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Author

Chavez, Lisa

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Untapped Potential: Latinos and California Community Colleges

A Statistical Portrait of Transfer Preparation

By Lisa Chavez

Latinos are projected to constitute 48 percent of California’s college-age population (age 18–24) by the year 2015. Despite comprising such an important age group, Latinos are significantly underrepresented among undergraduates at the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU), where they are 14 and 23 percent of all students, respectively. Only 13 percent of Latinos age 25–29 born in California hold a bachelor’s degree, compared with 31 percent of whites and 62 percent of Asians.¹ It is crucial to increase Latinos’ college degree attainment to improve this group’s social and economic standing and ensure the state’s fiscal well-being. One potential avenue for doing so is the California community college system.

Latino enrollment in the community college system has almost quadrupled over the last 25 years to reach nearly 450,000 students (see Figure 1). The system has served as a stepping stone for many Latinos to earn bachelor’s degrees from CSU, and it is increasingly important for Latinos to graduate from UC. In 2006, a full 60 percent of Latinos who earned bachelor’s degrees from CSU were community college transfer students, a ratio that has remained consistent since 1990. One-third of Latinos who earned UC bachelor’s degrees were community college transfer students, up from 25 percent in 1990.²

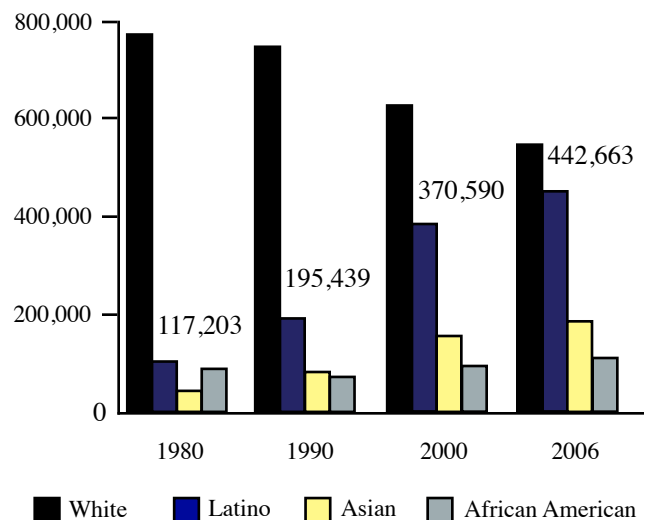
This research brief explores whether the California community college system is reaching its full potential in promoting Latino four-year college enrollment via transfers. It describes current transfer rates among Latinos, reviews the literature on barriers to transfer, and concludes with a cohort analysis of Latinos who entered

the community college system with the intention of transferring that describes their demographic profiles, coursework patterns, transfer readiness, and outcomes within six years of beginning their studies

The New Majority

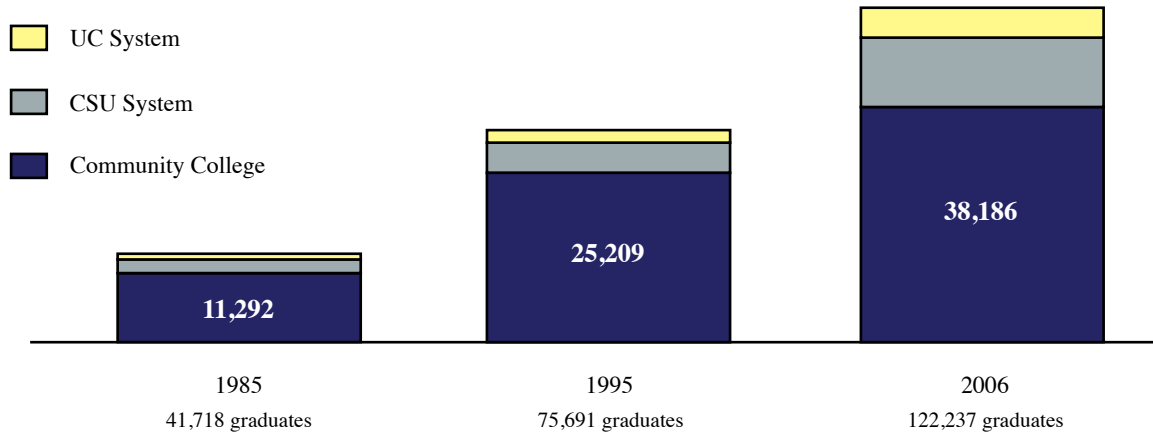
With more than 100 campuses serving over 2.5 million students each year, the California community college system has multiple missions: it offers remedial education, occupational preparation, certification programs, ESL and citizenship courses, and courses that are transferable to the CSU and UC systems. The California Master Plan for Higher Education specifically links the community

Figure 1: California Community College Enrollment: Fall 1980-2006



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission

Figure 2: College Destinations of Latino Public High School Graduates*



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission.
 *Graduates of comprehensive, alternative, and continuation high schools.

college system with CSU and UC; students may complete their lower division undergraduate work and transfer to either system, an option that is less expensive for both students and the state. The transfer function represents “a second chance” at obtaining a bachelor’s degree, especially for students who have experienced both personal and institutional barriers to four-year college preparation in high school, because community colleges have no admission requirements or entrance exams.

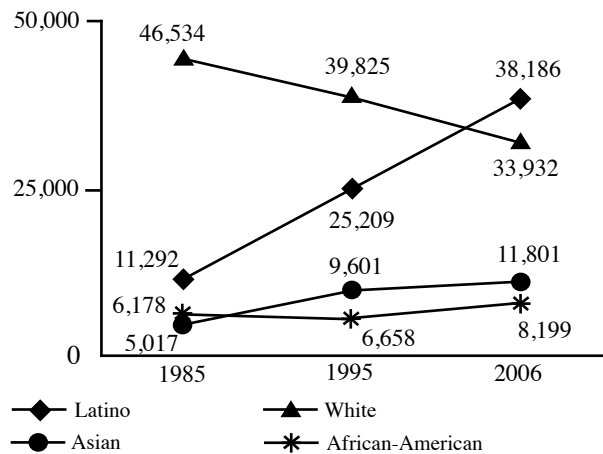
In this regard, Latinos are prime candidates for entry into the community college system after high school graduation. The majority (62 percent) of Latino children in California come from low-income families. Extensive research has documented Latino students’ inequality of opportunities in the form of underqualified teachers and less access to college prep courses in the California’s public high schools they attend. Although Latino eligibility rates for the CSU and UC systems have improved over the last two decades, they remain relatively low at 16 and 7 percent, respectively.³

As Figure 2 shows, Latinos who graduate from the state’s public high schools and enter the public higher education system are more likely to enter a community college than a four-year college or university, a pattern that has not changed in over 20 years. In 1985, a total of 41,718 Latinos graduated from the state’s public high schools, and 11,292 began their studies at a community college. In 1995, the vast majority of Latino students who entered the higher education system also enrolled

in a community college. By 2006, the number of Latino graduates had increased to 122,237 and 38,186 enrolled at a community college the following fall. Despite the number of Latino high school graduates enrolling in the community college system, there is concern that the Latino enrollment rate is not as high as it could be: Latinos are projected to account for 80 percent of the increase in California’s high school graduates by 2010, yet they will account for just 40 percent of the projected increase in the state’s community college enrollment.⁴

Figure 3 reveals an untold story: whereas just 20 years ago whites were the vast majority of the community

Figure 3: California Community College First-Time Freshmen Age 19 and Younger



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission.
 Note: Analysis is limited to Public High School Graduates.

college first-time freshmen who were recent public high school graduates, Latinos are now the largest group. The 38,186 Latino first-time freshmen constitute 36 percent of this group of students. The increase in Latino students is visible across the state. They are more than 30 percent of first-time community college freshmen in eight of the state's fourteen subregions and more than 40 percent in four of those eight (see Table 1). Nearly 50 percent of first-time freshmen community college students in the Los Angeles region alone are Latino.

More than ever, the community college system represents a potential resource to improve Latinos' attainment of bachelor's degrees by the transfer process. It also offers the opportunity to improve the educational attainment of Latino men in California. Whereas Latino males constitute just 38 percent of all Latino CSU and UC first-time freshmen, and Latinas constitute 62 percent, the gender imbalance among Latino community college freshmen is not as strong—the men there make up 47 percent.⁵

Current Status of Latino Community College Transfers

Latino community college transfers to CSU and UC have steadily increased over the last 25 years (see Figure 4). In 1980, 1,967 Latinos transferred to a CSU campus. By fall 2006, that number had increased to nearly 8,500. Although Latino transfers to UC increased at a faster rate than transfers to CSU during this period, the

Table 1: First-Time Freshmen Age 19 and Younger Enrolled in California Community Colleges: Fall 2006

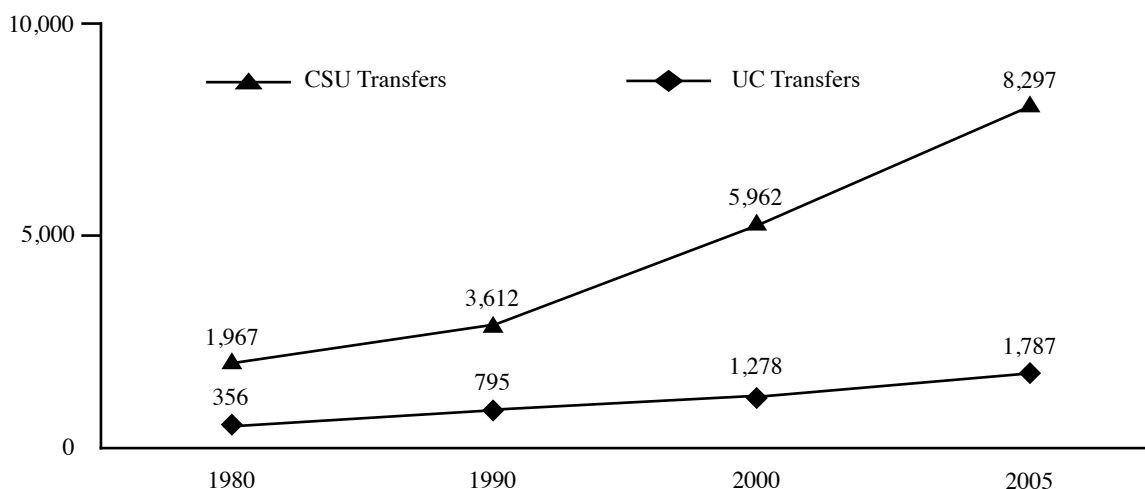
Region	Latino	Total	%
Los Angeles	14,579	30,020	49%
South San Joaquin Valley	2,112	4,476	47%
Inland Empire	4,142	9,921	42%
Monterey Bay	589	1,450	41%
North San Joaquin Valley	1,969	5,364	37%
Central Coast	2,560	6,993	37%
Orange County	4,208	12,067	35%
San Diego-Imperial	2,811	8,878	32%
San Francisco Bay Area	3,601	15,945	23%
Inyo-Mono	11	56	20%
Sacramento-Tahoe	1,317	7,425	18%
Upper Sacramento Valley	142	834	17%
North Coast	126	952	13%
Superior California	19	279	7%
Total First-Time Freshmen	38,186	104,660	36%

Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission
 Note: Analysis limited to public high school graduates

number is much smaller: only 1,787 transferred to UC in fall 2006.

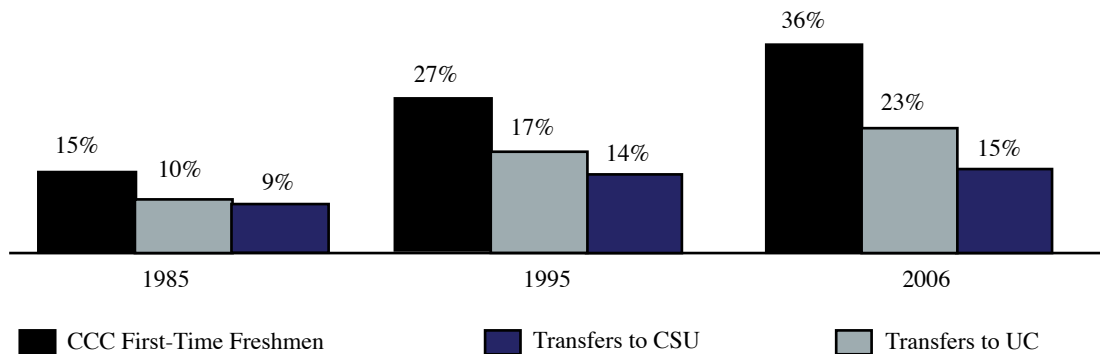
Despite the increases in transfers to CSU and UC, Latinos remain underrepresented among transfers in comparison to their representation among community college first-time freshmen, a disparity that has grown larger over time (see Figure 5). In fall 2006, Latinos were 36 percent of first-time freshmen but only 23 percent and 15 percent of transfers to CSU and UC, respectively.

Figure 4: Latino Community College Transfers to California State University and University of California: Fall 1980–2005



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission.

Figure 5: Latino Representation among California Community College First-Time Freshmen Age 19 and Younger and Transfers to CSU and UC



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission.

In contrast, whites were well represented among transfers to both four-year college systems, and Asians were overrepresented among transfers to UC.⁶ Analyses of longitudinal cohort data consistently find racial-ethnic variation in transfer rates regardless of the subgroup of community college students studied. For example, among all degree-seeking students, just 13 percent of Latinos transferred within six years compared with 21 percent of whites and 25 percent of Asians. Higher transfer rates are found among Latino high school graduates who began their studies at age 20 or younger, and rates of more than 30 percent have been documented among young Latinos whose primary education goal upon entering a community college was to transfer.⁷

Barriers to Transfer

Several recent reports have described the barriers faced by community college students as they pursue their educational goals.⁸ These students are often the first in their families to attend college—as such, they face both personal and structural conditions that hinder their navigation through the system and smooth transfer to a four-year college.

For example, financial constraints often prevent students from enrolling full-time at a community college. Although the California community college system has some of the lowest fees in the country, other costs, such as books and supplies, transportation, rent, and child care, have risen dramatically in recent years, and financial aid has not kept pace. As a result, many students must

work to support themselves and their families. Latinos who cannot take full course loads face a significant disadvantage as they prepare for transfer: only 28 percent of Latinos are full-time students during the majority of the terms they are enrolled, compared with 36 and 46 percent of whites and Asians, respectively.⁹

Many students enter the community college system unprepared for college-level coursework; they require basic skills coursework. This, in turn, delays their entry into degree-applicable, transferable courses. On average, 35 percent of new community college students enroll in at least one basic skills course, and Latinos are overrepresented among these students. A recent analysis of first-year coursework patterns found that basic skills and ESL courses made up the majority of units attempted by more than 25 percent of Latinos. Transferable units were the majority of units attempted by just 38 percent of Latinos.¹⁰

Finally, barriers to transfer are deeply rooted within the system's institutional structure, policies, and procedures. For example, the California Community College Chancellor's Office has documented wide variation in transfer resources across the system. The California Legislative Analyst's Office has noted the lack of standardization in transfer requirements across segments and campuses. A system with these variations requires both savvy navigation and the flexibility to pursue alternative options as students prepare for transfer. Moreover, the CSU and UC systems have faced capacity constraints in recent years that force crowded degree

**Table 2: Cohort Demographics of First-Time Freshmen
Age 17-20, High School Graduates with Intent to Transfer**

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Born in U.S.A</u>	<u>API State Rank of High School Attended</u>		<u>Persisted 1st Year</u>	<u>% Enrolled Full-Time***</u>	
			<u>Low*</u>	<u>High**</u>		<u>Fall 1996</u>	<u>Fall 1997</u>
Latino	56%	81%	50%	15%	79%	56%	62%
African-American	50%	97%	46%	15%	71%	55%	61%
Asian	49%	49%	28%	31%	85%	72%	77%
White	51%	97%	11%	45%	81%	65%	70%

Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office “Expanded Right to Know” database.

*Academic Performance Indicator State Rank was 1-3.

**Academic Performance Indicator State Rank was 8-10.

***Defined as attempting 12 or more semester units.

programs and entire campuses to become more selective in transfer admissions.¹¹

Case Study

The remainder of this research brief describes transfer readiness and outcomes among the California community college 1996 first-time freshman cohort, based on the database “Expanded Student Right to Know” by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, an exceptionally rich source of information.¹² The analysis was limited to students who (1) began their studies during the summer or fall of 1996, (2) were 17 to 20 years old when they first enrolled, (3) held a U.S. high school diploma, and (4) demonstrated an intent to transfer, as determined by one or more of the following conditions:

- their initial stated educational goal upon entry was to transfer,
- the majority of units they attempted in the first year of enrollment were transferable to the CSU or UC systems,
- they earned 12 or more transferable units by the end of their second year and attempted either a transferable English or a transferable math course.

This analytical population is referred to as the “total cohort.”¹³ Latinos made up 26 percent of the cohort; whites, Asians, and African-Americans were 43, 11, and 8 percent, respectively.

Cohort Demographics

Table 2 displays demographic information for this cohort of students. A gender imbalance favoring women existed only among Latinos, and the vast majority of Latinos were born in the United States. Measures of socioeconomic status are not available in the database, but information on the high schools the students attended is. Half (50 percent) of all Latinos attended a public high school with a low state rank on the Academic Performance Indicator (API), while just 28 percent of Asians and 11 percent of whites did so. In contrast, 45 percent of whites in this cohort attended one of the state’s highest performing high schools.¹⁴ Given the strong correlation between a school’s test scores and the socioeconomic composition of its students, it is likely that young ambitious Latinos who enter the community college system with the intent of transferring are from low socioeconomic families and face both economic and academic challenges that can affect their educational trajectories.

Measures of students’ persistence and full-time status for the first year of enrollment are also shown in Table 2. Approximately three-fourths of Latinos persisted through spring of 1997. However, only 56 percent of Latinos took a full-time course load in fall 1996 (with only a slightly higher proportion doing so in the spring), and they were less likely to do so than whites (65 percent) and Asians (72 percent).

Course Taking the First Year

Latinos get a late start on the road to a successful and timely transfer (see Table 3). A student “on track” to transfer will attempt at least six transferable courses during the first year of enrollment at a community college, yet only 21 percent of Latinos did so, compared with 41 percent of Asians and 35 percent of whites. Latinos’ English and math course-taking patterns in their first year of enrollment are mixed. Like their white and Asian counterparts, Latinos were more likely to take a transferable than a basic skills English course, but this was not the case for math. The types of math courses attempted by Latinos during their first year differed drastically: 21 percent attempted a basic skills math course, while just 14 percent attempted a transferable math course. All told, 35 percent of Latinos in this cohort attempted at least one English or math basic skills course, and nearly one in ten Latinos attempted both types of basic skills courses. In contrast, whites and Asians were twice as likely as Latinos to have attempted both a transferable English and a transferable math

course.

Finally, like Asians and whites, Latinos experienced higher success rates in their English courses than in their math courses. Their success rates in both subjects were lower than those of Asians and whites, however. While success rates in basic skills math were low for all groups, they were particularly low for Latinos (48 percent).

Transfer Readiness and Outcomes

For analytical purposes, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office defines students as upper division “transfer ready” if they earned 56+ semester (or 90+ quarter) transferable units with a minimum grade point average of 2.0 and successfully completed both transferable English and math courses with a grade of C or higher.¹⁵

As Figure 6 shows, the course-taking patterns in the first year of enrollment and the lower success rates in basic math severely limit Latinos’ chances of achieving transfer-ready status within six years of beginning their studies at a community college. Although nearly half of Latinos completed a transferable English course, only 29 percent completed a transferable math course. Only 21 percent of Latinos accumulated 56+ semester (or 90+ quarter) units that were transferable to CSU or UC with a grade-point average of 2.0 or higher. In each of these three measures of transfer readiness, Latinos fared worse than whites and Asians. Taken together, only 17 percent of Latinos satisfied all three transfer-ready conditions, in comparison to 23 percent of whites and 34 percent of Asians.

Table 4 shows the outcomes for this cohort of students six years after they first enrolled at a community college. Only 17 percent of Latinos transferred to a four-year college, compared with 31 and 39 percent of whites and Asians, respectively.¹⁶ Another 10 percent of Latinos earned an associate’s degree, and 2 percent earned a certificate of some kind. However, 72 percent of Latinos neither transferred nor earned an associate’s degree or certificate within six years. This is a significant loss of talent.

Table 3: Attempts and Success Rates in English and Math Courses During The First Year of Enrollment

Number of 3-Unit+ Transferable Classes Attempted*	Latino	Asian	White
Six+	21%	41%	35%
Three-Five	43%	35%	39%
One-Two	28%	20%	20%
Zero	9%	5%	5%
English Coursework			
Basic Skills Course	24%	23%	8%
Transferable Course	36%	40%	52%
Math Coursework			
Basic Skills Course	21%	7%	11%
Transferable Course	14%	43%	24%
Coursework Patterns			
At Least One Basic Skills Course**	35%	27%	16%
Both English & Math Basic Skills	9%	3%	2%
Both English & Math Transferable	9%	22%	18%
Success Rates***			
Basic Skills - English	60%	65%	64%
Transferable - English	60%	66%	70%
Basic Skills - Math	48%	55%	54%
Transferable - Math	51%	58%	61%

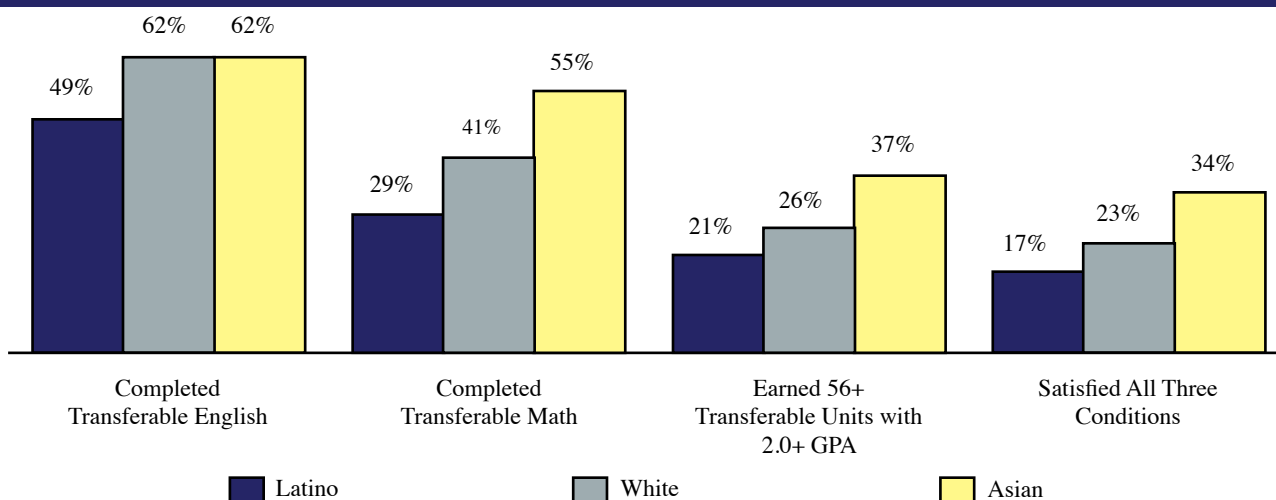
Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office “Expanded Right to Know” database.

*In any subject.

**In English and math only.

***This is calculated as a ratio of courses passed with a grade of “C” or better over all courses attempted.

Figure 6: Measures of Transfer Readiness within Six Years



Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office “Expanded Right to Know” database.

Racial-ethnic disparities are also found among students who achieved transfer-ready status (data not shown). Only 52 percent of Latinos who met this threshold eventually transferred to a four-year college or university, compared with 65 percent of whites and 70 percent of Asians. Instead, 28 percent of transfer-ready Latinos left the community college system with just an associate’s degree, and an additional 19 percent neither transferred nor earned a degree, representing a further loss of students who might have transferred and earned a bachelor’s degree.¹⁷

An associate’s degree is not required for transfer to

four-year colleges and universities, but Figure 7 reveals that nearly half (46 percent) of all Latinos who successfully transferred did so with this degree in hand. This pattern was not as pronounced among other students who transferred—lower percentages of them had associate’s degrees. This suggests that obtaining an associate’s degree plays a role in facilitating transfers to four-year colleges for Latino students. Perhaps many Latinos navigate their community colleges using associate degree requirements as guidelines, yet critical interventions in the form of program support, guidance counseling, or other forms of outreach set them on the path to transfer.

Table 4: Outcomes Six Years Later for Students Who Intend to Transfer

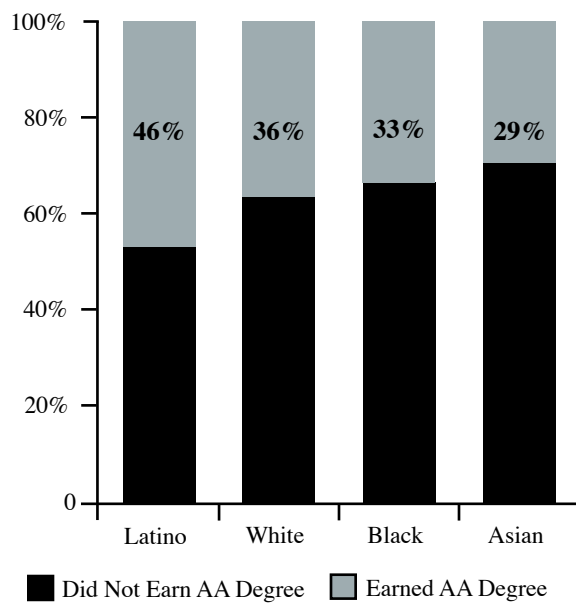
	Transferred to Four-Year College or University*	Did Not Transfer			Total
		Earned Associate’s Degree**	Earned Certificate Only	No Associate’s Degree or Certificate	
Latinos	17%	10%	2%	72%	100%
African Americans	17%	6%	1%	77%	100%
Whites	31%	9%	1%	59%	100%
Asians	39%	7%	1%	53%	100%

Source: California Community College Chancellor’s Office “Expanded Right to Know” database.

* This considers public and private colleges and universities both in and outside of California

** May have also earned a certificate

**Figure 7: Associate Degree Attainment
Among All Students Who Transferred**



Source: California Community College Chancellor's Office "Expanded Right To Know" database.

Conclusion

Latinos now constitute the largest group of first-time freshmen who enroll in the California community college system after graduating from a public high school. The community college system has always played a role in Latinos' attainment of bachelor's degrees in California. However, this research brief shows that the system is hardly close to reaching its full potential as a stepping stone to four-year colleges and universities. Most Latinos who express intentions of transferring to a four-year college or university neither reach transfer readiness nor transfer nor earn an associate's degree within six years of beginning their studies.

Latino students enroll in the state community colleges with educational and economic disadvantages that have implications for the types of courses they can enroll in as well as their ability to enroll full-time. The high proportion of Latinos who enroll in basic skills courses, along with the low proportion enrolled in full-time course loads, has serious consequences for the number of transferable courses Latinos attempt in their first year of enrollment. Latino success rates in English coursework hover around 60 percent, but

success rates in math are particularly low, suggesting that math is a major barrier for Latinos and that their future opportunities in math, science, and technology fields are limited. Additional resources in the form of grant-based financial aid, support in basic skills courses, and counseling are clearly needed for Latinos to fulfill their goals of transferring to a four-year college or university.

Endnotes

- 1 State of California, Department of Finance. (2004). *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 2000–2050*. (Sacramento, California); Reed D. (2006). *Educational Resources and Outcomes in California, by Race and Ethnicity*. (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California).
- 2 Based on author's calculations of data reports "Fall Term Transfers to Public Institutions" and "Degrees by Source Institution" retrieved from the California Postsecondary Education Commission's online data system (www.cpec.ca.gov).
- 3 Reed, D. (2006). California Postsecondary Education Commission, *Are They Going? Enrollment and Eligibility for African-Americans and Latinos*. Publication FS05-03 (Sacramento, CA, 2005); UC Accord/IDEA. (2007). *Latino Educational Opportunity Report* (Los Angeles: University of California).
- 4 Hayward, G. Jones, D., McGuinness Jr., A. and A. Timar. (2004). *Ensuring Access with Quality to California's Community Colleges* (San Jose: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education).
- 5 Based on author's calculations of data report "First-Time Freshmen Enrollment by Gender" retrieved from the California Postsecondary Education Commission's online data system (www.cpec.ca.gov).
- 6 Based on author's calculations of data report "Fall Transfers to Public Institutions" retrieved from the California Postsecondary Education Commission's online data system (www.cpec.ca.gov).
- 7 Moore, C. and N. Shulock. (2007). *Beyond the Open Door: Increasing Student Success in the California Community Colleges* (Sacramento: Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy); Sengupta, R. and C. Jepsen. (2006). *California's Community College Students* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California); Driscoll, A., (2007). *Beyond Access* (Davis: Policy Analysis for California Education).
- 8 California Tomorrow. (2003). *California's Gold: Claiming the Promise of Diversity in Our Community Colleges*

- (Oakland, California); Rivas, M., Pérez, J., Alvarez, C. and D. Solorzano. (2007). *Latina/o Transfer Students: Understanding the Critical Role of the Transfer Process in California's Postsecondary Institutions* (Los Angeles: UCLA, Chicano Studies Research Center); Moore and Shulock, (2007).
- 9 Zumeta, W. and Frankle, D. (2007). *California Community Colleges: Making Them Stronger and More Affordable* (San Jose: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education); Moore and Shulock (2007).
 - 10 Perry, P. (2002). *Study Session on Basic Skills: Background Data* (Sacramento: California Community College Chancellor's Office); Sengupta and Jepsen (2006).
 - 11 California Community College Chancellor's Office. (2002). *Transfer Capacity and Readiness in the California Community Colleges: A Progress Report to the Legislature* (Sacramento, California); Hill, E. (2006). *Promoting Access to Higher Education: A Review of the State's Transfer Process* (Sacramento: California Legislative Analyst's Office); Shulock, N. and C. Moore. (2003). *Capacity Constraints in California's Public Universities: A Factor Impeding Transfer?* (Sacramento: Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy).
 - 12 This administrative database includes student-level administrative records, such as courses attempted, awards earned, and transfer destinations for all noncredit students over a six-year period. More information on the database can be found at www.cccco.edu.
 - 13 This analysis excluded students who transferred to a four-year college within 12 months of first enrolling at a community college. Approximately 75 percent of Latinos who met the first three conditions demonstrated "intent to transfer" as measured by condition four. This was only slightly lower than the total cohort (82 percent). The final working file contained data on 90,853 students.
 - 14 This analysis merged 1999 Academic Performance Indicator data with students' public high school codes. The analysis was limited to public high school graduates who had a match on this variable (74 percent of the cohort).
 - 15 California Community College Chancellor's Office (2002). The minimum number of semester units required for upper division transfer to CSU recently changed to 60 units. See *Student Transfer in California Postsecondary Education*. (2005). Commission Report 05-08 (Sacramento, CA: California Postsecondary Education Commission).
 - 16 The majority of all transfer students enrolled in a CSU campus.
 - 17 Researchers also found that one-third of transfer-ready students did not transfer. Horn, L. and S. Lew. (2007). *Community College Transfer Rates: Who Is Counted Makes a Difference* (Berkeley: MPR Associates).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Chavez is a Research Analyst at the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity and Diversity at the University of California, Berkeley Law School where she conducts research on school integration, college preparation and community college students. She is also a lecturer in UC Berkeley's Chicano Studies program where she teaches an upper division course on Latinos and the education system. Lisa began this research as a Research Associate at the Center for Latino Policy Research. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 2001.

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CLPR FALL 2008 RESEARCH BRIEF



Untapped Potential: Latinos and California Community Colleges *A Statistical Portrait of Transfer Preparation*

Latinos are now the largest group of students who begin their postsecondary studies at a California community college after graduating from a public high school. This represents an opportunity to improve bachelor degree attainment among Latinos via the community college transfer function. This research brief describes current transfer rates among Latinos, reviews the literature on the barriers to transfer and concludes with a cohort analysis of Latino community college students that describes their demographic profiles, coursework patterns, transfer readiness and outcomes. The author concludes that the California community college system is not close to reaching its potential as a stepping stone to four-year colleges and universities for Latino students.

Center for Latino Policy Research
University of California, Berkeley
2420 Bowditch Street #5670
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670
510-642-6903 (phone)
510-643-8844 (fax)
email: clpr@berkeley.edu
website: www.clpr.berkeley.edu



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CENTER FOR LATINO POLICY RESEARCH
Institute for the Study of Social Change
University of California, Berkeley
2420 Bowditch Street #5670
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670

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