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Equity in Uncertain Times

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Improving and Ensuring Transfer is a Matter of Equity (p. 8).

By Jewel A. Bourne

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Maintaining Equity-Conscious Practices in Uncertain Times

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *SFAA vs. Harvard (2023),* which effectively prohibited race-conscious affirmative action policies in higher education, raises serious concerns about continuing progress toward educational equity. While much public discussion has focused on admissions procedures, the decision also has implications for campus programs and policies aimed at broadening postsecondary success among racially minoritized populations. With a compelling interest in racialized equity to improve both workforce and education outcomes, community colleges are especially susceptible to shifts away from socially just policies and practices. For advocates of community colleges, the question becomes, 'Where do we go from here?' (King, 1967). Against the threats of legal actions from well-funded political entities, how do we continue to advocate for marginalized students and communities who should view community colleges as local gateways for personal and collective well-being? In these uncertain times, are equity-conscious leaders destined for a Sisyphean existence of rolling boulders up the mountain, only for it to roll back down every time?

While this UPDATE edition provides no concrete answers to the difficult questions presented above, I believe the research reflected on these pages engages with the tradition of social justice – in the face of desperate attempts to suppress progress, we recommit ourselves to the cause of material justice with creativity, precision, and confidence. We engage in critical research not because we can guarantee success, but because focusing our actions and resources towards education equity is, in itself, a justified endeavor. This issue offers insights to deepen our understanding of current inequalities and potential solutions for scale. While the boulders of our work are heavy and the mountain remains oppressively high, equity-centered research and practice is most meaningful when we continue to push together. Thank you for taking the time to read and reflect. We welcome your thoughts at occrl@illinois.edu.

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Understanding *SFFA v. Harvard* and the Potential Impact on Community Colleges

By Lorenzo D. Baber and Jewel A. Bourne

The recent U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) 6-3 ruling in *SFFA v. Harvard (2023)* found that the admissions programs at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina (UNC) violate the equal protection clause in the 14th Amendment, which bars forms of discrimination based on individual classification including, but not limited to, racialized classification. Specifically, the majority decision written by Chief Justice Roberts determined that the use of race as a factor in admissions processes at Harvard and UNC did not hold to the "strict scrutiny" standard supported by previous court decisions – specifically, *Bakke (1978), and Grutter (2003)* – which permitted the use of race-conscious affirmative action as a narrowly tailored solution to the compelling government interest in shaping racially diverse college campuses. In a concurrent decision, Justice Gorsuch argues that the admissions policies at UNC and Harvard violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibit discrimination across all educational settings. This brief article highlights the potential impact of these decisions on community colleges and pathways for addressing this impact in future directions across the state of Illinois.

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Context

While much of the public and scholarly attention to the decision has focused on the consequences for four-year institutions and students, it is imperative that we recognize the bearing the decision has on community colleges. Community colleges have been removed from the larger conversations and considerations because they are open-enrollment institutions; however, the majority decision written by Chief Justice Roberts has a substantial impact on these institutions. For example, a growing number of academic and technical programs at community colleges have competitive admissions due to high demand and the need to limit faculty-to-student ratios for instructional effectiveness. Many of these programs are related to health fields, most notably nursing and dental hygiene. National data confirm that student demographics in these areas do not mirror the populations they serve. For example, the National Nursing Workforce Survey finds that 81% of registered nurses identify as white (Smiley, et al., 2023). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) finds similar racialized homogeneity among dental hygienists with 91.4% identifying as white. Given the research showing the positive impact of the shifting racial demographics in the U.S. and anticipated shortages in the health fields, the elimination of race-conscious affirmative action is a significant issue for states and the community colleges they rely on for workforce development.

Moreover, the impact of the SCOTUS ruling is magnified in the separate concurrent opinion submitted by Justice Gorsuch that states the majority opinion authored by Chief Justice Roberts should also be applied to Title IV, which prohibits discrimination across all educational settings. The opinion suggests that if racial diversity is not a justification for affirmative action in admissions, it should no longer be permissible as a justification for any campus program, policy, or practice that addresses racial disparities at an institution receiving federal funding. For all colleges and universities, this opinion has potential implications for student services, scholarship programs, faculty hiring, and academic planning. As a key postsecondary pathway for minoritized students of color, community colleges are particularly susceptible to legal actions aimed at undermining diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Less than four years after campuses pledged transformative change for racial justice as a response to the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests nationwide, we seem to be headed back to the ambiguous pace of 'with all deliberate speed' for racialized equity.

Charting the Future

If the past is prologue, understanding previous outcomes related to affirmative action bans may provide a valuable warning for Illinois. Specifically, researchers, policymakers, and campus leaders may draw from the consequences in California following the passing of Proposition 209 (1996). Proposition 209 banned the consideration of race in admissions at public colleges and universities,

stimulating a dramatic decrease in post-secondary enrollment among minoritized populations across California. Economist professor Zachary Bleemer (2022) found that enrollment among Black and Latino populations post-Proposition 209 declined across the University of California (UC) system, with students moving to apply and enroll at less-resourced institutions in the California State University (CSU) system. This enrollment shift also had a domino effect at CSU institutions, pushing a share of Black and Latinx enrollment to chronically underfunded community colleges in California. Consequently, increased community college enrollment ultimately crowded a portion of Black and Latinx enrollment out of public postsecondary education altogether. Analysis from Bleemer also found that post-Proposition 209, Black and Latinx students were less likely to earn a postsecondary degree compared to Black and Latinx students enrolled in post-secondary education before Proposition 209. Unlike California and the state's ban on affirmative action in the mid-1990s, the state of Illinois may be in a better position to proactively develop "creative resistance" to the potential implications of federally imposed limitations on race-conscious affirmative action. In June of 2022, the Illinois General Assembly passed House Bill 5464 (H.B. 5464) requiring public colleges and universities to develop and implement equity plans that address access, retention, and completion for populations "who are traditionally underrepresented in education programs and activities" (110 ILCS 205/9.16). The legislation includes a definition of specific racially minoritized populations that are to be included in the equity plan targets – American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Latino, and Native

Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

The bill also charges the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to collaborate on guiding the implementation of the new equity plans. While the equity plans and systems collaboration may be restricted in supporting admissions procedures that violate federal laws, there is an opportunity to define comprehensive measures that situate equity plans as part of a holistic approach to diversity and inclusion across Illinois higher education. However, these plans should work proactively to avoid the 'interest-convergence' paradigms that tend to position the needs of the minoritized communities as, at best, secondary background to the primary focus on macro-level state interests (Baber, 2019; Bell 2004). Rather than emphasizing a cautious approach that focuses on a cost-benefit analysis for equity-driven change, policymakers may consider a course that emphasizes comprehensive and corrective actions to address structural norms that disproportionately affect postsecondary outcomes among historically marginalized populations statewide.

H.B. 5464 has provided a starting frame for comprehensive and corrective policy development by focusing on related policies shaping inequalities in postsecondary access that include the student loan debt crisis, longitudinal assessment of campus diversity and inclusion, and building more seamless pathway partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions. As we continue to process the legislative language into actions that move us closer to egalitarian practices for Illinois postsecondary education, we can hold to inspiring words from poet Amanda Gorman: "While democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated. In this truth, in this faith we trust, for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us."

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> "While democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated."
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> **- Amanda Gorman**

Improving and Ensuring Transfer is a Matter of Equity
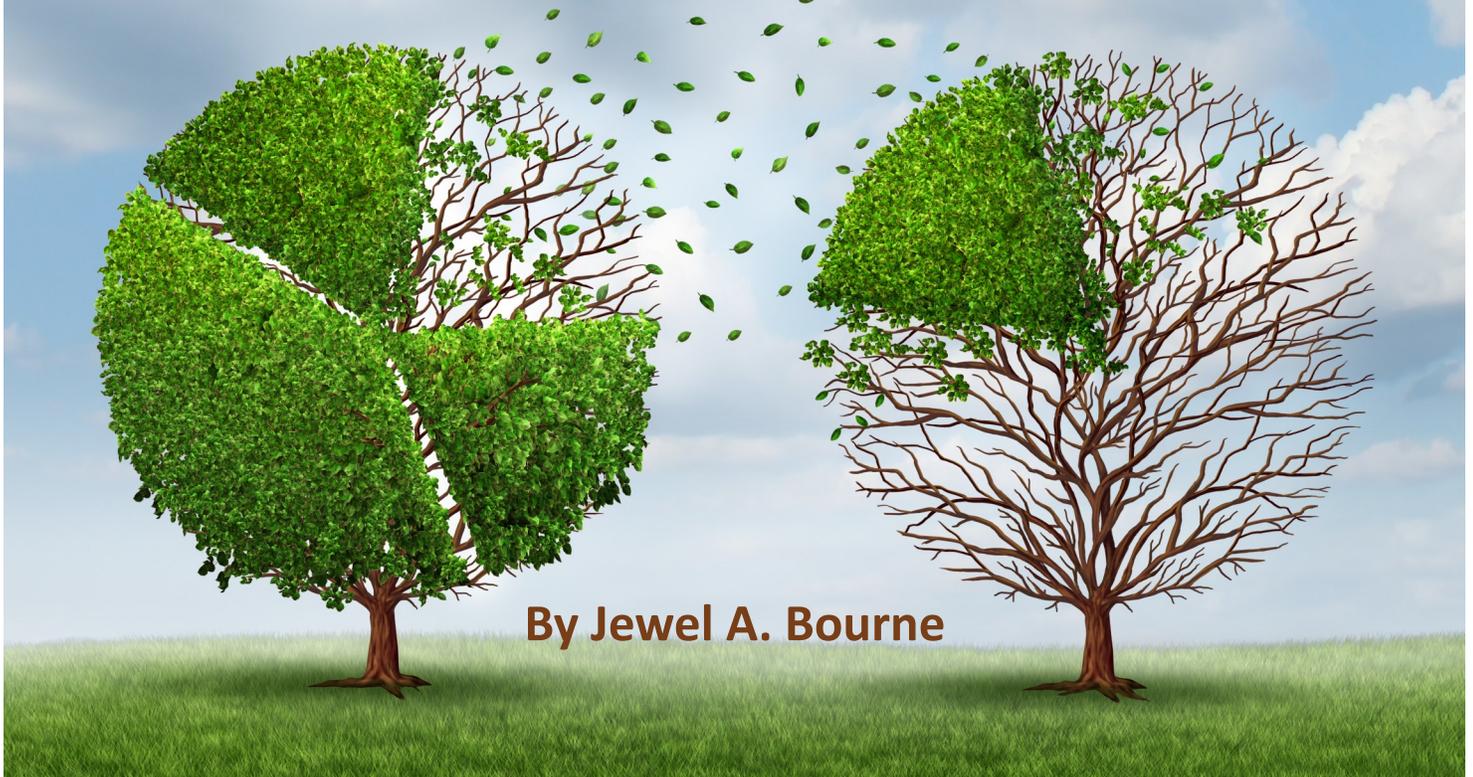
By Jewel A. Bourne

The potential of community colleges has long been acknowledged as a mechanism for addressing educational equity and better connecting underresourced communities to workforce opportunities across the local, national, and global economies (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011). The open-access mission makes higher education more obtainable for many students, including a sizeable percentage of students from minoritized backgrounds who would have limited or no access to postsecondary education without community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Although community colleges in the United States have provided greater access to higher education, it has also been argued that student aspirations tend to 'cool out' during their community college matriculation (Grubbs, 2020; Clark 1960a, 1960b). This critique is supported by data that suggests while over three-quarters of students enter the community college with intentions to transfer, only a quarter of students ultimately make the transition (CCRC, 2016). Further, critics argue that postsecondary policymakers have failed to provide adequate explanations for low transfer rates between community colleges and four-year universities.

The current stakes for transfer students could not be higher. A recent Associated Press article, "'Waste of Time': Community College Transfers Derail Students," illuminates the reality that among students with stated transfer goals, only 19% transfer within four years and 28% within six years, confirming the urgency of transfer reform and the process by which students move from community colleges to four-year institutions. As institutions consider means of ensuring diversity within the campuses, it is imperative that institutions, practitioners, and lawmakers consider the opportunities that the transfer provides to support equitable access to higher education. With

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large enrollments of Black, Latinx, American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI) and low-income students at the community college, and the mission to provide a pathway to a baccalaureate, the transfers pathway holds promise for closing national bachelor's attainment gaps by race and income, but improvements are needed. This policy brief reviews scholarship that supports transfer as an equitable pathway through successful transfer matriculation and degree attainment at a four-year college or university.

Why Transfer Matters as an Imperative for Racially Minoritized Students

Community college transfer pathways have immense potential for advancing equity in higher education as they provide access to bachelor's degrees and pathways to a living-wage job, as well as build generational wealth and support a vibrant, civically engaged democracy (Handel & Williams, 2012). While the barriers in the transfer process impact all students, with limited numbers of students ever transferring and even fewer completing bachelor's degrees, these roadblocks disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, and low-income students and otherwise minoritized students. For instance, among 80% of new degree-seeking community college enrollees nationally who intend to transfer, only 31% ever transfer to a four-year institution, and only 13% complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Johnson, Cuellar-Mejia & Sanchez, 2020).

Barriers to Transfer

Misaligned institutional practices and policies create barriers to successful transfer, limiting the potential of the community college transfer pathway for increasing higher education equity. Students pursuing transfer experience the complex and ineffective transfer system – largely on their own or without adequate support from sending or receiving institutions.

The lack of clear transfer pathways places the burden of navigating complex systems on students and results in lost transfer credits. Nationally, 43% of credits are lost when students transfer, and students who transfer from community colleges to public universities lose 20% of their credits on average (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017, Fig. 3). While articulation agreements and "2+2" models have been operationalized to address credit-loss barriers, most programs remain designed as general degree programs and remain unstructured within specific degree disciplines, resulting in students finding their way through a maze of transfer credit articulation policies. Given the complexity of the transfer system, it is unsurprising that fewer than one in 10 successful transfer students followed the 2+2 pathway. Many students who start the transfer pathway do not complete a bachelor's degree or ever transfer to a four-year institution at all (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Without clear, structured transfer pathways designed by partnering institutions to set transfer students up for success, the community college transfer pathway reinforces existing inequities in who does and does not have access to support and a sophisticated understanding of transfer.

When states and institutions do not design clear transfer pathways with aligned advising and support, it places an unreasonable burden that leaves students to navigate the complex transfer system on their own. This results in barriers that are most acute for Black, Latinx, AIAN, NHPI, and students from other marginalized groups (Wang, 2020).

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Figure 3: Estimated Percentage of Credits Lost in Transfer, on Average, by Transfer Path, Academic Years 2003-04 to 2008-09
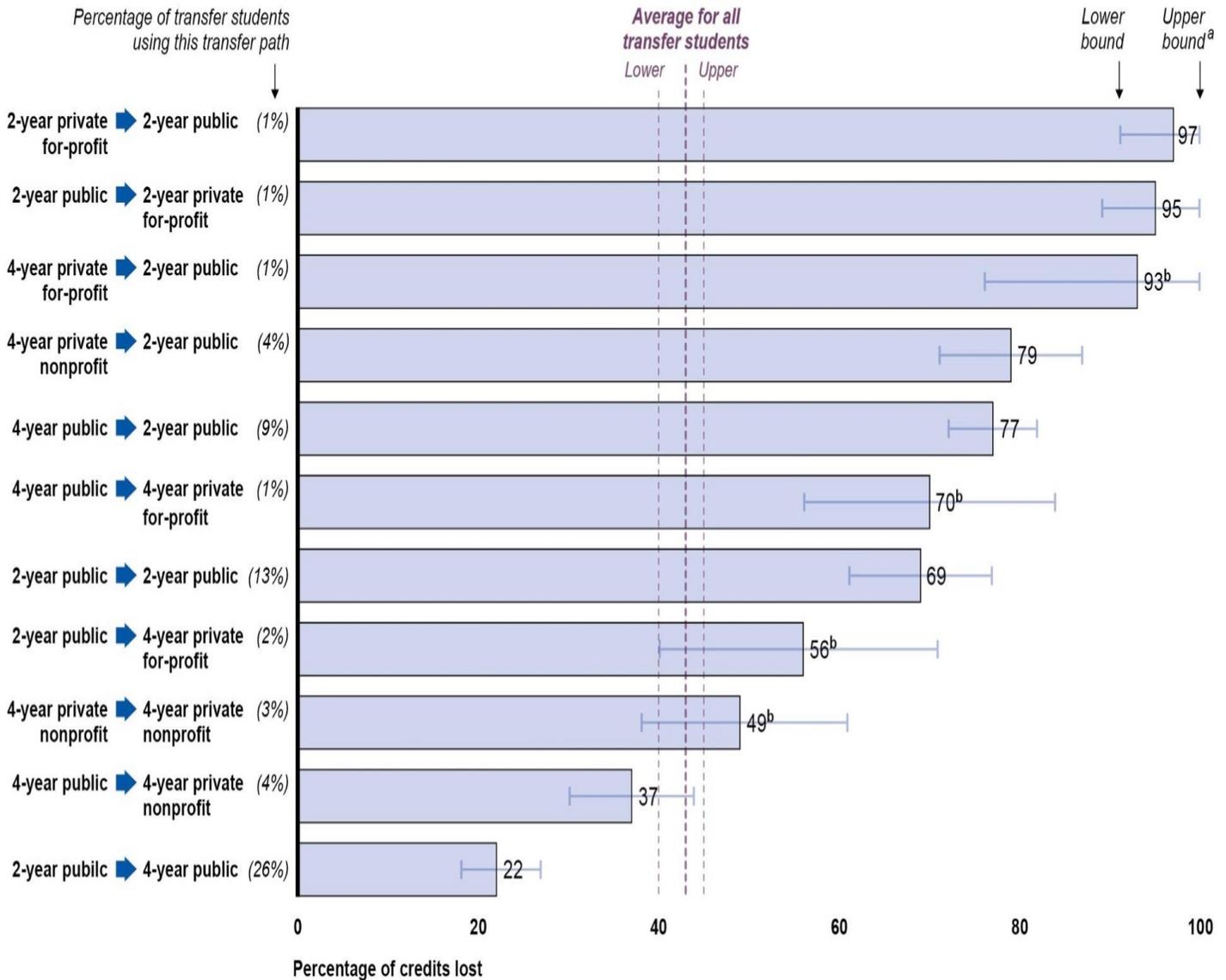
Source: GAO analysis of 2004-2009 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. | GAO-17-574

Community colleges commonly offer transfer advising to students, but it is generally up to students to seek it out (Karp, 2013). A national survey of transfer-intending community college students found that only about half of students reported ever using transfer advising services (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). Without adequate early transfer advising, students must individually figure out complicated transfer requirements that align with a baccalaureate major at a particular university. Some transfer-intending students are surprised to learn that not taking the right general-education coursework required for their chosen baccalaureate degree program results in having to retake similar courses after transfer and graduating with substantial numbers of excess credits (Fink et al., 2018). Existing scholarship confirms that excess credits are strongly correlated to higher stop-out rates due to exhausted financial aid, pushing students to work more hours and/or take fewer credits. These compounded circumstances result in students feeling demoralized, out of options, and stopping out before completing any credential.

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Best Practices and Recommendations

While not an exhaustive list of the barriers facing transfer students — including potential intersecting identities as student parents, children, caretakers, and employees — this section provides an overview of the challenges that transfer students face, resulting from institutional policies. The following sections provide recommendations for lawmakers, institutions, and practitioners to ensure that transfer is utilized as an essential lever to continue to affirm equity and achieve diversity in higher education.

- **Designing and Engaging in Effective Partnerships**

Effective partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions are those that prioritize transfer student success. These partnering institutions take responsibility for transfer-student advising and support, from the point of community college entry to four-year completion. This includes helping students explore options early on and creating a transfer plan based on major-specific transfer pathways, monitoring students' progress, and promptly reaching out with supports. These partnerships dedicate substantial resources to supporting transfer students, including transfer success as a core priority in strategic plans and tracking transfer outcomes as a part of key metrics assessing institutional performance. The partnerships with a strong commitment also organize faculty and academic leaders across their institutional partnership to create major-specific transfer pathways with aligned approaches to instruction, to ensure entering transfer students are prepared to succeed in upper-level program coursework.

- **Redesign Community College Onboarding and Advising**

For many community college students, advising ceases after enrollment in general-transfer programs and courses. This leads to students not being provided with additional supports to create a transfer plan aligned to a four-year institution and field of study. To implement transfer as an equitable practice, community colleges must revisit and revise advising and new-student onboarding, in order to implement guided pathways frameworks that include case-management style advising, additional advisors to reduce advising caseloads, and advisors organized by broad fields of study (e.g., advisors for students interested in business or STEM). Doing so will provide more specialized advising to transfer students. These models enable colleges to examine how they can better ask students about their educational and career interests, connect students to faculty and peers who share similar interests, strengthen teaching in introductory program coursework to inspire and invite students into academic programs, and help students build personalized educational plans toward their goals.

- **Building Transfer-sending and Receptive Cultures**

Important to transfer success is the development of transfer-sending and receptive university cultures. Creating transfer-friendly environments means increasing the visibility of transfers on campus. This would entail recognizing transfer-student achievements, correcting common

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myths or other misunderstandings about transfer students with data, and creating inclusive and identity-affirming spaces for transfer students. It is important to celebrate and honor the successes of transfer students and destigmatize the transfer pathway to provide models of possibility for future transfer student aspirants. Strong transfer-sending and receptive cultures provide a deep sense of belonging, which has strong correlations to retention and completion, particularly for students who may otherwise feel they did not receive a "traditional" college experience.

- **Establish and Maintain Major-specific Transfer Pathways**

States, systems, and partnering institutions should invest in creating major-specific articulation agreements that specify the exact pre-major lower-division courses that prospective transfer students should take at the community college, in order to gain access to the given major after transfer with all of their credits not only transferring, but critically, applying to the specific bachelor's degree requirements. Major-specific pathways such as the California Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) provide students with a greater structure to facilitate transfer and apply credits to baccalaureate degree requirements. They also guarantee students who select the pathway and complete the requirements are awarded a degree and earn guaranteed admission to a corresponding degree program.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Strengthening the community college transfer pathway means setting clear, public-transfer enrollment and success goals for public institutions that are disaggregated for specific student subgroups disproportionately impacted by the ineffective transfer system. These policies must include incentives that encourage states either

through legislation or their state's higher education coordinating bodies:

- to ensure credit transferability between community colleges and all four-year institutions (public and private) in the state,

- implement common course numbering shared by all community colleges in a state,

- guarantee admission to any public four-year institution in the state with junior-level standing for students with required GPA minimums,

- and adopt race-conscious reforms to transfer policies and practices that remove the barriers in the current transfer system that disproportionately exclude Black, Latinx, AIAN, and NHPI students from transfer as a more accessible and affordable route to a bachelor's degree.

While there is no simple answer to fixing transfer, the collective efforts to ensure students' access to seamless and equitable pathways to completion lie in robust collaboration and a multitude of stakeholders that prioritize transfer as a clear and affordable path for students' bachelor's degree attainment. An intentional focus on improving community college transfer will strengthen the capacity of institutions to equitably serve racially minoritized students. It will also increase public awareness and generate solutions to protect college opportunities for countless underrepresented students who have long struggled against the injustices ingrained in society.

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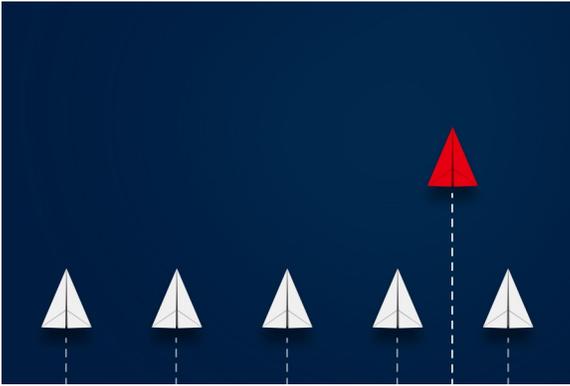
Reforming Developmental Education in Illinois

By Nina Owolabi and Stacy Bennett

Developmental education is a critical issue at community colleges. When first introduced, it was considered a means to support students in their pursuit of college-level courses. Yet, in more recent years, much of the research and discussion about developmental education has a decidedly negative tone (McGee, 2021), elevating the ways that placement has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups at the community college (Ganga et al., 2018).

In Illinois, 46% of the graduating high school seniors in 2015 who attended community colleges required some type of remediation (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). This number balloons for Black community college students, with 71% of the population being placed into developmental education (Equity Working Group, 2021) based on high stakes testing. With research demonstrating low rates of successful completion of developmental education courses and questions about disproportionate placement and cost to students, advocates and lawmakers have rightly called for action to address this equity issue.

In 2021, the Illinois General Assembly and Illinois Governor JB Pritzker responded to these inequities by passing and signing the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA) into law. DERA took a three-part approach to reforming developmental education at public colleges in Illinois. First, colleges and universities were required to change placement procedures, so that they included multiple measures for evaluating a student's abilities. These measures could include high school GPA, transitional courses, standardized test scores, and institutional placement tests to name a few. Second, higher education institutions were also required to develop new educational models to replace traditional non-credit developmental courses. Third, colleges and universities needed to scale their reforms so that they applied across the institution (Illinois General Assembly, 2021).

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Study

In consultation with the Illinois Community College Board, the Office of Community College Research and Leadership used both surveys and focus groups to gather information about the challenges and successes encountered by Illinois community colleges with implementation of the DERA requirements. Forty-four surveys were completed from 34 community colleges, and eight focus groups were conducted with community college faculty and administrators involved in the reforms. Overall, the focus-group discussions generally supported the survey responses and provided additional insight into those responses.

Challenges

Some Illinois community colleges have nearly completed all the DERA reform requirements, while others are still in the beginning stages. Even though institutions have made differing levels of progress, the challenges they have faced, and in some cases continue to face, are similar. Many challenges occurred at the institutional level, but some of them were contextual and outside of institutions' control.

Most Common Challenges Across the DERA Reform Process from Survey

	Placement	Curriculum	Scaling	Average
Lack of Outcomes Data	21%	24%	33%	26%
Stakeholder Buy-in	41%	28%	25%	31%
Lack of Staff Resources	26%	23%	18%	22%
Logistical Challenges	22%	34%	29%	28%

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Stakeholder buy-in, particularly regarding placement measures, was one of the most cited challenges faced by those trying to implement reforms. Faculty were the most frequently cited group that presented the most pushback on reforms. Many faculty were concerned that the new multiple-measures approach would not provide accurate information and lead to students not being prepared for the classes in which they were enrolled. Specific concerns included variability among high school courses and grading polices, the accuracy of students' high school GPA, and the time and resources required to make these changes. Additionally, there was disagreement at many institutions about the best developmental model to move to, as well as a concern that the students who needed the most assistance would be left behind.

Many of the logistical challenges were either directly or indirectly related to COVID. Most institutions had started working on the reforms just prior to the pandemic, so their efforts were greatly disrupted and put on the backburner when everything shut down. Those who had not started prior to the pandemic found it difficult to start due to the many other issues they had to address. Financial resources were diverted to efforts to adjust operations and instruction in the pandemic context, and staff resources were depleted greatly due to layoffs caused by low enrollments and attrition. Lack of staff and financial resources also impacted data collection and analysis. The new placement measures required a complete overhaul of many institutions' data systems, and they frequently found it difficult to find the staff and/or financial resources to make these changes.

Best Practices

As institutions work to implement DERA reforms, multiple community colleges identified key best practices that have supported strong faculty and staff buy-in as well as positive preliminary results. Participants in our study noted the following best practices across stages of implementation: cross-campus collaboration, professional development, and strengthening faculty/advisor relationships. These best practices tended to support

trustful relationships between key stakeholders involved in the developmental education process or helped to empower faculty as they worked to update or create new systems.

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**Most Common Best Practices Across the DERA
Reform Process from Survey**

	Placement	Curriculum	Scaling	Average
Collaborations Across Campus	68%	52%	61%	60%
Professional Development	46%	55%	52%	51%
Strengthening Faculty/Advisor Relationships	43%	57%	43%	48%

Our research demonstrated certain best practices supporting specific stages of DERA implementation. For instance, collaborating with feeder schools was critical for the placement phase of DERA implementation. However, when the time came to discuss how scaling would look, establishing an ongoing college-wide steering committee and ensuring a dedicated position to lead efforts were most useful to institutions. The timing of these initiatives likely influenced why institutions highlighted these as best practices, as institutions tend to have more interactions with feeder schools when incoming freshmen are preparing to graduate from high school. Campus-wide steering committees can also ensure accountability and leadership to address issues that may arise as developmental education reform scales.

These insights from administrators and faculty at community colleges statewide, who are directly responsible for DERA implementation, provide a valuable guide for future collaboration and support. There are opportunities to learn from one another and to provide widely available resources such as toolkits and professional development to build a more seamless process for reforming developmental education in Illinois.

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Creating Opportunities: The Role of Community Colleges in Empowering Student Parents

By Aidana Sirgebayeva and Nina Owolabi

Community colleges serve as a primary gateway to higher education for student parents, potentially leading to job prospects and well-paid careers. According to recent data, most student parents within the higher education system in the U.S. are currently attending community colleges (Huerta, et al., 2022b). The Urban Institute recently proposed this definition of a student parent: "someone who is enrolled in any level of education or training and is concurrently responsible for (or imminently will be responsible for) providing for a child of any age. They may be a biological parent, step-parent or unmarried co-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, grandparent, extended family member, or sibling caregiver" (Sick et al., 2023). About 42% of all student parents are enrolled in these institutions (Cruse et al., 2019). Although community colleges are perceived as committed to serving a diverse student population, access and completion challenges remain for student parents.

This report examines the current state of the student-parent experience and support system targeted at student parents at U.S. community colleges by reviewing literature from

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studies conducted from 2007 to 2023, with particular emphasis on the minimal data elevating the experiences of racially minoritized students.

According to Huerta et al. (2022a), student parents face vulnerability due to their familial obligations, child care needs, or financial pressures, often forcing them to leave college prematurely. Sallee & Cox (2019) highlighted that many student parents are first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds. As a result, this extends barriers to students' success in college and graduation.

Parenting students on average have better grades than non-parenting students (Cruse et al., 2019), and research also demonstrates a high sense of responsibility and self-efficacy with the completion of assignments among student parents (Peterson, 2016). Nevertheless, in cases where community college student parents might transfer to four-year institutions, there is evidence suggesting that their journeys could take significantly longer to complete compared to non-parenting students (Myers Dillon, 2023). If student parents do not complete a degree or certificate within six years, their journeys are not adequately captured by data tracking systems, such as IPEDS (Bivens, 2016), which further leads to a lack of understanding about the student-parent experience. Aspen Institute (2018) emphasizes the need for national, state, and institutional data on parenting students; consequently, most colleges need more information to assess student parents' well-being and progress accurately (Hatch & Toner, 2020).

The student-parent population is incredibly diverse (Perez, 2020). Cruse et al. (2019) estimate that most parenting students belong to racially minoritized groups, with one-third of that population being Black and an even larger percentage being Black women. According to data from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, nearly 75% of Black student mothers who attend community college are single and face particular financial challenges and barriers (Turner & White, 2023).

Black parenting students are also more likely than other student-parent groups to amass significant student-loan debt to support their families while in school (Reichlin Cruse & White, 2021). These financial strains coupled with high rates of basic needs insecurity, particularly during a high point of the Covid pandemic, can further complicate their ability to complete a credential or transfer to a baccalaureate institution (Kienzl et al., 2022).

The lack of widespread, strategic on-campus support for parenting students is unsurprising considering how the population frequently sits outside of the image of the so-called "ideal student," which would be white, male, in the age range of 18 to 24, dependent-free, and able-bodied (Madden, 2018; Moreau, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sallee 2020). This catering to

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the ideal student can result in a "chilly" environment in which student parents must decide whether to disclose their parenting status (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Madden, 2018).

Much research currently centered on community college-attending student parents often features few participants of color or only mentions race to the extent of explaining the demographic. Yet, what is missing and needed is a deep intersectional analysis that provides space for parenting students to share experiences across several pertinent identity markers including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability, among others. For student parents and their children who regularly encounter racialized trauma, much about their experience is missed without this intersectional perspective and analysis.

Student parents' experiences also shift based on the age of their children, marital status, and other factors. For instance, research elevates that most student parents have children who are in preschool or younger (Cruse et al., 2019). These parents can face even more challenges at college and are more likely to drop out than parents with older children, despite being highly motivated (Lovell, 2014a). These parents must be more concerned about available child care, not widely accessible despite a number of campuses having on-site centers (Johns et al., 2023).

One of the main goals of student parents who are attending community college to earn a degree is to have a better life and secure future for their children (Peterson, 2016). However, some studies have shown that not all community college students align their degrees and certificates to geographic labor-market needs (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Hora et al., 2021). This issue is also directly related to information from the community colleges. Karp (2013) argues that students need consistent access to a supportive resource within the college to help make informed decisions about their program. Moreover, Huerta et al. (2022a) support this with their study findings highlighting a need for a guided pathways approach, which will combine student parents own lived experience and skills and "move beyond a single and straightforward career capital" (p. 212). Institutional agents can be supportive of parenting students but can also act as gatekeepers to crucial resources (Huerta et al., 2022a; Sallee & Cox, 2019), thus "reproducing class- and race-based social structures through their differential provision of institutional support" (Sallee & Cox, 2019, p. 626).

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Recommendations

As this paper examines the current state of student-parent experiences and support systems at U.S. community colleges, it becomes evident that addressing unique needs is essential for promoting their success. Part of that effort requires energy from a broad group of institutional, regional, and national stakeholders that centers racial justice work across community college context to attune to the needs of racially minoritized parenting students, in addition to other recommendations below.

Institutions must:

- identify student parents and access their needs on campus to tailor resources,
- revise inflexible policies and student support systems to adjust them for students' demographics needs, and
- develop and mainstream family-centered campus initiatives such as creating specific spaces for parenting students to share their experiences.

Local, state, and national education entities must:

- provide the financial resources and collaborative space for institutions to feel empowered to do the work more broadly and consistently;
- develop student-affairs policy targeted to support student-parent needs.

Researchers must:

- explore the impact of national policies on community colleges' capacity to serve student parents, which will inform future interventions and improve the educational experience for this vulnerable and marginalized population (Cox & Sallee, 2018).

By addressing these challenges and implementing supportive measures, community colleges can continue to be vital in empowering student parents to pursue higher education and secure a better future for themselves and their children.

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