

The African American Transfer Tipping Point:

Recommendations for Supporting Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students

Brief 3 of 3

The
African American
Transfer Tipping Point Study



THROUGH THE GATESM
theRPgroup



Supported by:



Darla M. Cooper, EdD; Katie Brohawn, PhD;
Alyssa Nguyen, MA; Rogéair D. Purnell, PhD;
Ashley Redix, PhD; Daisy Segovia, PhD

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In late 2021, The RP Group conducted a robust quantitative analysis of the transfer trajectories of transfer-motivated African American/Black students. This research identified a number of factors salient to the journeys of African American/Black students, including timely unit completion, passing transfer-level English and math early on, receiving academic counseling in the first year, and not being put on academic probation. For more information on these analyses, see [*The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Identifying the Factors That Impact Upward Transfer Among African American/Black Community College Students*](#).

In April 2022, interviews with California community college (CCC) practitioners and focus groups were conducted with African American/Black students from five institutions identified as having relatively higher rates of African American/Black student transfer to add context to these quantitative findings and explore the supports and barriers to the trajectories of transfer-motivated African American/Black students (see sidebar).¹ For more information on why the factors identified were particularly salient to African American/Black students, see [*The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Unpacking the Factors That Impact The Success of Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students*](#).

1 See [*The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Technical Report*](#) for a more detailed overview of the study methodology and findings.



The RP Group's *Through the Gate* Research Initiative

The *Through the Gate* initiative launched in 2016 with funding from College Futures Foundation. The broader initiative focuses on identifying ways to increase transfer for a “high-leverage” group of community college students: those who are close to transfer but have not yet made it to university.

The RP Group's *African American Transfer Tipping Point* research study (2020-2023) builds on our original *Through the Gate* effort with a focus on understanding the transfer trajectories of African-American/Black students and includes...

Phase 1: A quantitative analysis of student course-taking patterns and unit completion thresholds to identify key transition points in their transfer journey

Phase 2: A qualitative assessment to identify programs and practices that bolster or hinder transfer outcomes

Phase 3: A systemwide survey to African American/Black students at key points in their academic journey to develop a comprehensive understanding of the many variables influencing their transfer journeys and ultimate success

This brief is #3 in a three-part series presenting results from the first two phases of this work.

Read Brief 1 [here](#), Brief 2 [here](#), and find more information about *Through the Gate* at www.rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate and the *African American Transfer Tipping Point* at www.rpgroup.org/aattpt.



In the current brief, we attempt to better understand what these five community colleges were doing to support African American/Black student transfer, with special attention paid to how they addressed the previously identified factors—namely counseling, academic probation, and the administration of special programs such as Umoja. This brief highlights key recommendations offered by college practitioners and students from these five colleges to help other colleges better support transfer-motivated African American/Black community college students. It then links what we heard through conversations with these stakeholders to The RP Group's [*Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity*](#), drawing connections between our prior research regarding the motivators of and barriers to transfer for students and the specific experiences of African American/Black students considering transfer.

These recommendations are in the following five areas:



Strong Leadership and Integrated, Intentional Partnerships and Supports Demonstate a Commitment to African American/Black Student Success



Partnering and Coordinating with Universities Is Key to Transfer Preparedness, Readiness, and Support Strategies



Counseling Is Critical, Yet Colleges Need to Consider the Unique Perspectives and Experiences of African American/Black Students



Academic Probation Needs to be Re-Envisioned from the Students' Perspective (and Renamed)



Instructional Faculty Must Recognize the Critical Role They Play in Students' Transfer Journeys



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Strong Leadership and Integrated, Intentional Partnerships and Support

Serving transfer-motivated African American/Black students requires buy-in at all levels—from administrators, faculty, and classified professionals—and strong partnership and coordination across entities. Community college student service administrators and professionals most commonly noted the importance of the following resources, services, and supports as critical to their higher African American/Black student transfer rates:

- Having **leadership that is supportive of and committed** to African American/Black student transfer
- Ensuring active efforts are made to **create a sense of community** among African American/Black students
- Offering **numerous intentional, integrated, and coordinated supportive student services**, including multiple tutoring centers and a Transfer Center
- **Celebrating students' success** as part of awards, African American/Black student graduations, and transfer luncheons
- **Partnering with institutional research, planning, and effectiveness (IRPE) offices** to prioritize continuous reflection on disaggregated student academic success and support usage data to identify how the college is and is not effectively supporting transfer-motivated African American/Black students

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We've had great success because... our chancellor was absolutely supportive. We can all be super jazzed and ready to go to do something, but if you don't have the support of the administration, then it falls short. So... I felt really blessed and really just lucky that I walked into an opportunity at [a college], where everybody was ready.

-College practitioner

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... providing a space for Black students run by Black people, providing a safe space where students can share and have those conversations that they may not be comfortable having within the classroom.

-College practitioner

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Partnering and Coordinating with Universities Is Key to Transfer Preparedness, Readiness, and Support Strategy

Research has suggested that a critical component of African American/Black student transfer success is the relationship between the community college and university that helps smooth the transition for students.^{2,3,4} Practitioners at these five colleges echoed these sentiments. Examples of strong partnership engagement with universities included:

- Providing students with **information on potential transfer destinations**, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
- **Regular visits to the university campuses and workshops hosted on community college campuses by university partners** that allow students and the college to build relationships with and learn more about potential transfer institutions
- **University campus tours** to help students develop a sense of what life might be like as a student at a new institution
- **College fairs with university partners in attendance**, allowing students to ask questions and potentially receive acceptance on the spot

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Because we have those relationships [with the universities], I think our students are able to have those real conversations with representatives from this standpoint: ‘Hey, I have this amount of financial aid. I have this particular gap. How do I fill that gap?’ instead of getting the runaround.

-College practitioner

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² Bustillos, L. (2017). *The transfer maze: The high cost to students and the state of California*. Sacramento, CA: Campaign for College Opportunity.

³ Cooper, D. M., Nguyen, A., Karandjeff, K., Brohawn, K., Purnell, R., Kretz, A., Rodriguez- Kiino, D., Chaplot, P., & Nguyen, K. (2020). *Students speak their truth about transfer: What they need to get through the gate*. San Rafael, CA: The RP Group.

⁴ Johnson, H., & Cuellar Mejia, M. C. (2020). *Increasing community college transfer: Progress and barriers*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California.



Counseling Is Critical, Yet Colleges Need to Consider the Unique Perspectives and Experiences of African American/Black Students

The top recommendation for African American/Black students from the practitioners at these five colleges was to seek academic counseling to increase their transfer success. However, both college practitioners and students in focus groups acknowledged that counselors' engagement with these students could be compromised by misinformation, bias, large counselor-to-student ratios, students' inability to see the same counselor over time, and the lack of African American/Black counseling faculty and staff.

The following recommendations are intended to help academic counseling have the desired and needed impact and ease some of the challenges African American/Black students noted as barriers to having a successful experience with academic counseling:

- Ensure information about the steps needed to stay on track to transfer is **timely and accurate**
- Whenever possible, students should see the **same counselor over time**
- Expand staffing levels with a commitment to recruit, hire, and retain **more African American/Black counseling faculty and staff**
- Create a **more welcoming environment** with attention to spaces and programming that help African American/Black students feel respected, represented, and seen
- Academic counselors can **leverage techniques often employed by special programs** such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services and Umoja that are more likely to address students' academic and personal factors and are reported to be more effective by students (e.g., trauma-informed care)



When I'm in the [African American/Black student-focused] program, it's a different conversation. Even if the students' transcripts look, as they would say, a mess... it's a different conversation, a different feel. So now that I'm thinking back, it doesn't feel like a counseling session... because maybe to them, a counseling session is a little aggravating, a little stressful, a little daunting and embarrassing. I don't make it feel that way. It's like, 'Let's do what we have to do.' And it's just a different approach. So they don't see... counseling as a bad thing....
-College practitioner





Photo: SDI Productions



Academic Probation Needs to be Re-Envisioned from the Students' Perspective (and Renamed)

College practitioners touted the values of academic probation as an opportunity to provide critical, just-in-time support to students. If this intention is to be realized, colleges need to reconsider how they communicate the value of academic probation to students and ensure students are able to focus on the benefits of the support rather than feel penalized and abandoned. For African American/Black students, the term “probation” is triggering and has negative connotations given its connection to the criminal justice system, which disproportionately targets the African American/Black community. If colleges want probation to confer the benefits they believe it can, they should consider the following recommendations:

- For probation to be impactful, it must be seen by students as a **hands-on intervention to support students**, instead of the college throwing up its hands and giving up on students
- **Re-examine academic probation, including the use of the term “probation,”** to reframe this status as an opportunity to provide timely and comprehensive support to African American/Black students. Consider alternative terms such as “Academic warning” or “Academic notice”



An important element of the probation monitoring and probation counseling process is to really look at some of the cognitive factors, like what happens to a student's self-efficacy when they're put on probation, how do we address that?Because sometimes that's what makes the difference between the student coming back to school or remaining in school, or doing well the next semester. And then ultimately transferring... it's really their impressions about who they are and what they're capable of and being put on probation can really have a negative impact.

-College practitioner





Photo: shironosov



Instructional Faculty Must Recognize the Critical Role They Play in Students' Transfer Journeys

Students in the focus groups shared that instructional faculty had the potential to serve as critical facilitators of or significant barriers to their success, especially faculty teaching transfer-level math and English courses. Positive experiences with instructional faculty included when they helped students build their confidence, increased their mastery of key subjects, and supported their success. Supportive faculty were described as those whose teaching helped students understand themselves, were patient, and identified how students could improve. Suggestions for faculty to best support African American/Black students include:

- Offer **culturally responsive curriculum** with assignments and readings that are reflective of African American/Black students' experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds, as well as African American/Black history and culture
- Faculty should be open to recognizing, understanding, and addressing how their **personal biases and prejudices** affect how they interact with and are perceived by African American/Black students

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The third time around, I had a better teacher for my English...He happened to be an African American teacher... he was...very understanding, and very helpful... it was easy for me to approach him when I had a question for essays or if I was having trouble. And he would... write notes on all my papers so I knew what I was doing wrong or what I needed to correct. And so, that was really helpful with my transferring and being on track to transfer.

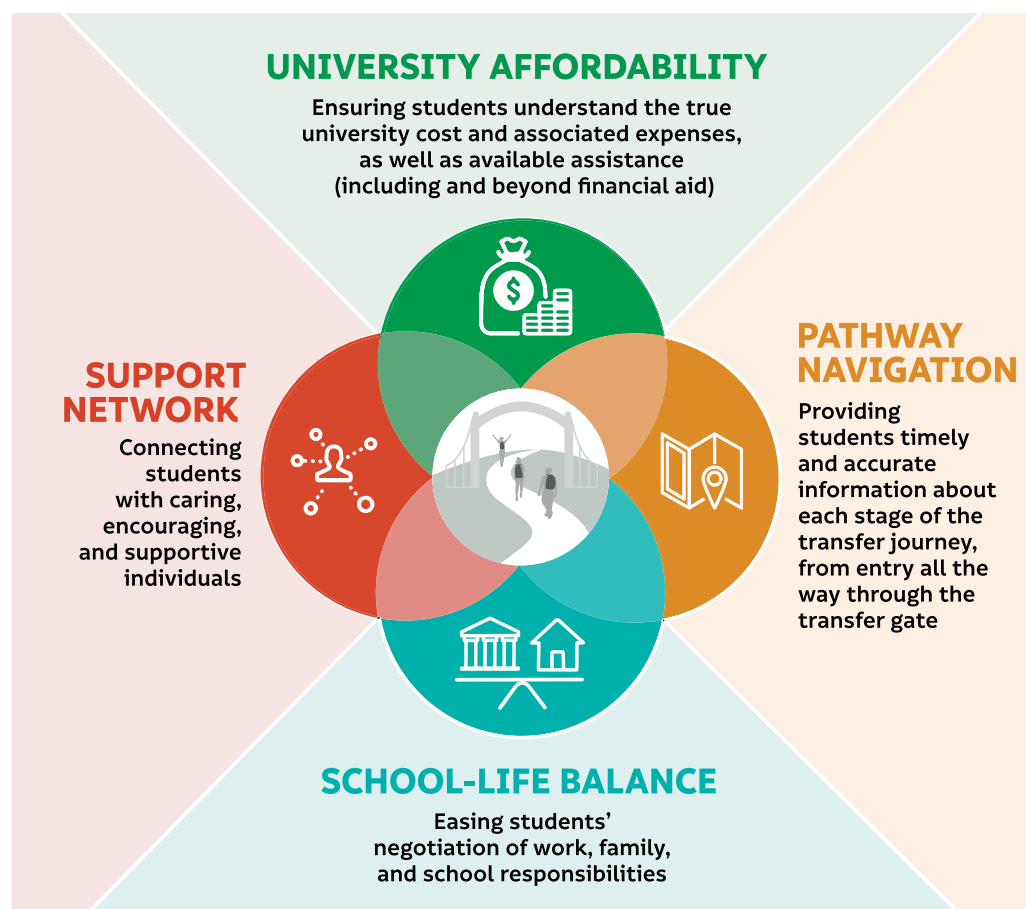
-Student

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Consider the *Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity* When Developing Supports

The RP Group's earlier *Through the Gate* research developed a [*Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity*](#). Notably, many of the challenges faced by transfer-motivated African American/Black students directly align with two of the four factors: **Pathway Navigation** and **Support Network**. With respect to Pathway Navigation, students need to understand the importance of timely transfer-level course-taking (and have the support necessary to pass such courses) and must be provided with the information and resources necessary to keep them squarely on their academic path and avoid academic probation. With respect to Support Network, the need to connect students with caring, encouraging, and supportive individuals was readily apparent in conversations regarding the factors that impact a student's experience with counseling and why students find Umoja especially impactful.

Figure 1. Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity



The following are additional recommendations from practitioners and students from these five colleges provide possible ways to improve African American/Black student transfer success at both the college and individual practitioner level and are specifically aligned to the *Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity*.

College-level recommendations aligned to the *Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity* for ADMINISTRATORS AND COLLEGE LEADERS:

- Develop a **referral network** designed to help African American/Black students access non-academic supports with a focus on basic needs, employment, and trauma
- Create a sense of belonging for African American/Black students through the **development of learning communities, peer mentoring, and personalized supportive services**, often as part of culturally relevant programs
- Identify ways to **increase funding for and the supports offered by special programs** such as Umoja, which can be scaled to serve more African American/Black students
- Ensure support programs **prioritize providing students with timely, accurate information** related to transfer

INDIVIDUAL ADMINISTRATOR-, FACULTY-, AND/OR CLASSIFIED PROFESSIONAL-LEVEL recommendations aligned to the *Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity* for each person who works at a college:

- Find ways for staff to show African American/Black students that they **care for their whole being** and not just their academic life
- Identify specific ways both inside and outside the classroom that help African American/Black students **feel they belong and are respected, represented, heard, and seen**

Looking Forward

These recommendations emphasize a need for **intentional, comprehensive, and coordinated culturally relevant services and programming** that let transfer-motivated African American/Black students know that their success is expected and they belong, are valued, and seen. All supports should focus on the whole student—not only academic, but also economic, personal, and social factors that can positively or negatively influence their transfer trajectories. These supports must incorporate **both community-based and on-campus resources** to help with students' basic needs such as mental health, employment, food, and housing.

Finally, **professional development opportunities for all college personnel focused on anti-racism** needs to be prioritized to address implicit biases and prejudices that may negatively affect how they show up for and interact with African American/Black students.



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The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Project Team

Darla M. Cooper, EdD, Project Co-Director
Katie Brohawn, PhD, Project Co-Director
Alyssa Nguyen, MA

Rogéair D. Purnell, PhD
Ashley Redix, PhD
Daisy Segovia, PhD

www.rpgroup.org/aattp

