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A Journalist's Report

Bucking the Trend: How Some Institutions Grew Their Transfer Enrollment Amid a Pandemic



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The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports on the shifting transfer landscape during COVID-19 in a rapid response report series titled *COVID-19 TRANSFER, MOBILITY, AND PROGRESS*. On August 31, 2021, the Research Center issued a comprehensive [annual report](#), revealing that American colleges lost nearly 200,000 transfer students in the first full year of the pandemic.

Commissioned by the Research Center, this special journalist's report offers insights into how some colleges were able to grow their transfer enrollment in 2020-2021 even as numbers were declining nationally. From a sample of roughly 400 colleges with double-digit increases in overall transfer enrollment, the Research Center identified a dozen that showed an unusual growth in upward transfer enrollment during the fall 2020 and/or the spring 2021 compared to their pre-pandemic enrollment trends. Kelly Field spoke with campus officials there to learn more about their growth.

The report continues with an examination of the increase in upward mobility into highly selective colleges and concludes with a look at the transfer challenges ahead, as colleges emerge from the ongoing pandemic.

- The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center -

Dannielle Cabrera was determined. It had taken her 13 years to accumulate enough credits to transfer to a four-year college, and she wasn't about to let a global pandemic stop her. So last fall, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis, she enrolled in California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

But many students who had planned to transfer during the last academic year made a different decision, opting to remain at their current institution or take a break from college.

Nationwide, close to 200,000 fewer students switched colleges between July 2020 and June 2021 than in the prior year, a drop of 8.4 percent, according to the NSC Research Center's [report](#) issued in August. That's more than double the rate of decline seen among non-transfer students last year, and nearly triple the rate of decline in transfer students in 2019-2020.

As with overall enrollment, the losses were greater among men than women, and among Black and Native American students than White ones. Only highly selective colleges expanded their total transfer enrollment for the year.

"You can compare it to what was happening in the job market, where you saw way less movement" early in the pandemic, said Lexi Anderson, an assistant director at the

Education Commission of the States. "Folks just sort of hunkered down."

But there were notable exceptions. Close to 400 institutions posted double-digit increases in transfer students last year, and 21 reported triple-digit growth, according to a Research Center's analysis. Several of the standouts were in the California State University system, which outperformed most other state systems nationally.

Asked how they'd managed to buck the trends, some of these outliers said they'd found new ways to connect with prospective transfer students during the pandemic. One credited increased marketing and new hires, while another said they'd relaxed their admissions criteria as a hedge against an expected enrollment decline. Online institutions said the shift to remote learning at the start of the pandemic made them an attractive alternative to brick-and-mortar institutions that were struggling to adjust.

Some colleges said they hadn't done anything differently, apart from moving their services online. They traced their recent growth to long-standing relationships with local feeder schools, and years of work to smooth the notoriously bumpy transfer process.

“We reaped the benefits of what we did” prior to the pandemic, said Paula Short, provost of the University of Houston, where enrollment was up 15 percent last fall. “There were no tricks, no magic, just a solid roadway that had been laid out.”

Bucking the Trend

At Cal Poly Pomona, where transfer enrollment rose 17 percent in both the fall and spring, some of the growth is likely due to changes that predated the pandemic. Among them: a statewide increase in students graduating community college with an “Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT).”

Since 2014, the number of California students earning an ADT, which guarantees that all their credits will transfer into a program at Cal State, has more than tripled, to over 68,000 students in 2019-2020.

But while an ADT ensures that an upward transfer student will be admitted to a Cal State campus, it doesn’t guarantee them admission to a specific campus. Some campuses accept more ADTs than others.

“They’ve been really successful, but they’re not equitably distributed,” said Rachel Beech, associate vice president for enrollment management at California State University, San Bernardino, where the number of students entering with ADTs grew from 2 in the fall of 2013 to 1,192 this fall.

This difference among campuses may at least partly explain why roughly half the CSU campuses saw spikes in transfer enrollment, while some others experienced significant declines.

At Cal Poly Pomona, ADTs articulate into 26 majors. Terri Gomez, the university’s associate provost for student success, equity, and innovation, said campus leaders made a concerted effort to expand the number of majors that accept ADTs, after internal data showed that students with the degree were more likely to graduate than other transfer students. Beech said her campus has “emphasized the importance of ADTs on our side and worked with community colleges to get them to offer more.”

But there were other factors at play during the pandemic, too. California State University, Fullerton, which grew its fall transfer enrollment by 14 percent last year, attributed its growth, in part, to a new online platform that has allowed it to engage prospective transfer students in novel ways. California State University, Northridge, which enrolled 451 more transfer students last spring than it had the prior year, pointed to updates in its website for transfer students and the launch of mentoring program that was in the works before the pandemic hit.

And California State University, Fresno said it grew its fall enrollment by 25 percent by simply accepting more students. Malisa Lee, the associate vice president for enrollment management, said campus leaders lowered the required GPA from 2.9 to 2.0 in the fall of 2020 out of a concern that COVID-19 would dampen enrollment.

“We admitted more students, with the hope that we’d bring in an equal number of students,” said Lee. “And as you can see, we brought in more.”

Online mega-universities also saw an enrollment boom in the first full year of the pandemic. Western Governors University grew its transfer enrollment by 18 percent in the fall and 13 percent in the spring; Southern New Hampshire University increased its spring transfer enrollment by 21 percent.

Officials at both colleges said they’d benefitted from the pandemic pivot to online learning.

“A lot of schools were struggling with holding classes, and students may not have wanted to lose momentum,” said Darin Hobbs, director of academic records and credentials at WGU. The college’s asynchronous model, which doesn’t require students to log in to lectures or class discussions at certain times, may have also appealed to students who were suddenly stuck at home, juggling work and childcare, Hobbs added.

“Students realized that they could make WGU work around their crazy pandemic schedules,” Hobbs said.

Christopher Feibel, assistant vice president of enrollment support services at SNHU, believes the near universal move to online K-12 education in the spring of 2020 changed some parents’ minds about the quality and security of online education.

Prior to the pandemic, “a lot of folks were somewhat skeptical of online,” Feibel said. When they saw their kids studying online, “there was a bit of an attitude adjustment.”

Central State University, an historically black college in Ohio that grew its transfer enrollment by more than 1,000 students between the falls of 2019 and 2020, attributed its success to “targeted marketing” and the addition of 7 new staff in admissions and enrollment management.

A Look Ahead

One bright spot in the generally bleak transfer picture for the last academic year was the increase in upward transfer into roughly 200 highly selective colleges. Competitive colleges grew their transfer enrollment by more than 10 percent, more than 7,600 students.

But the share of students transferring from community colleges to top tier institutions remained quite low – just 10 percent of the total - with growth concentrated among out-of-state students. At highly selective colleges, out-of-state transfers grew at three-and-a-half times the rate of in-state transfers: 28 percent versus 8 percent.

This suggests that the opening up of selective colleges to transfer students during the pandemic may have disproportionately benefitted a subset of students with the “capacity and means” to make the jump from a two-year college, said John Fink, a senior research associate at The Community College Research Center.

“It may be that there was more opportunity for those with financial resources and family support,” Fink said. If that’s true, “the pandemic has further stratified the market for higher education.”

It remains to be seen if the growth in upward transfers into highly selective colleges will outlast the pandemic. Tania LaViolet, director of the College Excellence Program at The Aspen Institute, said she worries that the bump in last year’s numbers was “just a temporary enrollment strategy to stem losses from direct entry students.”

At less selective colleges, the competition for transfer students is expected to grow increasingly fierce, as the pool of potential applicants shrinks. Community colleges have been shedding students for several years and saw enrollments plummet at the start of the pandemic, as the Clearinghouse [data](#) shows.

Colleges that depend on local feeder schools for students are eyeing these drops nervously, worried that they’ll be next. Even colleges that outperformed their peers last year said they are bracing for a decline.

Last year, transfer students “protected us from fewer freshman,” said Deborah Cours, interim assistant vice president for academic undergraduate programs at California State University, Northridge. “We are worried about the inverse of a bubble coming through.”

In the CSU system, where the priority application filing period ends in late fall, pandemic-driven declines in transfer students may not show up until this fall’s census, said Ryan Cornner, vice chancellor of educational programs and institutional effectiveness in the Los Angeles Community College District. That’s because many of last year’s transfer students had already been admitted when the pandemic struck.

Colleges in California say they aren’t taking continued growth for granted. At California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, which grew its transfer enrollment by 38 percent last fall, administrators are using Clearinghouse data to identify students who applied to the college, but enrolled in a two-year institution instead, and reaching out to them with information about transfer. They have also abolished a supplemental application that tripped up some transfer students, boosting the number who complete the process, according to Terrance Harris, interim vice president of strategic enrollment management.

Meanwhile, administrators at Cal Poly Pomona are hoping a recent switch to a multifactor admissions system will result in even more transfers being accepted to the college, Gomez said.

Officials there are also taking new steps to hold on to the transfer students they already have. They’ve created new research opportunities for transfer students and have started sending them targeted surveys to learn more about their unique needs, Gomez said.

For Cabrera, 32, it was an upbeat mentor named Edna who made all the difference. Edna checked in regularly, offered homework help over Zoom, and walked Cabrera through the byzantine student aid system. She even motivated her to attend the college’s workshops and events for transfer students, Cabrera said.

“I’d see her e-mails, and she was so peppy, I couldn’t not go,” she said.

As the pandemic drags on, LaViolet hopes more colleges that have grown their transfer populations in the past year will turn their attention to retention.

“Transfer can be a strategy to advance more equitable higher-education opportunities on the other side of the pandemic,” she said. “But those intentional policies need to be put in place now.”

For Doug Shapiro, Executive Director of the Research Center, the practices highlighted here provide hope that other colleges can also achieve higher levels of transfer growth.

“What stands out to me about these strategies is that they are not rocket science, not specific to the pandemic, and not restricted to the highly selective colleges that gained the most last year.” “They can still be applied now, or even post-pandemic. Any college that saw itself in the broader declines of the Clearinghouse data can adopt these ideas to help prevent further declines, or even to create growth going forward,” Shapiro added.

WGU: A Pandemic-Era Transfer Success Story

In the spring of 2020, when many brick-and-mortar colleges were scrambling to adapt to remote learning, online mega-universities like Western Governors University kept doing what they'd always done - and thrived.

While most of higher education experienced a decline in transfer student enrollment in the academic year that followed the shift to remote learning, Western Governors grew its transfer student population by 18 percent in the fall and 14 percent in the spring.

"For students, it just made sense," said Mary Hendrick, WGU's transfer engagement executive. They thought, "I don't need to roll the dice on a university that is trying to figure out online learning. I can go to one that specializes in that."

But the nonprofit college's deep roots in online learning wasn't the only factor in Western Governor's favor. Strong ties to local two-years, including Ivy Tech Community College, also played a role in its pandemic success story, Hendrick said.

WGU Indiana and Ivy Tech signed a memorandum of understanding back in 2009. But it wasn't until 2015 that the then-chancellor of WGU Indiana tapped Hendrick to strengthen the relationship between the colleges. Hendrick and other staff went campus-to-campus, introducing themselves to the local leadership, and clearing up misconceptions about online education.

"Because we were online, we were often lumped together with the bigger for-profits," Hendrick recalled. "We let them see we were serving a population much like the one they were serving."

WGU administrators also assured their community college counterparts that they weren't seeking to poach their students before they earned an associate degree.

"We know that if a student has completed an associate degree, it prepares them for success," Hendrick said. Students who transfer with an associate degree are 25 percent more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who transfer without one, she said.

But the real breakthrough came when Hendrick and her team started meeting with professors.

"The people who were influencing students' decisions about transfer were not at the executive level - it was really the instructors," she said. "That's who they were going to get advice about what to do next."

Two years later, WGU signed an agreement that guaranteed many Ivy Tech graduates could transfer to the four-year institution as a junior.

By the time the pandemic struck, in 2020, the relationship between the colleges was well-established. Still, WGU wasn't taking any chances. While most of its peers were busy moving courses and student services online, WGU officials reached out to prospective transfer students the old-fashioned way: through snail mail. It sent postcards to recent Ivy Tech graduates congratulating them on their accomplishment and pointing them to programs related to their major.

"It was a way to stand out a bit," said Kelsey Donnelly, strategic partnership manager for WGU.

Last year, WGU grew its enrollment of Ivy Tech transfer students by 14 percent.