

# Transfers show community colleges' rising reputation

**Institutions in California are part of a national trend to recruit community college students, mostly from minority and low-income backgrounds, to improve campus diversity.**

By Carla Rivera  
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Sichen Hernandez-Martinez is the type of undergraduate who is increasingly in demand at four-year colleges: She had been a community college honors student, a member of campus government and was active in school clubs.

After three years at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, she was admitted to USC, [UC Riverside](#) and Cal State San Bernardino. She accepted a scholarship to Pomona College, a selective, private school in Claremont, which she entered as a junior this year.

The Pomona admissions committee was as impressed with her academics as it was with her community involvement. At Chaffey, she had formed a campus group to help others like herself, who were brought here at a young age without documentation.

"Our college is always interested in enrolling a diverse population of students that includes race and ethnicity but also socioeconomic background," said Joel Hart, Pomona's senior assistant dean of admissions. "Some students don't have the same advantages as that of a significant portion of our campus, but they have overcome that and those experiences make them compelling applicants."

From small, private liberal arts schools like Pomona to the University of California system, colleges and universities nationwide are aggressively pursuing community college transfer students such as Hernandez-Martinez. These students, predominantly from minority and low-income backgrounds, are increasingly important in campus efforts to boost socioeconomic and ethnic diversity as well as the mix of ages, cultures and life experiences.

In 2012, the nation's 7.7-million community college students represented 45% of all undergraduates in two- and four-year colleges. Thirty-six percent were the first in their families to attend college and more than a third qualified for federal, low-income financial aid, according to the American Assn. of Community Colleges. In California, Latinos, Asians, blacks and other underrepresented minorities made up more than 60% of students enrolled in the state's 112 community colleges.

Since the recession, increasing numbers of students entering college view the two-year schools as a more affordable option than four-year institutions. More than half of these students say that they want to transfer and attain bachelor's degrees, according to the community college group.

They face obstacles. Many get bogged down in remedial classes and end up dropping out or taking years to finish. Many two- and four-year public colleges still have not managed to align programs so that students can successfully transfer credits.

President Obama and others have pushed to increase college accessibility for low-income students to help meet workforce demands.

"Community college students are becoming a very respected commodity and that's a shift from what we've seen in the past," said Janet Marling, director of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students at the University of North Georgia. "Not just four-year institutions, but competitive universities are seeing community colleges as a great source of students who can bring diversity."

That has been the case at Whittier College, a private, liberal arts campus of about 1,700 students — 55% of them minorities, a third of whom are Latino. The 127-year-old campus has been in the forefront of independent colleges nationally in courting transfers, recruiting about 15% of its students from such two-year schools as Pasadena City College, Mount San Antonio College in Walnut and Whittier's Rio Hondo College.

A new initiative at Whittier, set to begin in 2015, will help prepare about 300 graduates with associate's degrees each year to transfer to elite universities across the country.

Community college transfers add educational value for all students, Whittier President Sharon D. Herzberger said.

"Our seniors tell us that what they get from studying with and socializing with students from diverse backgrounds ... adds to their intellectual development," said Herzberger, who recently spoke at a Council of Independent Colleges conference focused on streamlining transfers to private institutions.

Christina Dedios said she initially felt uncomfortable after transferring as a junior from Cerritos College to Whittier last semester. Freshmen have the benefit of starting classes together as a group and living in the same residence hall. But campus clubs and mentors helped fill the gap.

"As a transfer, you definitely need to be involved in something," said Dedios, 21, an English major. "I'm on the track team, so that was instant involvement and there are a lot of clubs so that you don't have to feel isolated."

Her advisor, English professor Wendy Furman-Adams, said most transfer students do as well as those who start as freshmen.

"Occasionally we have transfers that don't understand our ethos, but for the most part, after a semester or two we can't tell them apart," Furman- Adams said.

A 2012 report by the College Board found that nationally, about 26% of community college students transfer to a four-year institution, a rate that has remained fairly steady over the previous decade. But it also found that the total number of transfers grew by about 24,000. Significantly, transfers of African American students from 2004 to 2009 grew by about 9%, according to the report.

UC President Janet Napolitano and other higher education leaders have recently committed to improving the flow of community college students to four-year institutions and UC is seeking to expand outreach in community colleges that send few of their underrepresented students to [UC Berkeley](#), [UCLA](#) and other selective campuses.