



# Community College Transfers and the Pipeline of Prospective Teachers in North Carolina

## Introduction

Increasing the number and diversity of those pursuing teacher education is a priority for many state and local education officials. With a stronger teacher pipeline, more K-12 classrooms could be led by highly effective teachers who promote students' academic and social-emotional growth.

Community college transfer students play an important role in the teacher pipeline. Community colleges attract a diverse range of students, with a strong representation of students from lower-income, non-white, and rural backgrounds. Community colleges also offer an on-ramp to a teaching credential for students who cannot immediately enter a four-year institution after high school and for working adults who wish to reskill and change professions.

However, community college students often experience difficulties with transfer processes that limit their ability to successfully transfer to and complete four-year degree programs. Challenges can include getting credits to transfer to their new institution, issues with scheduling courses upon transfer, adjusting to new campus social and academic norms, and aligning differences in introductory course instruction across campuses. Challenges specific to teacher education programs include passing licensure exams and balancing student teaching requirements with other academic and personal responsibilities. Efforts to smooth the transition from community colleges to four-year teaching programs could reap large policy rewards by helping more students successfully transfer and complete teacher education programs.

In this brief, we highlight the role that transfer students play in North Carolina's undergraduate teaching pipeline. Specifically, we highlight two key contrasting points:

1. About 25 percent of students at University of North Carolina (UNC) System institutions who complete an undergraduate teaching program each year are community college transfers.
2. Transfer students are less likely to complete undergraduate teaching programs than students who began

college at a UNC System institution at the same time. This is especially true among students of color and students from urban areas.

If transfer students earned education licensures at a similar rate as their peers who began at a UNC System institution, there would be 70 additional teacher licensures awarded at UNC System institutions each year, a 4 percent increase over baseline totals. This increase could be even greater if policy changes also helped more community college students successfully transfer into four-year teaching programs. Overall, our results suggest that improving the transition between community colleges and four-year teaching programs could significantly strengthen and diversify North Carolina's education workforce.

## Background

This report utilizes data from the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), the UNC System, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Using this data, we describe characteristics and outcomes of *teacher education pursuers*, which we define as students who ever enrolled in an undergraduate education major or teacher licensure program at a UNC System institution. We focus primarily on *community college transfer students*, defined as those who: (1) first enrolled solely in a NCCCS institution for at least one fall or spring semester and (2) later enrolled in a UNC System institution within 2 years of exiting the NCCCS institution. At times, we compare outcomes of community college transfers to *non-transfers* (i.e., UNC System starters).

We examined three outcomes: (1) the percentage of all UNC System undergraduate teacher licensure earners between 2016-17 and 2020-21 who were NCCCS transfers; (2) the percentage of undergraduate teacher licensure earners who were NCCCS transfers by student subgroups defined by race/ethnicity and high school urbanicity;<sup>1</sup> and (3) the percentage of transfer and non-transfer teacher education pursuers who earned a teacher licensure within 7 or 8 years of initial college entry for students who first entered a NCCCS or UNC System institution in 2013-14 or 2014-15.

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of this outcome is restricted to students who attended a North Carolina public high school in 2010-11 or later and who could be linked to NCDPI data to determine their demographic characteristics.

## Results

**Figure 1** displays the number of undergraduate teacher licensures awarded each year at UNC System institutions between 2016-17 and 2020-21. Light-blue bars indicate the total number of licensures awarded, while dark-blue bars indicate licensures earned by transfer students.

On average, about 1,900 students earned undergraduate teacher licensures from UNC System institutions each year. Transfer students earned between 460 and 480 of these licensures, equivalent to about 25 percent of the licensures at UNC System institutions. This highlights that community college transfer students comprise a meaningful percentage of the state’s newly-licensed teacher workforce.

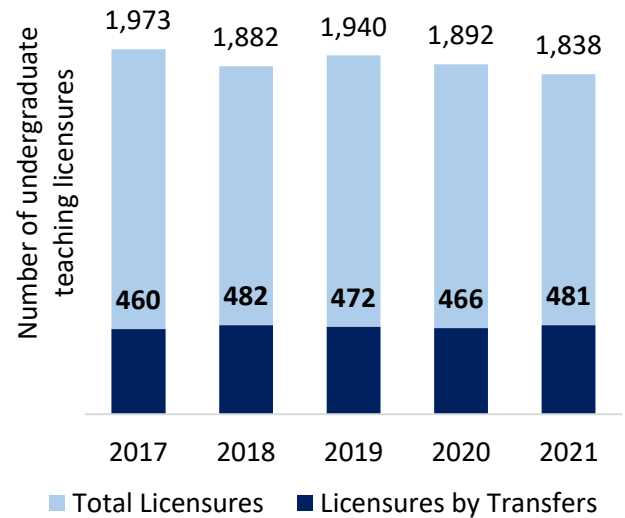
We note that six UNC System institutions account for more than 85 percent of the undergraduate teacher licensures awarded to transfer students. On average, East Carolina University (ECU) and Appalachian State University (ASU) award about 100 licensures to transfer students each year; UNC Charlotte (UNCC) and UNC Wilmington (UNCW) award 75 to 80; and UNC Greensboro (UNCG) and NC State (NC State) award 40 to 45.

**Figure 2** shows the percentage of undergraduate teacher licensures over this five-year period (2016-17 to 2020-21) that were awarded to transfer students within student subgroups defined by race/ethnicity (Black, white, Hispanic) and high school urbanicity. This analysis is restricted to students who attended a public high school in North Carolina in 2010-11 or later and who could be matched to NCDPI data on demographic characteristics (about 70 percent of all undergraduate teacher licensure earners).

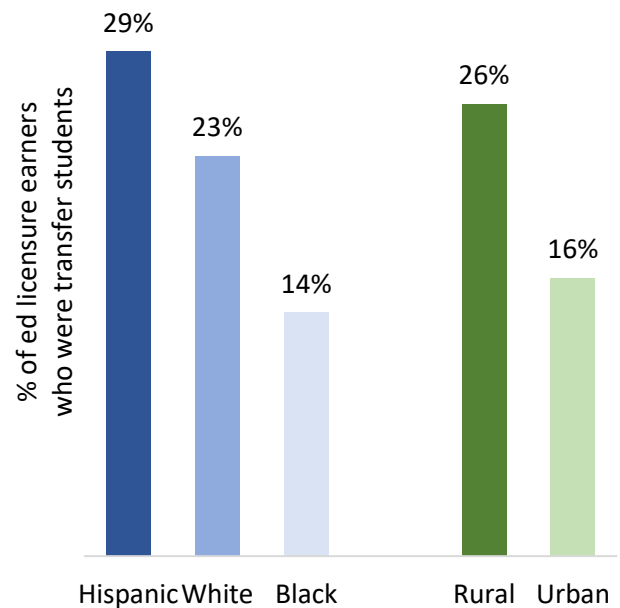
By race/ethnicity, Hispanic students had the highest concentration of transfer students among teacher licensure earners. Nearly 30 percent of the 250 Hispanic students who earned an undergraduate teacher licensure at a UNC System institution over this five-year period (and who matched to NCDPI data) were transfer students. By contrast, transfer students accounted for just 23 percent of the 5,700 white students who earned a teacher licensure and only 14 percent of the 570 Black students who earned a teacher licensure.

Rural students who earned an undergraduate teacher licensure were much more likely to have been transfers than urban students. Specifically, 26 percent of the 4,000 rural students who earned a teacher licensure were transfers, compared to 16 percent of the 2,700 urban students who earned a teacher licensure.

*Figure 1: Number of undergraduate teacher licensures awarded at UNC System institutions, 2016-17 to 2020-21*



*Figure 2: Percentage of UNC System undergraduate teacher licensure earners who were transfer students, 2016-17 to 2020-21, by race/ethnicity and urbanicity of high school*

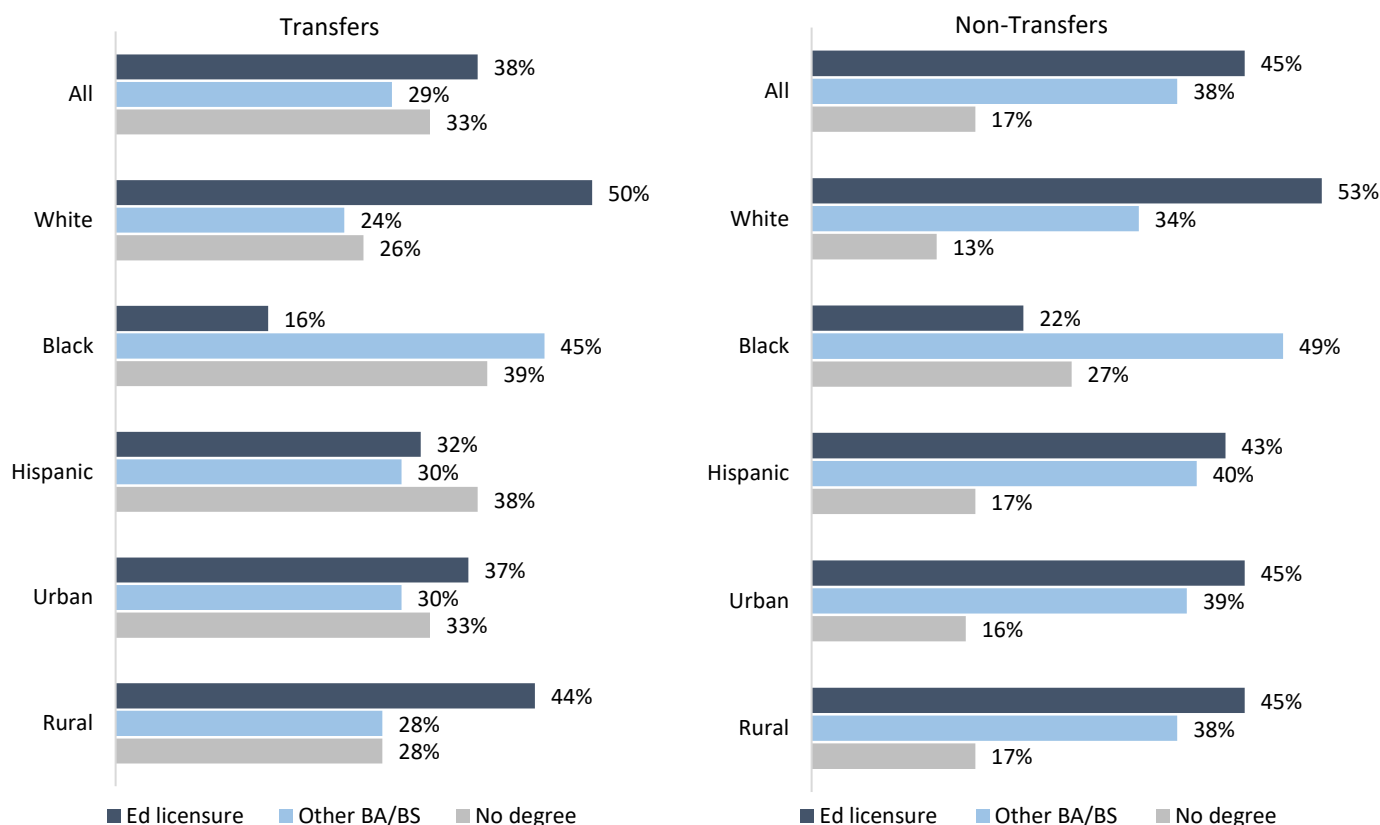


Finally, among those who first enrolled in a NCCCS or UNC System institution in 2013-14 or 2014-15 and who pursued teacher education, **Figure 3** shows teacher licensure attainment rates and overall Bachelor's degree completion rates for transfer students (left) and non-transfer students (right).

In these two cohorts, 83 percent of UNC System starters who pursued teacher education earned a Bachelor's degree, compared to 67 percent of transfer students. This means that transfer students who pursued teacher education were about 19 percent less likely to earn a Bachelor's degree than UNC System starters. Because students often switch majors, many students who enrolled in teacher education at one point ultimately earned a degree in a different field of study, while others completed an education major but did not earn a teacher licensure. In total, 45 percent of UNC System starters who ever pursued teacher education earned a teacher licensure compared to 38 percent of transfers. Thus, among those who pursued teacher education, transfers are 16 percent less likely to earn an undergraduate teacher licensure than UNC System starters.

By student characteristics, rates of teacher licensure attainment were similar for White transfer and non-transfer students (50% and 53% respectively) and for rural transfer and non-transfer students (44% and 45%, respectively). By contrast, rates of teacher licensure attainment were lower for Hispanic transfers (32%) compared to Hispanic non-transfers (43%). For Black students, rates of teacher licensure attainment were low both for non-transfers (22%) and transfers (16%). This is largely due to a high rate of Black students who pursued teacher education completing Bachelor's degrees but not completing a teacher licensure. For example, while only 16 percent of Black transfer students who pursued teacher education earned a teacher licensure, 45 percent earned a Bachelor's degree without earning a licensure. By contrast, among white transfer students who pursued teacher education, 50 percent earned a teacher licensure while just 24 percent earned a Bachelor's degree without earning a licensure. A similar pattern holds for non-transfer students. Thus, Black students exit or do not complete undergraduate teacher licensure programs at rates that are far higher than the moderate Black-white difference in Bachelor's degree completion rates.

*Figure 3: Teacher education licensure and Bachelor's degree attainment rates of transfer and non-transfer education pursuers, by transfer status, race/ethnicity, and urbanicity of high school*



Note: Restricted to students who ever enrolled in a UNC System teacher education program and who began college in 2013-14 or 2014-15

## Conclusion

This brief highlights two key points about the role of community college transfer students in North Carolina's teacher education pipeline. First, transfers are vital to the teacher education workforce in North Carolina, earning about 500 undergraduate teacher licensures per year or about one-quarter of the total number awarded at UNC System institutions. Second, transfer students are less likely to successfully complete teacher licensures than UNC System starters who began college at the same time.

If rates of undergraduate teacher licensure attainment for transfer students and UNC System starters were equal, there would be about 70 additional teacher licensures awarded to transfer students per cohort, or a 4 percent increase in the total number of undergraduate teacher licensures awarded each year. This is a meaningful increase, particularly amid concerns about enrollments in undergraduate teacher education programs and high rates of teacher turnover in NC public schools.<sup>2</sup> Further, if policy changes help a greater number of community college students successfully transfer into four-year teacher education programs, there could be an even bigger increase in teacher licensures conferred.

Regardless of their major, transfer students can encounter many barriers to earning a Bachelor's degree. These include difficulties in transferring credits, scheduling courses, navigating new campus climates, and rectifying misalignment in introductory coursework across institutions. Transfer students in teacher education may also face unique barriers to entering and completing a teacher licensure program, including satisfying GPA requirements for program entry; completing licensure exam requirements (such as Praxis Core, Praxis II, and edTPA); and challenges in balancing student teaching experiences, academic coursework, and personal responsibilities (e.g. family, other work).

Institutions can begin to address these challenges by developing strong cross-sector partnerships that aim to smooth academic and logistical challenges facing transfer students. For some UNC institutions, this may mean developing a close relationship with one cross-sector partner – for example, nearly half of transfer students in teacher education at UNC Charlotte came from Central Piedmont Community College (and likewise, more than half of Central Piedmont Community College transfers who pursue teacher education do so at UNC Charlotte). By contrast, at ASU, ECU, and UNCG, no more than 20 percent of transfer students in teacher education come from any single NCCCS institution. These institutions may need to develop strong transfer systems that work for and with many community college partners.<sup>3</sup>

North Carolina can also support this work by continuing to develop statewide transfer standards, policies, and support systems that aim to help students who transfer from any NCCCS to any UNC System institution. State officials might also consider making changes to teacher education program entry/completion requirements and reducing financial barriers around full-time student teaching. The state's implementation of a new Associate's Degree in Teaching represents one important step towards the goal of strengthening the pipeline from community colleges to undergraduate teacher education programs. Future research should examine how the development of this pathway affects teacher licensure rates for transfer students.

Overall, this brief shows that transfer students are a fundamental part of North Carolina's teacher education pipeline but may face challenges that limit their undergraduate degree attainment and completion of a teacher licensure program. The development of stronger partnerships and support structures that help more community college students transfer and successfully complete teacher licensures could significantly boost state efforts to strengthen and diversify the teacher workforce.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g.: Bastian, K. C., & Fuller, S. C. (2023). *Educator attrition and hiring in North Carolina's public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://epic.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1268/2023/02/Educator-Attrition-and-Hiring-in-NC.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Detailed results for all UNC System and NCCCS institutions can be provided by the authors on request.

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