



***Academic Cultures of Community Colleges and  
Selective Four-Year Institutions: The  
“Transfer-Going” Context  
in California***

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**Plenary Session Remarks for:  
*A Fresh Look at Equity at Selective Colleges and Universities:  
Expanding Access for Low-Income Community College  
Transfers<sup>2</sup>***

**Jack Kent Cooke Foundation National Forum  
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<sup>2</sup> Plenary session participants were asked to address the following questions: “*Why has the population of high achieving, low-income community college students remain untapped by selective colleges and universities? How do the cultures at two-year and selective four-year colleges impede access for these students?*”

***Academic Cultures at Community Colleges and Selective Four-Year Institutions: The “Transfer-Going” Context in California***

**Stephen J. Handel  
The College Board**

**Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Conference  
June 26, 2006 -- Washington DC**

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Good morning. My name is Stephen Handel and it is amazing to see all of you out there. I have been in the community college transfer business for a very long time. I do not remember a period when there has been so much attention and so much good work being done on this topic.

What is wonderful about this conference (and the work of the Cooke Foundation) is that it brings to the forefront of debate and deliberation, a topic that has long needed the attention of legislators and policymakers nationally. And I applaud publicly the work of the Cooke Foundation in highlighting this important issue.

My role today is to help advance a topic that was given to us by our Conference colleagues, namely, “The Cultures of Community Colleges and Four-Year Institutions that Have Had Limited Access Until Now.” And the issue I will advance is the extent to which academic cultures influence – positively or negatively – the transfer of students from community colleges to highly-selective four-year colleges and universities. I will focus my remarks on the work of my colleagues at the University of California and California Community College systems, who have been developing new pathways to support the bachelor’s degree goals of community college students.<sup>1</sup>

My current position with the College Board is a national one and it provides me with a wonderful opportunity to work with community college researchers and

practitioners throughout the country. But prior to this, between 1994 and 2004, I served as the Director of Community College Transfer Enrollment and Outreach at the University of California President's Office.

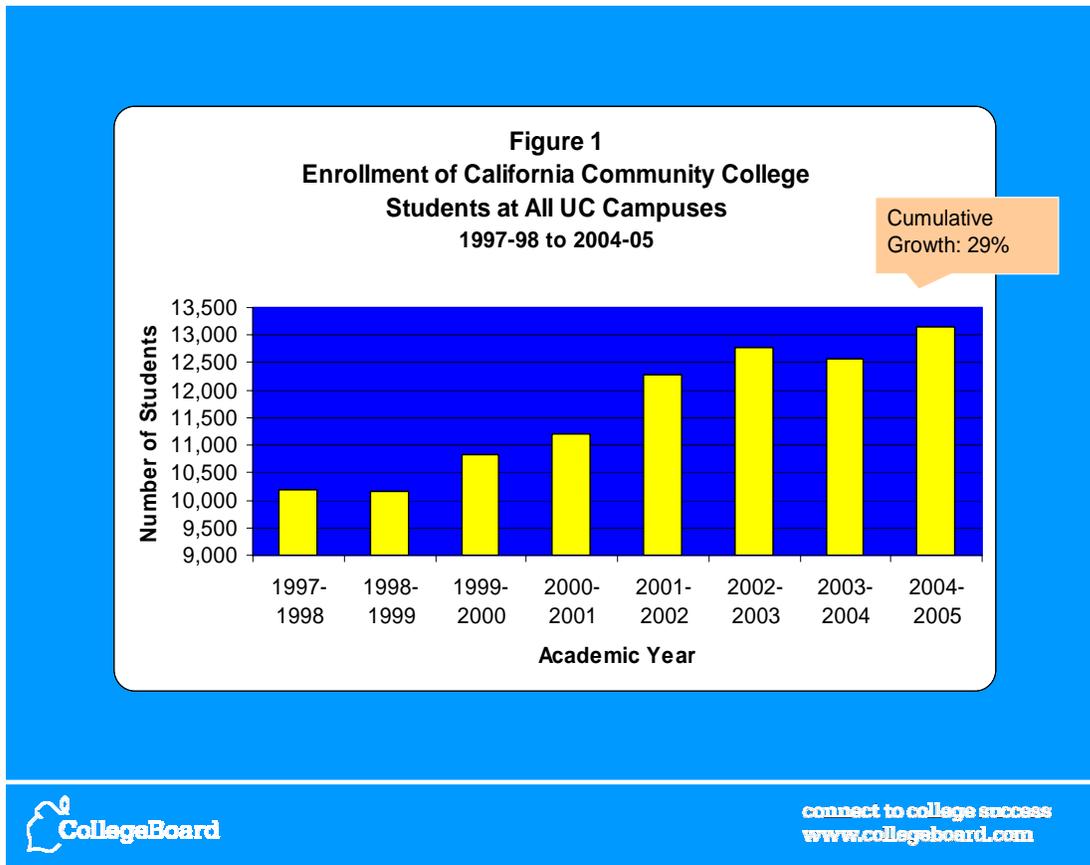
It was a fertile time to be involved in transfer. We were fortunate in California to have two visionary education leaders – UC President Richard Atkinson and Tom Nussbaum, Chancellor of the California Community College system. Both saw clearly that the demographic shifts in California would make the need for a stronger transfer function necessary. In a very public and formal way, UC agreed to increase its enrollment of transfer students by 50 percent and the California community colleges agreed to prepare a concomitant number of transfer-ready students.

This was both wonderful and intimidating to those of us who worked on transfer. We appreciated the attention, but wondered how we were going to ramp up transfer enrollment at a rate greater than at any other time in the modern history of the University of California. It was not simply a matter of admitting more transfer students. The University of California system is one of the most selective in the nation. UCLA, UC San Diego, and UC Berkeley regularly garner over 45,000 applications per year, with only about 3,000-4,000 open slots. The remaining campuses, though not as selective overall, have specific majors and programs that are among the most competitive in the nation.

How would we meet our transfer goal? Before I address that question, let me first tempt you with the results of our collective efforts. The news is very good. (Even better is the fact that this unique partnership has lessons for all higher education institutions interested in transfer. But more about that later.)

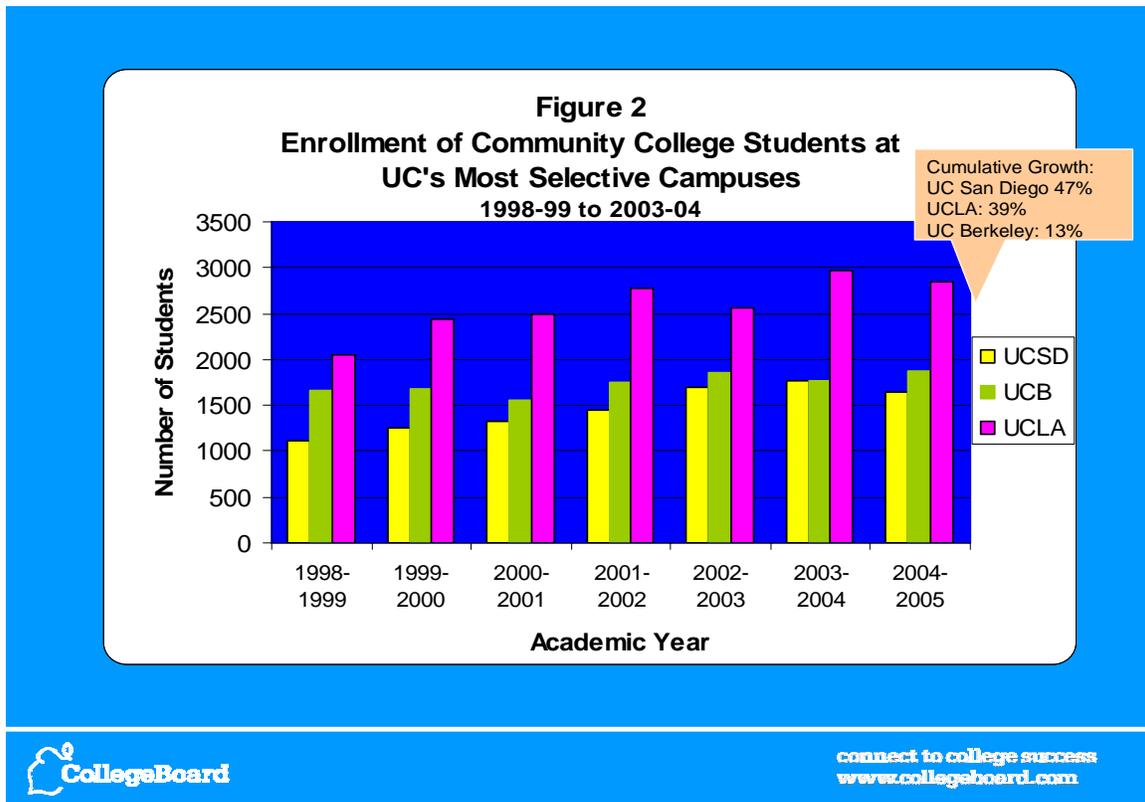
### **UC's Transfer Enrollment Successes**

- Since 1998-99 (the academic year in which the partnership agreement was first implemented), full-year enrollment of transfer students from California community colleges to the University of California system has increased 29 percent. This is shown in Figure 1.<sup>ii</sup> (Let me also publicly thank my colleagues at the UC Office of the President for providing data for the following figures.)



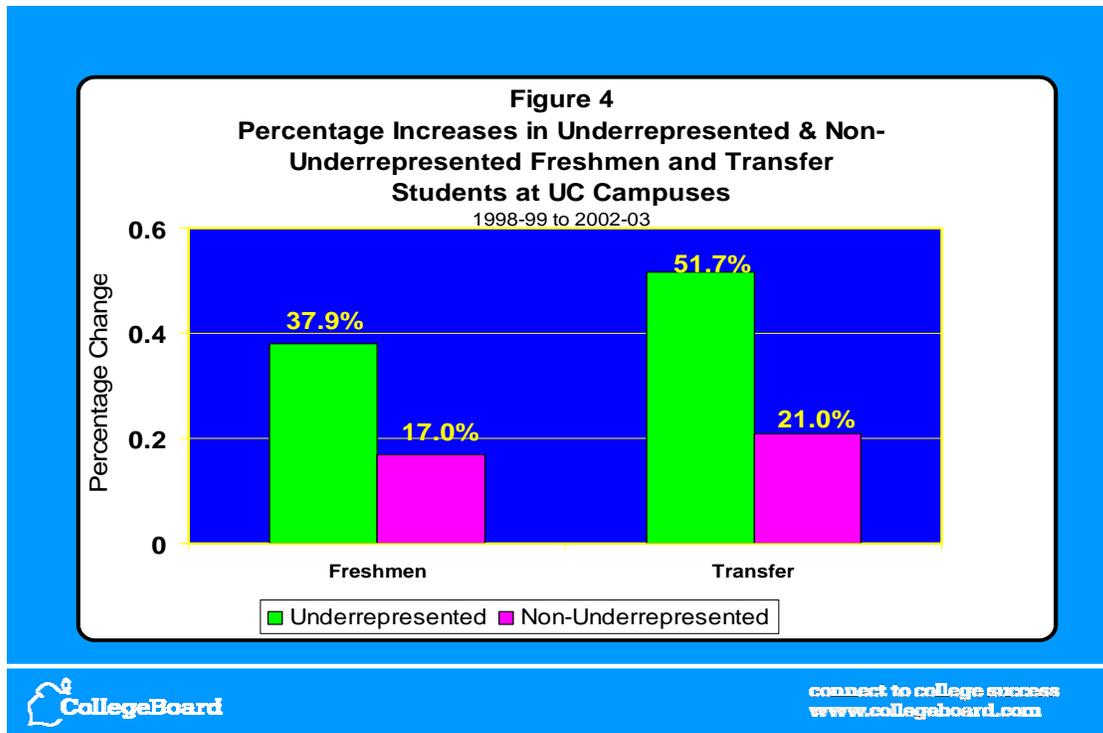
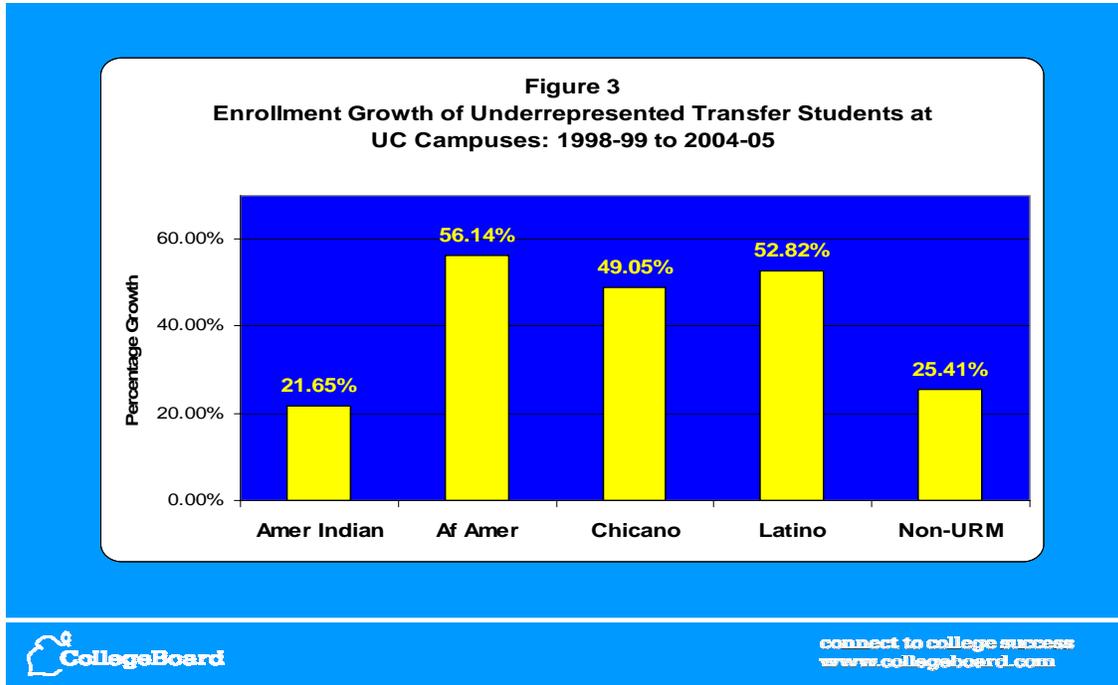
- In 2004-05, UC enrolled over 13,000 new transfer students from California community colleges, UC's largest transfer class since the adoption of the California Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960.

- For UC's most selective campuses – Berkeley, UCLA, and San Diego – there has been a steady increase in the number of transfers enrolling at these institutions. See [Figure 2](#). (Growth in the enrollment of transfer students also has been recorded at all but one of the remaining six undergraduate campuses since the signing of the partnership agreement.)



Between 1998-99 and 2003-04, students from underrepresented groups (defined in California as African American students, American Indian students, and Chicano/Latino students) increased an average of seven percent per year, while the annual increase in enrollment for all community college transfer students during the same period was four percent. Mind you, this is after the UC Regents banned all forms of affirmative action. [Figure 3](#) presents enrollment growth for each of these underrepresented groups.

- Figure 4: shows that, for the first time, community college students became a greater source of ethnic and racial diversity than freshmen for UC's undergraduate population.



**Persistence and Graduation Rates**<sup>iii</sup>

One of the persistent (though largely unsubstantiated) concerns about community college transfer students is that even if they are admitted to highly-selective institutions, they will not finish their degrees. This is not the case at the University of California:

- In the last decade, one-year persistence rates for community college transfer students averaged 90 percent. They range from 83 to 92 percent for underrepresented students.
- In the last decade four-year graduation rates for community college transfer students ranged from 75 percent to 79 percent.
- These rates of completion are comparable, and sometimes exceed, the graduation rates of students who began at UC as first-year students.

**One of the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Transfer**

I no longer work at UC and have no vested interest in the system's enrollment figures. So, believe me when I tell you that the results I have described are astonishing. Growth in transfer enrollment, over such a short period of time, is a phenomenon not often recorded, to my knowledge, for large, public college and university systems.

Are there some downsides to these results? Certainly. First, while we see enrollment increases in the number of students from all underrepresented groups enrolled at UC, the absolute number of African American students and American Indian students is extremely small. So there remains a good deal of work to do there. Moreover, I predict that will take UC two to three years longer to reach the

overall enrollment goal originally promised in the partnership agreement. But this seems understandable in light of the California's multi-billion dollar budget deficit two years ago that essentially drained away all funds for transfer efforts at UC and the California Community Colleges (some of that money has since been restored).

These results are the product of many interventions – some successful, some not. In California, we have identified the most successful interventions, which I like to call the “seven habits of highly effective transfer.” But today I have time to talk about only one of them: the impact of academic culture on the transfer process.

So, back to my original story...President Atkinson says we have to grow the transfer class by 50 percent and there are no new funds to do this – at least initially. Now, there was no dearth of ideas about what how we could ramp up our transfer efforts. But the initial response was somewhat scatter-shot and unfocused. And the initial meetings between UC and the California Community Colleges were not especially productive.

What we needed was a framework – a lens, really – which would allow us to work productively with everyone who was involved in transfer, including senior leadership, faculty, staff, and students from both systems. Moreover, we quickly realized that if this was to be a collective and systemic effort, we needed to understand the differences in academic culture between community colleges and selective four-year institutions. Without an understanding and a genuine appreciation for the different histories and ways of doing business at both community colleges and highly-selective institutions, there was no way we would reach our goal. We had to pull together a common language, a common agenda, a common ethos that would allow us to do the work we needed to do.

The solution for us in California was to try and create a “common culture” – one that embraced the strengths of both educational systems, while minimizing the

provincialism that often undercuts inter-institutional cooperation; a common culture that is focused on increasing the number of students that transfer from a community college to a four-year institution and who earn the baccalaureate degree. What we called then (and now), “a transfer-going culture.”

### **Some Observations About a “Transfer-Going” Culture**

What is a transfer-going culture? One way to think about it is summarized in a paper that Alfred Herrera and I wrote titled, *Pursuing Higher Education Access and Achievement: Case Studies in the Development of “Transfer-Going” Cultures*.<sup>iv</sup> We would be happy to share a copy with you. But let me provide you with four observations that will give you a sense of what we mean about this culture and the ways in which it can serve transfer students:

- 1) Acknowledge at the outset that difference and diversity are a hallmark of American postsecondary education. It should come as no particular shock that two-year community colleges and highly-selective four-year institutions differ a great deal. They were established in different centuries, built for the needs of different groups of students, and possess fundamentally different missions.
- 2) Understand that while community colleges and four-year institutions are devoted to student achievement, each side looks to the other, not with suspicion, but rather with disinterest. Nearly two decades ago, Richardson and Bender observed this essential inter-institutional tension:

*...improving opportunities for...transfer students involves helping them to adjust to two different kinds of institutions, each with its own set of values and assumptions...[and] there is a lack of understanding among community colleges and universities of the differences between their cultures.... Accompanying this lack of understanding is an absence of respect for the differences in attitudes and behavior*

*that these cultures produce. As a result, neither does as much as it could to help students understand or adjust to the other's culture.<sup>v</sup>*

- 3) Focus your attention relentlessly on the needs of transfer students if you plan to have any success in bridging the cultural divide between community colleges and four-year institutions. These institutions are inextricably linked because students attending a community college must transfer to a four-year institution to earn the baccalaureate degree. Thus, the ways in which community colleges and four year institutions work with one another has profound consequences for student success.
  
- 4) Create a sustainable effort via the creation of a transfer-going ethos. I know this sounds terribly abstract. But keep in mind, as my graduate school adviser always said: "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." Without an ethos of transfer-going that focuses on student success, your approaches will be scattershot; worse, they won't be continued if you leave the project or the money runs out.

Of course, an "ethos" alone will not increase the transfer rate. You need strong programs, rigorous evaluation, and very good people. My point is simply this: Don't get ahead of yourself.

### **Essential Elements**

And what are the essential elements of this transfer-going ethos? The model relies on the research literature concerning "college-going" cultures, which has documented the importance of the high school context in the preparation of students for college<sup>vi</sup>. High schools that support an ethos of college-going via high academic expectations and college-preparatory curriculum are more effective in focusing student expectations toward higher education goals. We believe the same would hold true within a community college context. In California, we have a series

of precepts that we turn to time and time again (based on the work of faculty and administrators at UCLA<sup>vii</sup>)

- Establish transfer to a four-year institution as a high institutional priority;
- Ensure that transfer is perceived by students as expected and attainable;
- Offer a rigorous curriculum for all students that includes writing, critical thinking, mathematics, and the sciences;
- Provide high quality instruction, including innovative and research-based pedagogies;
- Develop intensive academic support programs based on models of “academic excellence” (e.g., academic counseling, peer tutoring, and reciprocal learning techniques);
- Create an environment of belonging in which students feel stimulated to achieve at high academic levels; and
- Establish strong community and family linkages that foster intellectual stimulating, secure and culturally rich environments for students on and off campus.

These characteristics are neither unique nor all-encompassing. But they provide, I would argue, a powerful context for an authentic and sustainable commitment to community college students seeking transfer to a four-year college or university.

I appreciate your attention and look forward to your questions.

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### **Reference Notes**

<sup>i</sup> All UC data quoted in these remarks came from Corporate Student Database at the University of California Office of the President ([www.ucop.edu](http://www.ucop.edu)). Thanks go to my UC President’s Office colleagues – Margaret Heisel, Elizabeth Tamayo, and Robert Tacconi – for their assistance in identifying appropriate data for this report. Nonetheless, any errors in the presentation or interpretation of UC data are the mine alone.

<sup>ii</sup> All enrollment data presented in these remarks are full-year totals (fall, winter, and spring quarter terms combined).

<sup>iii</sup> Data obtained from the University of California *Information Digest Series* (<http://www.ucop.edu/sas/infodigest/index.htm>)

<sup>iv</sup> Handel, S. J. and Herrera A. (2006). *Pursuing Higher Education Access and Achievement: Case Studies in the Development of “Transfer-Going” Cultures*” A paper prepared for, A Fresh Look at Equity at Selective Colleges and Universities: Expanding Access for Low-Income Community College Transfers, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation National Forum, Washington DC (June 28-29, 2006).

<sup>v</sup> Richardson, R. C. and Bender, L. W. (1987). *Fostering Minority Access and Achievement in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

<sup>vii</sup> Paredes, R., Bermeo, A, Peterson, C., and Herrera, A. (2000). *The UCLA/Community College Academic Consortium*. Washington D.C.: US Department of Education (Grant proposal submitted to the Fund for the Improvement of Secondary Education [FIPSE]).