

## **Strengthening the Community College Pipeline**

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Community colleges have long provided high school graduates and adult learners an alternative entry point to 4-year higher education institutions. Although a large majority of students who enroll in a community college intend to go on to earn their bachelor's degree<sup>1</sup>, research indicates that nationally only about 30% of students are able to successfully transfer into a 4-year institution; and of those, only about 15% complete their bachelor's degree<sup>2</sup>. With pathways to higher education continuing to be more diffused and bachelor's degrees being preferred or required in the job market, these students represent a vital demographic requiring attention and support.

A bachelor's degree is widely considered a means to promote and improve individuals' economic stability<sup>3,4</sup>. Recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that adults with a bachelor's degree earn up to \$15,000 more annually<sup>5</sup>. According to the NC Dept of Commerce, occupations in our state requiring at least a bachelor's degree are predicted to grow at the fastest rate, providing an opportunity for the state and postsecondary institutions to think strategically about how to train North Carolinians to fill these roles<sup>6</sup>.

There are many factors that could affect a student's ability to successfully transfer from a community college to a major institution such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). North Carolina Transfer Student Voices<sup>7</sup> illustrates the potential confusion that students face when making decisions to transfer into a four-year institution by showcasing the 691 unique transfer patterns students can currently follow from the North Carolina community college system to a four-year degree program. Students have access to information about transfer that can serve to inform them or overwhelm them. The choices are important ones for students, advisors, and families especially as they think about ways to apply credits and maximize degree completion. This information could also be important for students and their families to consider as they explore available transfer pathways and the likelihood of academic and economic success in particular fields.

One mechanism to assist community college transfers into UNC-CH is the Carolina Student Transfer Excellence Program (C-STEP). This program provides a pathway for low- to moderate-income students with a means of starting their education at select community colleges and guarantees admission if they meet certain requirements. The program additionally provides academic and practical support once they arrive. It boasts an 82% graduation rate for students that utilize this program, though has supported a modest average of 133 students per year since its launch.

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<sup>1</sup> Wyner et al., *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges*. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, "Researchers hope to boost community college transfer and make it more equitable". 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings*. 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ma et al., *Education pays 2019: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*. 2019

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census, 2019

<sup>6</sup> NC Department of Commerce, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Miller et al., *North Carolina Transfer Student Voices: A Pilot Study Report*. 2022

To get a more precise understanding of this program and how it works, we will look at Daniel's life story. He is from a family of 7, and his parents, who did not attend college, worked endlessly to support his household as they struggled financially throughout his youth. When the time came for him to apply to colleges, his parents did not know how to navigate the application and financial aid processes. With only limited help from a school counselor, he was able to apply and get accepted to NC A&T. The first week of college was a hectic and stressful time for him, as he could not start classes until his mom was able to secure a loan to get him through his 1st semester of school. Unfortunately, he was ill prepared and had to return home and get a job at the end of that semester. Getting that job was a blessing in disguise, as it was at that job that he met a man that helped changed Daniel's life. He gave him focus, encouragement, and guidance. He put Daniel on the right track for success. With his guidance and mentorship, Daniel was able to work his way up from a temporary employee to a Crew Leader. He then was promoted to manager and is now an Assistant Director.

C-STEP does exactly this – C-STEP participants are set on the right path to graduate from UNC-CH and pursue successful careers. The program provides hands on guidance and mentorship to navigate the academic, application, and financial aid challenges that come with transferring into UNC-CH. This is further supported by an additional key takeaway from the before-mentioned North Carolina Transfer Student Voices report, and that is that students typically rely on one or two trusted partners to advise them through the transfer process.

C-STEP was founded in 2006 with funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which is a nonprofit centered around furthering the education of promising students who have financial hardships. The mission of the C-STEP program is to prepare community college students for transfer into and graduate from UNC-CH. The program currently partners with 14 of North Carolina's community colleges and has the bandwidth to allow 25 students per year from each college. The 14 community colleges are: Wake Technical, Durham Technical, Central Piedmont, Alamance, Cape Fear, Central Carolina, Guilford, Sandhills, Fayetteville Technical, Carteret, Craven, Robeson, Southwestern and Richmond. Wake Technical and Durham Technical community colleges are the top feeder schools into UNC-CH.

To be admitted to the C-STEP program, a student must not have completed more than 50% of their associate's degree, maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.2, be eligible for federal financial aid, and have a household income less than 3-times the national poverty level. Students who meet these requirements work with a counselor at their community college to submit a formal application that contains academic records, letters of recommendation, and two essays. Students who are accepted to the C-STEP program and maintain the minimum GPA while receiving their associate's degree are given automatic admittance to UNC-CH.

C-STEP employs a multi-pronged approach to ensure a successful transfer to, and graduation from, UNC-CH. First, the program provides academic and financial aid counseling while the students are still at the community college. Upon acceptance to C-STEP, the students will meet regularly with their faculty advisor as they progress toward meeting the academic requirements to transfer into their eventual degree program as a junior. Once the students successfully

complete their associate's degree and transfers into UNC-CH, the program provides an academic advisors and a peer mentor. Finally, C-STEP holds social functions across UNC-CH to help the transfer students become fully integrated members of the UNC-CH student body and to provide them with the full 'Carolina Experience'.

Funding from the C-STEP program covers the personnel effort necessary for the administration of the program as well as the advising of the students. This includes stipends for faculty at the community colleges to have dedicated time for advising the C-STEP students as well as for full time staff at UNC-CH to oversee the program, provide community outreach, and academic counselors. In addition, C-STEP will provide small stipends for students that choose to participate in non-funded internships that match with their career goals.

The C-STEP program has been a remarkable success for the students who have been admitted. It boasts an 82% graduation rate with an average GP of 3.0. This is in comparison to all community college transfers, who graduate at a rate of 69% with a 2.7 average GPA. In April 2023, UNC Chapel Hill's Chancellor Guskiewicz sent out a message welcoming over 1,000 transfer students to campus, both physically and virtually; not only did he underscore the importance of transfer students to the fabric of Carolina and leadership's commitment to investing in programs and resources that make it a welcoming environment, but he specifically called out C-STEP as an exemplary model of this in operation. To further this commitment, we propose several initial recommendations for consideration.

In order to understand the current landscape, bottlenecks, and possible opportunities, we first reached out directly to the UNC-CH C-STEP advisors and subject matter experts:

- Rebecca Egbert, Director, C-STEP
- Brian Woodard, Senior Assistant Director, C-STEP
- Beth Ann Wilber, Assistant Director, C-STEP
- Ni-Eric Perkins, Director, Carolina College Advising Corps

Based on their recommendations, we interviewed C-STEP advisors from four community colleges:

- Zak Matthews, Alamance Community College
- Angela Crisp-Sears and Charity Turner, Central Carolina Community College
- Lea Bingham, Durham Tech
- Loutricia Nelson, Fayetteville Technical Community College

All community college representatives spoke very highly of the UNC-CH C-STEP team members. Further, all interviewees agreed that C-STEP is a beneficial program and were eager to share their views on opportunities for taking the program to the next level. There were some common themes that emerged from these discussions, including: maximizing utilization of program capacity, improving communication coordination, delivery, and impact, and exploring expansion of sustainable funding model.

Currently UNC-CH has the capacity for 25 C-STEP students per term from each of the 14 community colleges that participate in the program. On average, the community colleges that we met with have 12-15 participants per term. From the community college perspective, C-STEP advisors do not have the capacity to assist 25 students per term, as the advisors have multiple areas of responsibilities, including teaching classes. Hence, the advisors' capacity to visit each high school within their communities, build awareness for prospective students, and increase the pipeline volume is limited.

Another common theme that emerged from these interviews is a need for more streamlined and better coordinated communication, which would assist with awareness building within communities, including outreach activities, such as information fairs being conducted for high schoolers. When UNC-CH ambassadors visit high schools and community colleges, the C-STEP advisors at those institutions may not even be aware of the scheduled event, and C-STEP itself may not be highly touted during the visit. A more coordinated effort could ensure that prospective students are getting all of the information they need about C-STEP to make an informed decision. In addition to better coordinated communication, C-STEP administrators and advisors have recommended that information about the program be available in writing and in multiple languages. This would result in better understanding and more effective communication, particularly for the families in the underrepresented communities that C-STEP hopes to target. Finally, the ability to communicate with C-STEP ambassadors via in-person or virtual meetings may result in increased participation and assist with the dissemination of information more broadly.

Generating a synthesis of interview responses, best practices elucidated in the research, and an assessment of the potential to make an immediate and positive impact on the UNC transfer landscape, we have devised the following recommendations:

1. *Enhance online self-service tools related to credit equivalency and transfer, degree mapping and auditing, and career pathway suggestions to improve clarity and illustrate both value and possibility.*

There are several existing resources that address various pieces of the process, but each is incomplete, and it is difficult to visualize the variety of pathways that one may need or want to pursue. We recommend creating one comprehensive tool that allows a prospective student (and/or a loved one, high school advisor, community college advisor, or UNC-CH transfer support staff) to explore credit equivalencies, required prerequisites, degree maps, and career paths.

This tool should allow a student to start at either end of the process – either to start with a career they want and trace back to see the paths to get there OR to start with the credits they have and work forward to see what degrees and possible careers they are aligning to. This would enable efficiency in course selection, reduce possible redundancy or extraneous classes, ensure knowledge of prerequisites, and sets a student up to not only meet their intended completion timeline and financial capacity but also to have a clear idea of what can

come next in terms of job placement and earning potential. There is additionally an opportunity to harness AI as an assistive tool in the creation, iteration, and expansion of such a resource.

Initially, we recommend piloting this tool by creating such maps based on the 14 community colleges partnered with C-STEP and testing it with their engaged advisors for feedback and adjustment. Long term, it could be expanded to all feeding community colleges and to other non-traditional transfer paths. Further evaluation metrics would include using data analytics to track website usage and unique users.

2. *Standardize and expand marketing and feedback networks to build early awareness among potential transfer students and establish career pathway partnerships with corporations or local organizations.*

Students will only explore UNC-CH transfer options if they are aware early on that it is something that can be within reach for them. We recommend increasing the frequency and regularity of communications with both high school and community college advisors and the provision of tailored, coordinated, multi-language materials that highlight available opportunities and resources for each community. Increased engagement with the community college advisors, in particular, may be accomplished by increasing virtual meetings to reduce duplication and prioritize regular input to inform the ongoing evolution of the pipeline and support system.

Beyond staff, it is important to prioritize early awareness and meaningful engagement within the communities themselves. One successful approach that should be purposefully pursued is the establishment of a feedback network, where current and past students who have been through the process return to their communities regularly to share their experiences and serve as mentors for others. Creating a context and culture where students, peers, family members, and community leaders/influencers understand and believe that this is a tangible and attainable option will further increase the impact of other efforts and the intentionality with which students are able to visualize pathways and harness their support systems in pursuit of a path that is the best fit for their talents and aspirations.

Finally, partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and corporations can be explored to build awareness and trust in the communities served by C-STEP and across North Carolina as well as to develop career pathway programs or open opportunities for sponsorship in support of community college-to-university transfer pathways.

3. *Root cause analysis and model proposal to better support community college advisors and expand their capacity to navigate students into various transfer pathways.*

Although each of the 14 community colleges participating in C-STEP has advisors who receive a stipend for their efforts in supporting C-STEP students, we found that they often did not have the bandwidth to adequately support and engage cohorts of students equal to the C-

STEP slots that are available. Figuring out how to support those individuals to match program enrollment to available capacity is critical to maximizing the impact of C-STEP and to developing a community college advisor support model that can be extrapolated and adapted to support other all transfer students aiming to move into UNC-CH.

Developing a model to provide advisors with more protected time for this support or additional staff to provide administrative support and to lead community-building efforts for each incoming cohort may improve outcomes but would probably require an agile structure to provide adaptability to the needs of each community and community college. This may require additional funding or a deeper examination of how to create an adequate, sustainable proposal that doesn't place an undue burden on the community colleges but does offer benefits to both them and their students. This will be best evaluated by the number of students in C-STEP from each community college. Optimally, we will get to the point where the program is meeting its capacity of 25 students from each community college per cohort.

4. *Leverage diverse UNC-CH transfer expertise while building on the success of the C-STEP model.*

As we've seen, C-STEP is a successful model that leverages close relationships and an innovative approach. However, it would be a mistake to consider it in a vacuum – part of ensuring sustainability, maximized capacity, high-quality students, and effective ongoing engagement is to consider the full transfer context at the University. Within admissions, advising, career services, and lifelong learning, there are a number of individuals who regularly engage with different facets of the potential transfer population; they should be purposefully connected and empowered to lean upon each other and develop channels for increased efficiency and efficacy. We believe that it is important to create a home and community for both transfer students and our staff that advocate for them.

5. *Establish a Center for Transfer Excellence at UNC-CH.*

To provide a clear, trusted, central home for transfer students and associated programs, our final recommendation is the creation of the Center for Transfer Excellence. In addition to fostering identity and community, it would bring together the expertise of our existing transfer/advising/career services staff and the strengths of our existing transfer programs, allowing them to leverage each other and provide all transfer students with the support and resources that they need. Even though these students don't start in the traditional way or come along the traditional paths, they really are valued students who are important members of the Carolina community.

Central access points like this one, are noted in the literature as an essential component of a successful 2-to-4-year transfer model<sup>8,9</sup>; they communicate the importance of transferring

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<sup>8</sup> Hodara et al., *Supporting Transfer Student Success in Oregon: Lessons from Oregon Community Colleges and Universities*. 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Wyner et al., *The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-year Colleges*. 2016.

students to the institution, centralize information, enhance the impact of available resources, allow for greater cross-functional collaboration, underscore students' identity, and provide an administrative and practical foundation within and upon which the transfer experience can thrive and evolve. The Center could be a clear driver for the above recommendations without extensive additional resources and without overburdening any individual group but to the benefit of all.

The creation of such a Center should be led by the subject matter experts who do this work daily. If we bring together the right folks and perspectives, they could really build something amazing and ensure that anyone who steps through the door, physically or virtually, has access to everything they need to feel supported and to be successful. Leadership from C-STEP and the Carolina Advising Corps would be ideal partners to identify and convene such a cross-functional group and lead the creation of a formal proposal, budget, timeline, and an iterative evaluation plan.

We believe that these initial recommendations lay a solid foundation upon which to build while moving the needle on transfer student interest and success here at UNC-CH. It will be critical to keep the student at the heart of the innovation, ensuring that future plans are student-centric and incorporate both lessons learned from across the nation as well as priorities and elements that have driven C-STEP's success here at UNC-CH. Every North Carolinian should have the opportunity to consider a path to UNC-CH. It's our job, collectively, to make sure that we create an environment that speaks to their priorities and supports them in that journey.