

Transferring to a Historically Black College or University: Student Perceptions and Decision-Making

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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. 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. 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, transfer is not experienced uniformly across contexts or institutions. The current phase of our project broadens the lens to examine transfer pathways to baccalaureate-granting institutions across the state, with particular attention to different subpopulations of transfer students. This brief explores perceptions, decision-making influences, and transfer patterns related to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Prior Literature

In the latter half of the 20th century, CCs and HBCUs expanded significantly to increase access for diverse student populations. HBCUs were established with the mission to support the education of Black Americans and have historically been successful in retention and bachelor's degree attainment for African American and Black communities.¹ Over the past 20 years, HBCUs have seen increasing racial diversity with non-Black students comprising 24% of enrollment as of 2022.² HBCUs have had a cultural impact as institutions that emphasize the importance of belonging³ and have a long history of demonstrated success in supporting students and improving socio-economic mobility⁴ despite a history of economic challenges and inequities.⁵

Similarly, CCs serve a diverse student population, often being a first-choice institution type for neo-traditional students and historically underrepresented racial groups due to their more affordable tuition and fees, flexible course offerings, and smaller class sizes.⁶ Although CCs and HBCUs have distinct missions and structures, there are historical connections between the student populations they both serve and shared goals of providing liberal arts education and workforce development.⁷ Building on this context, this study examines vertical transfer decisions and perceptions of HBCUs as potential transfer destinations.

North Carolina Context

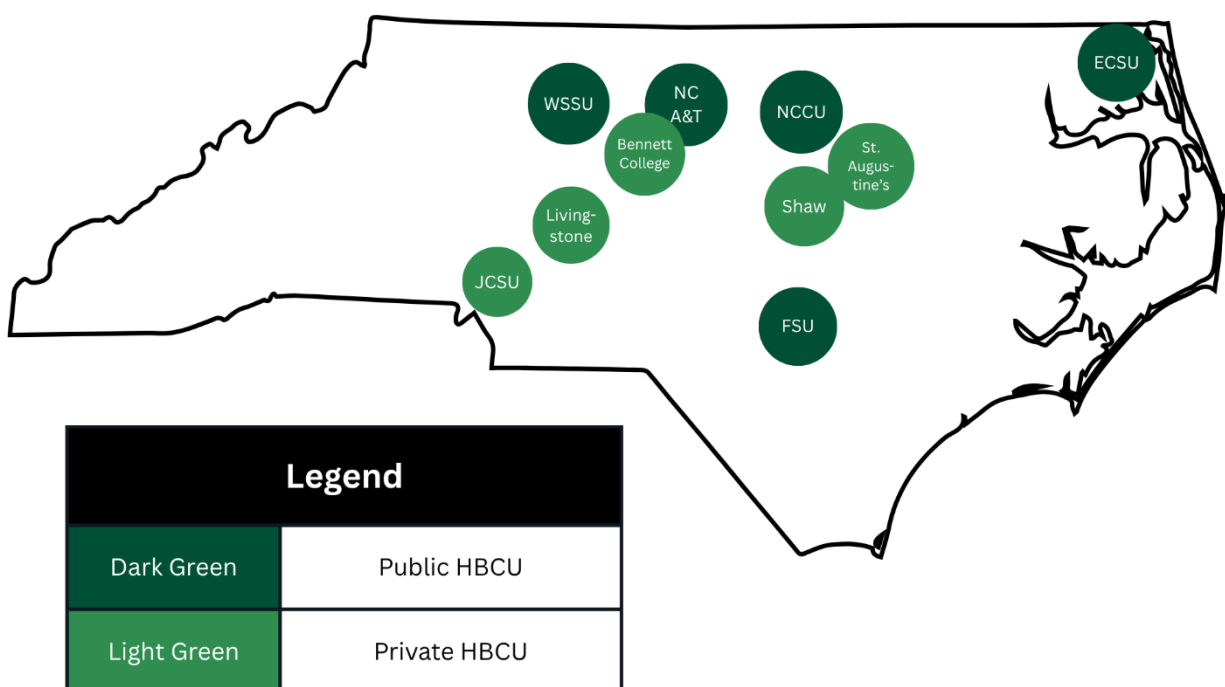
In prior reports, we have examined vertical transfer enrollment patterns from NC community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions and found that students often follow varied patterns across a statewide transfer ecosystem. While common feeder patterns exist, for example, between Central Piedmont Community College and UNC Charlotte both located in Mecklenburg County, only about 40% of vertical transfer students follow primary feeder patterns that flow from CCs to their students' top transfer destination.

This variability makes NC a particularly salient context for examining transfer student perceptions and decision-making patterns related to HBCUs. The state is home to 10 HBCUs (Figure 1), five of which are part of the University of North Carolina System (Elizabeth City State University, Fayetteville State University, North Carolina A&T State University, North Carolina Central University, and Winston-Salem State University) and five private, nonprofit institutions (Bennett College, Johnson C. Smith University, Livingston College, Saint Augustine's University, and Shaw University). Public and private HBCUs comprise 16% of the baccalaureate degree-granting institutions within NC.⁸ Coupled with a robust CC system, the state exemplifies the potential for dynamic transfer pathways between HBCUs and CCs. Yet, enrollment data show that HBCUs are not typically the most populated feeder pattern, but instead serve a more nuanced, often both regional and statewide, transfer mission.

There are some examples where local patterns are prevalent with HBCUs, such as from Fayetteville Technical Community College to Fayetteville State University and from College of the Albemarle to Elizabeth City State University. These local avenues represent rare primary feeder patterns to HBCUs. Even if primary feeder patterns are not common, many other strong patterns exist, especially in areas where there are multiple state universities. For example, the primary feeder pattern for Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC) is to UNC Greensboro (223 students in Fall 2025); however, a highly populated pattern also existed in the same semester from GTCC to North Carolina A&T with 81 students choosing that destination. Strong feeder patterns still exist even if not the primary for a particular CC's transfer student population.

HBCUs are important partners in the statewide transfer ecosystem, as evidenced by the five public HBCUs each enrolling students from at least 30 different CCs in Fall 2025. Understanding transfer to HBCUs should not be explored through a traditional vertical transfer lens alone. Rather, students' transfer experiences should account for diverse geographic and social contexts across the state.

Figure 1: Public and Private HBCUs in North Carolina



Current Study and Participants

This report seeks to build on prior research involving vertical transfer and HBCUs guided by the following primary research question: What shapes North Carolina community college students' perceptions and decisions to transfer to HBCUs? To understand more about perceptions and choice-making at the student level, this report draws on qualitative interview data from a statewide research study conducted in NC to examine transfer student experiences. The report features the transfer experiences of four post-transfer students who attended an HBCU and an analysis of 39 pre-transfer students' choice-sets, particularly those who included HBCUs among their potential transfer options.

Findings

Three interrelated themes emerged related to the structural, relational, and perceptual factors shaping transfer decision-making toward or away from HBCUs.

Finding 1: Exposure and Structured Pathways

While geography plays a significant role in transfer students' destination choices, it is not always a deciding factor. Although five of the public NC HBCUs are within a 30-mile radius of community colleges, we found that the nearest HBCU was not always the top choice, or even a consideration.

Our findings suggest that even when institutions were geographically proximate, limited awareness of structured transfer pathways (e.g., co-admission, guaranteed admission, or 2+2 programs) affected students' transfer decision-making. There are established transfer pathway agreements between the 58 colleges in the NC Community College System (NCCCS) and the 16 public baccalaureate degree-granting institutions within the UNC System through the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA), as well as signatory institutions of the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) through the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA). These statewide agreements govern the transfer of credits for Associate in Arts (AA) and Associate in Science (AS) degrees, among other transfer guarantees. There are also several dual-admission programs between public universities and CCs within

the state. Dual admission (also referred to as co-admission) programs offer joint admission into a CC and university, where there is a partnership between the institutions that provides students with guaranteed transfer admission.⁹

Exposure to HBCUs and an understanding of structured transfer pathways were impactful for some participants when making transfer decisions. Several students engaged with TRIO, a federally funded program designed to provide services to first-generation and low-income college students from middle school through post-baccalaureate studies. Participants, who engaged with TRIO programs, were exposed to and, in some instances, visited several post-transfer institutions. We found that TRIO students had strong knowledge of post-transfer options and opportunities to gain greater exposure to various post-transfer universities and colleges.

Emily, a first-generation, bi-racial/African American woman who was pre-transfer in both year one and year two of the study, selected a public HBCU as one of her top transfer destinations. Emily credits the TRIO program for providing her with wide exposure to transfer choices and familiarity with co-admission programs. She noted that her first touchpoint with a baccalaureate-granting institution was visiting a public HBCU facilitated by the TRIO program.

I hear about colleges from TRIO and [my TRIO advisor's] like, look into it. And I'll usually go home and I'll Google what majors they have, what the student life looks like there, what they have for financial aid. - Emily, pre-transfer student

Emily's exposure through the TRIO program demonstrates how providing students with the knowledge to make informed transfer decisions expands their options and enables them to choose institutions that best meet their academic, financial, and personal needs. When there is a lack of structured support, transfer students may lack awareness of the various programs available to support them.

Participants in this study often cited cost as a key factor in their transfer decisions, but some were unaware of dual-admission programs that could support credit transfer and reduce costs. Ryan, an African American, pre-transfer, first-generation college student, noted cost and proximity to home as being top considerations for transfer destination selection; however, when Ryan listed his top choice transfer institutions, the HBCU within a 30-mile radius of his CC that offered a dual admission program was not mentioned as a transfer option. Ryan was part of organizations dedicated to supporting Black men and felt that his racial identity was important to his educational experiences, while at the same time, interview data suggests that he had limited exposure to HBCUs. Similarly, David, an African American man and pre-transfer student, also identified cost as a top factor in transfer; however, he did not have information about co-admission programs or other post-transfer options. David referred to the nearest HBCU as a "pretty good option," but did not indicate awareness of the dual admission program offered between the HBCU and his CC.

Other participants described the impact of communication with prospective post-transfer institutions. Katherine, a White woman who was attending a public HBCU, reflected on her experience making her transfer decision. Her choice set included three schools, two of which were HBCUs. She found it difficult to make contact with someone to explain the dual admission agreement between her CC and that particular HBCU. The dual admission program was attractive to Katherine, but her understanding of that as a viable pathway was unclear.

And that's [the dual admission program] what really drew me to try and do that, but I was never able to talk to anyone about that program through two semesters of trying to reach out to somebody. And then the last advisor I spoke to at [community college] actually told me that she was pretty sure that program wasn't even what it was advertised, that it was only for high school students, which no one ever told me before that. No one ever talked to me at [HBCU] about it, I reached out multiple times about it. - Katherine, post-transfer student attending a NC HBCU

Finding 2: Institutional Visibility and Brand Power

Most students receive information about transfer choices from a variety of sources, including institutional agents (e.g., advisors, instructors) and outside sources (e.g., family, friends). Participants shared details on their perceptions of post-transfer destinations, which gave insight into how much institutional visibility and reputation have in decision-making. In some instances, the HBCU name itself brought positive interest. Joseph, a pre-transfer African American man, attended a CC in close proximity to an HBCU. Part of his decision to apply to the HBCU was based on the university's responsiveness and its reputation.

I'm interested in getting the education and actually, [University] is an HBCU, but it's been rated one of the best HBCUs. So, if I have a name, [University] is not a bad one to go have behind me. - Joseph, pre-transfer student

Some participants without much institutional knowledge about specific HBCUs did consider an HBCU as a post-transfer destination, but ultimately selected another institution type. Mark, a post-transfer Latino man, described that his previous CC was in close proximity to an HBCU, and he was aware of this, but ultimately chose another institution for academic reasons. Likewise, Julio considered an HBCU near home but chose a larger public university due to perceptions of available opportunities, which speaks to how both size and resources (real or perceived) shape students' perceptions of HBCUs.

I actually had two choices, two options for what I wanted to do. One was [University]. Another was [HBCU]. That one [HBCU], I did not want to, because even though it's a little closer, for some reason, I got ... I think convinced ... of what the facilities and all the institution-wise what [University] offers. - Julio, post-transfer student

Ethan, an Asian/Pacific Islander pre-transfer student near a public HBCU, had three top transfer destinations, including the nearby HBCU. Both proximity and “academic excellence” were at the top of Ethan’s post-transfer destination choice criteria. However, information about transfer options, including options for transferring to the nearby HBCU, was not readily available. Ethan noted that when he asked his CC about specific transfer destinations, he would receive information, but that information was not provided without his inquiry. Citing a stronger academic fit, Ethan ultimately decided not to attend the HBCU. Further thinking about his choice process, he questioned why other institutions might be more closely associated with strong programs. He expressed that he believed all the universities he was considering would provide a quality education and prepare him for success after graduation, but he questioned what makes one institution perceived as more prestigious than another. Like Ethan, the authors of this brief question how institutional resources shape perceptions of program quality and how not being primary transfer destinations may contribute to transfer students’ HBCU enrollment decisions.

Finding 3: Cultural Belonging and Black Excellence

For many students, practical considerations, such as location and affordability, shaped their decision-making. For others, campus culture and fit were prioritized in their choice sets. Prior literature pointing to the inclusive educational environments and sense of belonging at HBCUs was affirmed in this study, emphasizing the historical parallels of HBCUs and CCs. Michelle, an African American woman attending a private HBCU, applied to both predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs. The deciding factor for Michelle’s post-transfer choice ultimately came down to where she felt she would be most comfortable. When comparing her CC and HBCU experience, she noted that her CC was diverse and inclusive, but it was her experience post-transfer where she felt her identity was embraced.

I would say my identity as a Black female is always celebrated here at [HBCU], we literally have events on campus that are literally to uplift Black women here because we know how we're always looked at outside of just beyond the gates of where we call our home as far as school. We have opportunities where we build people up here so that way when they go out into the real world and deal with other things, that they kind of have that instilled in them like, 'Okay, this is who I am first going into this space.' - Michelle, post-transfer student at a private HBCU

Angel, an African American woman, non-traditional, post-transfer student, found her experience attending an HBCU to be very positive and affirming. At the time of her second interview, Angel had graduated with her bachelor’s degree from an HBCU. She described her feelings:

That experience, it's crazy because thinking about it now, I get choked up, to be my age and to have all the responsibilities that I have, I'm thankful to God for the strength to do it. But to be in the midst of so many winners and so much support and excitement and it's HBCU and all that Black excellence, I get full now thinking about it. So, it was nothing less than amazing. It was an amazing experience. - Angel, post-transfer student who graduated from an HBCU in NC.

Other participants were aware of HBCUs, but lacked some information about public HBCUs within NC. Tiffany, a pre-transfer African American woman, was not considering any HBCUs for her bachelor’s, but did discuss interest in an HBCU outside of NC for her master’s degree. Tiffany shared her feelings of wanting to be at an academic institution where she felt included:

Once I obtain my bachelor's degree, I do want to go to [HBCU]. I want to go to HBCU for my master's. I definitely just want to know what that experience is like. I really want to know the difference. I want to feel included. I want to know what it feels like going to school with people who look like you and we're all in a classroom, not me just looking out like, "Oh shoot, I see you, you look like me." I want to know what that's like. - Tiffany, pre-transfer student

Collectively, student experiences and perceptions related to HBCUs demonstrate the role of HBCUs within the transfer ecosystem in NC and present opportunities to strengthen the pipeline between CCs and HBCUs.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Previous reports in our series have demonstrated how CC-to-university (vertical) transfer in NC occurs within a complex, statewide transfer ecosystem largely shaped by factors such as state policy, cost and affordability, and student identities. Student experiences and perspectives on vertical transfer to an HBCU provide new insights into transfer in NC. Findings show that participants value the potential of HBCUs to continue their education post-transfer. For some students, an HBCU was their top choice or among the options highly considered. Some of this was due to proximity and some for a stronger cultural fit and sense of belonging. For other students, HBCUs did not result in their ultimate transfer choice due to a lack of exposure or awareness about HBCU transfer opportunities, and HBCUs, often being smaller institutions, were perceived as having fewer resources. Although many CC students may transfer to HBCUs in NC, HBCUs are not often primary transfer destinations for most CCs, leaving opportunities to normalize HBCU vertical transfer and raise awareness of HBCU transfer pathways and programs.

Recommendations

Our findings point to one primary recommendation: ensure that CC students are fully aware of their HBCU vertical transfer options. This awareness can occur through many avenues:

- **Community colleges** - In order for HBCU vertical transfer to be normalized, CC leaders and advisors must advise beyond typical transfer feeder patterns and include information about transfer options locally, regionally, and even statewide. Information can be communicated through online information, individual advising, and established mechanisms such as ACA 122, the transfer seminar course included in statewide articulation agreements.
- **HBCUs** - University leaders, enrollment management professionals, and pre-transfer advisors must recognize their unique role in the statewide transfer ecosystem. Not often being the primary vertical transfer destination for CCs presents inherent challenges around awareness, but HBCUs have an opportunity to articulate their unique mission to students seeking the HBCU experience. HBCUs must also communicate with transfer students and CC advisors about co-admission programs, community and belonging efforts, and the physical amenities available even in smaller institutional settings.
- **Community College–HBCU Transfer Outreach Efforts** - Community colleges and HBCUs each have opportunities to increase awareness of HBCU transfer pathways among pre-transfer students. We recommend strengthening these efforts through more intentional partnerships between the two institution types for intentional outreach. Strategies could include engaging HBCU alumni to speak with community college students and creating HBCU exploration opportunities, such as joint student events, campus visits, and summer bridge programs for prospective transfer students.
- **State and system leaders** - As we have recommended in the past, it is critical that statewide efforts enhance transparency so that advisors and students can obtain information about all transfer agreements across the state. Recent UNC System efforts to post all Transfer Guides on the CFNC website¹⁰ and the forthcoming NCICU transfer portal¹¹ are examples of strong statewide efforts to communicate all transfer options.
- **College access programs** - Federal college access programs, particularly TRIO, were identified by participants as influential in increasing their awareness of HBCUs. Leveraging existing partnerships among federal, state, and local college access programs presents an opportunity to expand students' awareness of transfer pathways and educational opportunities across NC's HBCUs.

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