

From Silos to Synergy: Bridging the Gaps for Disabled Transfer Students

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Understanding Disabled Transfer Students

Theory and Background on How Disabled Transfer Students Experience
Higher Education

Transfer Students in Higher Education (1)

- Data shows an increasing presence of both transfer and disabled students at higher education institutions
 - Increase of 5.3% in total new transfer students between Fall 2022 and Fall 2023
 - For public four-year institutions, students with no gap in their transfer increased year-to-year by almost 11% in Fall 2023
 - Upward transfer increased in Fall 2023 by over 7%

Transfer Students in Higher Education (2)

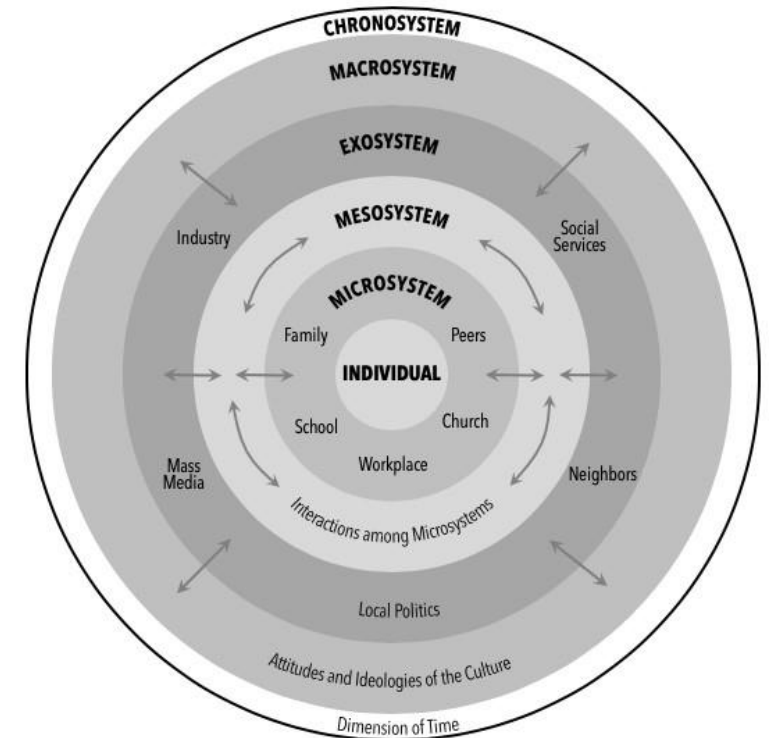
- Variety of ways in which transfer students arrive at the institution from which they will graduate
 - Community college experience, stopping out, multiple enrollments are all common
- Interest in transfer pathways remains high
- Perna (2006) helps us understand the negotiation transfer students engage in to make their decision about enrollment and college choice
- Rosenberg (2016) expands this concept to emphasize the concept of transfer student capital

Disabled Students in Higher Education

- Challenges exist in their conceptualization of college-going and factors/attitudes that discourage their enrollment in college
- IDEA is intended to provide comprehensive transition planning for disabled students
 - Wide variance in how and if that is accomplished in each school district/unit
- A larger portion of disabled students choose to initially enroll in community college compared to a four-year institution
- Formation of disability identity or self as disabled varies
 - Type of disability, educational background, intersecting identities and other life experiences all impact individual framing of disability

Understanding Disability Identity Development & Meaning Making (1)

- Moving from medical to more social models of disability, environmental factors play a major role in how disability is defined
 - Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model provides a foundation for understanding how disabled students interact with their environment to shape their identity
 - Notably, this ecological model accounts for disability as a political identity through the exosystem of federal policy and law that has defined the existence of disabled students for over 50 years.

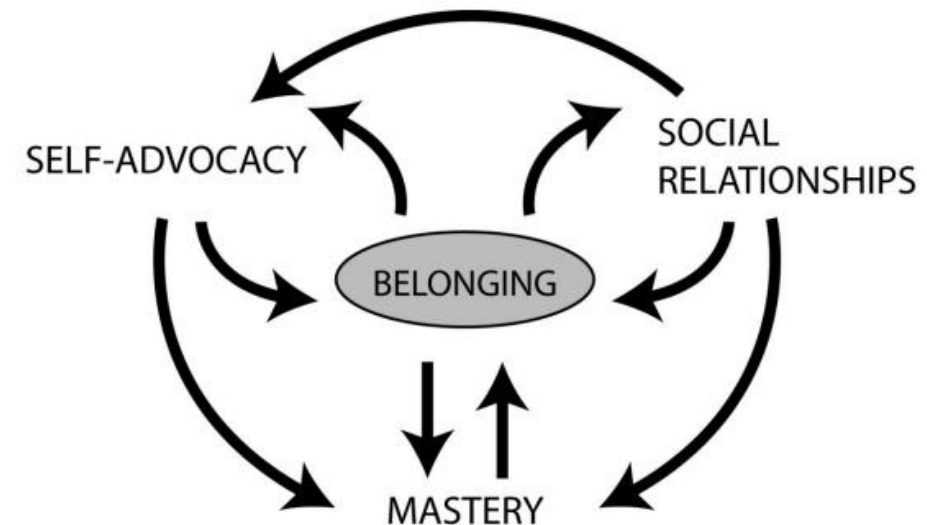


Understanding Disability Identity Development & Meaning Making (2)

- Forber-Pratt and her colleagues across multiple explorations of disability identity expand upon these findings with their Disability Identity Development Model, moving through stages of acceptance, relationships, adoption, and giving back to the community. Critical factors to a student's moving through these stages are:
 - Internal beliefs of disability and the disability community
 - Anger and frustration with disability experiences
 - Adoption of disability community values
 - Contribution to the disability community

Understanding Disability Identity Development & Meaning Making (3)

- Vaccaro and her colleagues undertook important work to understand how disabled students feel a sense of belonging through meaning-making around their disability, noting:
 - Dispelling myths around ablebodiedness through self-advocacy, particularly in times of impact with their disability
 - Mastering elements of what they believe to be universal demands of college students
 - Developing reciprocal social connections with peers, both with and without disabilities



Understanding Disability Identity Development & Meaning Making (4)

- Understandings of how students construct their sense of their own disability often borrow from complementary theory focusing on LGBTQ students
 - Identifying a “coming out” process and performance of identity (Miller, 2018)
 - Emphasis on the nonapparentness of disability for many students

Understanding Disability Identity Development & Meaning Making (5)

- Abes and Wallace (2020) explore similar themes in the application of Crip Theory to Student Development Theory, outlining the following:
 - Highlights the fluid nature of disability identity
 - Challenges compulsory ablebodiedness through emphasis on the importance of interdependence for disabled students
 - Makes room for not meeting society's ableist standards, defined as *crip failure* and *crip time*

Campus Climate/Culture for Disabled & Transfer Students (1)

- Attitudes and perspectives on disability are major factors in the sense of belonging of disabled college students.
 - Pryal (2022) argues that the substitution of logistical rigor for intellectual rigor creates exclusionary climates for disabled students
 - Both faculty and staff can be dismissive of disabled lived experiences, communicating an expectation of ablebodiedness/mindedness aligned with Crip Theory
 - Built environment often will reflect shared attitudes of the campus with disabled students

Campus Climate/Culture for Disabled & Transfer Students (2)

- Rendon's Validation Theory underscores the importance of these campus agents communicating and behaving in ways that are supportive and affirming of lived experiences
- Factors such as strong affiliation with their university, support and acceptance, and positive relationships with faculty and staff contribute to disability identity development amongst students

Campus Climate/Culture for Disabled & Transfer Students (3)

- Transfer pathways from community colleges have often disproportionately centered whiteness; many community colleges serve larger numbers of students of color than the institutions to which students are transferring.
- Herrera et al. (2020) outline the importance of a **transfer sending culture** at community colleges, where transfer pathways are standardized beyond articulation agreements. Attitudes and behaviors of faculty, administrators, and policy makers is critical to its establishing.

Campus Climate/Culture for Disabled & Transfer Students (4)

- **Transfer receptive culture** emphasizes the role of transfer-accepting institutions playing an active role in the transfer process. Five factors are critical in establishing this culture:
 - Institutional priority
 - Outreach and resources
 - Financial and academic support
 - Community and family support
 - Research and assessment

Community as a Common Factor

- Transfer students more frequently rely on existing support networks and challenge the assumptive hegemony of the community to which they are transferring
- Success in the transfer process is often rooted in the sharing of narratives across the community of transfer students to build collective knowledge around the transfer process and to alleviate stigma around attending a community college
- Both finding and engaging with their disabled community, particularly across different disabilities, is critical to disabled students' sense of belonging and identity development.
- Broido et al. (2023) outline the importance of engagement in collective activism with the disabled community, mirroring Abes and Wallace's (2020) emphasis on interdependence through Crip Theory

Engagement of Disabled Transfer Students

- Orientation is a critical point of engagement for both transfer and disabled students
 - Often presumptive in the ways it engages students or what resources it selectively covers (Ridgeway & Delmas, 2025)
- Responsive academic engagement and deeper interactions with faculty are critical for belonging amongst both transfer and disabled students
- For both transfer and disabled students, using time as a concept to challenge normative time to degree and “effort” of engagement in academic and social settings is necessary

Voices of Disabled Transfer Students

A Qualitative Assessment of the Disabled Transfer Student Experience at a Four Year Public Institution

About the Project

- In the Winter 2026 quarter, we interviewed five transfer students affiliated with our DRO
- Questions focused on their experiences defining their disability throughout their educational journey and in transferring to UCLA
- Students were identified through a data pull and emailed to encouraged voluntary participation

Insights from Interview (1)

- Accommodations are essential, but the process feels burdensome and uncertain
- A common experience is disability-related invalidation or skepticism
- Validation matters because it directly shapes belonging
- Both students moved from concealment or masking toward openness and self-advocacy

Insights from Interview (2)

- Community college was a source of preparation, confidence, and relational support
- Transfer shock is intensified by disability
- Belonging is built through “pockets” of support rather than the institution as a whole
- Peer support fills gaps left by formal systems

Insights from Interview (3)

- Participants framed their experiences as resilience, but it's partly a response to institutional barriers
- Advocacy is a pathway to purpose, community, and identity affirmation
- Disabled transfer students may feel they have to prove belonging twice
- Institutional environment is experienced as fragmented, bureaucratic, and not fully accessible

Creating Better Colleges for Disabled Transfer Students

Insights and Brainstorming on the Disability Resource Office Role in
Disabled Transfer Student Success

Activity: Pair & Share (1)

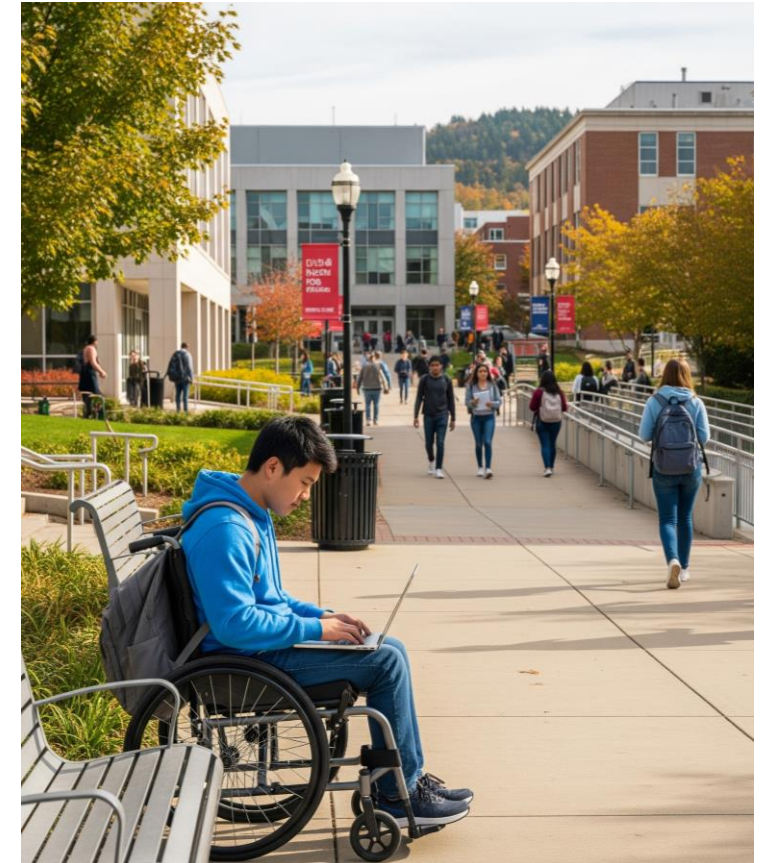
- Individual reflection: Think about a disabled transfer student arriving on your campus. What are three moments in their first 10 weeks when they might encounter unnecessary friction?
- Then, take 15 minutes in a pair or triad and discuss your insights on disabled transfer students (questions on next slide)
- As a pair, end your discussion with a commitment statement

Activity: Pair & Share (2)

- What message does your campus currently send to disabled transfer students before they arrive?
- Where on our campus might disabled transfer students be unintentionally made to feel like they are asking for special treatment rather than equitable participation?
- What are the 'pockets of belonging' on your campus, and how would a disabled transfer student find them?
- Where do we currently expect students to connect the dots between offices that should already be connected?

Implications for Practice (1)

- Important to note the commonalities between transfer and disabled student experiences
- Assumptions made about impacts for both populations compound for disabled transfer students
- If transfer students rely on an extensive community outside of the university, how affirming/supportive is that community of disability?
- Disability likely has a major impact on the transfer student capital



Implication for Practice (2)

- Emphasis on the active participation of universities in the transfer process underscores the need for such partnerships with community colleges to extend through Disability Resource Offices (DROs)
- DROs must examine their history with restrictive documentation standards and practices that disproportionately affect students of color, first-generation students and transfer students, unpacking how they negatively impact students' ability to develop purpose and sense of self
- Universities must take a both/and approach, creating unique spaces of belonging for transfer and disabled students, and integrating understandings of the transfer and disabled student experience into traditional modes of engagement

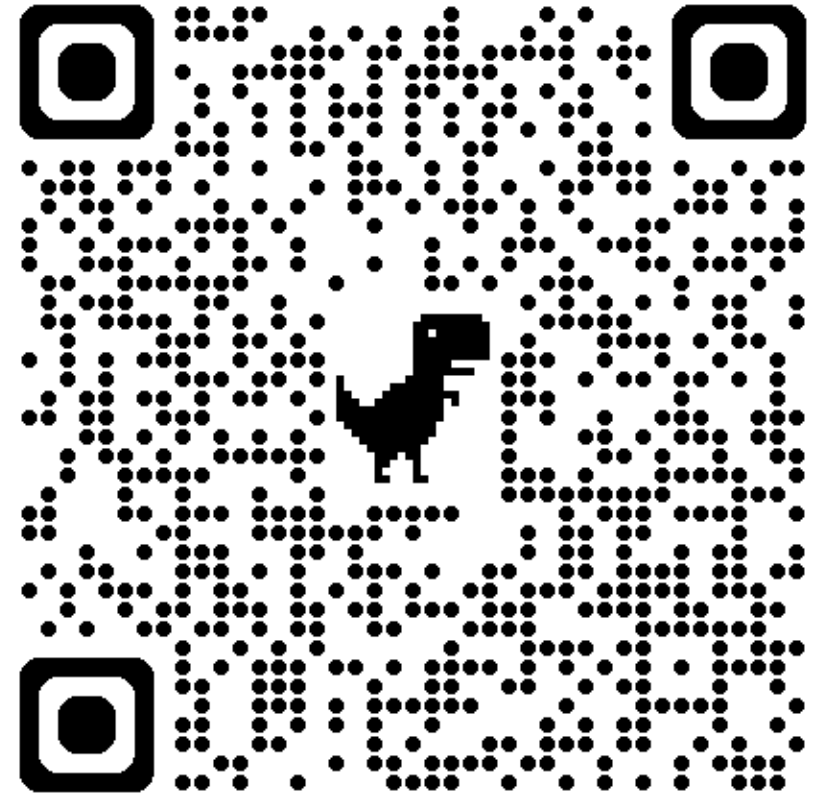
Questions?

Session Evaluation

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Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.



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