

**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 student experience typically focus on barriers impeding transfer from two-year to four-year institutional settings, or the experience of students who have already made the transition to four-year institutions. While this area of research is valuable in strengthening transfer and retention programs, it overlooks the significant number of qualified community college students who choose *not* to transfer to selective institutions, or worse, not transfer at all. These students fall into the transfer “choice gap.” In many ways, this problem is counter-intuitive. The college application “saga” consists of high school students (typically middle or upper-middle income) striving for admittance to selective institutions or community college students (typically lower income) experiencing obstacles to transfer to a four-year institution (i.e. the transfer gap). The problem of a *choice gap* among community college students eligible for admittance to selective institutions has not, to our knowledge, been properly articulated and addressed. This paper will focus on the existence of the choice gap at the urban community college that served as our research site, and identify barriers and potential solutions to transfer based upon student interviews and a comprehensive cultural audit at our research site.

Distinguishing the “transfer gap” from the “choice gap”

Community colleges represent the main gateway into higher education for under-represented students such as students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students (Bloom & Sommo, 2005). Their responsibilities include preparing students for transfer to four-year baccalaureate programs. The existence of the transfer gap and the choice gap represent different dimensions of the same problem: access to higher education.

- The *transfer gap* refers to the gap between the number of students who attain transfer eligibility status, as defined by the California State University and the University of

California, and the number of students who actually transfer to a four-year college. The transfer gap is calculated by determining the number of CSU- and UC-eligible students who did not transfer divided by the total number of transfer-eligible students. The existence of the transfer gap suggests a lack of institutional effectiveness in meeting the needs of already marginalized students.

- The *choice gap* refers to the gap between the students who, besides having attained the minimum requirements for transfer-ready status, also met the more stringent requirements for entry to the University of California (or similarly selective private institutions), and the number who actually transfer to such institutions. In other words, the choice gap refers to the rate of *non-transfer* to selective institutions, as determined by UC eligibility. The rate is calculated by determining the number of UC-eligible students who did not transfer to a UC campus, divided by the total number of UC-eligible students. The existence of the choice gap reminds us that we have more work to do in democratizing access to elite institutions.

While the choice gap has implications for all transfer applicants, its existence among minority students –the predominant population at community colleges – is of particular concern. Research suggests that minority students tend to reap greater benefits by attending selective institutions than their peers who attend less-selective institutions. They enjoy higher rates of graduation, greater income potential, greater likelihood of attending graduate programs, and greater likelihood of assuming leadership positions in the community (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Horn, 2007; Melguizo & Dowd, in press; Titus, 2006; Wyner, 2006). Unfortunately, access to elite institutions for the least affluent members of our society is limited: Dowd and

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.

inquiry team noted that only 520 out of 27,422 first-time freshman students who enrolled in fall terms 1999-2000 (1.9 %) completed Plans B and C (i.e. transfer requirements to the CSU and UC systems respectively) in three years. This low figure indicates the difficulty students generally have in attaining transfer eligibility at LBCC. These 520 students who attained transfer-readiness within three years were designated as “fast-track.”³ Among the fast-track students, 198 (38%) completed Plan C requirements for transfer to a UC campus by spring 2006. *However, only 20% of UC-eligible students transferred to a UC institution.* Over 50 % of UC-eligible students chose to transfer to a CSU campus instead. Another 8 % transferred elsewhere and 19% did not transfer at all (please see table 1 in appendix). Thus, the choice gap stands at an astounding 80% for the fast-track group as a whole (i.e. the share of UC-eligible students who do *not* transfer to the UC system).

There is wide variance in the choice gap by racial/ethnic group. Sixty-five percent of UC-eligible African-American students experience non-transfer to a UC campus; the rates for Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/a, White, and Other⁴ students are much higher, at 82%, 77%, 85%, and 74% respectively (please see table 3 in appendix). It appears that UC-eligible African American students are more likely to enroll in a UC campus when they are admitted compared to other groups of students. The relative success of African American students in enrolling at UC campuses may offer some insight into improving transfer for other groups of students.

The racial-ethnic distribution between students who are CSU- or UC-eligible, and those who are UC-eligible, shows a striking pattern that reinforces the problem of the choice gap (please see table 3 in appendix). The results in columns 1 and 2 (i.e. the number of CSU- and

³ The fast-track students were generally of traditional college-going age, carried a full-time course load, and performed well in their classes. They are unrepresentative of the general student body, who tend to be older and take classes on a part-time basis.

⁴ Students falling under the “Other” category include Filipino, Native American/Alaskan Native, Other and Unreported.

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

Project participants conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with UC- and CSU-eligible students. More than half of the 20 students completed Plan C, so they were eligible for UC admission. Among these UC-eligible students, only 4 transferred to a UC or equivalent selective institution; 7 transferred to a CSU; and 2 did not transfer at all. The student narratives offer a powerful lens to examine the choice gap. Please refer to table 4 in the appendix to see the profiles of the interviewed students. Excerpts from interviews with students appear in the “transfer stories” that follow.⁵ The first three narratives feature UC-eligible students who fell in the choice gap; the final narrative features a UC-eligible student who attended a selective institution to provide a contrast to the preceding stories.

⁵ These excerpts from the student interviews appeared in an unpublished report submitted to the Office of Superintendent-President of Long Beach City College in December 2007. All names are pseudonyms. Only four “transfer stories” were selected for this paper due to space limitations.

“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. “Right now, I don’t have any student debt, and I’m happy to be able to say that.”

The benefits of being an Honors student

Raquel described herself as “pretty aggressive” and always able to find the resources she needed. She looked for information on transfer requirements, transfer deadlines, and the transfer process. She was a loyal user of the writing center and she also “got to know” her professors “really well” and frequently sought them out during their office hours.

The Honors Program seemed to be the best place to get information and support. “Honors,” she said, “was superior for transfer information. First, all my professors assumed we were going to transfer. They were always promoting transfer and giving us transfer information.” She also added, “It really helped to have counselors come into class to talk to us about transfer opportunities and encourage us.”

Raquel made it clear that she was proactive about getting information but that a lot of students she knew “stay for a long time because they don’t know how to move and they don’t ask.” She was very knowledgeable about the procedures and how to prepare for transfer but “a lot of people don’t have a clue about a major, and you need to declare a major when you apply for transfer. A lot of my friends don’t have a clue about what they want to do. They haven’t had enough experience or taken enough courses, so they don’t know about their major and they stay [at LBCC].”

“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
- Find a way to hand everyone information about transfer

Raquel recognized that there is a lot of information available at LBCC for those who know how to look for it. “I know all the information that’s needed is there, but I guess it would help to nag a little more so students can’t miss it.” Although Raquel had not transferred, she received information to set a clear career and educational path for herself at LBCC and will rely on aid from her employer to finance her continuing education.

“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 Long Beach State, I didn’t have the bad vibes, I felt good...it felt like a second home.”

The story of Juan Ruiz, a Filipino, illustrates the factors that influenced high achieving students to limit their transfer options to local institutions. Juan Ruiz is a first generation student from a working-class family. He enrolled at LBCC when he was 18, after graduating from Lakewood High School, where he was in the top five percent of his high school class. Juan Ruiz was a Bank of America Scholar and also had a Rotary Club Scholarship. Juan Ruiz could have easily gone directly into CSU-Long Beach in Fall of 2002, but instead decided to complete the first two years of college at LBCC.

The financial and social benefits derived from community college attendance

Even though Juan Ruiz had his heart set on going to Long Beach State ever since he could remember, there were three reasons that made him decide to complete the first two years at LBCC: the price, the associate degree, and gaining more confidence. “Long Beach City College not only has education with value, because of the price, but also the associate degree that comes with it can help you get the inside track to any work whatsoever.” Juan Ruiz spoke about his personal circumstances,

Keep in mind, my family was really on—really on a shoestring budget at the time. I think that the two important things, hand in hand, were the price and the associate’s degree. Long Beach City’s degree will have a lot of good weight. It’s really great value. Just compare that to \$1500 for 12 units for one semester over at Long Beach State to like about maybe \$300 or so for tuition at LBCC. It’s definitely a steal.

For Juan Ruiz, the Associate degree was something to fall back on “if the bachelor thing doesn’t work out.” It was not just the money but also academic quality. “The caliber of education here at LBCC is, is, it’s good, maybe even better or the equivalent over at any university during the freshman and sophomore years. The decision was very easy.” He also thought that going to LBCC would be a way of “maturing faster...and have more confidence [when eventually] heading to [CSU] Long Beach.”

The grandeur of selective universities and anticipatory rejection

Juan Ruiz was in the Honors program at LBCC and completed Plan C with a GPA of 3.32, which more than likely made him eligible for admission to many other institutions besides CSU. In his last year at LBCC, Juan Ruiz went on a campus tour to UCLA but something about the campus did not seem “to feel right.” As a student in an Honors program that is certified by UCLA, he had a reasonable chance of admittance. However, he said,

All these buildings, gothic buildings, Royce Hall and all that, it was like, I just—I somehow I was getting a feeling that this wasn’t going to be the university for me. Somehow when I was walking up the steps, visiting all the different buildings, even eating in some of the restaurants, I somehow just had shivers and a bad feeling that this wasn’t going to be where I was going.

Elaborating more about his feelings for UCLA, Juan Ruiz mentioned having watched a water polo game between UCLA and Arizona State: “they were doing a PAC 10 water polo match, but I just didn’t feel like this was going to be where I was going to continue on...It was just bad vibes, the aura did not look very favorable for me.”

The competitiveness of UCLA, along with the fear of rejection, also influenced Juan Ruiz’s decision. “I would say that even though I would give it my best shot and I would have

had a strong case, they can only take so many students and I don't think that...If I wanted UCLA and UCLA did not accept me, I would have been traumatized."

Anxieties about selective college costs and anticipatory debt

But it was not just the sheer size or competitiveness of UCLA that made Juan Ruiz "shiver." There were also practical issues of finance, transportation, and residence. He said: "I am living with my parents, and to get to UCLA, I would have to take public transportation. It would be probably easier for me to live in the dorms, but that is going to be adding to the tuition." As Juan Ruiz talked more about why he had decided not even to apply to UCLA, he spoke at great length about the costs of more selective institutions:

No doubt, I would love to have been—be at USC or UCLA—heck, I would even love to be going to the East Coast at Harvard. But, you know, transportation and all the cost for room and board and all that, it just—it just did not look like—like I was going to be going. The tuition was a little bit—little bit—it was a little bit too, too, too, a little bit too much, and it was—tuition was a little bit too much.

Juan Ruiz decided against USC because the tuition was too high. He was also under the impression that to get admitted one has to have "connections" to a family or friends who have gone there. "You gotta be connected and you gotta have the funds to pay for that stuff." Below is an excerpt of the exchange between the interviewer and JRS.

Interviewer: When students are making the decision on what school to transfer to, we've heard from a lot of students that money is an issue. For example, USC is a very expensive school. But they also have more scholarship money, did anybody help you look into that?

Juan Ruiz: Yeah, money, money---It was more for me about retail price, you know money doesn't grow on trees. I could easily become accepted at USC and then I wouldn't be given any scholarships, because everybody wants to get scholarships, everybody wants to get free money. Or you'll have to be on loans for a long time...even like 20 years after you graduate and get your degree. I don't want to go on loans because

if I don't get them paid by the date, then everybody's going to be knocking on my door and get a default and they are going to be taking money out of my paycheck to pay for it.

Like Raquel Roque, Juan Ruiz was set against taking out loans. He concluded that, "UCLA and USC, not worth it [getting in debt], even if I did get accepted."

Counselors and clubs: Informal means of academic support and validation

Juan Ruiz had continuous and frequent contact with his counselor and made sure "everything was accounted for" in terms of the classes he took. He saw his counselor every month and commented that one of the great things about LBCC is having counselors who can help in the selection of classes that meet requirements. He also said that "student life" had helped him out greatly. Juan Ruiz took advantage of special courses such as "College Study Techniques" and "Orientation for College Success." Every semester, starting in Fall 2002, he took Learn 617, which is a non-credit course on "Educational Technology Skills for Colleges" that provides access to computer labs.

On his first semester Juan Ruiz joined the Order of Tong International, which according to a description on LBCC's website, is the oldest community college men's social service club in the United States. The club emphasizes academics and athletics. Juan Ruiz found that the involvement in clubs helped him join study groups and opened doors to other organizations. The members were supportive and provided helpful advice. The volunteer service program sponsored by Tong, he said, "helped me put the skills I learned from my classes in the community." Because membership in TONG requires the maintenance of a minimum GPA there is a built-in pressure for the "brothers" to be "academic compliant." Another positive aspect of clubs is that "they [members] make sure all those folks are up to date with their courses. They

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 him a bid; and his math instructor was not very friendly. "That first semester was something that I will never forget. I was feeling like those American Idol rejects who are not able to go to the next round." After that first semester "baptism by fire" and learning how to "jump [the course scheduling] hoops" he was able to move on. Juan Ruiz, who transferred to CSU Long Beach in 2005, is scheduled to complete his bachelor's degree in Information Systems in Fall 2007.

“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 in the level below transfer for English and in transfer level math. Her reading scores put her at the proficiency level, but she chose to enroll in a developmental reading course. However, she was able meet the UC transfer requirements within four years.

At LBCC Marisol majored in music and by all indications she must have been an excellent student because she earned mostly A’s in her music courses. As a high school student, Marisol was in AP and honors program and in a Distinguished Scholars program. She was an elected officer in Alpha Gamma Sigma, an honors society, and a member of Leaders Across Campus, a selective club based on academic eligibility and other screening criteria.

Marisol enrolled in LBCC because she did not know that she could go anywhere else and because her brother was a student. “And” she added, “it’s cheaper.” “I didn’t really look into a four-year university. I thought that what I had to do was come here [to LBCC].” She mentioned that the high school counselors advised students to go to LBCC because it is cheaper and they get “actual instructors” instead of “student instructors,” as in the UC or CSU systems.

Marisol received financial aid and was also the recipient of the Rotary Club scholarship. Her intent always was to transfer to CSULB. However, when she applied she was not admitted to the music program and thus went instead to the only other school she had applied, CSU

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 because, despite having transferred successfully to a selective college, he had several characteristics that have been associated with high risk for dropping out and not transferring. As a Latino he belongs to a vulnerable minority group with a history of low degree attainment. At LBCC, based on his basic skills assessment scores, he was placed in English and Math courses below college level. Additionally, he was a first-generation student who met the income and educational criteria for participation in EOPS.

Many high achieving students decide not to apply to selective institutions because of the cost of tuition and the reluctance to accept loans as part of a financial aid package. Ernesto was different; he willingly risked indebtedness in order to attend his dream college. When the interviewer mentioned students' apprehension about the price of private universities, Ernesto answered: "It was a sacrifice that I was willing to make and it's worth it. It's a good investment."

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.

The relational aspects of transfer

LBCC provides students with information on transfer to four-year colleges in various ways: one-on-one counseling, college fairs that bring recruiters on campus, workshops, and college tours. Surprisingly, Ernesto said he had not participated in any of the organized transfer activities sponsored by LBCC. The only exception, he said, was when a USC admissions representative visited the campus. The manner in which Ernesto connected with the USC representative illustrates the extent to which students' transfer choices and opportunities may depend on sophisticated social skills and personal confidence. We surmised that Ernesto, being a presidential ambassador, learned how to interact naturally and comfortably with individuals in positions of authority. He also seemed to appreciate the benefits of developing important relationships. He described the meeting with the USC recruiter as follows: "I went to see her and I introduced myself and it turned out that she was on the Admissions Review Board. I stayed after and I talked to her for awhile. I got to know her really good, and she helped me to get into SC. She went out of her way to help me out." When the time came for Ernesto to apply to USC, he was able to enlist her help in shepherding his application through the admissions process.

Ernesto also received a lot of help from counselors and teachers. In fact, by his calculations in the three years he was at LBCC he met with a counselor between 10 and 16 times. Additionally, when it came to writing the college application essays, he said "I had my teachers, I had people look at them. Every single person that I talked to kind of gave me advice."

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.

Cultural and Resource Audit of Transfer

The inquiry team members collected data through observations on campus, interviews with colleagues, and analysis of campus information sources. These sources included websites maintained by LBCC or state, university, or private organizations; and printed documents such as course catalogs, flyers, brochures, booklets, guidebooks, information request postcards, application forms, and articulation agreements. The team members used a Transfer Self-Assessment Inventory (SAI) to guide their research. This tool was developed by USC Center for Urban Education in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts Boston (Dowd, Gabbard & Bensimon, 2006) based on a national case study of transfer from community colleges to highly selective colleges and universities (Gabbard, et al., 2006) and life history interviews with community college students who successfully transferred to highly selective colleges (Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, Marquez, & Park, 2006; see also Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, Macias, Dee, et al. 2006; Dowd, Cheslock & Melguizo, in press; Dowd, Singleton, Macias, Dee, Bensimon, Dowd, et al, 2006). The tool consists of a series of indicators of exemplary transfer practices in the areas of transfer counseling, financial support, institutional transfer practices and policies, and partnerships and collaborations. The assessment tool enables a comprehensive audit of transfer culture and practices.

Results

Community colleges typically serve first-generation students and immigrants, but are not well-equipped to orchestrate a major marketing and outreach effort to communicate complex transfer information to their audience. For example, the LBCC Transfer Center made the most of its limited copying budget by creating flyers and brochures with small type and a jam-packed

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 Polytechnic University Pomona, UCLA, UC Irvine, and UC Santa Barbara. The inquiry team noted that significant differences in the level of participation of four-year institutions depending on their level of selectivity and enrollment demand. The most selective institutions behaved like "choice colleges" as they have the ability to choose among numerous applicants. Less selective institutions that had not reached enrollment capacity behaved like "supply colleges." The latter were more likely to market themselves at the transfer fair. CSU Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) recruits transfer students through telemarketing, mailings, and special receptions. Vanguard University provides information on tuition discounts, federal

and state grants (i.e. Pell and Cal grants), department-level contact information for academic advising, and on-site assessment of transfer-credit eligibility. CSU Long Beach and Dominguez Hills were the most active participants, sending representatives to campus 15 and 12 times respectively in the spring 2007 semester.

The example of CSUDH is particularly illustrative of how aggressive recruitment tactics can encourage transfer. CSUDH organized a range of activities as part of its “Day with Dominguez Hills” event on the LBCC quad. A team member described what she learned though an informal interview with a CSUDM representative and her observations of the interaction between CSUDM counselors and LBCC students:

A person in the [CSUDM] transfer office invites both deans and faculty members from different departments to be part of the fair, so they can field specific questions regarding their departments’ requirements; she thinks it’s having a positive impact. I saw representatives from the Music department, Human Services, Liberal Studies, Army Reserve Officer’s Training, and Financial Aid (whose representative was speaking in Spanish to a student!). There were brochures available from Public Administration, English, Anthropology, and World Cultures as well.

She also has an evaluator present, so that on-site admissions can be done. She wants to be proactive in order to increase the number of transfer students to Dominguez Hills, and also encourages her faculty to be available to make presentations. She encourages her faculty to be available to make presentations in community college classrooms. Once students are at Dominguez Hills, they seem to do well, so her goal is to increase the number of transfers. As part of her pro-active stance, she also makes sure that transfer fairs are held where they will be visible to the greatest number of students (near food/financial aid/the bookstore).

The efforts of CSUDH have reaped rewards. In 2006-2007, 163 LBCC students transferred to CSUDH, including 32 African American students and 46 Latino students. More than a third of UC-eligible students choose to transfer to the CSU system in spring 2007; recruitment practices such as those detailed above may be a part of the reason why.

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 informational. For each category, we describe barriers and enablers, and suggest potential solutions.

	Barrier	Enabler	Potential Solution
Practices	<p>Access to four-year college recruiters. Currently only schools in the CSU system, with possibly the exception of Cal Poly Pomona, have open transfer fairs. None of the UC campuses have open transfer fairs. Meeting with a recruiter is by appointment only. One of the researchers commented that requiring appointments could be perceived as “elitist” and unwelcoming. Students may be more likely to attend a fair that is open to all students instead of scheduling an appointment. Having to make an appointment may be intimidating for students who are not sure what questions to ask and feel apprehensive about meeting a stranger, particularly from an institution that has an established reputation as selective.</p>	<p>The transfer center provides students with opportunities to visit colleges outside of the local area. During an interview with a counselor, team members learned that the transfer staff coordinates 5-day campus visits to Northern California universities during Spring Break. Two transfer coordinators, as well as two male and two female chaperones provided through the EOPS Office, travel with 100 students on the tour of northern campuses. A campus tour to universities in the San Diego area is in the planning stages for Spring 2008. Most trips involve a nominal charge of about twenty-five dollars. In addition, there is a special trip to UC Berkeley where students attend a summer transfer event. The students who are admitted into the special program receive free transportation, accommodations and meals.</p>	<p>Determine which students make appointments with university recruiters and whether particular groups of students are less likely to do so. Find out how students how feel about having to make an appointment. Assess the need for special outreach.</p> <p>Seek feedback from recruiters who require appointments on the recruitment process. Encourage them to treat transfer fairs as walk-in advising opportunities and to be more approachable to students. It may be useful to prepare students for holding a conversation with a four-year recruiter, e.g., what questions to ask, how to communicate their interest in the institution.</p> <p>Familiarize students with selective campuses so they are more likely to enroll if admitted. Overnight programs where potential transfer students stay with undergraduates may help them feel more connected to the institution. Campus tours should spotlight all academic resources available to all students (e.g. research support at libraries, computing support at computer labs, etc.) so students are aware that help is available if needed.</p>

	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 need help. In addition, they also tell students that they will check their applications on-line. These practices provide a personal touch that may help students overcome barriers to transfer.</p>	<p>Anti-anxiety programs. Psychologists who work with clients that suffer various phobias use behavioral modification techniques to acclimatize people to their fears and gradually expose them to different degrees of anxiety provoking situations. Similarly, students who do not see themselves as potential transfers or who are fearful of the unknown could be introduced to the idea of transfer gradually.</p> <p>Invite alumni who transferred to selective institutions to speak to current students about their experience. Seeing students like themselves being successful could be a powerful motivator.</p> <p>Expose students to the many types of selective colleges (e.g. small liberal arts, large research universities). One inquiry team member suggested ask faculty members to wear clothing from the university that they attended so that students can see where faculty members were educated. The purpose would be to make a personal connection and to encourage students to talk to their professors about their experiences at their schools.</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, “Go to the Transfer Center,” 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	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.	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.	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.

	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>	<p>Foster a culture of electronic communication among students and faculty: LBCC would benefit from establishing various means of communicating with students and full-and part-time faculty, including email accounts, text-messaging, instructors' announcements, and electronic bulletin boards. Providing email accounts to students in particular offers a number of advantages. Campus offices have an easy way to disseminate <i>uniform</i> and accurate information to students and faculty regarding academic and transfer policies to students. Emails can be tailored depending on students' course enrollment and class-standing or faculty members' teaching commitments. For example, students and faculty taking or teaching transfer-level courses could obtain information about an on-campus transfer fair. Similarly, students and faculty taking or teaching basic skills courses could learn about academic support services. Now that email constitutes a basic form of communications technology, it is important to help students familiarize themselves with it and use it as a means to enhance their computing skills.</p>

Conclusion

Researchers and policymakers typically focus on the transfer pathway as a means to potentially expand access to higher education. The barriers to transfer documented in the literature (e.g. Jenkins, 2007; Freeman, Conley, & Brooks, 2006) are compounded by the choice gap we found at the research site. As noted above, the choice gap for LBCC students in the examined cohorts stands at an astounding 80 percent. In other words, only 20 percent of those eligible for transfer to the UC system made the transition to a selective institution within the time period studied. The pool of UC-eligible students at LBCC in Spring 2006 was limited to 198 students. Of those students, more than half transferred to the California State University (CSU) system, and more than a third did not transfer to any institution. Only 40 students –out of a potential pool of 198 – transferred to a UC campus. Imagine if this situation exists, unnoticed, at other community colleges throughout the state of California. Transfer cannot serve as a viable pathway to selective institutions if qualified applicants choose not to apply or enroll in the UC system.

The student narratives provide insight in some of the reasons why the choice gap exists. For example, Juan Ruiz's description of the "shivers" he felt while touring UCLA suggests that a mix of wariness and fear of rejection compelled him not to even apply. He also named the cost of attendance and perceived lack of "connections" as other deterrents, concerns echoed by other interviewed students. His story contrasts sharply with that of Ernesto Ramirez, who benefited from "people before [him] that laid down the process" and ultimately enabled his transfer to USC: his professors, counselors, peers, and even a USC recruiter. Unfortunately, the experiences of students like Juan are often missing from discussions of the transfer experience. Their absence from selective institutions has implications for social mobility for minorities and increased

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		
	CSU Eligible ^a (Completed Plan B)	UC Eligible ^b (Completed Plan C)	Total
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 transfer eligible within three years of first enrolling at LBCC. The sample studied is drawn from a multi-year population of 27,422 students who enrolled for the first time at LBCC in the years 1999-2002.

^a IGETC certified students who completed CSU transfer-eligible courses (LBCC’s curriculum “Plan B”), excluding those who were UC eligible.

^b IGETC certified students who completed UC transfer-eligible courses (LBCC’s curriculum “Plan C”).

Table 2. Joint Frequency Distribution of Transfer Status by Race and Ethnicity among LBCC Fast-Track Transfer-Eligible Students, 1999-2002

Racial-Ethnic Group	CSU or UC Eligible (Completed Plan B and Plan C)			UC Eligible Only (Completed Plan C)		
	(1) N (% of eligible students)	(2) Transferred (% of transfers)	(3) Did Not Transfer ^a (% of non-transfers)	(4) N (% of eligible students)	(5) Transferred to a UC (% of transfers)	(6) Did Not Transfer to a UC (% of non-transfers)
African American/ Black	38 (7.3%)	35 (8.6%)	3 (2.7%)	17 (8.6%)	6 (15.0%)	11 (7.0%)
Asian/ Pacific Islander	107 (20.6%)	84 (20.6%)	23 (20.5%)	34 (17.2%)	6 (15.0%)	28 (17.7%)
Hispanic/ Latina/o	136 (26.2%)	111 (27.2%)	25 (22.3%)	48 (24.2%)	11 (27.5%)	37 (23.4%)
White	163 (31.4%)	121 (29.7%)	42 (37.5%)	68 (34.3%)	9 (22.5%)	59 (37.3%)
Other	76 (14.6%)	57 (14.0%)	19 (17.0%)	31 (15.7%)	8 (20.0%)	23 (14.6%)
Total	520 (100%)	408 (100%)	112 ^b (100%)	198 (100%)	40 (100%)	158 (100%)

Note. “Fast-track” refers to students who became CSU or UC transfer eligible within three years of first enrolling at LBCC. The sample studied is drawn from a multi-year population of 27,422 students who enrolled for the first time at LBCC in the years 1999-2002.

^a Students who had not transferred as of Spring 2006 are treated as non-transfers.

^b This group includes 37 UC-eligible and 75 CSU-eligible students.

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 first enrolling at LBCC. The sample studied is drawn from a multi-year population of 27,422 students who enrolled for the first time at LBCC in the years 1999-2002.

^a The transfer gap rate is the number of CSU- and UC-eligible transfer students who did not transfer divided by the number eligible multiplied by 100.

^b The choice gap rate is the number of UC-eligible transfer students who did not transfer to a UC divided by the number eligible multiplied by 100.

Table 4. Characteristics of the Twenty Students Interviewed

Demographics	Educational Pathways
Gender	Eligibility
Female (15)	CSU eligible and transferred to CSU (1)
Male (5)	CSU eligible and transferred elsewhere (0)
	CSU eligible but have not transferred (6) ^a
Race/Ethnicity	UC eligible and transferred to UC (3)
Latino (5)	UC eligible and transferred to CSU (7)
Latina (3)	UC eligible and transferred elsewhere (1)
White (3)	UC eligible and did not transfer (2)
African American/Black (2)	
Asian American (2)	Fast-track students
Filipino (2)	Yes (14)
Cambodian (1)	No (6)
International (1)	
Other (1)	Still enrolled at LBCC
	Yes (9)
Age	No (11)
18-24 (12)	
Older than 24 (8)	Still enrolled at four-year transfer institution
	Yes (7)
High School Origin	No (13)
Lakewood (4)	
Long Beach Polytechnic (2)	Completed Bachelor's Degree
Milikan (1)	Yes (5)
Wilson (1)	No (15)
Out of District/Others (12)	
	Completed Master's Degree
Financial Aid Recipient	Yes (0)
Yes (14)	No (20)
No (6)	

^a We added six transfer-eligible students who had not transferred to the group of students who were interviewed. These students were not part of the fast-track group, but we interviewed them to learn what was preventing them from transferring and to shed light on the “transfer” gap (the research project’s original purpose was to examine both the transfer and choice gaps, hence the mix of students in the interview pool; this paper focuses on findings regarding the choice gap only, but we have included the profiles of all the students who were interviewed in the appendix).