.
- Students attempted to identify and build relationships with advisors (professional and/or faculty advisors) and other institutional agents and noted the importance of a single institutional point of contact, including someone in the receiving university, to help navigate the transfer process.
- Some advisors were seen as unhelpful or lacking knowledge about specific programs, and one student described being advised to take the wrong class.

## Implications and Considerations

Preliminary findings from this study substantiate that there is not a “one size fits all” approach for engaging transfer students given the range of needs, experiences, and goals across diverse student populations. Students in this study relied primarily on themselves and informal networks to gather information and make decisions about the transfer process. In addition, their goals and paths varied over time based on academic and life circumstances in addition to their relational and social identities.

Considering that these are findings from a larger study that is currently underway, our goal is to present a few concluding thoughts and implications which we plan to explore further and build into specific recommendations for policy and practice as we continue our research. Implications include:

- Early touchpoints with students to discuss academic and career goals are critical to a successful and transparent transfer process.
- The transfer process is complicated in an articulation system that requires students to know their intended university and major by the end of the first 30 credit hours.
- Students may tend to seek out information independently; therefore, equipped and knowledgeable advisors along with clear and credible online resources are necessary.
- CC students’ intent, aspirations, paths, destination universities, and other choices unfold over time. As such, regular communication about transfer decisions are necessary to ensure a seamless experience.
- Students approach transfer through different credential paths (e.g., certificate, AA, AS, AAS, AE, or no plans to earn a credential prior to transfer). Systems must recognize multiple pathways leading to the baccalaureate.
- Students’ life experiences, commitments, and social identities coincide with multiple forms of capital or lack thereof for CC students. We must approach transfer through an equity lens.

# Next Steps for the Qualitative Study of NC Transfer Students

This initial investigation prompts additional questions and a need to center the voices of more transfer students throughout the state of North Carolina. Further qualitative work, which is currently underway, will expand on this initial study with pre- and post-transfer students throughout the state, located at various CCs, UNC System campuses, and independent colleges and universities. With each student we interview, we plan to address several major areas:

- Formative educational experiences leading to transfer, including background, family, identity, and CC decisions and experiences,
- Current college/university experiences with a focus on the transfer process, including college and major choice, campus engagement, coursework and advising, online learning, equity issues, transfer resources, and credit mobility,
- Future projections for career and life aspirations as well as advice for other transfer students and college administrators and faculty.

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<sup>1</sup> D'Amico, M. M., Dika, S. L., Wu, T., Holliday-Millard, P., Miller, R. A., & Atwell, A. (in press). Transfer student destinations: Mapping geographic diversity and equity patterns in vertical transfer. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*.

<sup>2</sup> D'Amico, M. M., Chapman, L. M., & Robertson, S. (2021). Associate in applied science transfer and articulation: An issue of access and equity. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(5), 378-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1741477>

<sup>3</sup> Schudde, L., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2015). On second chances and stratification: How sociologists think about community colleges. *Community College Review*, 43(1), 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552114553296>

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). *Tracking transfer: New measures of state and institutional effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, J. L., & Jain, D. (2017). The multiple dimensions of transfer: Examining the transfer function in American higher education. *Community College Review*, 45, 273-293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552117725177>

<sup>6</sup> Crisp, G., & Nuñez, A. (2014). Understanding the racial transfer gap: Modeling underrepresented minority and nonminority students' pathways from two-to four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 37, 291-320. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2014.0017>

<sup>7</sup> Jain, D., Herrera, A., Bernal, S., & Solorzano, D. (2011). Critical race theory and the transfer function: Introducing a transfer receptive culture. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35(3), 252-266.

<sup>8</sup> Hodara, M., Martinez-Wenzl, M., Stevens, D., & Mazzeo, C. (2017). Exploring credit mobility and major-specific pathways: A policy analysis and student perspective on community college to university transfer. *Community College Review*, 45, 331-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552117724197>

<sup>9</sup> Vignoles, V. L., Schwartz, S. J., & Luyckx, K. (2011). Introduction: Toward an integrative view of identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 1-30). Springer.

<sup>10</sup> Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

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## Acknowledgements

We thank the John M. Belk Endowment for their financial support of this work and their dedication to transfer student success in North Carolina. We also appreciate feedback on a draft of this work provided by Dr. David English, Dr. Shun Robertson, and Dr. Eric Fotheringham with the UNC System Office, as well as Dr. J.W. Kelley from the North Carolina Community College System and Dr. Adam Atwell from Mitchell Community College. We are also grateful for ongoing input from the UNC System, North Carolina Community College System, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, myFutureNC, and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State as we move forward on the expanded project.

## Suggested Citation

Miller, R. A., Slane, L., D'Amico, M. M., & Serrata, C. (2022). *North Carolina transfer student voices: A pilot study report*. UNC Charlotte Cato College of Education.