

Studying the Choice Gap in the Transfer Student Experience:
A Collaborative Project by Long Beach City College and
University of Southern California Center for Urban Education¹

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Researchers interested in the transfer st

Cheslock (2006) indicate that the number of economically disadvantaged community college transfer students who enroll in the elite institutions may be as few as 1,000 students per year. Because of the tangible benefits elite institutions offer to minority students, the choice gap deserves further study.

Examining the Data

The findings for this paper emerged from a collaborative action research project conducted by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California and an inquiry team of faculty members, student affairs practitioners, and administrators at Long Beach City College (LBCC) in 2006-2007.² LBCC researchers developed student profiles based on enrollment in one of three paths to degree attainment: Plans A, B, and C.

- Plan A is comprised of general education requirements for students planning to obtain an Associate Degree. It is designed for those students who wish to prepare for a career immediately after graduating from LBCC.
- Plan B is comprised of lower division general education breadth courses required for transfer to the California State University system. It is used for transfer or to obtain full or partial certification.
- Plan C is comprised of lower division general education courses that prepare students for transfer to both the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems.

After examining student educational outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the

² The project studied the transfer gap *and* choice gap at LBCC; accordingly, data was collected to examine both of these facets of the problem surrounding transfer at LBCC. However, this paper only presents data relevant to the choice gap.

UC-eligible students, and the number of transfers, respectively) indicate comparable distribution in terms of racial/ethnic background. This suggests that CSU-eligible students admitted to the CSU system are likely to enroll at rates that reflect their representation in the eligible pool of candidates. In contrast, the results in columns 4 and 5 (i.e. the numbers of UC-eligible students and the number of transfers, respectively) show a wide variance in distribution by racial/ethnic background. For example, African-American students constitute 15% of the share of UC transfers, yet have only 8.6% of the share of UC-eligible students. Thus, they are overrepresented among LBCC fast-track students who transfer to the UC system. Like African-American students, Latino/a students exhibit some overrepresentation in successful transfer from LBCC. In contrast, the shares of successful transfer to the UC system among Asian/Pacific Islander and white students decline relative to their shares of the UC-eligible pool at LBCC. The uneven outcomes by race and ethnicity in the pool of UC-eligible candidates suggest that different groups have varying likelihoods of enrolling at more selective institutions.

It is important to note that the UC-eligible cohort is extremely small at 40 students. As a result, the number of students transferring from any racial/ethnic group is low, ranging from 6 African American and Asian/Pacific Islander students, to 11 Latino/a students. From a methodological standpoint, the percentage distribution is sensitive to small numerical increases in transfer and sampling error. However, from an *equity* standpoint, the numbers call attention to differential rates of transfer to selective institutions among different racial/ethnic groups. The difference between 11 Latino/as and 9 white students (please see Table 2 in appendix) going to a UC may not seem significant, but the number of minority students who transfer carries greater symbolic value in light of their historical exclusion from selective institutions.

Exploring the Problem

The collaborative research project between LBCC and USC Center for Urban Education was grounded in practitioner inquiry into observed inequities in educational outcomes. To better understand why academically qualified students do not always transfer to selective institutions, the project participants interviewed transfer students and conducted a comprehensive cultural and resource audit of transfer at LBCC. The latter involved interviewing staff members instrumental to transfer, reviewing institutional information systems (e.g. online transfer information, course schedules), and observing institutional spaces where transfer services and activities take place (e.g. how transfer services are provided and who uses them).

Student Voices

“Happy to not have incurred any debt”: Raquel Roque

Raquel’s determination not to get into debt is the main reason for not having transferred. After becoming a registered nurse she decided to work at a hospital and save the money to pay the tuition at a four-year college. At the time of her interview she was waiting to hear from CSU-Long Beach about her application to the nursing program. If she is accepted the hospital where she works will pay for part of the tuition, which will make it possible for her to work and finish the BS without relying on financial aid. After she finishes her baccalaureate degree, she would like to earn a MSN degree at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Raquel Roque was a transfer-ready student who did not transfer to a UC institution. Her last semester at LBCC was in Spring 2004, when she graduated with an Associate Degree in nursing. She had completed all the requirements for transfer to both CSU (Plan B) and UC (Plan C). Moreover, her GPA, 3.51, was one of the highest among the 20 students interviewed, and she had participated in the Honors program. In her first semester she was placed in Honors English where she earned an A. She earned a B in the first calculus course. Her transcript shows that she earned mostly A’s except in her last year, when she earned mostly C’s in the nursing courses required for her nursing degree. Needless to say, given her excellent academic record she could have had many choices for transfer institutions but she chose not to continue immediately.

Raquel, like other high-achieving students, could have transitioned to a four-year college directly from high school, where she had taken Advanced Placement courses and was in a special academic intensive program. She chose LBCC primarily because it was affordable and she could save money by living at home and commuting. She said, “I always had to work and go to school.” She was also familiar with LBCC’s Honors Program and felt she would have access to good classes and teachers and not experience problems with transfer. At LBCC she was more likely to be able to get into the classes she needed for nursing than at institutions with highly impacted nursing programs. She was adamant about not incurring debt in order to pay for

college. In particular, she did not want to be put in the same position as her friends, where they felt forced to take “the first job” that they could get after college in order to pay off college loans.

“Nag a little more so students can’t miss it”

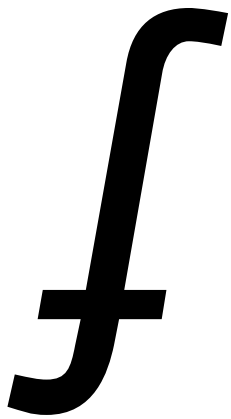
Raquel knew how to get information and make an educational plan but she recognized that not all students were like her and many needed more help. One of the questions she was asked was “If the president of LBCC asked you what you would change or do differently to help students with transfer, what would you say?” Raquel said she would recommend the following:

Let students know more about what is available at LBCC

Make the transfer center, financial aid and scholarship information more visible

From the first semester, stress counseling students on majors

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“On a Shoestring”: Juan Ruiz

The grandeur of the architecture and the enormous size of the university were overwhelming, said Juan Ruiz of his visit to UCLA and why he opted for CSU-Long Beach. “I literally was shivering while I was walking—walking—walking around the campus...Like, ‘oh man’, I just like, I thought I was going to collapse on the UCLA pavement and I thought to myself, when I was walking on the grounds of Lo

if I don't get them paid by the date, then everybody's going to be knocking on my door

look out for each other, making sure they are not flaking, they are not dropping out any courses, making sure that they don't stay here for ten years." The Honors Program ranked high in Juan Ruiz's list of "most valued resources." Being in the program was a "privilege" particularly being able to wear the "Alpha Gamma Sigma Honors Sash" at commencement.

The trauma of first semester—even at a college that feels like a second home

Juan Ruiz viewed CSU-Long Beach as a place where he could feel at home.

Nevertheless, he recalls his first semester as "traumatic." He was not able to enroll in the classes he wanted; a fraternity that he wanted to join did not offer an honor society.

“It’s hard to leave”: Marisol Carrion

Marisol Carrion, a Latina, started at LBCC in 2002 and in 2006, having completed 117 credits with a GPA of 3.75, she transferred to CSU-Fullerton. However, after one semester at Fullerton she returned to LBCC because she didn’t “feel right” there. “They didn’t make it feel as homey as here. I just felt like it wasn’t where I was supposed to be.”

Like all students who attend LBCC, Marisol was given an assessment test to determine her placement in English and Math. Her test scores placed her

Fullerton (CSUF). She considered applying to USC but she did not feel she was adequately qualified: “I wasn’t smart enough to go there.”

Marisol mentioned that she learned a great deal from her teachers and counselors, who told her she could go to any college. She also made use of the Transfer Center. But she did not participate in campus tours. Marisol wished that LBCC would send more information about activities and deadlines through mailings to the home or through the internet, rather than depending only on flyers posted on campus.

At the time of her interview in Spring 2007, Marisol had returned to LBCC and was taking 12 credits in child development in order to qualify for a job as a teacher’s assistant. She had also decided not to transfer for the time being, but perhaps in the future after she was employed full-time.

“Investing in Myself”: Ernesto Ramirez

Unlike the majority of high achieving students, Ernesto Ramirez chose to transfer to a selective institution rather than to a nearby CSU. We chose to spotlight Ernesto for his use of ,5(i2.8itu)5.ro e

I'm investing in myself." In the 10th grade, he remembers saying to himself, "You know what? That's [USC] where I want to go. I don't really want to go anywhere else." While goal commitment provided Ernesto with the inner determination to succeed, his story demonstrates the importance of people—teachers, family, friends, and authority figures—as sources of valuable knowledge and intangible resources.

Role models and social networks

Following on the footsteps of his brother, Ernesto first enrolled in LBCC. "LBCC was the one because people that came before me, my brothers and friends, this is where they did it and this is the way I knew. I had pretty decent grades in high school, but I just didn't apply anywhere. So everybody was pretty much doing the Long Beach City College thing." Like his brother had done before him, after completing the first two years of college, he transferred to USC. Although he knew that USC was hard to get into, he was not discouraged from applying like other students he knew. "The good thing is I had people before me that laid down the process. So for me it was, I'm going to apply and I'm going to get in."

Ernesto attributed his decision to major in economics to a professor at LBCC with whom he became close. "I took an independent class with him and he helped me out a lot because he showed me how to write economic reports." "Independent study" classes are rare at LBCC, prompting the interviewer to ask, "Now most students never do that, how'd you end up doing that?" "I just went to him and I said, I want to learn more about the process and how economics works [because] I'm thinking of majoring in it." Ernesto felt special that an admired professor was willing to go through a lot of paperwork to make a class up "just for me."

In the three years he spent at LBCC he joined clubs that gave him valuable access to people and resources. For example, he was involved in President's Ambassadors, which consists of a small group of students, selected on the basis of their academic record and leadership qualities, to represent the president in activities and the community. Being an ambassador is very special and those chosen for this role are formally recognized in the graduation program announcement. But more importantly, they get a letter of recommendation from the Superintendent-President to a four-year university of their choice. They also receive a small scholarship stipend. This program is primarily for full-time students as ambassadors are required to participate in a weekly staff meeting. Ernesto was also in Leaders Across Campus like Marisol. Being aware that most students probably do not even know about the existence of Leaders Across Campus, the interviewer asked, "How did you get hooked up with that?" "I did that because I'd seen my brother and my friend, were in it already. And I kind of knew about the campus already."

Ernesto's extensive involvement in extra curricular activities could have interfered with his academic work; however, he felt they helped him stay focused. The benefits of his involvement included being in "study groups" with other club members and access to "insider information" on what courses to take and what faculty members are like.

They helped me on what teachers to take. Sometimes they gave me the book. I got notes. I was prepared before I even got into the class. That helped me out because—like, there's people that were better in English, and there's people who were better in math, and all these people were in the group. We helped each other.

Feeling out-classed

Ernesto comes across as an extrovert who easily made friends with peers, teachers, and even the USC recruiter. When the conversation shifts into USC and the interviewer asks Ernesto to describe his initial impressions, we learn that even he, who up to this moment has personified the model transfer student, experienced the discomfort of difference. “At first when I was over there, it was like, I felt out of place.” “The first thing that my teacher in economics asked us was, ‘So, what’d you guys do this summer? Did you guys do anything involving economics?’ And some of the kids were saying, ‘I got to help my parents out with their portfolios.’ I was like, ‘What?’ ‘Oh man, this is not going to be a good situation for me’, because I just felt out of place.”

The social differences that became apparent in Ernesto’s economics class could have been discouraging and made him want to look for a more socially comfortable college. However, the confidence Ernesto developed at LBCC helped him get over the initial intimidation. “Once the class got going, I said, ‘You know what? We’re at the same place. They don’t know anymore than I do. They just know about portfolios, but this class isn’t about portfolios.’ So when we got going, I felt a lot more comfortable.”

After having completed 67 UC transferable units and a 3.22 GPA, Ernesto transferred to USC and earned a BA in economics. Now, at the age of 24, he holds a professional position in the corporate sector.

design. In contrast, selective institutions reach out to the most academically prepared and savvy students with professionally-designed view books. The resource audit revealed that transfer information may never reach its intended audience. The inquiry team observed dust on postcards, little posted information in the vicinity of counseling centers, and poor signage directing students to appropriate offices. Observers felt there was under-utilization of transfer planning websites as well. A respondent at the transfer center indicated that www.collegesource.org was a valuable but seldom used resource, possibly because it not properly advertised to students. A faculty member stated that based on his teaching experience, students would not have the computing skills necessary to search for transfer information.

Transfer fairs serve as the centerpiece of LBCC's efforts to inform students of their transfer options. For the spring 2007 calendar, representatives from four-year institutions participating in the fairs included Mount St. Mary's University, a consortium of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and private for-profit institutions such as Vanguard and Phoenix Universities and the DeVry Institute. CSU and UC institutions in the Long Beach area participated as well. These included CSU Long Beach, CSU Fullerton, CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU Los Angeles, California Pfessilerassnm0tinformation.

The “choice colleges” did not have display any of these proactive tactics to reach students, nor did they visit LBCC as often. In fact, the representatives from the UC campuses and California Polytechnic University Pomona require students to make appointments when the transfer fairs take place. This suggests that it would not be easy for a student to meet a representative from a selective institution without advance knowledge and planning and, perhaps, a certain level of self-confidence. For example, would a student like Juan Ruiz, already intimidated by the size and competitiveness of UCLA, want to make an appointment to discuss transfer with a UCLA representative?

Remedying the Choice Gap

The table below summarizes major findings from the student interviews and the cultural and resource audit of transfer at LBCC. The findings are organized into the following categories: practices, cultural, relational, and informationa

	Barrier	Enabler	Potential Solution
Relational	<p>Transfer anxiety. Students experienced transfer anxiety stemming from fears about cost, not belonging, leaving home, and generally from a lack of exposure and knowledge of higher education beyond LBCC. Transfer anxiety prevented qualified students from considering selective institutions, in California and nationally, as a transfer possibility. A transfer counselor shared that about 75% of the students who participate in bus tours to northern California colleges have never been outside the immediate Southern California area. An Honors Student described UCLA as a place that gave him “shivers.”</p>	<p>Learning from successful transfers. LBCC students could learn from others who have made the transition to places outside the immediate geographic area about how it can be done.</p> <p>Actively reaching out to students. Counselors noted that students are always grateful for being called and invited for an office appointment. One counselor gives students her/his phone number and encourages them to call at any time if they</p>	

	Barrier	Enabler	Potential Solutions
Cultural	<p>Faculty involvement in transfer at the two-year level. One inquiry team member observed, <i>“As an institution we all have to speak it, own it and have that as our mission. It’s meaningful if it gets reinforced.”</i> Another faculty member emphasized role modeling <i>“On the syllabus, I list all of the places that I went to college.”</i> Instead of telling students, <i>“Go to the Transfer Center,”</i> faculty members can show students where the transfer center is located or invite a counselor to speak in the class.</p>	<p>Increased awareness of the need to build a stronger transfer culture. LBCC does not have a very strong transfer culture. However, there seems to be a shift in the way that services are being delivered and the project has had an impact on project participants. Instructors have reported talking about transfer in their classes, inviting counselors to give presentations, and one instructor in collaboration with the transfer coordinator created a PowerPoint presentation on transfer to be shown in classes.</p> <p>Make transfer expectations and information an integral part of classroom instruction and the curriculum. A new and creative program called <i>Don’t Cancel that Class</i> schedules LBCC counselors on days in which instructors will be absent. Dissemination of information about transfer can also be integrated into all courses, including basic skills courses, through posters and marketing brochures.</p>	<p>Create professional development opportunities on the role of community college faculty in the transfer process. Topics of discussion can include instructional practices to introduce students to transfer opportunities and providing assistance with planning.</p> <p>Foster high expectations about transfer and future success at selective institutions. Many of the UC-eligible students who did not transfer or transferred to the CSU system reported feeling “not smart enough” to succeed at selective institutions, and therefore chose not to apply or attend such colleges. Some faculty members, especially those who teach in the honors program, expect students to transfer to four-year institutions, but there does not seem to be an emphasis on encouraging promising students to apply and enroll in the UC system.</p>

	Barrier	Enabler	Potential Solution
Cultural	<p>Lack of faculty involvement in transfer at the four-year level. Faculty members at four-year institutions generally have little to do with the transfer process. The campus representatives students are most likely to come in contact with on campus tours and at transfer fairs are admissions counselors. Interacting with faculty members may diminish perceptions of elitism.</p>	<p>Faculty involvement in recruitment activities. CSUDH’s recruitment is unique in that it involves four-year faculty members and department heads meeting potential transfer students to answer questions, describe programs, and encourage students to join their community. In contrast, selective institutions do not use a comparably intensive recruitment strategy. Expending more effort as a campus community in recruiting and welcoming transfer students, particularly from minority backgrounds, may make a difference.</p>	<p>Create programs that encourage faculty from selective institutions to be more closely tied with transfer. Admissions officers from selective four-year institutions can serve as in-class guest speakers. Faculty members can attend recruitment events at community colleges to answer questions about programs and open their classrooms to visiting students touring the campus. Interaction with faculty members from selective institutions may alleviate students’ anxieties about transferring to a potentially alienating institution.</p>

	Barrier	Enabler	Potential Solution
Informational	<p>Students do not spend enough time interacting with counselors. The Transfer Director explained, “I think as counselors, a lot of times it’s a one shot deal. I mean they [students] come in [here] and we meet with them for just a half an hour... there’s not time to really build that rapport. And to have students come back another time, that may or may not happen...When they come to sit down with us we have to think that this is our shot at giving them information.”</p>	<p>In-class transfer presentations. Some students found themselves in classes where counselors made presentations about their services to help students attain degree and transfer goals. These brief presentations can effectively reach a number of students at once with vital dates and information to promote transfer.</p> <p>Counselors and Instructors. Students attributed successful transfer to counselors and instructors who reached out to them and helped with various aspects of the application process. The major problem is lack of capacity to provide counseling services in a timely fashion and to all students.</p>	<p>Encourage all instructors to invite counselors to make presentations about transfer in their classes. Counselors feel that they “are at the mercy of instructors.” Dissemination of information about transfer should be integrated into all courses, including basic skills courses.</p>

	Barriers	Enablers	Potential Solutions
Informational	<p>Lack of computer skills constrains use of electronic resources. While the website features useful information, team members felt that students would need to have sufficient computer skills to access the information.</p> <p>Lack of capacity for just-in-time communication with students and faculty members. There is no uniform email system for students or part-time faculty at the college. Students use multiple email addresses (or do not have any account at all). It is thus difficult to communicate essential information directly through email. Similarly, emailing faculty members information about transfer has been unreliable. One team member said, “The messages we get from the Transfer Center are not received by the majority of the people who are teaching at the college [particularly adjuncts who do not have a college email address], and probably if they are received then chances are they are not being communicated to the students. Ideally those messages will be sent directly to the students.”</p>	<p>Information on the website is readily available. However, students need to have computer skills to access this information. After analyzing the LBCC website, a team member noted, “LBCC maintains an excellent web site that is complex, detailed and readable. One can find the Student Services page, then go to the Transfer Center and find transfer guides for various majors and for many different colleges and universities. At the very bottom of the page a student encounters General Education course patterns (the A, B and C transfer bands) and a transfer guide.”</p>	

diversity on our campuses. Closing the choice gap will require further study and research, but first requires attention and a place in the conversation about transfer student experiences.

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Appendix

Table 1. Transfer Success Rates by Transfer Eligibility among LBCC Fast-track Students, Spring 2006 (N's in parentheses)

Transfer Outcome	Eligibility		Total
	CSU Eligible ^a (Completed Plan B)	UC Eligible ^b (Completed Plan C)	
Transferred to UC	—	20% (40)	8% (40)
Transferred to CSU	66% (214)	53% (105)	61% (319)
Transferred Elsewhere	10% (33)	8% (16)	9% (49)
Did Not Transfer	23% (75)	19% (37)	22% (112)
Total	100% (322)	100% (198)	100% (520)

Note. “Fast-track” refers to students who became CSU or UC

Table 3. Percent Transfer and Choice Gaps (Rate of Non-transfer) by Race and Ethnicity

Racial-Ethnic Group	Transfer Gap ^a (Non-transfer among CSU or UC Eligible Students)	Choice Gap ^b (Non-transfer to a UC among UC-Eligible Students)
African American/Black	8%	65%
Asian/Pacific Islander	21%	82%
Hispanic/Latina/o	18%	77%
White	26%	85%
Other	25%	74%
Total	22%	80%

Note. “Fast-track” refers to students who became CSU or UC transfer eligible within three years of

Table 4. Characteristics of the Twenty Students Interviewed

Demographics	Educational Pathways
Gender Female (15)	Eligibility CSU eligible and transferred to CSU (1)