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The African American Transfer Tipping Point:

Unpacking the Factors That Impact the Success of Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students

Brief 2 of 3



Supported by:



The
African American
Transfer Tipping Point Study



THROUGH THE GATESM
theRPgroup

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In late 2021, The RP Group conducted a robust quantitative analysis of the transfer trajectories of transfer-motivated African American/Black students. This research identified a number of factors salient to their journeys. Some of these were quite intuitive—namely, the completion of 15, 24, 30, and 45 units in a timely manner and the passing of transfer-level English and math in the first year. However, further analyses revealed a number of additional salient factors that predicted student success, including receiving academic counseling in the first year, not being put on academic probation, and participation in Umoja.

To capture a more robust understanding of why these factors were salient and uncover other potential factors that could not be captured in the data, in April 2022, The RP Group conducted interviews with six California community college (CCC) student services professionals and focus groups with 11 African American/Black students from five institutions¹ identified as having relatively higher rates of African American/Black student transfer. These conversations also unearthed a set of recommendations for facilitating African American/Black student transfer, which are presented in the accompanying brief, [*Recommendations for Supporting Transfer-Motivated African American/Black Community College Students: Brief 3 of 3*](#); also see sidebar).

¹ College of San Mateo, College of the Sequoias, Los Angeles Pierce College, Mount San Antonio College, and San Jose City College.



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 journeys to develop a comprehensive understanding of the many variables influencing their transfer journeys and ultimate success

This brief is #2 in a three-part series presenting results from the first two phases of this work.

Read Brief 1 [here](#) and find more information about *Through the Gate* at www.rpgroup.org/Through-the-Gate and the *African American Transfer Tipping Point* at www.rpgroup.org/aattp.

In the current brief, we provide information gathered from these conversations on why these particular factors may act as facilitators of or barriers to transfer for African American/Black students. The brief provides valuable context as to why counseling, probation, Umoja, and faculty matter. Within each section, we share both the college practitioner and student perspectives.

Why Counseling Matters

Our research revealed that African American/Black students who received academic counseling were 60% more likely to make it near the transfer gate than African American/Black students who did not receive counseling. However, counseling was more impactful for non-African American/Black students. Non-African American/Black students who received counseling were 110% times more likely to make it near the transfer gate than non-African American/Black students who did not receive counseling. In other words, receiving counseling more than doubled non-African American/Black students' chances of making it near the gate.

The overall finding of the importance of counseling is well aligned with The RP Group's [Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity](#)—notably the intersection between two core factors: pathway navigation (which highlights the importance of providing students with timely, accurate information about each stage of the transfer journey) and having a support network (connecting students with

caring, encouraging, and supportive individuals). However, it is critical to understand why African American/Black and non-African American/Black students are not equally benefiting from such support.



Counseling: The Student Perspective

Many students reported how they avoided general and Transfer Center counseling, as their previous interactions within these spaces made students feel they were not heard, seen, valued, or respected, and they did not see themselves reflected in these spaces. Students were more likely to indicate benefiting more from academic counseling support they received from special population programs such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) or Umoja. As four of these students shared:

“

I don't think [the Transfer Center is] geared to who I am and what I'm looking for. It's not that I'm trying to go to school with a bunch of Black folks—that's not what I'm trying to do. It's just that the representation they have for the schools (in the Transfer Center) is not really clicking with me. It's literally in the same building as the resources that I'm currently using and I'm finding myself like, 'Nah, that's not for me.'

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Why am I looking at a blonde-haired, blue-eyed counselor who studied parks and recreation when I want to pursue x, y, z? It just didn't make sense.... It wasn't actually until I started [at the university] where I happened to get lucky, where my advisor and my counselor were both people of color and their questions were more things that I could culturally relate to.

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A lot of times, we'll check a lot of who we are at the door before we go into these spaces because of the disconnect between us and the people we're meeting with.

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For Black and African American students, they are starting at a different point than most students would be—and so it would be more difficult for Black students to gain something because their relationship with their counselor is starting at a different point. The student has to become more comfortable with a person digging into their life, and that can feel a little bit intrusive. And for a Black student, that can be possibly a little triggering...versus another student who has possibly been conditioned by society to believe that they are a bit safer in society and they have a place in society and that they are valued.

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Counseling: The Practitioner Perspective

When presented with data suggesting that counseling did not have as large of an influence on African American/Black students' transfer success as it did for students from other racial/ethnic groups, several college practitioners **recognized that misinformation, bias, large counselor-to-student ratios, students' inability to see the same counselor over time, and the lack of African American/Black counseling faculty and staff may play a role.** In the words of two practitioners:

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For a student who might be going into a counseling appointment with preconceived notions of this person not really caring about them based on their race, it can be a little bit difficult. My first thought was that trust has to be built with a Black student versus trust already being there [with a non-Black student]. It's a little bit less effective for Black students because more time needs to be taken... just comfortability and conditioning of Black students, I think is probably why [counseling is] not as effective for them as other students.

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All it takes is just one bad experience. Speaking for myself, when I went to school, it was very discouraging getting the runaround, people just kind of treating you like you don't belong. Like you're not supposed to be here. The microaggressions...[our college has] come a long way since I've been here as far as acknowledging Black students' needs. There are a lot of stories I hear from my mentees that are heartbreaking. They just don't feel comfortable. They don't have the space to have conversations about these issues. So, they're just kind of stuck and they have to perform under uncomfortable situations.

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Photo: Rodnae Productions



Why Probation Matters

To remain in good academic standing each term, students who have attempted a total of at least 12 units must maintain a grade point average (GPA) of 2.00 or higher and/or have completed more than 50% of the attempted units. Our research revealed that African American/Black students who are put on probation are much less likely to make it near the transfer gate than students who are not put on probation. While being put on academic probation was negatively impactful for all students regardless of race, since African American/Black students are more likely than their non-African American/Black peers to be placed on probation in the first place, this variable is even more relevant for African American/Black students. When we asked about the relationship between academic probation and transfer success, college practitioners and students had very different perspectives.

Probation: The Student Perspective

Students described **academic probation as a real barrier** to their success, in spite of the thoughtful and strategic efforts by colleges to use probation as a chance to provide meaningful, timely, and “fail-safe” support.



When students get on academic probation, that’s an indicator that the college has kind of given up on them.



For students, receiving a notice that they are on probation can be devastating. They stressed that academic probation resulted in the significant challenge of needing to meet additional requirements (e.g., seeing a counselor) and negatively impacted their financial aid eligibility. Losing access to this financial support is especially troubling for students from low-income backgrounds

and may intersect with the finding that low-income status negatively predicted getting near the gate. However, a resounding sentiment among African American/Black students was the triggering nature of the term “probation” itself—notably its association with the criminal justice system and the loss of benefits associated with it.

When asked about the impact of probation in an African American/Black student's transfer journey, three students commented:

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Perspective matters. If you tell an African American you're on probation... they think of prison... and now you tell them they have probation again in school. So, it doesn't sit well with them and... that will be one reason why they would want to give up.

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When we think of probation, half the time, we think of something bad. Usually in the African American community, a lot of that is 'Oh, if someone is on probation, they just got out of jail and now they still have to keep being put through trials until they can be actually freed.' So, when we do academic probation, in a Black student's mindset, that's the same thing—'I'm being held until I can be set free to continue on.' And a lot of times they reduce your financial aid if you're on academic probation, so if that's what you're counting on to get classes, now that's another deterrent to staying in school.

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When you get on academic probation, it's like the school said, 'Now fend for yourself.' Because you don't get financial aid. You don't get support programs because nobody trusts you ...but then nobody wants to ask what happened. No one ever wants to ask the question of 'What happened that semester? Did anything happen with the [student's] family?'

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Photo: Andrea Piacquadio

Probation: The Practitioner Perspective

In contrast to the student perspective, practitioners viewed academic probation as an opportunity to provide critical, just-in-time support to students who were struggling academically. They saw academic probation as a safety net of sorts to ensure students did not get so far behind that they would not be able to recover. Two practitioners discussed academic probation in the following ways:

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We require that before a student registers for another class, they have to come in and see a counselor. And this is where they can see an advisor. They would have to come in and see a counselor and sit down and talk about... what's really going on... Without that... they can't register for classes. And that sort of helps the student from digging themselves into a hole that... may be very difficult to dig themselves out of.

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“

It's almost like a fail-safe, right?... The specialized programs have the ability to implement, 'Hey, you have below a 2.0... come to meet with us once a semester if you want to stay in the program.' Then you have to come and meet with us maybe twice a month,... and now you have to do this many hours. You have to come to tutoring or at least explain to us why you can't come and do tutoring... So, from a school standpoint, we have set fail-safes in place where you have to come and see a counselor.

”

However, some practitioners also acknowledged that being placed on probation could be discouraging for students and noted the need to ensure these students understood that it was a system designed to help, rather than penalize them. As one practitioner described:

“

An important element of the probation monitoring and probation counseling process is to really look at some of the cognitive factors, like what happens to a student's self-efficacy when they're put on probation. How do we address that? How do we really put that at the forefront? Because sometimes that's what makes the difference between the student coming back to school or remaining in school, or doing well the next semester... then ultimately transferring... It's really their impressions about who they are and what they're capable of, and being put on probation can really have a negative impact.

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Why Umoja Matters

According to the [*Umoja Community Education Foundation*](#), Umoja promotes student success and improved lifetime outcomes for all students through a curriculum that is responsive to the legacy of the African and African American Diasporas. **Our research revealed that African American/Black students who participated in Umoja were 20% more likely to make it near the transfer gate than their African American/Black peers who did not participate.**

Umoja: The Student Perspective

Of note, all of the focus group students had participated in Umoja at some point in their community college careers. They consistently touted the benefits of the holistic support they received in the Umoja program. Further, students highlighted how the mandatory, dedicated, and proactive counseling offered by Umoja allows the time and space for counselors who reflect students' backgrounds to build relationships with them where they feel heard, seen, and valued. In the words of one student:

“

I'm going to say that [the Umoja counselors] really care about you and have your best interest at heart. They're trying to provide resources to better help you through your process and they actually want to know more about you, about your life, and not just about school, but about just everything in general to better help you. I think it's very important that I can always shoot my counselor an email and she'll respond, even if it's not related to school, because it shows how much they care about us.

”



Photos Umoja on Campus social media

Students also reported that counseling offered by culturally-focused programs such as Umoja offered more relevant, personal, personable, and effective support focused on both academic and personal factors than what was offered by the general counseling office, the Transfer Center, or when they were on academic probation.

Umoja: The Practitioner Perspective

Practitioners highlighted the ways Umoja, as well as EOPS, MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement), and other **special population and culturally-focused programs were more likely to adopt more holistic approaches and have the time** to support students' academic, financial, and personal needs.

As one practitioner explained:

“

I know that's why counseling is so successful for Umoja programs, because there is a smaller workload and more time to be able to create those relationships and have the counselor really interested in the student, because when you can take that time to really get to know the student, you get to know their life, you get to know their interests and you get to know their personality, and that can really help a counselor with directing the student in the right direction in terms of their career or their educational path.

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Images from Umoja on Campus social media





Why Instructional Faculty Matter

Our research revealed that passing both transfer-level English and math in the first year is incredibly predictive of whether African American/Black students persist to make it near the transfer gate. In general, it is apparent why passing these courses in a timely manner would play a role in students' transfer success; however, when probed about this finding, what came up most was the role of faculty in students' ability to successfully complete these courses. This finding aligns with The RP Group's [*Student Support \(Re\)defined*](#) research that found that while everyone on a college campus plays a role in students' success, faculty are critical. In previous studies, students spoke at length about specific ways faculty members have supported their academic progress and their career choices or options and transfer destinations.

Faculty: The Student Perspective

Students shared that faculty, often a critical driver of student success, **helped them build their confidence as students, increased their mastery of key subjects, and supported their success**. However, in some cases, students reported experiences with faculty who were biased, prejudiced, or dismissive, and who presented course materials and content in dispassionate and unnecessarily difficult ways. Students who participated in the current study's focus groups described **faculty who were patient and supportive, whose teaching—often in the Umoja program—helped them understand themselves and identify how they could improve as students and citizens**. As two students shared:

“

Luckily, the third time around, I had a better teacher for my English 1A class, and I took... the critical thinking equivalent... and that teacher was very helpful. He happened to be an African American teacher... he was very nice... He was very accommodating, very understanding, and very helpful... And so, it was easy for me to approach him when I had a question for essays or if I was having trouble. And he would... write notes on all my papers so I knew what I was doing wrong or what I needed to correct. And so, that was really helpful with my transferring and being on track to transfer.

”



“

I went through a stage where this blonde-haired, blue-eyed lady was my first women's history teacher. And she completely changed my life and my perspective because she taught me things about myself and being a woman—a Black woman—that I didn't even know—that my own mom didn't even teach me. So now, I'm in love with this White woman who just saved me. We formed a friendship outside of class...it was just like things that I never would have expected. She was that person. So, that helped me and changed my perspective.

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While students highlighted the positive impacts of having supportive African American/Black faculty, there is a clear need for more African American/Black faculty in the higher education system, and as the above quote highlights, other faculty can—and should—play a supportive role and make a difference in African American/Black students' lives. **African American/Black students are not the sole responsibility of African American/Black faculty and staff. They are everyone's responsibility.**

Unfortunately, students also shared experiences with faculty who did not teach in ways that were clear and engaging or focused on students' learning. As a result, student respondents shared how they were forced to navigate faculty members' personalities and whims, in many cases unsuccessfully, resulting in them having to retake key courses—particularly in English and math. They described faculty as aggressive, moody, prejudiced, and lacking passion for their subjects. For students with disabilities, students described encounters with faculty members who questioned the legitimacy of their disability and need for accommodations.



Photo: Adobe Stock

Three students shared the following experiences with their instructors:

“

There seems to be a disconnect between old school professors and new school professors, and I'm not saying all the old school ones are bad. It's just all the ones I [have had] in STEM, they were just very aggressive, just super aggressive... but I found a couple [who weren't].

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This question is the reason why I'm in therapy—because of my professors...I took statistics four times... statistics is one of those classes where you need someone who can make it make sense to you. Professors make a hell of a difference in classes like that.

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When it comes to professors, respectfully, you have to learn to kiss their ass, because they are the way you get through. And I don't know how to make that sound sweet—how to make it sound pretty. You have to figure out where their sweet spots are and milk that—and you keep on doing that because you need their letters of recommendation, you need the good grades. What I've learned the most about professors is that it's not really even about being smart, it's about navigating what their styles are and making it work for you.

”

Faculty: The Practitioner Perspective

Practitioners highlighted the **need for instructors to be part of the transfer process**, not just counselors and transfer professionals. Instructional faculty can be especially useful in facilitating student transfer when it comes to **forging partnerships with their counterparts at universities** to help ensure they are preparing students for success after transfer. Further, practitioners touted the **benefits of having African American/Black instructors**, not just counselors, to support African American/Black students. As two practitioners noted:

“

The thing our college does really well is get the instructional faculty involved and interested in the transfer process. We have instructional faculty that work with university partners on grants, articulation, and new and emerging things from the university that should be talked about or investigated or studied at the community college. And so our faculty are very interested in working with their counterparts and colleagues and their disciplines at the transfer universities.

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“

We really, really need to hire more Black [instructors] and more Black counselors in particular and have those faces. I do surveys for my cohort every semester and really try to give back and just flat out ask my students, ‘What do you want to see? What would be better?’ I really want to know what is going to help our students now, in the future, and in the next generations. If they need to see themselves, they really need to see themselves.

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Photo: Christina Morillo

Looking Ahead

This brief provides important context to the findings from the first phase of our *African American Transfer Tipping Point* research. Findings from interviews with college practitioners and focus groups with students help provide a better understanding of the role of key variables in the African American/Black student transfer experience. Understanding why these factors are important helps the field move forward to develop solutions. Our accompanying brief, [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.

The identification of these factors provides important insights, as noted previously; however, there is a need to identify *additional* factors that impact African American/Black student success that are not available in the extant data. Left unanswered is: **what other factors not identified here play an important role in African American/Black students' journeys as they navigate transfer?** As such, the next phase of this work will seek to unpack the social and situational factors that also come into play as African American/Black students navigate their transfer journeys—all in service of developing strategies to best support their success.



Photo: Kampus Production

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The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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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