



THE TRANSFER PLAYBOOK

SECOND EDITION

Recommendations for California

JUNE 2025

**COLLEGE
EXCELLENCE
PROGRAM**

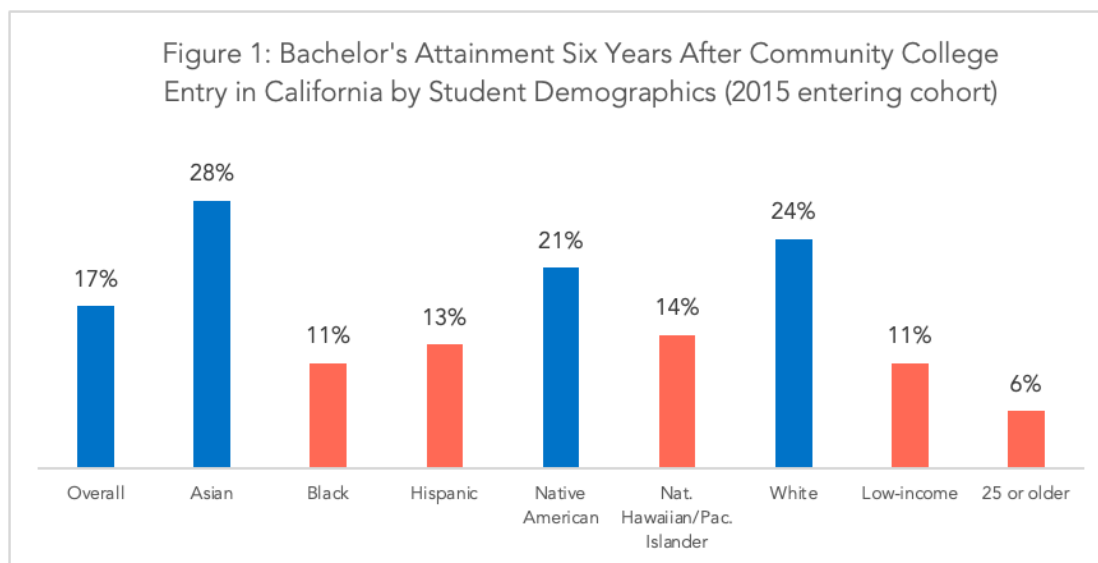
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Overview

California has long enacted policies to improve student transfer within its three public systems: the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California. Yet, bachelor's attainment rates for students who start in community college remain low. Specifically, 32 percent of the state's community college students transfer to four-year institutions, and only 17 percent earn a bachelor's degree within six years of entry.¹ Rates are lower for Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, lower-income, and adult students (Figure 1).

Over the past two years, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program has been working with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University to study transfer student outcomes nationally and by state. Using this data, Aspen and CCRC have developed evidence-based recommendations for institutions to improve transfer and bachelor's attainment for community college entrants, including those who have been historically underserved in higher education. This research is reflected in the [Transfer Playbook 2.0](#) (released in March 2025), which synthesizes lessons from the practices of community colleges and universities across the country that have achieved exceptional outcomes for transfer students. Based on that research and a scan of California's statewide and system transfer policies, practices, and priorities, Aspen has considered how the state can improve transfer and bachelor's attainment outcomes for community college students.

Section One summarizes Aspen's recommendations for the state, its higher education systems, and nonprofit/advocacy organizations focused on improving student success. Section Two provides recommendations for philanthropy to support these efforts.



¹ Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya-Guevara, Davis Jenkins, and Tania LaViolet, Tracking Transfer: Community College and Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment (New York: Community College Research Center and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2024), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/Tracking-Transfer-Community-College-and-Four-Year-Institutional-Effectiveness-in-Broadening-Bachelors-Degree-Attainment.html>.

Section One: Six Recommendations for California's Policymakers, Higher Education Systems, and Nonprofit/Advocacy Organizations

1. *Strengthen statewide coordination and data to improve outcomes and enhance/streamline the transfer student experience*

Playbook Insight: The Transfer Playbook research revealed that exceptional institution- and partnership-level practices are associated with strong and equitable transfer student outcomes. Additionally, some exemplary partnerships and institutions also benefited from their states' efforts to implement transfer policies, provide data, and convene faculty statewide to create or strengthen transfer pathways.²

Specific Actions for Consideration:

- Create a permanent, statewide entity to coordinate and strengthen transfer from California's community colleges to four-year institutions. This entity could: (1) Oversee implementation of transfer policy at the system and institutional levels (2) Propose and monitor progress toward state-level transfer access and success goals that could be adopted by the state and the systems (3) Convene institutional staff and faculty for professional development designed to improve transfer and bachelor's attainment outcomes (see next bullet). One way to accomplish this would be to expand the duration and purview of the current Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) Intersegmental Implementation Committee.³
- Strengthen the entity's convening capacity by funding event and programming costs, including the engagement of third parties to design and deliver statewide programming, such as:
 - Cross-sector/cross-system faculty meetings to strengthen and streamline transfer pathways (e.g., ADTs)
 - Training counselors (especially at community colleges) to improve and standardize effective transfer advising practices (see recommendation #5).
 - Professional development for institutional leaders and staff to design local programs based on evidence-based practices that can build on system and statewide initiatives (see recommendation #2)
- Devise strategies to use the forthcoming Cradle-to-Career transfer outcomes dashboard to encourage cross-sector/system collaboration. Colleges could use that data to set goals and benchmark against peer and state-level outcomes.⁴

² For example: <https://www.transfervirginia.org/transferva-initiative>

³ <https://www.ab928committee.org/>

⁴ <https://c2c.ca.gov/cradle-to-career-dashboards/>

2. *Create incentives to support the transformational end-to-end redesign of local transfer pathways and partnerships to better serve place-bound students.*

Playbook Insight: Significantly improving the 17 percent bachelor's attainment rate among California Community College starters will require substantial reform.⁵ In addition to incrementally improving processes and policies, many exemplary colleges featured in the Playbook created “transformational transfer models” that addressed core challenges across the transfer student experience and were often tailored to the needs of students in their region. Those models included several of these features: guaranteed/dual admission, guaranteed and clear affordability, guaranteed four-year pathways, dedicated advising, co-location, and ties to regional labor market demands and opportunities.

Specific Actions for Consideration:

- Promote bilateral or regional transfer partnerships that build on systemwide programs by tailoring more support to the needs of local transfer students and their communities (e.g., shared staff or facilities, or major-specific agreements to meet local workforce needs). The CSU ADT program established systemwide guaranteed admissions with junior standing, but not to any specific CSU campus. While offering a local priority admissions consideration, the absence of a local guarantee could present challenges for place-bound students who seek admission to their local university.
- Offer state funding to accelerate the development or strengthening of bilateral or regional partnerships, similar to the Equitable Placement and Completion Grant program.⁶
- Develop a strategy to substantially increase enrollment in programs such as the CSU Transfer Success Pathway and UC's Dual Admissions pilot (which guarantees admission to a specific campus), including by reconsidering the programs' limited eligibility criteria.^{7,8}

3. *Develop more ADT-aligned, major-specific pathways from California Community Colleges to the CSUs and UCs, and strengthen all ADT pathways to ensure they support transfer with junior standing within a major.*


Playbook Insight: The high-performing schools featured in the Playbook make clear that effective transfer pathways share particular attributes. Compared to typical transfer pathways of many other colleges and partnerships, those featured in the Playbook include sufficient

⁵ Velasco et al (2024).

⁶ <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/equitable-placement-plan-2023-v3-a11y.pdf?la=en&hash=A8843DC6FD656D861B953F10567D1E189027671E>

⁷ <https://www.calstate.edu/apply/transfer/Pages/transfer-success-pathway.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/new-dual-admission-pilot-program-will-help-more-students-transfer-uc>



major-specific coursework (e.g., biology courses for biology majors) for students to transfer as juniors within a major after completing their associate degree. This helps minimize the time between transfer to the four-year institution and bachelor's attainment, saving students time and money. The Playbook recommends that 2+2 four-year (or equivalent) transfer pathways and corresponding maps include at least one major-specific course in the first term, at least one major-specific course per term (or equivalent) to ensure junior standing within a major upon transfer with an associate degree, and completion of college-level math and English within the first year. If this structure is not possible, the Playbook recommends investigating alternative pathways, such as 1+3 arrangements, when adequate numbers of sophomore-level major-specific courses are not available at community colleges.

Specific Actions for Consideration:

- Study existing ADT pathways to ensure they include sufficient major-specific coursework and make recommendations accordingly. While many current ADTs to the CSUs align with the Playbook's recommendations, this varies by campus and program. Researchers in California can also examine whether the ADTs that include the elements featured in the Playbook produce stronger student outcomes than those that do not. Based on this research, state leaders and advocates can create guidance, legislation, and/or professional development programs to strengthen ADT pathways.
- Continue to build on existing pilots at UC campuses to adopt and scale ADT-aligned pathways^{9,10}
- Support cross-sector faculty collaboration by academic discipline at both the bilateral/regional partnership level and across systems to strengthen transfer pathways and streamline required coursework to enable maximum transfer opportunities. (Described in more detail in recommendation #5.)

4. *Promote participation in high school dual enrollment courses that are intentionally connected to community college degree pathways, including ADT-aligned transfer pathways to universities.*

Playbook Insight: As a way to increase access to historically underserved communities and advance student success in college, several community colleges featured in the Transfer Playbook increased high school students' participation in dual enrollment courses and ensured they were intentionally linked to either a transfer or workforce degree pathway at the college.

⁹ UC ADT Pilot (UCLA): <https://senate.ucla.edu/news/associate-degree-transfer-adt-program>

¹⁰ UC Merced CVHEC Pilot: <https://cvhec.org/pilot-cvhec-uc-merced-transfer-project-improves-process-for-students/>

Specific Actions for Consideration:

- Promote strong dual enrollment practices at scale by funding opportunities for focused professional development at community colleges that would support staff in designing and delivering dual enrollment programs connected to transfer (or workforce pathways). These programs should include adequate advising to help students shape their career goals and connect them to their dual enrollment coursework and possible degree pathways. This could help the state achieve its California Community Colleges Vision 2030, which aspires “toward a future in which all California high school students enroll in community college transfer, career or apprenticeship pathways and complete high school with at least 12 units of dual enrollment credit.”¹¹
- Offer competitive grant programs, along with focused professional development efforts, to help seed or scale strong models that can be replicated across the community college system in the future.

5. *Engage faculty to strengthen transfer pathways, further expand the adoption of Program Pathways Mapper, and support more publicly available four-year maps.*

Playbook Insight: At exemplary institutions featured in the Transfer Playbook, students cited readily available four-year maps as some of the most effective tools in supporting the advising they received and, ultimately, their success. Key to developing and maintaining these maps were regular, well-structured, cross-sector faculty engagement and collaboration in specific programs of study.

Specific Actions for Consideration:

California campuses already have a strong start with the Program Pathways Mapper expansion effort.¹² The state and higher education systems could strengthen the Mapper expansion effort by:

- Supporting routine, cross-sector faculty engagement to ensure that program maps include university coursework and adopt the transfer pathway course suggestions in recommendation #3 above.
 - As mentioned in recommendation #1, a statewide coordinating entity could help organize these efforts to ensure consistent, high-quality meetings.
- Leveraging the backend database of ASSIST to help coordinators of faculty engagements create preliminary maps that faculty can use to develop four-year maps. AI may facilitate the development of preliminary maps, reducing the human capital and time typically required in the initial phases of pathway development.

¹¹<https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf>

¹²<https://digitalfutures.cccco.edu/empowering-california-campuses-unlock-up-to-60000-to-advance-student-success-with-program-pathways-mapper/>

- Considering the creation of a unified publicly-available Mapper that aggregates pathways to the CSU and UC from the California Community Colleges to simplify degree planning and the college search process for prospective transfer students.
- And, as access to dual enrollment expands (see recommendation #4), consider using the Mapper to explain to students how that coursework integrates into transfer pathways.

6. *Enact policies that would scale development of individualized education/transfer plans, supported by counselors, to all students in their first year at an institution.*

Playbook Insight: Several colleges featured in the Transfer Playbook scaled early advising/counseling support to help students translate four-year maps into individualized/personalized educational plans. These colleges used mandatory advising at credit milestones and/or mandatory student success courses in the first term to ensure that advising on transfer opportunities and plan development was inevitable for all students. At one college, state policy initiated the development of a transfer-specific student success course (alongside a general student success course), and the college made the transfer-specific course mandatory for all students, including those in workforce programs.¹³ A key component of the course is creating a transfer plan to a specific destination, and most students at the college take the course in their first term. Continued advising after the first term ensures students are following their education plans or have the support to modify them.

Specific Actions for Consideration:

Research in California demonstrates the importance of counseling to the success of community college students who intend to transfer.¹⁴ While many students meet with counselors, scheduling timely appointments is a challenge.¹⁵ State legislation or systemwide efforts could ensure that counseling and educational plan development are inevitable for students by:

- Expanding enrollment in the student success (COUN) courses that many California community colleges offer, and strengthening and standardizing their content to ensure each of these courses focuses on supporting every student in creating individualized educational and transfer plans.
 - o Consider going a step further and adopt a standardized student success course across the California Community Colleges. A standard course focused on educating most (if not all) students about transfer and creating individualized plans can be a cost-effective way to support multiple counseling touch points at scale.

¹³ The college allows an exception for certification programs that typically enroll students who already have bachelor's degrees.

¹⁴ [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-\(AATTP\)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping_Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf)

¹⁵ <https://edsources.org/2023/transferring-from-california-community-colleges-its-a-tough-road-edsources-survey-finds/693791>

- Mandating that colleges deliver counseling support to all students in their first year—ideally their first term—to create an educational/transfer plan through a combination of COUN courses, counseling at orientation, and/or individual appointments.
- Ensuring counseling offices are equipped and funded to meet the increased demand required to support every student in creating tailored educational and transfer plans, including through staffing and tools (such as the Program Pathways Mapper) to reduce the cognitive load on counselors.

Section Two: Recommendations for Philanthropy on Potential Investments in Transfer in California

Many of the above recommendations will need dedicated funding, and philanthropy can play an important role in supplementing necessary state funding, in order to accelerate the work. Philanthropy can help in several ways:

1. Supporting organizations that advocate for policy priorities aligned with the above recommendations, and their efforts to bring those recommendations to policymakers and system leaders.
2. Providing direct funding to the California Community Colleges, CSU, and UC systems to implement strategies designed to accelerate adoption of the above recommendations.
3. Creating a challenge grant program to enable more institutions to adopt and/or scale:
 - a. Evidence-based institution and partnership practices (i.e., transformational transfer models among bilateral/regional partnerships, and pathway-connected dual enrollment opportunities).
 - b. Cross-sector faculty collaboration to develop transfer pathways and maps for academic programs at scale.
4. Investing in additional research on the effectiveness of ADTs and how to strengthen them.
5. Providing a portion of the funding for a statewide coordinating entity for transfer. Funds could have the most impact if directed to accelerating the entity's establishment and strengthening its ability to host events and engage external partners and experts in designing and delivering cross-sector faculty collaboration opportunities, along with professional development for institutional staff, to improve local transfer practices and partnerships.



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