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Beyond Transfer Intent: Why Some Students Don’t Make It to the Next Level

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When I met Evelyn, she was a determined community college student and single mom working two jobs. She wanted to transfer and earn a degree in accounting, and she did everything a transfer-intending student should do. She:

- followed a transfer planning guide that carefully aligned community college and university requirements to earn an associate degree and not lose credits,
- met regularly with her advisor for academic guidance, and
- utilized academic support services when struggling to ensure she met transfer admission requirements for her dream school.

Evelyn applied early, was accepted, and began the enrollment process to start as a transfer student in the upcoming fall.

This sounds like a transfer success story, right? Yet just before completing enrollment at her dream university, Evelyn learned that most of her required upper-division courses were only offered during the day, conflicting with her work schedule and parenting responsibilities. The university had few evening or online options, leaving her with an impossible choice between balancing life responsibilities and continuing her education. Her academic progress came to a halt as she continued working and tried to figure out her options.

Sadly, Evelyn's experience is a common one. Many transfer-intending community college students still face barriers preventing them from reaching their goals and successfully enrolling at a university. Evelyn's story reflects a larger question that guided my doctoral research:

What factors influence the transfer outcomes of community college students who intend to transfer but do not complete the transfer process?

Using Bean and Metzner's (1985) model for nontraditional students and the Transfer Student Capital framework (Lanaan et al., 2010; Moser, 2013) to guide the study, I explored how academic, social, and environmental factors shaped outcomes for students with transfer intent who had stopped out, were still enrolled at the community college, or who had transferred to a four-year institution.

The findings revealed that students' persistence toward transfer is not just about academic readiness or support, but about navigating their environmental realities. Often, transfer reform efforts focus on what happens once students are ready to transfer, whether it's simplifying pathways, aligning curriculum, or improving the transition to a university. We must also recognize the external realities of students' lives that influence their progress, and address them throughout their transfer journey. In this article, I will share highlights from my research findings, including important nuances related to institutional strategies, along with three key action steps that practitioners and institutions can take to more holistically support transfer-intending students.

Real-World Responsibilities and the Transfer Process

While academic preparedness and social integration are important, my study revealed that for many students the decision to stop out is driven by external pressures. These contextual factors are often the most decisive barriers for students who do not transfer, regardless of their academic standing.

The data from my research, which included 145 transfer-intending community college students, paints a clear picture of these contextual challenges:

- *Financial strain:* The cost of university tuition was the most widely cited concern, identified by 91.6% of students who stopped out, 100% of those still enrolled, and 79.1% of those who transferred.

- *Work responsibilities:* The need to balance school and work is not an exception but the rule. A majority of students, including 73.5% of those who successfully transferred, worked while enrolled.

- G*eographic constraints:* Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) of students who stopped out reported being location-bound, limiting their transfer-destination options.

These findings highlight that even students who are academically progressing can be pulled away from their goals by financial pressures, work demands, and geographic limitations. As Bean and Metzner's (1985) model for nontraditional students suggests, these contextual factors can outweigh institutional variables in determining whether students persist or stop out. Advising has the potential to support transfer-intending students in navigating academic and contextual challenges, but not all advising is equally effective.

Effective Advising Builds Transfer Capital, Not Just Class Schedules

Advising quality emerged as a critical factor to transfer outcomes. However, my study found that it is not simply whether students receive advising, but *how* advising is delivered and *what it helps students develop*. Advising that simply provides information may not be enough for students juggling complex external pressures. Effective advising builds transfer capital: the knowledge, skills, and confidence students need to act on information, make informed decisions, and sustain momentum through the transfer process in spite of external factors (Laanan et al., 2010; Moser, 2013).

A Surprising Finding: Sense of Belonging May Not Predict Transfer

One surprising result from my study was that students' sense of belonging at their community college did not significantly predict transfer outcomes, despite a sense of belonging being a positive influence on persistence at four-year institutions

(Blekic et al., 2020; Cepeda et al., 2021; Chamely-Wiik et al., 2021; Gogun et al., 2010; Wang, 2021). Using an eight-item Sense of Belonging Scale (Mellinger et al., 2024), no statistically significant differences were found among students in my study who transferred, were still enrolled, or stopped out.

For many students with transfer intent, the community college experience is transitional, a means to an end rather than a final destination. Their focus is often forward-looking, centered on completing transfer requirements, managing work and family responsibilities, and preparing for the next step. That doesn't mean their experience at the community college doesn't matter; it just may not be a deciding factor in transfer outcomes.

From Findings to Action

Together, these findings highlight the need for a more holistic approach to transfer. Practitioners and institutions can begin by focusing on three key areas:

- *Address environmental factors:* In this study, financial concerns, work responsibilities, and geographic limitations were the most influential barriers to transfer. Policies and practices that mitigate these pressures, such as flexible scheduling, emergency aid, partnerships between community colleges and local universities, and virtual services can make a difference.

- *Frame advising as capital-building:* The most effective advising goes beyond information-sharing to help students develop the confidence and competencies needed to navigate a complex transfer landscape in the midst of their busy lives.

- *Re-examine belonging efforts:* Traditional engagement initiatives may not fully meet the needs of transfer-intending students. Belonging for this

population might look more like connection to purpose, clarity of goals, or access to supportive advisors than participation in campus activities.

My research reinforces what many of us working in transfer already know: success is not determined solely by what happens on campus. We must help students navigate the often complicated path from community college to a university while understanding their lives shape their educational journeys.

Evelyn's story has a happy ending. She enrolled in a university that offered online courses which provided the flexibility she needed and is close to graduating with a bachelor's degree. Her persistence, even when faced with barriers beyond her control, reflects the determination of countless community college students who set out with clear transfer goals but encounter systems not built for their real lives. Evelyn's story illustrates the importance of supporting students holistically throughout their journey. Transfer equity requires us to consider the complexities of students' lives when designing ways to support them in reaching their transfer goals.

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