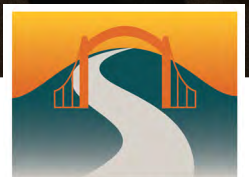


# The African American Transfer Tipping Point:

Identifying the Factors That Impact Transfer  
among African American/Black Community  
College Students

Brief 1 of 3

The  
African American  
Transfer Tipping Point Study



THROUGH THE GATE™  
theRPgroup



Research • Planning • Professional Development  
for California Community Colleges

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October 2022



# Introduction

Nearly two-thirds of African American/Black individuals who attend college in California begin their postsecondary journey at a community college—yet, they are not being provided the supports necessary to succeed, as evidenced by the fact that nearly half wind up leaving without any degree or certificate and without transferring to a university.<sup>1</sup>

California recognizes the critical importance of transfer in ultimately achieving a diverse, qualified workforce. The transfer goals outlined in the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Vision for Success, the state's Guided Pathways movement, and the establishment and expansion of the Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T) are all working to strengthen transfer outcomes. Yet, only 3% of African American/Black students successfully transfer from a California community college (CCC) to a university in two years and just 35% successfully transfer within six years, compared with 45% of their White peers (ibid).

Achieving the goal of transfer is critical, as not only are lifetime earnings significantly higher for those who attain a bachelor's degree, but the



## Short on time? Read this...

Completing units in a timely manner is most predictive of whether an African American/Black student makes it near the transfer gate; however, timely unit completion is not enough.

- African American/Black students who **pass both transfer-level English and math in the first year** are more than 300% more likely to make it near the transfer gate than those who do not.
- **Receiving academic counseling** increases the likelihood that an African American/Black student will make it near the transfer gate; however, counseling is more impactful for non-African American/Black students.
- **Participation in Umoja** is associated with an increased likelihood of making it near the transfer gates among African American/Black students.
- African American/Black **Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS) students** are slightly less likely to make it near the transfer gate than non-DSPS African American/Black students.
- African American/Black students from **low-income backgrounds** are slightly less likely to make it near the transfer gate than African American/Black students not from low-income backgrounds.
- **Being placed on academic probation presents a significant barrier** to making it near the transfer gate for students of all races/ethnicities, yet it is especially salient for African American/Black students, as they are more likely to be placed on academic probation in the first place.

<sup>1</sup> The Campaign for College Opportunity. (2021). *The State of Higher Education for Black Californians*.



availability of jobs for those with only a high school diploma is also declining.<sup>3</sup> Decreasing existing racial inequities in transfer rates is a key strategy for increasing racial and income equality, as doing so will increase diversity within the workforce and provide an educational bridge to economic mobility to individuals with historically limited access to high-skill and living-wage careers.

Over the past five years, The RP Group's *Through the Gate*<sup>4</sup> transfer study developed a deeper understanding of how CCC students experience transfer pathways. In the first phase of this work, an enlightening finding was revealed: While African American/Black students were less likely to make it near the transfer gate than students of other racial/ethnic groups, among students who *did* reach this milestone, African American/Black students were significantly *more* likely to transfer than their peers.

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3 Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Cheah, B. (2013). *The college payoff: Education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

4 <https://rpgroup.org/through-the-gate>



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

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

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

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

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

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

**This brief is #1 in a three-part series presenting results from the first two phases of this work.**

Find more information about *Through the Gate* at [www.rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate](http://www.rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate) and the *African American Transfer Tipping Point* at [www.rpgroup.org/aattp](http://www.rpgroup.org/aattp).

**When compared with White students, African American/Black students are 2.04 times more likely to transfer than to remain near the gate and 1.17 times more likely to transfer than to remain at the gate.<sup>5</sup>**

These data suggest an alternative narrative to common perceptions about which racial/ethnic groups are most likely to achieve successful transfer outcomes. The problem is that too few African American/Black students are making it to the transfer gate in the first place. According to these findings, if more students could make it this far—near the transfer gate—their chances for success would increase dramatically. Thus, additional research is warranted to identify which factors have the greatest influence on whether African American/Black students make it near the transfer gate.

This research brief provides findings from the first phase of The RP Group's *African American Transfer Tipping Point* project. Via rigorous quantitative analysis of student-level data, this phase of the study was designed to answer: **What factors contribute to African American/Black students' likelihood of making it to the key milestone of near the transfer gate?**

## Population

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The study population included data for six first-time cohorts of students enrolled at a CCC between 2011 and 2016 and tracked for six years. Students were included if they had completed at least 12 transferable units with passing grades and had not yet enrolled in a university. The final sample included 69,242 African American/Black students and 778,977 non-African American/Black students.

## Methodology

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The analyses employed a two-phased approach. First, exploratory decision tree modeling was used to identify the factors most predictive of reaching key milestones in a student's transfer trajectory and to refine the model. Several predictors were included in the model to predict whether a student reached at least near the gate (earned  $\geq 60$  transferable units with a 2.0 GPA), which were organized into the two categories on the following page.

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<sup>5</sup> Definitions: Students At the Gate: Achieved an AD-T or completed the requirements for transfer [ $\geq 60$  transferable units,  $\geq 2.0$  GPA, and transferable English and math], and had not yet transferred; Students Near the Gate: Earned  $\geq 60$  transferable units with a 2.0 GPA, but missing transferable English and/or math, and had not yet transferred.

## Student-Level Factors

- **Student-level predictors:** demographic variables (e.g., gender, low-income status, first-generation status, financial aid recipient status)
- **Academic-level predictors:** academic metrics (e.g., units completed, transfer-level math and English course-taking, GPA)
- **Support program participation predictors:** participation in special population programs (e.g., Umoja, EOPS), counselor visits

## College-Level Factors

Metrics aggregated at the college level (e.g., proportion of African American/Black faculty, transfer rate, size of student population)

Subsequently, regression analyses were completed using the variables identified during the decision tree modeling to further determine the relative salience of each factor.<sup>6</sup>

## Key Findings

Decision tree modeling revealed that taking units in a timely manner was most predictive of getting near the gate. In general, taking 30 or more units within two years was most predictive, though taking 24 or more units was also highly predictive, as was—more generally—the proportion of terms the student attended full time.

As shown in Figure 1 on the following page, decision trees identified that for African American/Black students overall, the chance of making it at least near the gate was 35%. The top predictors of reaching near the gate in order of predictability were: timely unit completion, academic standing (i.e., academic probation), and successful completion of transfer-level math in the first year.

**The top predictors of reaching near the gate were: timely unit completion, academic standing, and successful completion of transfer-level math and English in the first year.**

<sup>6</sup> A more detailed description of the methodology and the full list of predictors can be found in the [technical report](#).



For example, African American/Black students who complete 45 or more units with a C or higher in their first two years and never get put on academic probation have an 88% chance of making it near the transfer gate. Conversely, among African American/Black students who do not complete 30 or more units in their first two years, get put on academic probation, and do not take at least 24 units within their first two years, their chance of making it near the transfer gate is only 15%.

It is important to note that when looking at these predictors, gender did not emerge as a salient factor.

*Figure 1. Decision Trees of Factors Predicting Whether an African American/Black Student Gets Near the Transfer Gate*

## Chances the student makes it at least near the transfer gate

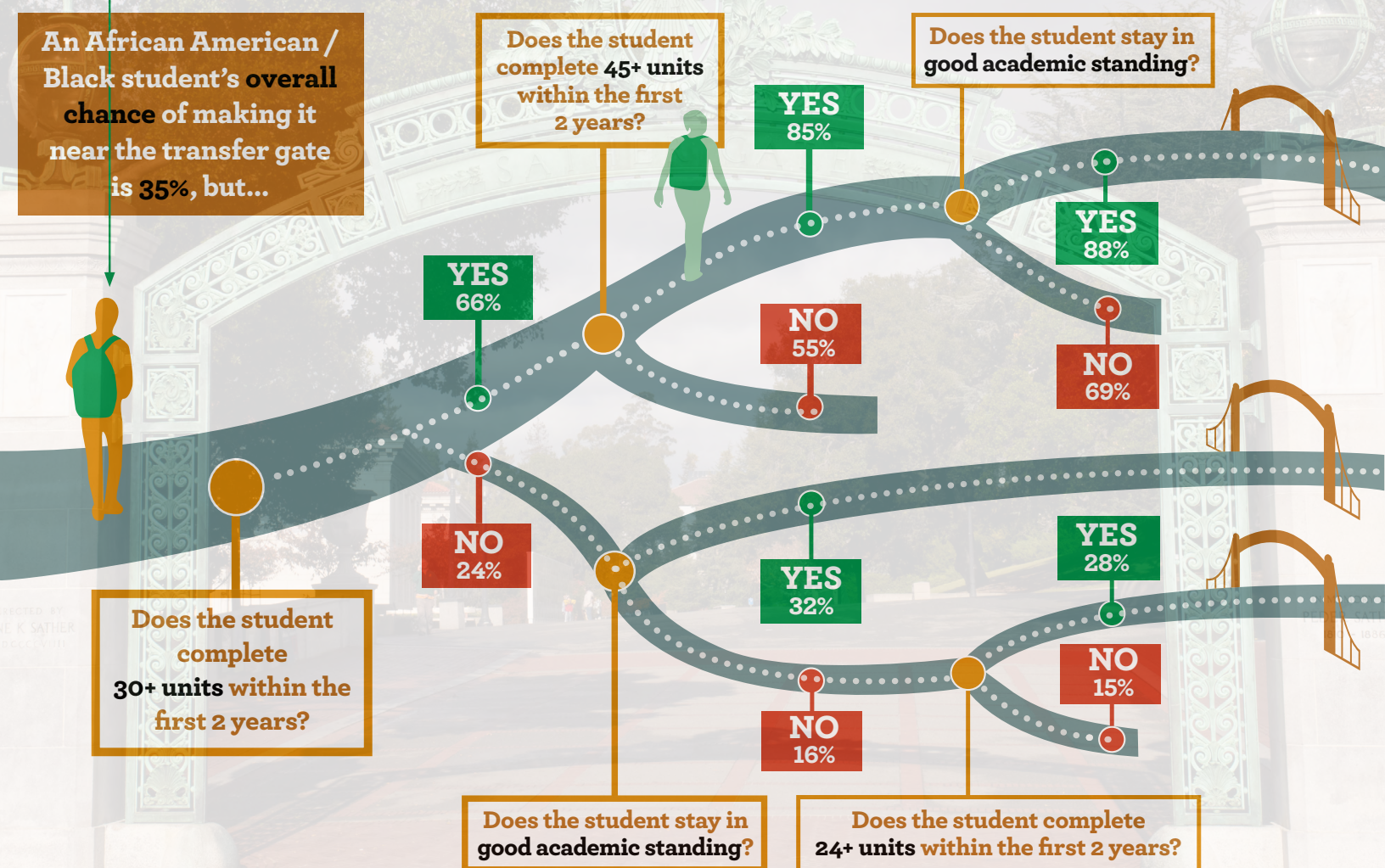




Photo: Alex Green



Photo: Umoja on-Campus social media

Given the disproportionately strong weight of the various unit thresholds (notably completing 24, 35, and 45 units within the first two years), subsequent decision trees were run to determine the variables most closely associated with students reaching each of these three unit completion thresholds. These analyses revealed the saliency of the following variables in African American/Black students' transfer journeys:

- **Passing transfer-level English and math in the first year**
- **Being put on academic probation**
- **Counseling**
- **DSPS status**
- **Income status**
- **Umoja participation**

Ultimately, each of the above variables was included in a regression analysis to determine its predictive value in whether or not an African American/Black student made it near the transfer gate. The following section highlights the variables that were most closely associated with whether or not an African American/Black student made it at least near the gate (NTG+).

## Facilitators of Transfer

- Passing both transfer-level English and math in the first year is incredibly predictive of whether a student goes on to make it near the transfer gate. In fact,

**African American/Black students who pass both transfer-level English and math in their first year are over 300% more likely to make it near the transfer gate than those who do not**

- **Passing only transfer-level math** (but not English) **is more predictive of making it near the gate** (making students 160% more likely to make it near the gate) **than passing only transfer-level English** (but not math; making students 70% more likely to make it near the gate), but both are highly predictive
- **African American/Black students who receive academic counseling are 60% more likely to make it near the transfer gate** than their African American/Black peers who do not receive academic counseling
- **African American/Black students who participate in Umoja are 20% more likely to make it near the transfer gate** than their African American/Black peers who do not participate

# Barriers to Transfer

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- African American/Black students who are put on **probation** are much less likely (70% less likely) to make it near the transfer gate than African American/Black students who are not put on probation
- African American/Black **DSPS** students are less likely (20% less likely) to make it near the transfer gate than non-DSPS African American/Black students
- African American/Black students from **low-income backgrounds** are less likely (20% less likely) to make it near the transfer gate than African American/Black students not from low-income backgrounds

## Comparing African American/Black and Non-African American/Black Students

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For many of these factors, their relative saliency was similar among African American/Black and non-African American/Black students. However, there are a few differences worth pointing out.

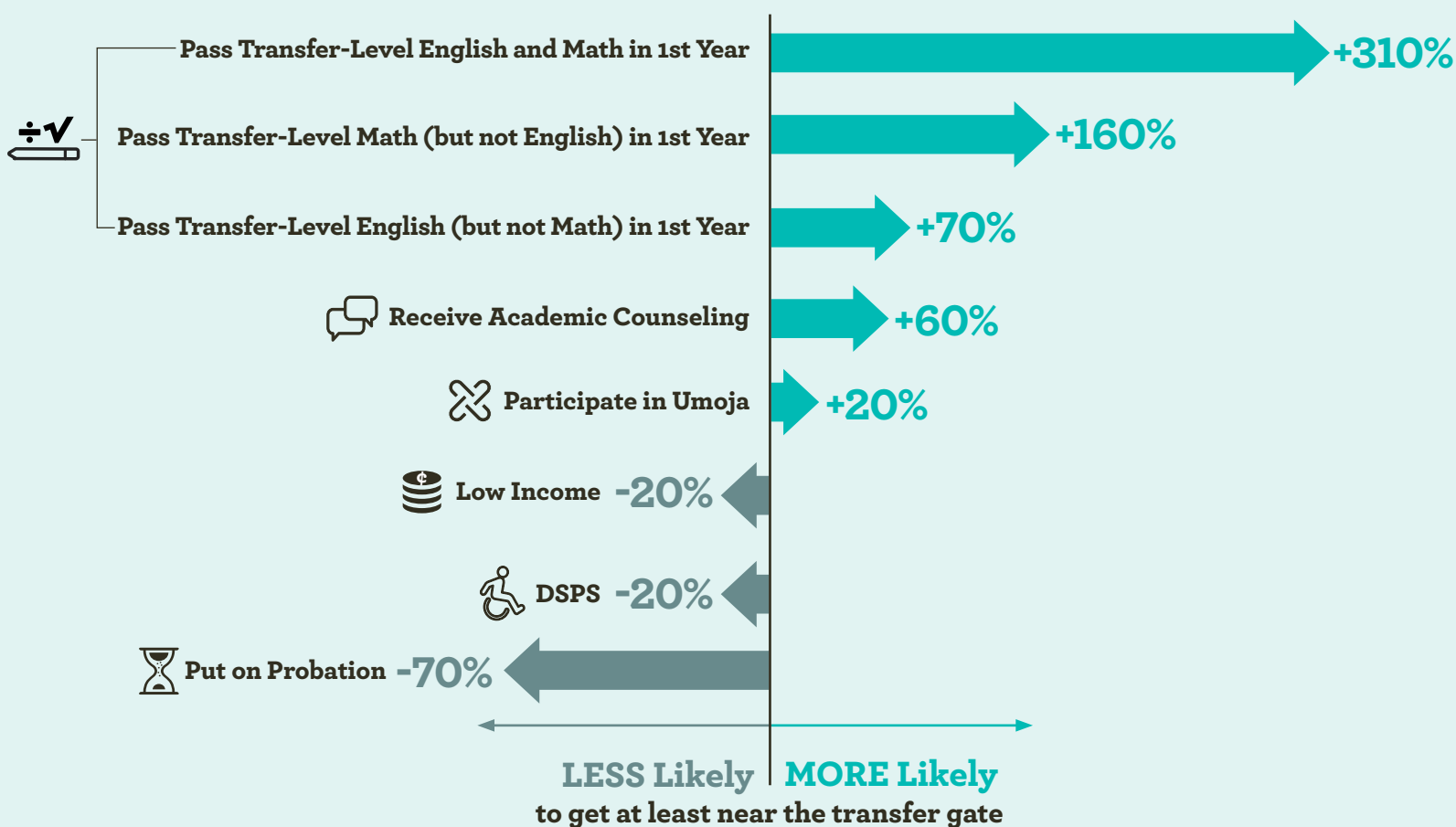
- While passing the combination of transfer-level English and math increases African American/Black students' chance of reaching near the gate (making them 310% more likely to reach NTG+), it is more impactful for non-African American/Black students (making them 360% more likely to reach NTG+)
- While African American/Black students who receive academic counseling are more likely to make it near the transfer gate than students who do not receive such counseling (making them 60% more likely to reach NTG+), counseling is more impactful for non-African American/Black students (making them 110% more likely to reach NTG+)
- Being put on academic probation is negatively impactful for all students regardless of race (making African American/Black students 70% less likely to reach NTG+ and making non-African American/Black students 80% less likely to reach NTG+). However, our data also revealed that African American/Black students are much more likely than their White peers to be placed on probation in the first place; 41% among African American/Black students versus 29% among non-African American/Black students (and 24% among White students), making probation an even more relevant variable for African American/Black students



**Timely completion of transfer-level math and English in the first year is a critical tipping point for making it near the transfer gate.**



Figure 2. Predictors of making it near the transfer gate



# Looking Ahead

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These findings provide critical information regarding the factors that influence African American/Black students' transfer trajectories. Left unknown is **why these factors are as impactful as they are**. Understanding why these factors are important helps the field move forward to develop solutions. The second brief in this three-part series, *[The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Unpacking the Factors That Impact the Success of Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students](#)*, leverages conversations with college practitioners and students to unpack why the factors uncovered in this brief resonated with students' experiences. The third brief in the series, *[The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Recommendations for Supporting Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students](#)*, takes the next step by providing concrete recommendations community colleges and their partners can take to help facilitate African American/Black student success while keeping all of these factors in mind.

Additionally, the factors included in this model are the ones that are available in extant datasets. Left unanswered is the question: **What other factors not identified here play an important role in African American/Black students' journeys as they navigate transfer?** From our early *Through the Gate* research that identified a *[Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity](#)*, we know there are numerous other social and situational factors at play. The next phase of this project is designed to systematically uncover these and other factors to ensure we develop the most comprehensive picture of how to support transfer-motivated African American/Black students.



# Acknowledgments

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This research was generously funded by Lumina Foundation. We thank our program officer, Dr. Wendy Sedlak, for being a true thought partner in and supporter of this work. This work also benefits tremendously from the collective wisdom and guidance of our esteemed Advisory Committee to whom we are so incredibly grateful.

The RP Group thanks the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office for providing the administrative data necessary for the analyses. We also want to recognize Terrence Willett, Dean of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness at Cabrillo College for his insights into the analytic models.

Finally, and most importantly, we extend a wealth of gratitude to the college practitioners and students who participated in the qualitative portion of this research. The value of your insights and candor goes far beyond what we could ever find in a dataset.

## The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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

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