In Students' Own Words: The African American Transfer Tipping Point

The African American Transfer Tipping Point Study

THROUGH THE GATE℠
TheRPGroup

TheRPGroup
Research, Planning & Professional Development for California Community Colleges℠

Lumina FOUNDATION

Darla M. Cooper, EdD
Katie Brohawn, PhD

February 2025

Table of Contents

In Students' Own Words:
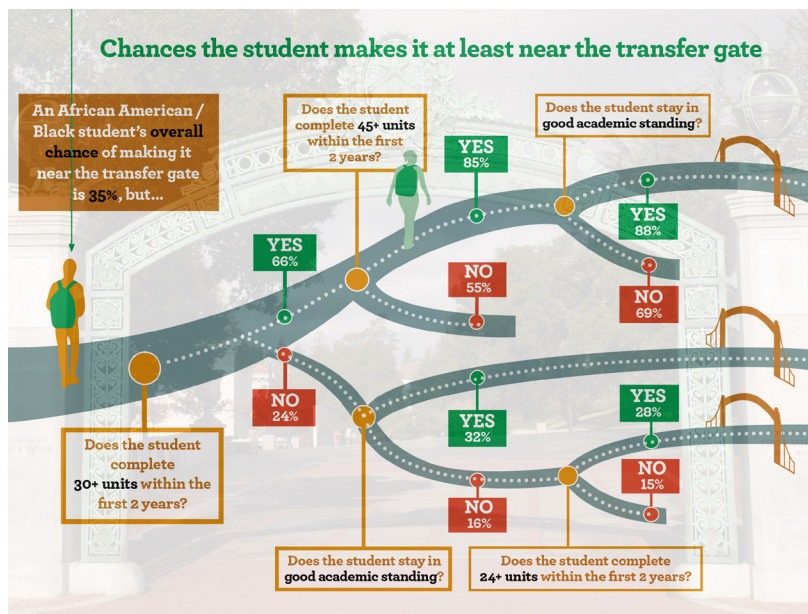**The African American Transfer Tipping Point**

Introduction

Two in three African American/Black individuals who pursue higher education in California begin their academic journey at a community college. Yet, these students often confront not only insufficient support but also the enduring effects of systemic and institutional racism, as reflected in the stark statistics: only 3% successfully transfer from a California community college (CCC) to a university within two years, and just 35% manage to do so within six years—compared to 45% of their White counterparts.[1]

The RP Group's *African American Transfer Tipping Point* study was born from the original research, *Through the Gate*, which found that among students who complete all or most of their transfer requirements, African American/Black students were significantly more likely to transfer than their peers. The problem is that too few African American/Black students are making it to the transfer gate (completing all or most transfer requirements) in the first place. Thus, we sought to determine the "tipping point"—the point in an African American/Black student's transfer journey when they change from being part of the group least likely to make it through the transfer gate to part of the group most likely to do so.

Figure 1. *Predictors of making it near the transfer gate for African American/Black students*

Source: *The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Identifying the Factors That Impact Transfer among African American/Black Community College Students*

In the first phase of this research, we found that the more quickly African American/Black students complete 24, 35, and 45 units, **the higher their chances of making it near the transfer gate** (see Figure 1). Further analyses cemented the importance of additional factors beyond unit completion, including **passing transfer-level math and English in a timely manner, receiving academic counseling, participating in Umoja, and avoiding being put on academic probation** (see Figure 2 on the next page).

Our October 2023 report, *The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Exploring the Transfer Journeys of Over 7,000 African American/Black Community College Students*, presented specific findings from a subsequent statewide survey, homing in on the experiences previously identified as relevant to transfer success—notably

---

[1] The Campaign for College Opportunity. (2021). The State of Higher Education for Black Californians.

transfer-level course-taking and passing, experiences with academic counseling, the role of Umoja,[2] and the impacts of academic probation—exploring which additional factors are associated with these variables.

Moreover, this comprehensive survey also **asked students directly about what they felt was their transfer tipping point**. Students who had already successfully transferred were asked "*Before you transferred, what was the moment when you knew you would be successful in your goal of transfer?*" Students currently enrolled at the community college were asked "*What will need to happen for you to feel confident that you will be successful in your goal of transfer?*" Responses from 563 students who had successfully transferred and 2,461 transfer-intending students at various points in their transfer journey were analyzed and coded for themes.

Figure 2. *Predictors of making it near the transfer gate for African American/Black students*
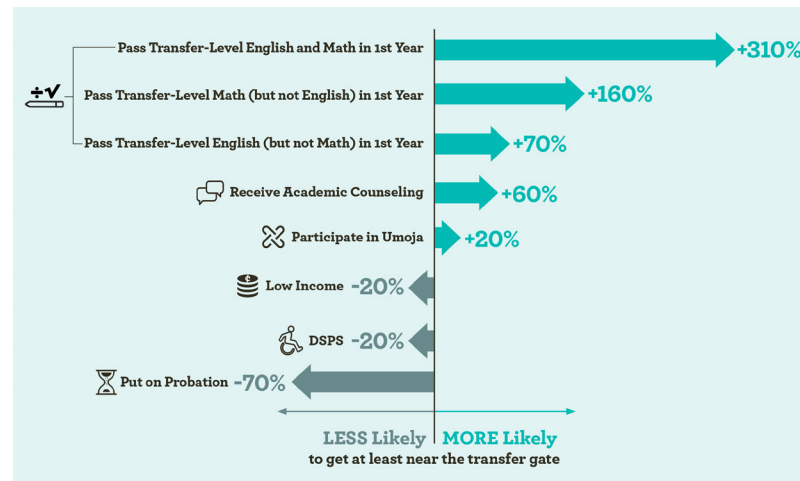
Source: *The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Identifying the Factors That Impact Transfer among African American/Black Community College Students*

When taking a holistic view of the open-ended responses, over 40%[3] of all responses fell within one of three core themes with respect to when students knew they would be successful in their transfer journeys:

- When they **felt supported and empowered** in their journey (24%)

- When they had a **clear, navigable path** laid out for them (12%)

- Upon reaching **certain academic milestones**, namely maintaining a high GPA and doing well in their courses–especially math (11%)

This brief expands on these three responses, uplifting the voices of African American/ Black students and what they believe to have been their transfer tipping point.

---

[2] The Umoja Community Education Foundation is a critical resource dedicated to enhancing the cultural and educational experiences of African American and other students in the California Community Colleges.

[3] For the remaining 60% of responses, the other most frequent responses were finance-related (8%) and the need to have focus (4%). All the other responses (all < 4%) did not pinpoint a specific point (i.e., keep up my grades, just keep going, try my best, pass my classes, I don't know, or always knew).

Authentic Support and Empowerment

Counseling sessions, notably ones where students felt supported in navigating their path to transfer, were frequently cited as a factor in solidifying students' confidence that they would be successful, as noted by 543 respondents (18%). However, just knowing the path is not enough. Students expressed the need not only for support as they navigated their transfer journeys—be it from counselors or instructors—but also for **support that is authentic and *personal*, not performative or transactional**. These findings align with the success factor of "nurtured," where students have someone at the college who not only cares about them and their success but also helps them reach their goals. As three students noted:

> *[To be confident in my goal of transfer I need ...] to have a **counselor that I feel knows me and my situation** and can offer advice and guidance.*
>
> *[To be confident in my goal of transfer I need ...] to meet with an academic **counselor who could speak to not just my school life but consider my personal lifestyle** as a Black mother in school.*
>
> *[I knew I would be successful in my goal of transfer...] after I spoke to a transfer counselor for the first time. I felt my goal was far more solidified. **I felt cared for** again. I knew that I could do it, that I had ongoing help, and that I had a person/people to help me reach the goal that the counseling center wasn't helping me reach.*

A troubling number of students, even those with a well-defined educational plan, noted that it did not or would not feel real until they were actually at, if not through, the transfer gate (180 respondents; 6%). In the words of three students:

> *I only knew I would be successful in my goal to transfer **when I got accepted** into all of the colleges I applied to.*
>
> *I knew that I would be successful in transferring when I finally got my acceptance letters. I was worried and doubtful, but it turns out I had what it takes this whole time.*
>
> *[I didn't know I would be successful until] the moment I got accepted into my university. Before that was pure anxiety.*

Even in the face of evidence of their achievements, it is hard for some African American/Black students to visualize their own success. Left unknown is the degree to which this finding is a result of students' lack of self-confidence, lack of trust in the system due to systemic barriers, and/or something else.

Clear Pathway Navigation

Students who successfully transferred frequently cited that having a clear, well mapped-out path to transfer was critical in boosting their confidence in the likelihood of successfully transferring (n=355, 12%).
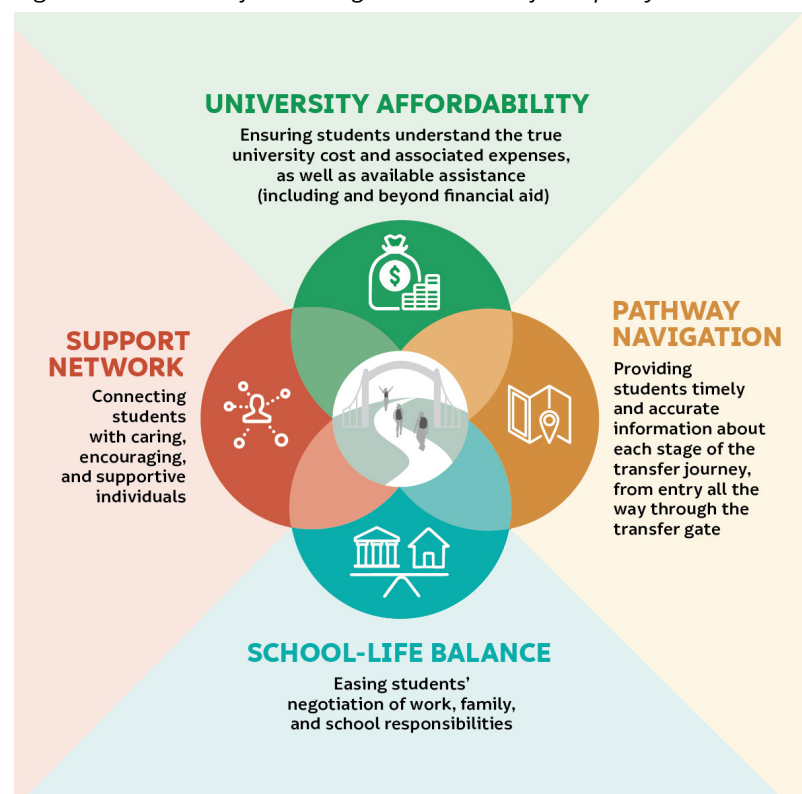
Similarly, current students also indicated that to be confident in their transfer success, they needed a clearer roadmap to navigate the path. Aligned with the _Six Success Factors_, educational plans enable students to be directed and focused, where they not only have a clear goal but also know the steps they need to achieve that goal and keep their eye on the prize, staying motivated and doing the work every day that gets them closer to their objective.

Figure 3. _Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity_

The current findings also align directly with _Through the Gate_'s _Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity_ (see Figure 3), wherein students tout the benefits of having timely and accurate information on how to navigate their transfer pathways (Pathway Navigation). In the words of four African American/Black students:

> [I knew I would be successful in my goal of transfer...] when I **planned out each year and each class** I would need to take in order to transfer. After seeing it all on paper, it didn't feel as daunting.

> [I knew I would be successful in my goal of transfer...] when I **received from my counselor a clearly outlined path** listing colleges that best fit me financially and that had a strong leadership team that would support me emotionally through my journey.

Source: _Students Speak Their Truth about Transfer: What They Need to Get Through the Gate_

*Since I am a first-generation student to one parent who is not from this country, I often do not get any help with handling school documents, filling out student aid forms, etc. **Getting advice from those whose professions are to help students like me would make me feel a lot less intimidated** about this process.*

*The person that helped me most during my transfer journey was my counselor at Umoja, as she created **a step-by-step process on the courses I needed to transfer**. This helped as I knew I wanted to transfer within two years, and making sure I took all my courses within each quarter to ensure I would not delay my transfer process was key.*

In contrast, there was a subset of students who, due to not having a complete understanding of their transfer path, **did not become aware that they would be able to transfer until they were near the end of their journey**—far later than they likely should have known. In most of these cases, it was a counselor who informed them that they were ready to transfer. Three students shared:

*I actually **had no idea it was time for me to transfer until I met with an Umoja counselor**. He told me that with the classes I was enrolled in for the current semester, I had completed all the requirements and could begin applying to university. It was past the application date but I applied anyway with some help, and got in!*

*[I knew I would be successful in my goal of transfer...] when I met with an academic counselor and was **informed I had nearly enough credits to complete my AA and transfer**. It was a surprise as it felt I was aimlessly taking GE.*

***It was my last year in community college, but I didn't know that. When I saw a counselor, she told me, "Okay, you will be ready to transfer next year." I was surprised.** I knew I was going to college for a reason. I just didn't know when it would be time to move on. It was then that I applied to my dream school an hour before, that I knew I could do it.*

Reaching Academic Milestones

Many survey respondents (n=321, 11%) knew they would be successful in their goal of transfer once they reached a certain academic milestone that they associated with success. Aligned with earlier phases of the research, many students cited the **successful accumulation of a certain number of units** while maintaining a **strong GPA**. As three students noted:

*The moment I knew I was going to successfully transfer was when I started to reach around **50 credits**.*

*Once I knew I had a **relatively high GPA**, I knew my chances of transferring would be successful. I was always worried that I would not have a high GPA, or that I would not be accepted to any "good" schools, so my GPA was one of the facts that allowed me to start thinking more positively.*

*I will need to complete units to **raise my GPA to 2.5** and I cannot afford to get less than an A on each course to begin with.*

Other students highlighted the increase in confidence associated with **passing a certain class—most often math.**

*I knew I would be successful when my professor really spent time to help me understand and **finally pass Math 227 with an A**.*

*After **completing my math and English classes**, I felt significantly more confident in being able to transfer. Those two classes felt like a huge weight off my shoulders.*

Conversely, struggling with math proved to be a major confidence deterrent.

*I need to **pass Math 259 with a C or better**. Unfortunately, I failed the class this past semester and did not feel that the professor did everything she could to teach the material.*

*I was confident in the very beginning years of when I first began going to my college but **my confidence deteriorated when I kept failing at math and my GPA was dropping**. Although I was trying my very best, life and school could never balance out for me. But I am confident once more in my ability to pass this math course I am taking finally once and for all; and move forward and closer to completing my degree.*

Conclusions and Recommendations

Results from the analysis of these survey questions support what has been found in previous phases of this research—**there is no singular "tipping point"** for African American/Black students upon which they switch from being less to more likely to transfer. Rather, there are **many milestones and experiences along the way that intersect with one another to cumulatively impact their ultimate success**. Building off our original set of recommendations that stemmed from interviews with administrators and focus groups with students, The RP Group offers the following additional recommendations for colleges and districts looking to support African American/Black students' transfer success according to what students say impacts their transfer journeys.

Increase Personalized Student Support

- **Expand Access to Holistic Support:** Ensure students who are not in programs like Umoja or EOPS have access to personalized guidance from a range of supporters, including counselors, instructors, and classified professionals. Foster deeper, relationship-based connections where students feel valued and understood. Students need more than academic advising—they need mentors and advocates throughout their college journey to help them succeed.

- **Build a Broader Support Network:** Create a campus-wide culture of support where every student, regardless of their involvement in special programs, feels part of a community. Expand peer and professional mentoring programs with mentors who can guide students through the transfer process and beyond, offering information, insights, encouragement, and professional development opportunities. A robust network of support helps foster a sense of belonging and connection for students and was found to be a key factor in transfer success.

Improve Transfer Pathway Clarity

- **Equitable Access to Counseling Services:** Ensure that students with the greatest need have access to counseling that fosters ongoing relationships between students and counselors rather than transactional interactions. Students in programs like Umoja and EOPS benefit from this type of consistent, personalized counseling, and comparable support should be made available to students not in specialized programs.

- **Clear Communication Channels:** Support counselors by developing and distributing clear, concise guides and checklists that complement their work in helping students navigate the transfer process with a better understanding of key steps and deadlines. Collaboration with counselors will ensure these tools enhance the guidance counselors already provide, giving them additional resources to assist students more effectively.

- **Extended Counseling Sessions for New Students:** Ensure that all first-time students can access extended sessions with a counselor to help set personalized, long-term transfer plans, including academic and administrative milestones.

- **Required Check-ins at Key Credit Milestones:** Mandate regular counseling check-ins for students at pivotal credit milestones (e.g., 15, 30, 45 units) to ensure they stay on track with their transfer goals and address any emerging challenges.

Recognize and Celebrate Student Success Early and Often

- **Early and Ongoing Acknowledgment of Milestones:** Colleges should celebrate students' progress at key points throughout their academic journey, such as completing their first semester, earning a certain number of units, or achieving transfer readiness. These celebrations can take the form of recognition events or individualized messages that acknowledge students' achievements. These messages could be personalized by individual faculty or staff or automated to avoid significant increases in workload events, certificates, or personalized messages from faculty and staff. These messages could be automated to avoid any significant increase in workload. Frequent acknowledgment helps students see their path as more tangible and reinforces their sense of accomplishment before they reach the transfer gate.

- **Creating a Path of Tangible Achievements:** Colleges should break the transfer journey into smaller, more manageable steps with clear rewards or celebrations tied to each step (see *Take Charge of Your Transfer Success*, a student resource co-created by The RP Group and Student Senate for California Community Colleges). By focusing on these incremental achievements, students can more easily visualize their overall success and avoid feeling like their progress only becomes real at the moment of transfer. Continuous reminders of success may help address the sense of imposter syndrome many students feel as they approach their goal.

- **Building Students' Self-Confidence and Trust:** Recognize that African American/Black students often face challenges related to self-confidence and trust in the educational system. To address these issues, institutions must go beyond simply supporting and believing in students–focusing on embedding intentional confidence-building efforts into counseling and other interactions, while also actively working to rebuild trust. As was shared in a previous brief, both instructional and counseling faculty should be trained to implement culturally relevant, trauma-informed approaches in their practice.[4] It is critical to acknowledge students' lived experiences, follow through on commitments, and close feedback loops by doing what the institution promises. Additionally, colleges need to challenge the deficit mindset that still pervades many campuses by focusing on students' strengths and potential. Through these actions, institutions can demonstrate a commitment to empowering students and fostering an environment of trust, respect, and growth.

- **Success Stories, Role Models, and Mentoring:** Highlight and celebrate the success stories of alumni who have successfully transferred, particularly those who overcame significant challenges, by inviting alumni to speak at events or mentor current students. Host transfer workshops that bring in alumni to discuss life post-transfer. As previously mentioned, peer and professional mentors who share their experiences and strategies for success can help students feel more confident and supported as they move along their transfer journey.

Enhance Academic Support Services

- **Targeted Academic Milestone Tracking:** Students expressed a sense of achievement and confidence when reaching specific credit milestones or maintaining a strong GPA. Consider working with the college's office of institutional research in implementing a milestone tracking system that allows students to set and monitor their progress toward their academic goals, such as reaching a certain number of units or achieving a specific GPA. This system could include reminders and updates to help students stay motivated and moving forward.

---

[4] Cooper, D. M., & Brohawn, K. (2023). The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Exploring the Transfer Journeys of Over 7,000 African American/Black Community College Students. The RP Group, San Rafael, CA.

- **Enhanced Math Support Services:** Math was repeatedly mentioned as a critical confidence builder or deterrent. Improving support in this area could help students overcome obstacles and feel more secure in their academic journey. On the student end, consider providing additional resources for math courses, including tutoring, supplemental instruction, corequisite support, and faculty office hours tailored to students struggling with math. On the faculty end, provide continuous professional development for math faculty on student engagement techniques and creating an inclusive and supportive classroom environment, particularly for courses where students struggle most.

- **GPA Recovery Programs:** Students expressed anxiety about maintaining a high GPA or the need to retake courses/take additional credits to improve their GPA, which is crucial for successful transfer. Consider implementing GPA recovery programs for students on academic probation or those needing to improve their GPA. These programs could include personalized academic advising, workshops on study strategies, and access to holistic student support services (e.g., basic needs supports, mental health resources, financial aid). Many colleges already have academic renewal programs in place, but not all students are aware of them. Colleges that have such programs should prioritize messaging about these supports for students proactively.

Ultimately, fostering transfer success for African American/Black students requires a multifaceted approach that addresses academic, personal, and institutional challenges. By implementing these recommendations, colleges and districts can create a more supportive, equitable environment that nurtures students' confidence, strengthens their connections, and ensures every student has the resources and guidance needed to achieve their transfer goals.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group is a leader that supports equitable outcomes for minoritized and marginalized students through race-conscious, equity-minded research, planning, and professional development. We uplift student voices and empower researchers and planners to improve institutional effectiveness by dismantling systemic barriers and injustices.

Authors

Darla M. Cooper, EdD, Project Co-Director

Katie Brohawn, PhD, Project Co-Director

Project Team

Alyssa Nguyen, MA

Rogéair D. Purnell, PhD

Ashley Redix, PhD

Daisy Segovia, PhD

www.rpgroup.org/aattp