



SUPPORTING EQUITABLE OUTCOMES & SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS AT THE FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

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Sense of belonging, not GPA, leads to inequitable outcomes for transfer students.

Community colleges provide a convenient, affordable, and flexible pathway to higher education for a large number of first-generation, low-income students, and other populations that may face inequitable personal barriers to beginning their post-secondary studies at a four-year university.

As more students seeking higher education choose community colleges, articulation agreements between community colleges and with public four-year institutions continue to support successful transfer to the university, but not how to support these students after transfer. Upon arrival at the four-year university, transfer students are left mostly on their own, and even the highest-achieving students often experience a sharp decline in GPA during their first term, a phenomenon known as **transfer shock** (Tinto, 2017).

Overall, **only 13% of community college students successfully transfer to and complete a baccalaureate program on-time, compared to 60% of native university students** (National Clearinghouse, 2018).

Age, gender, race, employment, and marital status only play minor roles in transfer shock. What the research tells us is that sense of belonging (or lack thereof) to the four-year university is the driving factor in transfer student achievement & graduation rates.

Community college transfer students require institutional support to develop peer-to-peer social connections that can quickly facilitate the sense of belonging needed to remain resilient and graduate on-time.



WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

- **Transfer student orientations were too brief and generalized to address the social integration needs of community college transfer students** (Cejda, 1994; Laanan, 2001; Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; De Wine et al., 2017; Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017; Shayestehpour, 2020).
- **Peer-to-peer social connections decreased transfer students' feelings of loneliness, improved GPA, lowered stress levels, improved mental and physical health, increased overall life satisfaction, student retention and feelings of being able to navigate the institution and persist** (Laanan, 2004; Jackson & Laanan, 2015; Tinto, 2017; Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017; Xu et. al, 2017).
- **Social connections were the most effective mechanism for community college transfer students to expeditiously develop sense of belonging and avoid transfer shock** (Bramston et. al, 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Estell et. al, 2009).

KEY BARRIERS FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS



Transition Anxiety: Fears and insecurities about adapting to a larger, unfamiliar university.

Belonging: Loss of familiar community support structures leads to student loneliness and imposter syndrome, with no sense of belonging.

Navigational Capital: The campus systems and culture that native students possess is not accessible to transfer students unless they befriend a native student who can guide them.

WHY THIS STUDY?

This population of transfer students is especially unique, because they tend to have little to no free time to spend on campus socially.

Of all university student populations, community college transfer students report spending the least amount of time on-campus outside of classes. This is due to a variety of factors, but most often cited is the high percentage of community college transfer students that also need to continue working while in school or have other family obligations that require them to return home (e.g., childcare, eldercare).

Prior studies on transfer student social integration have focused on:

formal interventions
(such as orientations and
mentorship programs)

or

student participation in
university extra-curricular
activities (events or clubs).



This study addresses the limitations of community college transfer students by exploring only those peer-to-peer social connections that were made *within the classroom.*

RESEARCH METHODS

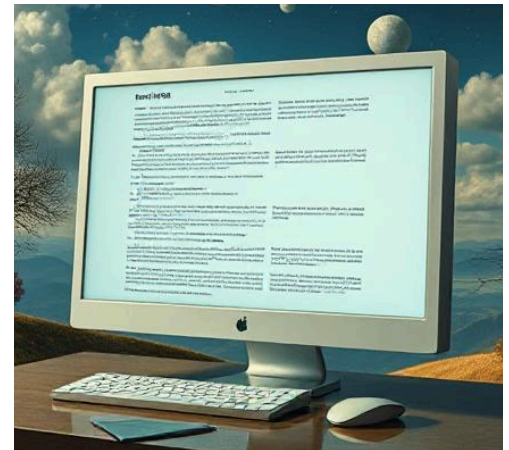
This qualitative research study investigated how community college transfer students at a large, public, four-year university in California developed social connections with their classmates, their perceptions of how these social connections influenced their academic and personal resilience, and how the university facilitated or inhibited these connections.

Study participants were recent graduates who transferred to the four-year university from community college and who completed their Bachelor's degree on-time (within 6 years of beginning their post-secondary studies). All participants lived off-campus and commuted to school during the entirety of their university program.

Each participant completed an in-depth interview where they explored *how* institutional structures (class schedules and logistics) and classroom experiences (instructor pedagogy) facilitated the development of their peer-to-peer social connections upon arrival at the university. Next, Dr. Anousheh asked participants to explore the *why* – *what was it about these connections with other students that influenced their personal resilience?*

After each interview, participants were given two weeks to complete additional written reflections about the role of these social connections in their academic achievement.

Interview transcripts, journal entries, researcher notes and initial survey data were triangulated and coded (by hand and via qualitative software) to reveal findings.



SITE AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The site was selected because it is a public four-year R1 research institution in a major metropolitan city with a diverse undergraduate student body. This highly competitive university admits over 3,000 undergraduate transfer students each year, 90% of which transferred from community colleges. Participation required commuter status as these students spent the least amount of time outside of their classes on-campus. Understanding how these students were able to integrate socially into the university within their first semester highlights the most effective strategies for addressing transfer shock.

Students were recruited through targeted outreach at the transfer student center, email blasts, on-campus flyering, social media, and snowball sampling. The study yielded twelve students who met the criteria, ages 18-26, six male and six female; four representing STEM majors and seven representing non-STEM majors.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONNECTION-MAKING

Factors that influenced peer-to-peer social connection development

"I think there's some psychological phenomenon when you're exposed to someone more you tend to like them. Just being around someone more, you talk more, you get to know them more. We're in a class together now that I actually decided to join because she was in it."

Proximity + Repetition: Initial introductions happen with those closest to them. Same seating builds familiarity over time.

Recognition: Introductory activities helped students learn about their classmates and identify other transfer students.

Relatability: Discovery of shared interests and life experiences, especially when instructor led, facilitated quick connections.

Collaboration: Group projects or tasks cement ties. Courses with lab/discussion sections facilitated the most collaboration.

THE HUMOR FACTOR



Students today share social media profiles, not phone numbers. This allows them to send each other posts they find funny. Not sharing their sense of humor? That's a dealbreaker.

“Even things like laughing when someone tells a joke... it makes me personally feel more comfortable in talking because even if, I don't know, I'm not intelligent enough, or pretty enough or whatever thing that I'm not enough of, at least I made them laugh, so I'm interesting.

I think you begin to feel more comfortable with the person once you guys share a same sense of humor because you know that something you say isn't going to offend them and you don't feel like you're tiptoeing when you're talking to them... that's a big thing for me to become closer with someone... it just shows that they're comfortable with me and I'm comfortable with them.

Once [my classmate] was very receptive of memes [I sent her], she started sharing other memes that aren't related to the school things.

Shared Commiseration: The Secret Ingredient

Although participants identified relatability as the key factor in how their social connections started, the secret ingredient to true bonding with their classmates was the act of shared commiseration.

Being able to vent to and relate with other students about their struggles with upper-level coursework, either in a group chat or whispers during class, resolved their imposter syndrome, especially when native students expressed the same anxieties.



In class it's easier to bond with people over a common thing... Every time we would meet for class, we would share our feelings about the class. What we thought about the class, about the TA, how it was really hard and everything. And then that would start a conversation...we just shared struggles. I don't think any of us had taken that class before, so it's pretty new and challenging material. And sometimes our classes are not organized very well. So I think just shared frustration, that helped us bond. Like, we had a common problem.

HOW SOCIAL CONNECTIONS SHAPE ACADEMICS

“ Just seeing that someone's in the same boat as I am, that makes me feel like I'm not the only one going through this journey of school... it makes the pain easier because we've told each other, 'this is a good school. We're here for a reason.' So then, that sort of motivated both of us to do better in school.... Because before coming to school, even being here at school, sometimes I feel like maybe I don't belong here, but then I see that she's also trying. She's also pushing herself and so the motivation that I get from her makes me remember of how I got here and why I wanted to be here. That motivates me to keep on going. ”



Study Skills Development

- Students reported that forming study groups improved comprehension and accountability.
- Peers shared strategies for note-taking, exam prep, and navigating challenging assignments.

Motivation & Accountability

- Connections created a sense of shared responsibility that kept students on track.
- Working alongside peers reduced procrastination and improved follow-through.

Access to Resources & Knowledge

- Classmates were often the first to share information about tutoring, office hours, and campus resources.
- This insider knowledge helped transfer students bridge gaps in institutional navigation.

Improved Academic Performance

- Students who developed strong peer ties reported higher grades and smoother transitions.
- Social connections reduced imposter syndrome, allowing students to focus on coursework.

Social connections are not just about belonging, they are directly tied to community college transfer student academic behaviors and outcomes. By improving study skills, work completion, and access to resources, peer relationships become a critical driver of GPA recovery and long-term success after transfer.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUITABLE PRACTICE

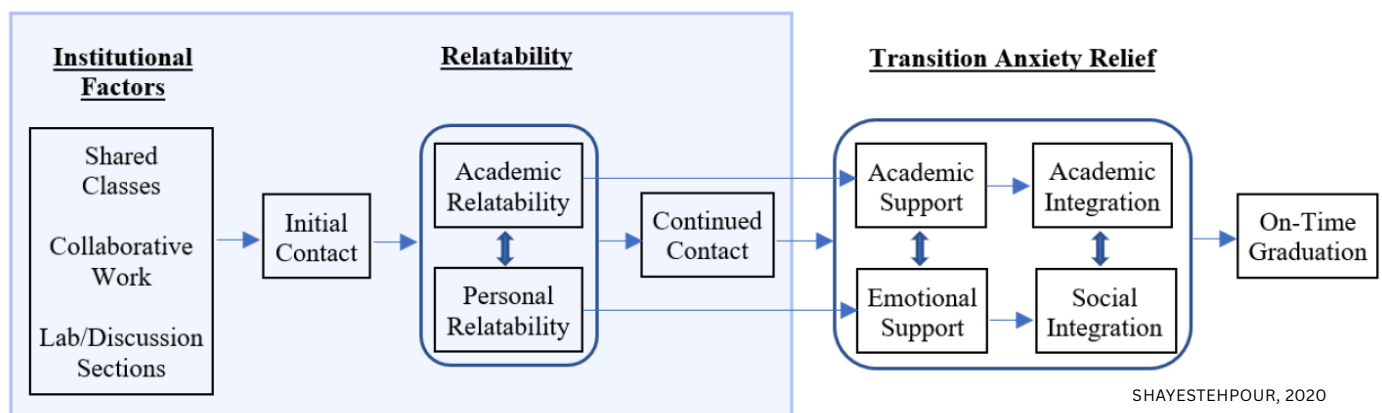
How can universities design curriculum and structures that facilitate socialization?

Institutional culture was found to be decisive in shaping social integration and resilience. Students perceived that when faculty fostered collaboration and when programs intentionally grouped transfer students together by major, opportunities for relationship-building increased and transition challenges were mitigated. Conversely, environments where transfer students were treated as peripheral or invisible reinforced social and academic disconnection, intensifying transfer shock.

Universities should consider reframing the classroom as a primary site of social integration for transfer students. Faculty can explicitly address imposter syndrome, provide first-day of class activities that focus on identifying points of relatability and embed collaborative pedagogies that foster peer connections.

At the institutional level, practices such as linked-course scheduling, cohort-based pathways, curriculum and intentional integration of transfer and native students can facilitate meaningful relationships and reduce barriers to belonging. Data analysis produced a model of peer-to-peer social connection making (below) which demonstrates how institutional factors and classroom pedagogy can facilitate or inhibit transfer student anxiety relief and on-time graduation.

Peer-to-Peer Social Connection Making



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anousheh Shayestehpour is an award-winning educator and administrator with over 15 years of experiencing designing learning programs across K-12 and Higher Ed. Her research focusses on curriculum design & pedagogy that supports equitable outcomes for students with disabilities, at-risk and first-generation students. She has served as Director of Lifelong Learning at UCLA and as an Education Research Analyst for the US Department of Education.

