

Transitions from Community College to Teacher Education: Motivations, Barriers, and Post-Secondary Experiences Among University of Houston Teacher Candidates

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Introduction

For more than a decade, policymakers and practitioners have expressed concern that fewer individuals are entering and completing a university-based teacher preparation program (TPP). Title II data show that enrollment in traditional TPPs fell by 347,000 students between 2011 and 2021. Likewise, the annual number of university-based TPP completers fell by 57,000 students across this period.¹ Increasing TPP enrollments is essential to strengthening the teacher pipeline and will require a multi-pronged policy and practice approach.

Towards this end, strengthening connections between community colleges and four-year institutions may offer one promising strategy to both boost TPP enrollment and diversify the teaching profession. Nationwide, 20 percent of students entering public, four-year institutions are community college transfers, and these students are more likely to be Black or Hispanic and be from low- or middle-income neighborhoods than students starting at a four-year institution.² In Texas, one-third of bachelor's degree recipients in 2019 had more than 30 transfer credit hours from a two-year college.³ In North Carolina, approximately 25 percent of those completing an undergraduate TPP at a public four-year institution started at a community college.⁴

While community colleges represent a key source of prospective teachers, community college transfers face barriers to finishing their degree. Continuing to

understand and address these barriers—those common to all transfer students and those unique to transfer students pursuing teacher education—is essential to strengthening and diversifying the teacher pipeline. As such, EPIC and the University of Houston (UH) partnered to develop and administer a survey to UH teacher education students focused on their experiences at community colleges and four-year institutions. With these survey data we address four key questions in this brief:

- (1) What are the characteristics of undergraduate teacher candidates who transferred from a community college?
- (2) What were the community college experiences of undergraduate teacher candidates?
- (3) What influenced the decisions of undergraduate teacher candidates to both start at a community college and transfer?
- (4) What barriers do community college transfers face in completing their TPP?

We view these results as an opportunity to motivate further research, to inform stakeholders about the importance of the community college to teacher education pipeline, and to encourage greater intentionality in the recruitment and support of community college transfers.

¹ Saenz-Armstrong, P. (2023). Data brief: How do trends in teacher preparation enrollment and completion vary by state? *National Council on Teacher Quality*. Available from: <https://www.nctq.org/blog/Data-Brief:-How-do-trends-in-teacher-preparation-enrollment-and-completion-vary-by-state>

² Volasco, T., Fink, J., Bodoya, M., & Jenkins, D. (2024). Tracking Transfer: Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment. Available from: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/tracking-transfer-four-year-institutional-effectiveness.pdf>

³ Texas Association of Community Colleges Fact Sheet. Available from: https://tacc.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/fact_sheet_2023.pdf

⁴ Swiderski, T., Bastian, K.C., & Fuller, S.C. (2023). Community College Transfers and the Pipeline of Prospective Teachers in North Carolina. Available from: https://epic.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1268/2023/08/EPICInsight_CCTransfers_final.pdf

Background

Since 2019, EPIC has partnered with the UH College of Education to study the implementation of UH program reforms and outcomes for UH graduates in Texas public schools. As part of this work, EPIC and UH became interested in the role of community colleges in the teacher education pipeline. To understand more about this topic, EPIC and UH developed and administered a survey to juniors and seniors majoring in Teaching and Learning at the UH College of Education. This was an online survey conducted as part of a required course in the College of Education and taken by students in spring 2022. In total, 614 students completed the survey, which represents a response rate of approximately 75 percent.

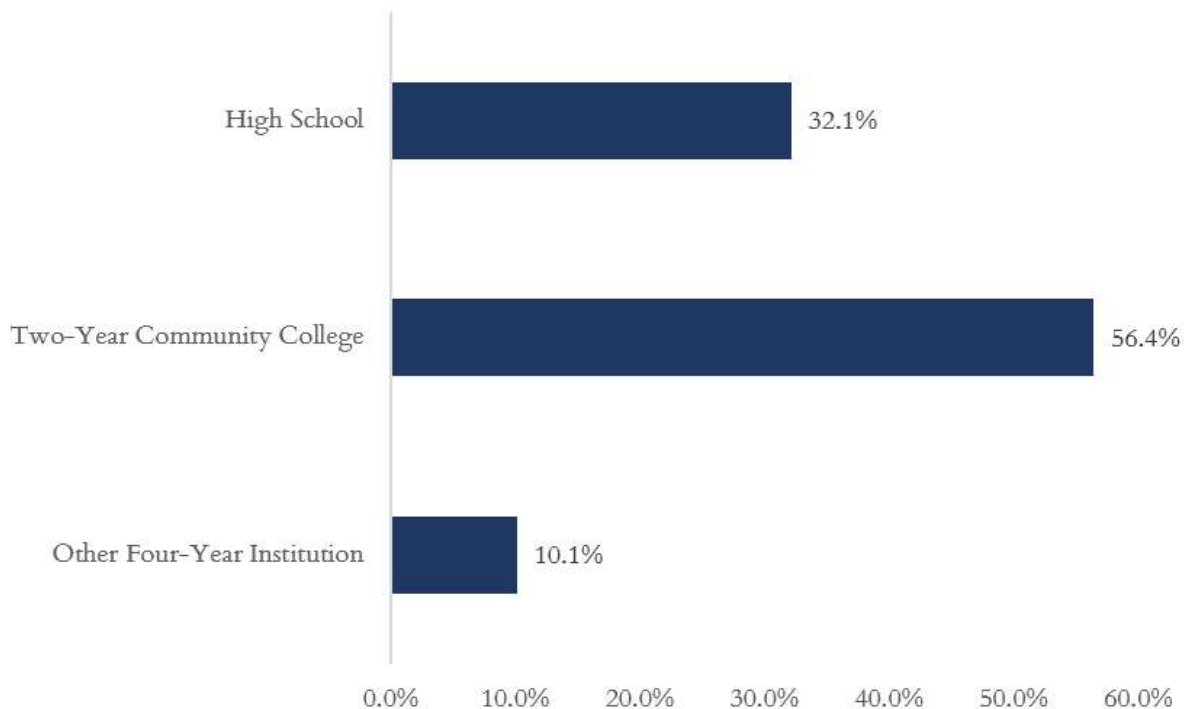
The survey covered topics such as student background, prior institution of enrollment, factors influencing community college and four-year institution choice, community college and four-year institution experiences, and barriers to success. We analyze these data descriptively, and where possible, compare the survey responses of community college transfers to those of students who entered UH directly from high school. This comparison allows us to assess perceptions among the two primary pathways into the UH College of Education.

What are the characteristics of undergraduate teacher candidates who transferred from a community college?

Figure 1 and Table 1 present descriptive data on the characteristics of the UH College of Education survey respondents. Figure 1 shows that nearly 33 percent of survey respondents reported entering UH directly from high school, while 10 percent transferred from another four-year institution. Fifty-six percent of survey respondents entered UH from a community college. This highlights the important role that community college transfers hold in the undergraduate teacher education pipeline at UH.

Table 1 presents enrollment and demographic data for community college transfers and those entering UH directly from high school. Overall, these two groups are similar across these characteristics. On average, 93 percent of community college transfers are enrolled full-time, 87 percent are female, 12 percent are Asian, 3 percent are Black, 57 percent are Hispanic, 19 percent are White, and 5 percent are multiracial. Relative to those entering directly from high school, community college transfers are slightly less likely to be enrolled full-time, Asian, or Black. Conversely, community college transfers are slightly more likely to be female, White, Hispanic, or multiracial.

Figure 1: Prior Institution Before Enrollment at UH



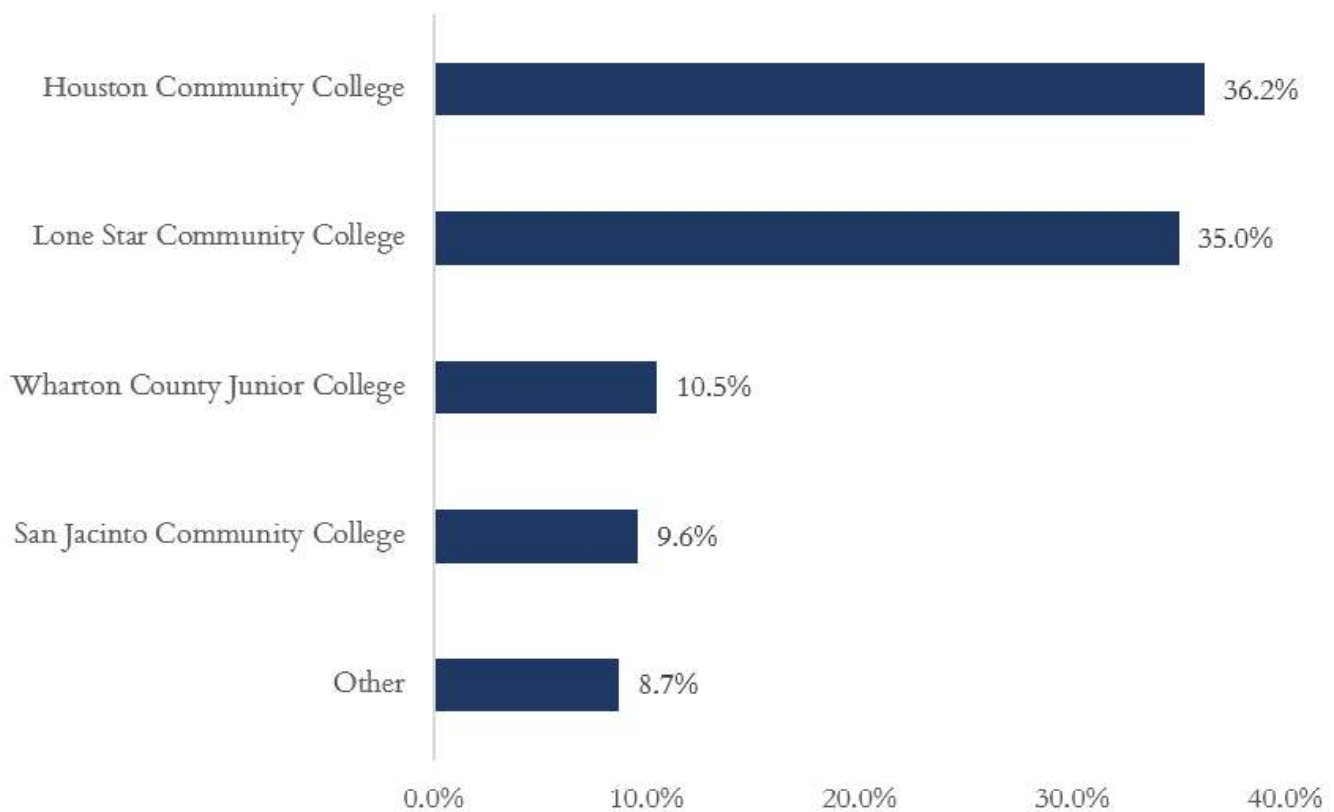
Note: This figure presents descriptive data on survey respondents' prior institution before enrolling at the University of Houston.

Table 1: Characteristics of Community College Transfers Compared to High School Entrants

	Two-Year/Community College	High School Entrant
Junior	43.9%	47.2%
Senior	55.5%	50.3%
Full-Time Enrollee	92.8%	95.9%
Female	87.1%	85.1%
Asian	12.1%	15.9%
Black	3.0%	6.7%
Hispanic/Latinx	57.2%	54.6%
White	19.3%	15.5%
Multiracial/Other	5.4%	4.1%

Note: This table displays the enrollment and demographic characteristics of survey respondents who entered UH from a community college or directly from high school.

Figure 2: Community College Attended Before Enrolling at UH



Note: Among survey respondents who transferred to UH from a community college, this figure presents data on the community college they previously attended.

What were the community college experiences of undergraduate teacher candidates at UH?

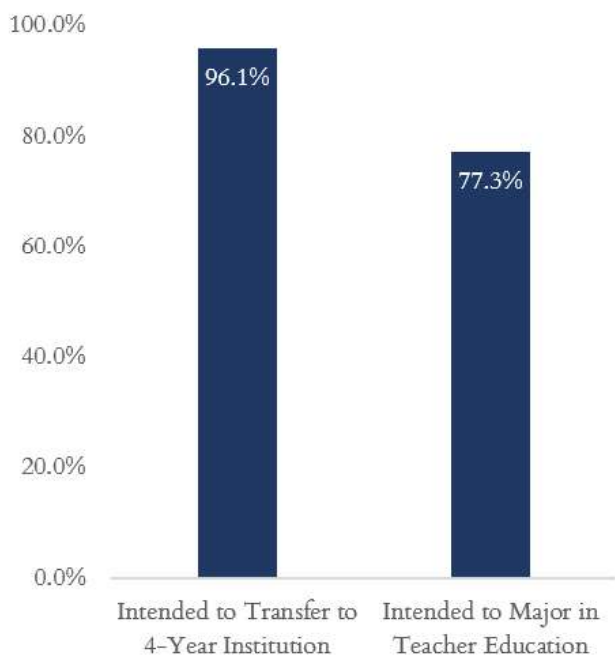
Figure 2 shows the community colleges that survey respondents attended before transferring to UH. Overall, these data indicate that transfers come from a small number of community colleges. In particular, two community colleges—Houston Community College and Lone Star Community College—account for more than 70 percent of the transfer population within the UH College of Education. Adding two more institutions—Wharton County Junior College and San Jacinto Community College—accounts for more than 90 percent of transfer students. This concentration of prospective UH students at a few community colleges presents opportunities for large impacts from purposeful partnerships between institutions.

Figure 3 details the academic intentions of community college transfers in the UH College of Education. Nearly all those who started at a two-year institution (96 percent) reported that they intended to transfer to a four-year institution prior to beginning their post-secondary education. Furthermore, over 75 percent of survey respondents reported that prior to transferring they knew they wanted to major in teacher education. This early knowledge of intentions to pursue teaching at a four-year

institution presents opportunities to advise and support community college students.

Table 2 presents data on survey respondents’ area of study at their community college and whether they completed an associate degree before transferring to UH. These results suggest that students do not always choose a community college degree path that aligns with their reported intentions (Figure 3). In particular, while 77 percent of transfers reported an intention to major in teacher education, relatively few transfers (16.5 percent) reported pursuing an Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree. Instead, most transfer students pursued more general Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degrees. To the extent that AAT degrees better position transfers to complete teacher preparation at a four-year institution, these data may suggest a need to understand why students choose more general degree paths and potential gains from encouraging more students to pursue an AAT. In the right column of Table 2, we find that many students do not complete an associate degree before transfer and that completion rates vary by degree program. Taken together, these data show that only 10 percent of transfer students reported finishing an AAT degree before transferring to UH.

Figure 3: Intentions to Transfer and to Major in Education



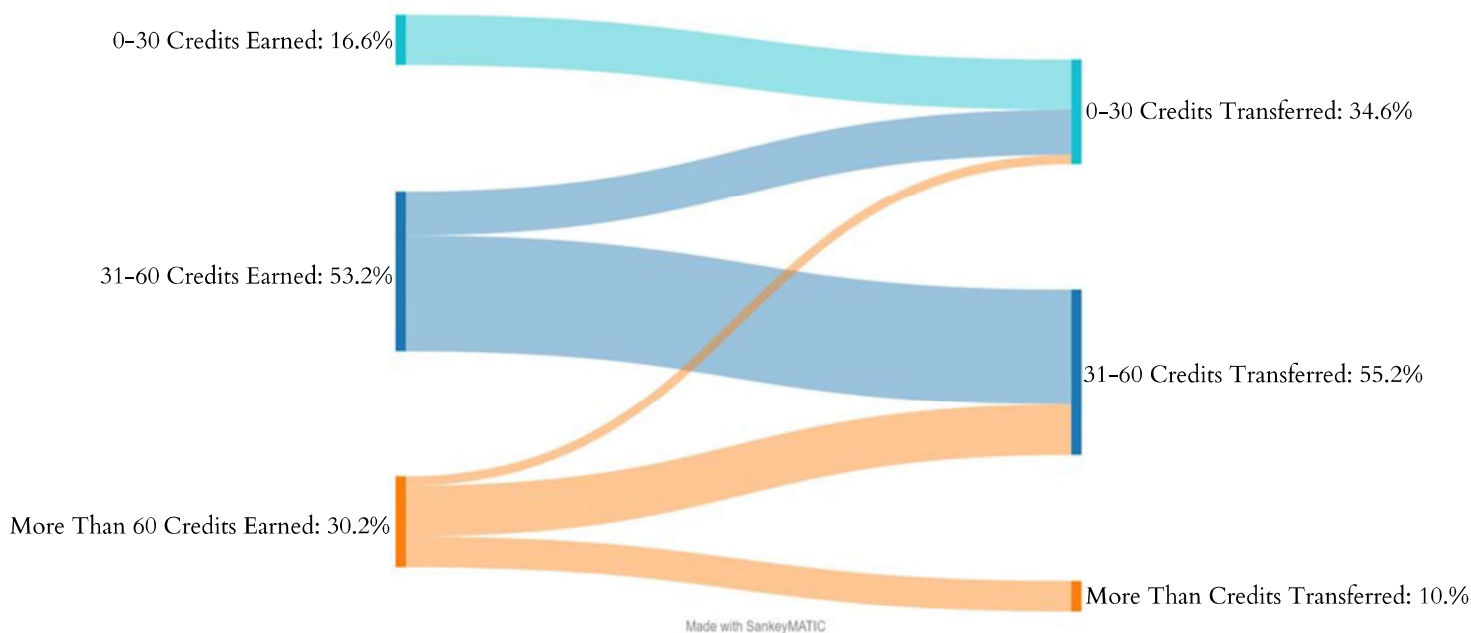
Note: Among survey respondents who transferred to UH from a community college, this figure presents data on their academic intentions.

Table 2: Area of Study and Completion of Associate Degree

Area of Study	% in Respective Area of Study	% Completed Associate Degree
Associate of Arts	45.4%	76.7%
Associate of Science	22.8%	47.4%
Associate of Arts in Teaching	16.5%	60.0%
Other Associate	2.7%	37.5%
Other	12.6%	2.4%

Note: Among survey respondents who transferred to UH from a community college, this table presents data on reported area of study and whether the transfer student completed an associate degree.

Figure 4: Credits Earned at a Community College and Credits Transferred to Degree Program at UH



Note: Among survey respondents who transferred to UH from a community college, this figure presents data on the number credits they earned at their community college and the number of credits they successfully transferred to UH.

An important consideration for transfer students is how many credits they can successfully transfer to the four-year institution. As such, Figure 4 presents a Sankey chart to capture respondents' reported number of credits earned at their community college and the number of credits they were able to transfer to UH. The left side of Figure 4 shows that 53 percent of respondents reported earning 31-60 credit hours, with 30 percent of students earning more than 60 credit hours. Few transfer students reported earning fewer than 30 credit hours at their community college. The key takeaway from Figure 4 is the reported loss of credits between the community college and UH. Among those reporting 31-60 credits earned at their community college, 28 percent were able to transfer less than 30 credits to UH. Among those reporting more than 60 credits earned, 10 percent transferred less than 30 credits and 56 percent transferred 31-60 credits. This loss of credits represents additional time and money that transfers will need to devote to their undergraduate degree and signals a need for community colleges and four-year institutions to mitigate credit loss through articulation agreements, advising, and other student supports.

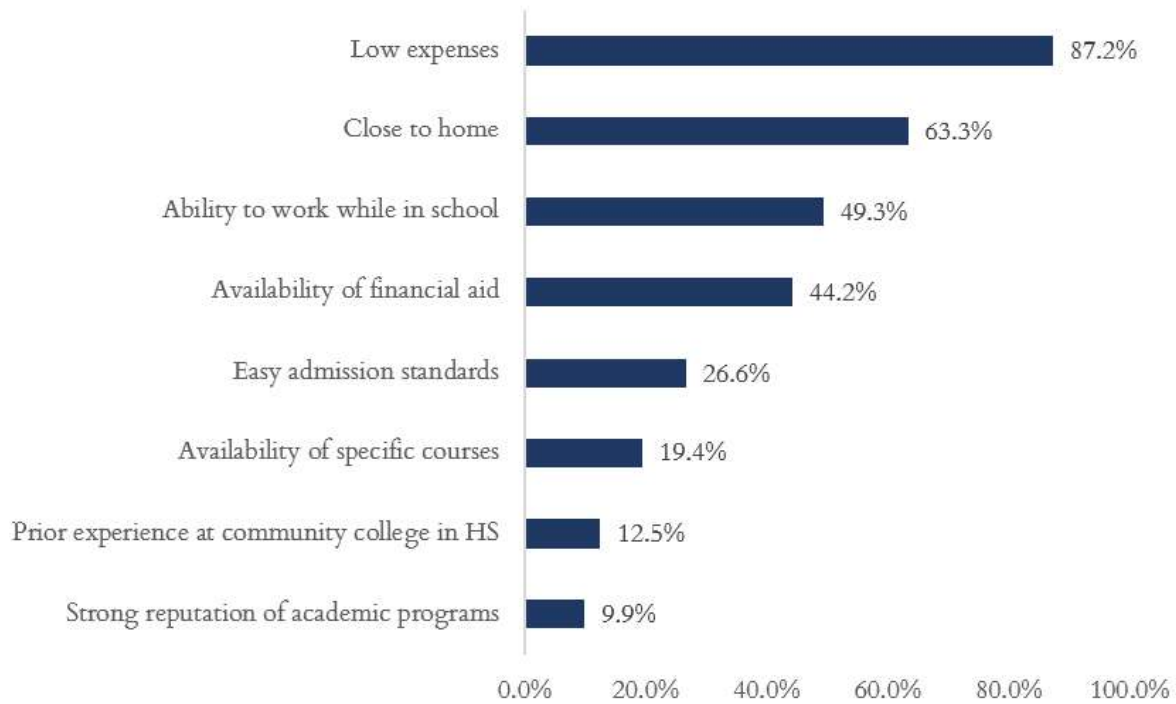
What influenced the decisions of undergraduate teacher candidates to start at a community college and to select UH for transfer?

Figure 5 details the motivations of UH teacher candidates to begin their post-secondary education at a community college. Here, a key finding is the importance of financial resources and familial support to post-secondary choices.

Nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated that low expenses influenced their decision to begin at a community college and more than 60 percent identified being close to home as an influence. Likewise, approximately 50 and 45 percent of survey respondents, respectively, reported that the ability to work while in school and the availability of financial aid influenced their decision to start at a community college. After affordability and proximity to home, other factors were relatively less likely to influence the decision to start at a two-year institution.

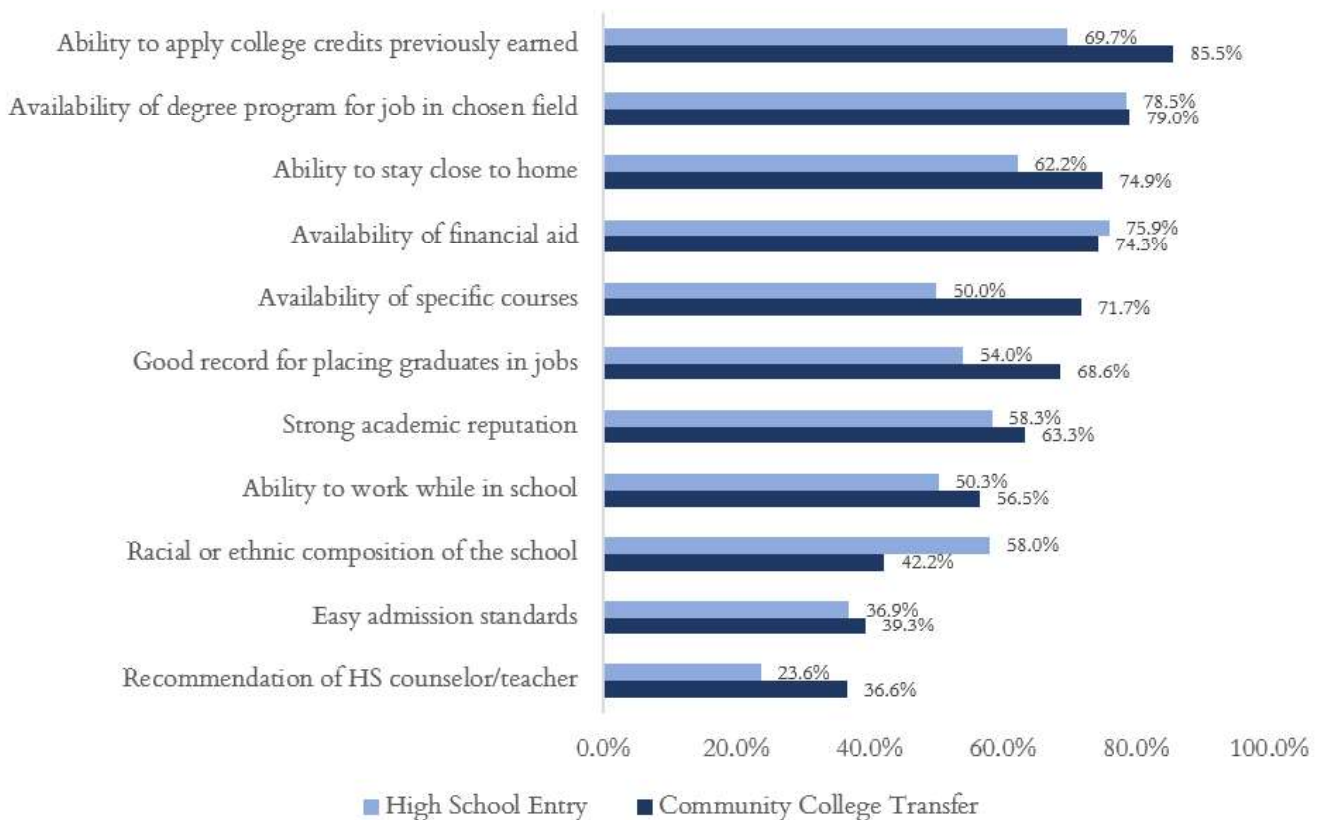
To extend these data, Figure 6 displays the percent of survey respondents who identified certain factors as being very important to their choice of a four-year institution to attend. We display these data for community college transfers and those who entered UH directly from high school. Across both groups very important factors in the choice of a four-year institution included academic, financial, and logistical concerns. Relative to those entering UH from high school, the ability to apply college credits previously earned, the ability to stay close to home, the availability of specific courses, and having a good record for placing graduates in jobs were very important to more community college transfers. For example, 72 percent of community college transfers versus 50 percent of high school entrants identified the availability of specific courses as very important to their decision of which four-year institution to attend.

Figure 5: Importance of Factors in Decision to Begin College at a Community College



Note: Among survey respondents who transferred to UH from a community college, this figure details the percent of students indicating that each factor influenced their decision to begin at a community college.

Figure 6: Important Factors in Choosing a Four-Year College



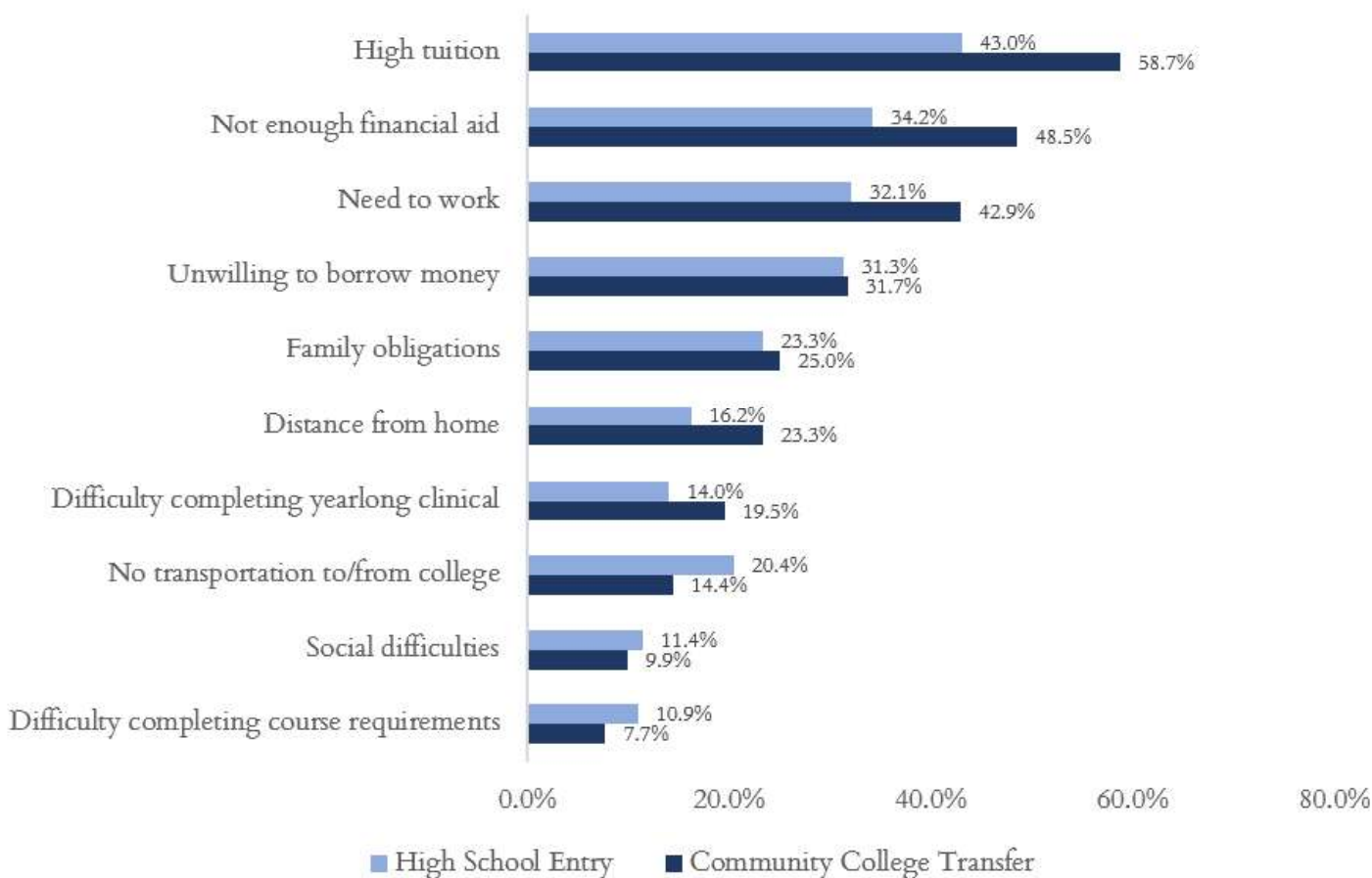
Note: This figure displays data on the percent of students identifying factors as very important in the choice of a four-year institution for community college transfers and those who entered UH directly from high school.

What barriers do community college transfers face in completing their teacher education program?

Figure 7 displays the percent of community college transfers and high school entrants who identified certain factors as major barriers to their college success. Across both groups, the factors most commonly cited as major barriers were all financial—i.e., high tuition, not enough financial aid, the need to work, and being unwilling to borrow money. These financial factors were more likely to be identified as major barriers by community college transfers than high school entrants. For instance, nearly 60 percent of community college transfers versus 43 percent of UH starters considered high tuition a major barrier to success. Likewise, 50 percent of community college transfers versus 34 percent of UH starters identified insufficient financial aid as a major barrier.

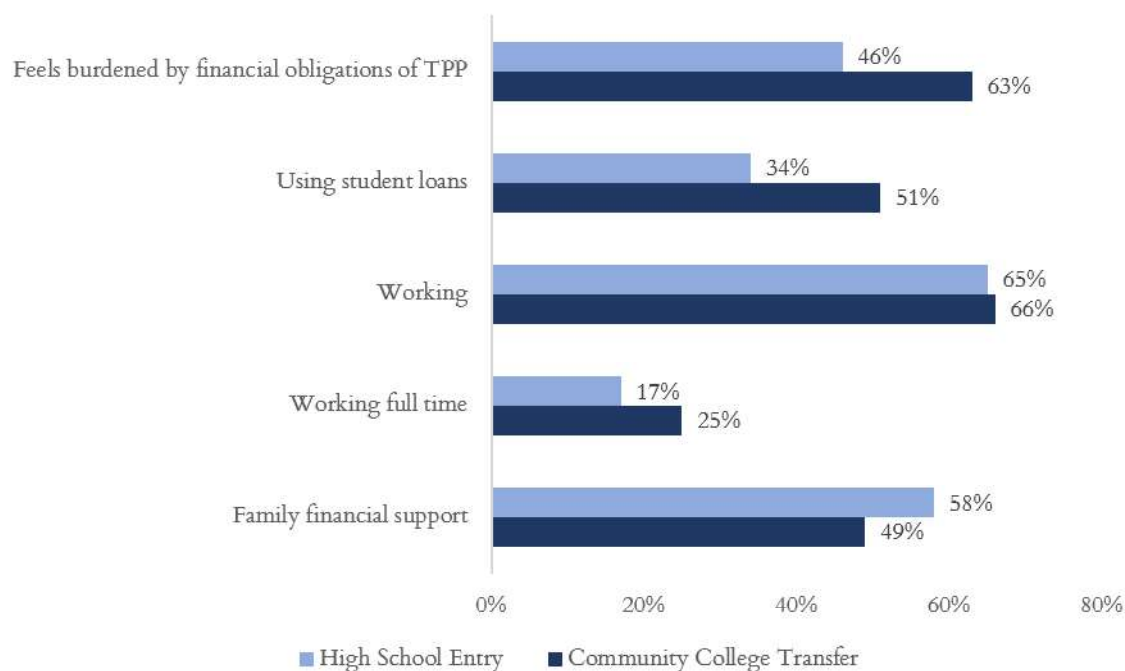
To further explore financial factors, Figure 8 presents data on feelings of financial burden and sources of financial support. Here, we find that community college transfers are nearly 20 percentage points more likely—63 to 46 percent—to report feeling burdened by the financial obligations of attending their TPP. When considering financial supports available to them, 51 percent of community college transfers reported using student loans. This is a much higher percentage than their peers who entered UH directly from high school. While two-thirds of community college transfers and UH starters report working to help pay for college, community college transfers are more likely (25 to 17 percent) to report working full-time. Lastly, we find that community college transfers are less likely to identify family financial support as a way to pay for college.

Figure 7: Major Barriers to College Success for Community College Transfers and High School Entrants



Note: This figure displays data on the percent of students identifying factors as major barriers to post-secondary success for community college transfers and UH high school entrants.

Figure 8: Feelings of Financial Burden and Sources of Financial Support



Note: This figure displays data on the percent of students who agreed or strongly agreed that they feel financially burdened by obligations of the TPP and the percent who used specific sources of financial support.

Discussion

To better understand the academic experiences of community college transfers, EPIC and the UH College of Education developed and administered a survey to junior and senior-year teacher candidates. Based on our analyses of over 600 survey responses, we identified several key takeaways regarding the community college to teacher education pipeline.

First, community college transfers make up a significant portion of those enrolled in the UH College of Education. While these percentages will vary across TPPs and states, these data highlight the important role that community colleges *already* play in the teacher pipeline. TPPs need to be aware of transfer student needs and intentional about how they work with local community colleges to recruit and support transfer students.

Second, when considering students’ intentions, we found that prior to entering a community college almost all transfer students reported planning to complete a four-year degree. Many also reported that they planned to become a teacher. Despite these intentions, many students did not enroll in the community college programs most aligned with teacher education (AAT degree). Instead, transfer students enrolled in more general degree programs and many experienced credit loss between their community college and UH. These results highlight a need for two and

four-year institutions to create articulation agreements, advise students regarding course enrollments, and provide other supports to minimize credit loss.

Finally, financial concerns are a key barrier throughout community college students’ post-secondary experience. Finances are the primary motivation for students to start at a community college and are a significant factor in transfer students’ choice of a four-year institution. Community college transfers feel more financial burden than peers who started at a four-year institution, are less likely to have family financial support, and are more likely to take out loans and work full-time. Additional financial supports may be particularly impactful in both encouraging students to transfer to a four-year institution and in helping these students complete teacher preparation requirements.

Moving forward, it is important to note that our study considered the post-secondary experiences of teacher candidates at just one TPP. It is possible that motivations, experiences, and barriers for community college transfers will vary across different programs and states. As such, there is a need for continued work to better understand the community college to teacher education pipeline at a greater scale. We recommend further research studies and action by stakeholders to ensure that the necessary structures, advising, and financial resources are in place to support the recruitment and success of community college transfers.

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