

The Community College-to-Private College and University Connection: Vertical Transfer Student Experiences in NC

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Introduction and Project Background

Since 2021, the Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has sought to examine community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC) using a multi-method approach including large-scale qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data. Through a series of briefs using data from multiple institutions across the state, we have shared findings on student navigation through the complex transfer ecosystem, experiences during the college transition process, and predictors of successful university transfer on a more macro scale. See our prior reports: <https://sites.google.com/uncc.edu/uncctransferresearchproject/home>.

While the experiences and outcomes of our current participants paint an important picture about transfer in NC and yield recommendations for policy and practice, we know that not all students experience transfer in the same way. The current phase of our project is to tell the stories of students within vertical transfer student subgroups to explore the nuanced experiences of specific populations seeking to transition to a university. This report describes the vertical transfer experiences of CC students who transferred to a private college or university in NC.

Literature and North Carolina Context

North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) is a statewide organization that supports 36 private, nonprofit colleges and universities in NC. NCICU encompasses a diverse range of institutions, including research and comprehensive universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), women's colleges, Minority-Serving Institutions, traditional liberal arts and science colleges, and one two-year college. Collectively, the 36 NCICU colleges and universities contribute significantly to post-secondary access, affordability, and innovation in NC. In 2023-24 alone, they awarded approximately \$1.1 billion in institutional aid, including over \$91 million in need-based aid, underscoring their commitment to affordability for NC students.ⁱ

Private colleges and universities have historically embraced educational practices that promote student learning, high-impact practices, personalized instruction, and mission-driven environments,ⁱⁱ while emphasizing community, relational learning, and individualized educational pathways, factors that draw transfer student enrollment. Prior research shows that transfer decisions for CC students are also influenced by academic goals, affordability, family obligations, geography, and perceptions of institutional fit.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, examining the experiences of private institution vertical transfer students contributes to a better understanding of transfer and post-transfer transitions.

Private Institution Vertical Transfer in NC

Private, nonprofit colleges and universities are important contributors to the transfer landscape in NC. In fall 2024, 1,307 students transferred from NC community colleges (NCCCs) to NCICU institutions along 432 distinct vertical transfer feeder patterns (i.e., transfer paths from each CC to each private college/university).

These diverse paths are enabled by significant and coordinated statewide effort including the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA)^{iv} between the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and 30 signatory NCICU institutions. The ICAA guarantees students who complete Associate in Arts (AA) or Associate in Science (AS) degrees transfer with junior status having met general education requirements. Pre-major requirements are institution-specific and guided by Baccalaureate Degree Plans.

Knowing the challenges for students navigating transfer options with different pre-major requirements across institutions, NCICU has developed discipline-specific uniform transfer agreements for early childhood education, fine arts, music, psychology and sociology, nursing, theatre, and teacher education.^v The recent agreement in psychology and sociology was supported through a grant from the Teagle Foundation.^{vi} In addition, while Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees are not included in the ICAA, many private colleges have offered AAS-baccalaureate pathways through a combination of on-campus and online programs.

Further demonstrating a commitment to transfer student access, financial opportunities exist through the NC Need Based Scholarship for Private College Students^{vii}, and some institutions have been proactive in terms of keeping costs low for transfer students. Notable examples include the Gateway to Wingate (University)^{viii} and Bear Bound at Lenoir-Rhyne University.^{ix} In addition, NCICU received a \$1.3 million grant to implement a transfer portal to improve transparency for credit mobility between the NCCCS and NCICU colleges and universities.^x

Current Study and Participants

This report draws from a statewide longitudinal research study designed to understand NC vertical transfer students' experiences. In this report, we focus on a subsample (n=17) of transfer students who transferred from a NCCC to a private, nonprofit university.¹ This report features data from two rounds of interviews.

As shown in the table below, participants reflect diverse identities, including race and ethnicity, age, first-generation status, parent-student responsibilities, and employment status, highlighting the varied life contexts students navigate as they pursue transfer to five different NCICU institutions.

In this research brief, we examine two guiding questions:

- (1) How did NCCC students choose to transfer to private, nonprofit colleges and universities in NC?
- (2) How did NCCC students navigate the transfer process to private, nonprofit colleges and universities in NC?

Characteristic	Number (%) of Sample n=17	
Neotraditional age (25+)	7 (41%)	
First-generation college student	15 (94%)	
Student parent	5 (29%)	
Employed full-time or part-time	12 (71%)	
Racial/ethnic identity	African American/Black	6 (35%)
	Latine	3 (18%)
	White	8 (47%)
CC degree type	AAS	7 (41%)
	AA/AS	10 (59%)
Gender	Woman	14 (82%)
	Man	3 (18%)

Findings

Finding 1: Intersecting Factors Shape Choice

Students described decision-making shaped by institutional characteristics, geography, and cost factors, emphasizing that transfer pathways are not uniform nor prescriptive. While some students were place-bound due to familial, employment, and transportation constraints, others prioritized factors such as cost, program fit, and campus climate, even if it meant traveling farther from home. Decision-making regarding institutional and programmatic choices was a layered process that led students to evaluate multiple transfer destinations. We identified three predominant factors that influenced choice.

Institutional Characteristics

Campus characteristics (e.g., class sizes, campus safety), and program quality and fit were central to student decisions. The prospect of small class sizes and meaningful connections with faculty and staff

¹ All participants attended an NCICU institution.

were key drivers for most students who selected to attend a private college or university. Helen, a 19-year-old student pursuing music education, described her choice:

I think definitely like the size of the college, because I didn't want to go to a school where there's over a thousand people in your department, so you get lost. I prefer like a more, I guess, like personal relationship with the people in my department, as well as other people on campus.

For Helen, the transition from a home-school environment to a CC and then to a small, private college retained the personalized and “tight knit” community that felt familiar. Like Helen, Lillian, an 18-year-old woman, preferred a smaller private institution so she could “get more...interaction” with her professors and “not just be another number.” Emotional comfort and safety also guided decisions, with some students perceiving institution size in relation to accessibility and safety. Post-transfer, relationships with family, faculty, and peers reinforced institutional fit. Natalie, a 21-year-old woman who completed an AAS in paralegal studies described beginning post-secondary education at a CC as being “a good one, because there were just really diverse people. There [were] all ages, different ethnicities and everything, and I felt like it was just a great introduction to it.” She remarked, “I always felt like my professors had time to speak with me. They knew who I was.”

The emphasis on community support was echoed by Isaac a 21-year-old man, who completed an AA. He described choosing a campus where he felt cared for:

Here, I'm close to my parents. I have professors that care about me, professors that I have great relationships with, and then professors that are excited to see me succeed in class and in the future.

Program quality and fit, such as licensure pass rates and the quality of instruction, were weighted heavily, but students also considered these alongside cost, proximity to home or work, and other convenience factors. Elaine, a 25-year-old woman who completed an AAS at the CC, was drawn to a private institution after finding success in smaller classes. She shared the following about her choice process:

...So we were kind of looking at like what I would expect from the college and passing rate and things like that. But also like personally for me how much it would cost me to travel to school every day and the schedule, what it would be like every day and what kind of classes that they offered and what extra college university classes that they had and that type of stuff or where I would be doing my clinical rotations ...

Although class size and program quality were important to Elaine, she balanced other practical factors, such as proximity and scheduling conveniences in selecting her transfer destination.

Geography

Choice processes were complicated by competing priorities at the intersection of institutional characteristics and students' geographic needs. For some students, transportation issues, long commutes, or responsibilities to dependents or partners often informed their choices, leading them to select institutions within a smaller geographic radius. For others, the availability of online programs lessened geographic constraints.

In some cases, students opted to live on campus post-transfer. Lillian, an 18-year-old student living on campus, described how campus size and proximity to home were key factors. She explained that her campus was “two hours and 20 minutes” from home, close enough for emergencies but far enough to experience adulthood. Similarly, Miranda, a 19-year-old student living on campus, explained that her institution was only an hour from home, allowing her to access her family support system while avoiding interstate driving. She explained:

I would hear certain things about different schools, and location really swayed me a lot because I live about an hour from [private college], and I don't drive on interstate. That's something that I'm fearful of. So, the fact that I wouldn't have to do that for there really swayed me.

For some, geography was less of a consideration due to the attractiveness of online programs. This was particularly evident with some adult learners transitioning out of AAS programs who found pathways from the more workforce-relevant associate degrees. Claire, a 44-year-old woman now pursuing a Bachelor's in Applied Science, described why she chose the private institution:

I wouldn't have to really have to go anywhere. If I did it had something that come up, then I could just take the whole class with me as long as I had my laptop. That's really the reason was because of just to be able to do it online was the whole point.

Other students' geographic considerations were tied to employment or caretaking commitments, making institutions with online or flexible program options more feasible. Although students sought to make choices that were logistically possible (e.g., commute time, proximity to home or work), these choices were filtered through perceptions of institutional fit and program quality.

Cost and Affordability

Cost and affordability factors shaped student choice to attend a private institution, but it was rarely the only driver. Students weighed cost and affordability factors against career-driven priorities such as degree type and time to degree completion. When considering cost, students also factored the cost of commuting, relocating, and on-campus housing. While some opted for the lowest cost choice, others focused on the best return on investment.

Antonio, a 19-year-old man pursuing a biomedical degree, described his choice to attend a private university based on program offerings. He shared, "*the [private university] was the closest one that I would be able to be a commuter and still get my education in.*" Shortened commute times and proximity to home reduced on-campus housing and transportation costs, making some private colleges and universities less cost-prohibitive for students. Although students perceived private institutions to be more expensive, financial aid packages comprised of scholarships and grants mitigated cost barriers. Miranda, a 19-year-old student pursuing a degree in music education shared, "*I was lucky enough to get a lot of scholarships... which overall made it the cheapest option.*"

Yet, even in cases when overall costs were higher, students sometimes chose the private institution if it was a better personal, geographic, or academic fit. Isaac chose the private option despite there being a more affordable option. He shared:

There was one place that was cheaper... but I didn't want to put myself in a situation where I was in the middle of nowhere... Here, I'm close to my parents... and professors care about me.

Finding 2: Personalized Support and Credit Mobility

Most participants described the transfer process as smoother than expected when supported by personalized advising and guidance.

Student Perceptions of the Transfer Process



Personalized Support

Study participants sought general and personalized information about their degree program when transferring. Myra, an 18-year-old who transferred to an HBCU, said the staff "*walked [her] through step-by-step,*" making the transition welcoming. Students emphasized the value of transfer advisor support at various stages of the application process, particularly regarding credit mobility and applicability. Satisfaction with credit mobility was more salient among students who completed AAS degrees at the CC, which can be particularly challenging for credit mobility. Kori, a 52-year-old adult learner who completed an AAS shared:

I actually thought that I was going to have to change my major to something else, and he said, 'No... you can keep the human services because we have that field here.'

Aside from personalized advising support, individualized faculty attention was a notable support for students during coursework. Faculty assisted students through online course transitions and were available as needed. Natalie, a 21-year-old woman in a STEM discipline described,

I always felt like my professors had time to speak with me. They knew who I was. And then, even when we did move online, there was still a lot of communication, and just being able to know that if I ever needed help, that I had really a lot of people that I could speak with.

Noah, a 19-year-old student in a STEM major, noted that building relationships with his professors helped him gain clarity about their teaching and support, which aided his understanding and navigation of available institutional resources. He explained, "*understanding of how they're going to be teaching the*

class, how they're going to be like understanding my questions, if I had any." The process of developing a familiarity with faculty increased his confidence in seeking help.

Clarity on Credit Mobility and Applicability

Credit mobility represented opportunities to lower costs, time to degree completion, and redundancy in courses. Most participants in the study referenced credit mobility as important to their institutional choice. Elaine, a 25-year-old nursing student shared:

I took all my credits. I transferred, it was seamless. It was effortless. I didn't have any problems. I met [university advisor]. I didn't have to retake any classes. I mean it was perfection. Like I didn't have any problems and I'm going to graduate in the fall, which took me half the time it would with [CC nursing program].

While many students experienced a smooth transfer process, some students also described confusion when navigating the institution's credit evaluation process, particularly around whether previously completed coursework would "count" toward their intended major. Several students expressed concern about the need to change majors or retake courses. In these cases, proactive advisors who provided personalized guidance on credit applicability played an important role in managing student concerns about credit loss.

Beyond issues with transfer credit, a few students described a "difficult to navigate" process, citing the complexity of application-related decision-making, uncertainty about admission outcomes, and the need for organization around application deadlines. Myra anticipated challenges arising from being at a new institution and making relationships but instead described challenges with support services. She shared:

I didn't anticipate the struggle it would be to have accommodating housing to allow a cleaning service to come in because I also have OCD. To get financially cleared without being in person, get them to review my case, to get my accommodations with the disability's office and actually have them enforced. For teachers to know how to handle accommodations, I didn't expect any of that. And I think that just comes with the institution itself.

These barriers created tensions between expectations and reality, particularly for students with more complex financial, academic, and social support needs.

Seamless Transfer Experiences

Institutional efforts to minimize enrollment delays and credit loss were identified as key levers for student success. Many described the transfer process in terms of being "easy," "very easy," "pretty smooth," or contrasted the experience as being "a lot easier than...expected." Pre-established statewide agreements, institutional partnerships, and transfer resources provided students with a roadmap for transfer. For example, the college admissions office alleviated Noah's fears and offered assurance about the transfer process. The accuracy of their information helped him feel confident about his institutional choice.

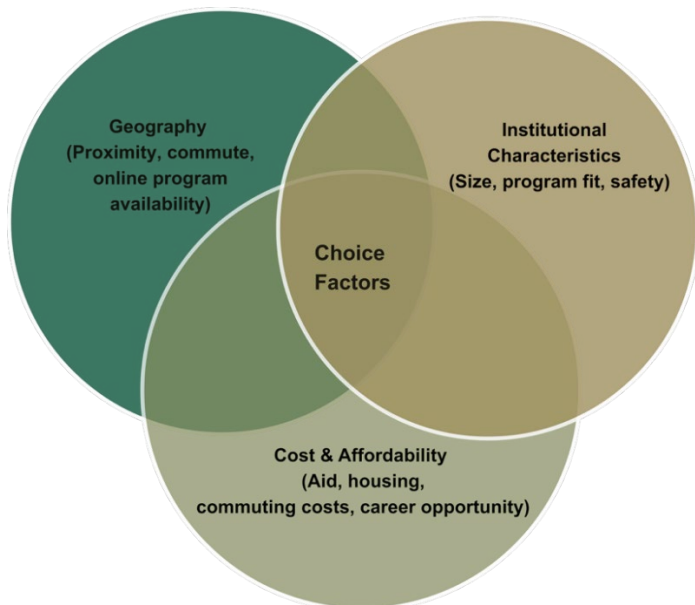
I did go to the community college admissions office just once just to make sure that everything was going to go smoothly and make sure that everything was going to transfer properly. It was just my mentality thinking, "What if something went wrong?" I just wanted to make sure everything was right. And so I just went up there one day and they showed me that everything should be fine. They had never had any difficulties with the [private college]. So, they kind of put me at ease for that.

Both seamless experiences and navigation challenges were largely characterized by personalized advising, support levers (i.e., faculty, campus community, transfer partnerships), and clarity about credit mobility which supported transfer.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest that vertical transfer students who enroll in private colleges and universities make choices at the intersection of geography, cost and value, and institutional characteristics.

Choice Factors: Balancing Geographic Realities and Broader Possibilities



While students consider geography and institutions that allow them to remain closely connected to home, family, and work, most students balance geographic considerations with other choice factors. Even when choosing among schools within a smaller radius to home, students filtered options through perceptions of institutional fit, program options, and career possibilities. Institutional fit and program quality were largely influential to students' transfer destination choice. Online programs also significantly expanded institutional options beyond local or regional limitations experienced by some students.

Students described preferences for smaller campus environments, personalized faculty and staff relationships, and program-

specific characteristics. Lastly, cost and affordability were weighed in relation to perceived degree value, workforce efficiency, and access to financial aid. Beyond tuition, students also considered commuting expenses and housing costs.

Ultimately, these factors did not operate independently. Students engaged in layered decision-making as choices reflected a balance of geographic constraints, aspirations, and possibilities, underscoring the multidimensional nature of the transfer process.

Recommendations: Private colleges and universities should continue to embrace a statewide transfer mindset. Even though many participants in the present study chose to stay in their local area or region of the state, they were navigating an array of potential destination institutions in their commuting radius, within a reasonable distance even if residential, and offered online. In addition, seeking quality, environment, cost, and career opportunities left students with many options to navigate. It is critical for NCICU colleges and universities along with NCCCS to continue statewide efforts for credit mobility through the ICAA and even greater uniform articulation agreements, including for AAS degrees. The forthcoming transfer portal will offer community college students, who are choosing among many transfer destinations, flexible and transparent options for transfer.

Relational Support Structures for Student Success

Private college and university transfer students report the value of institutional environments characterized by small class sizes, individualized instruction, and proactive advising. Enhancing transfer-advising to allow for greater transparency, while maintaining low student-faculty ratios, and fostering close faculty-student relationships are essential for supporting a sense of belonging, academic identity, and retention among private institution vertical transfer students.

Recommendations: Pre-transfer advising was a distinctive experience for students who transferred seamlessly, while navigating new systems and resources was one area where challenges occurred. CCs should ensure that their advisors are fully aware of private institution transfer opportunities along with UNC System options, while baccalaureate advisors should continue making themselves available to students currently enrolled in the CC. In addition, private colleges and universities can strengthen their orientation experiences specific to transfer students, offer structured and relational anchors to help students construct a sense of identity, and ensure guidance to integrate within their new institution.

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ⁱ North Carolina Independent Colleges & Universities. (2025). *Fast facts 2024-2025*. <https://ncicu.org/quick-facts/>

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^{iv} <https://ncicu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/icaa-january-2024.pdf>

^v <https://ncicu.org/articulation-agreements/>

^{vi} <https://ncicu.org/2021/04/21/2021-counselors-virtual-tour-of-36-campus-3/>

^{vii} <https://www.cfnc.org/pay-for-college/apply-for-financial-aid/nc-need-based-scholarship-for-private-college-students/>

^{viii} <https://www.wingate.edu/admissions/gateway>

^{ix} <https://www.lr.edu/admission-and-aid/undergraduate-admission/transfer-students/bear-bound>

^x <https://ncicu.org/?s=transfer+portal>