Introduction

This research brief presents key findings from the RP Group’s study of community college students who pursue transfer to Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN) programs. The RP Group conducted this study in response to California’s persistent nursing shortage, the increasing call for baccalaureate-level training in this occupation and the significant number of future nurses who start their postsecondary careers in community colleges. This investigation explored (1) how BSN completers use the state’s community colleges to prepare for transfer and pursue this degree, (2) what factors impact their journey and (3) what opportunities exist for improving transfer to BSN programs.

This research brief is part of a series of reports that present discipline-specific information from the Student Transfer in Professional Pathways Project (STP3). It shares results from a quantitative study of 2,800 transfer students who completed a BSN and identifies key themes from contact with 200 nursing students currently pursuing a baccalaureate. Highlights including the following:

- Only 17% (482/2,820) of students who achieved a BSN between fall 1996 and spring 2009 completed an ADN pre-transfer; 38% received an associate degree in another discipline while 46% transferred without completing this credential.

- Students encounter a long and winding road to transfer and degree, with 30% taking upwards of six or more years to complete a BSN and another 30% taking eight years or more.

- Those who achieve an ADN have the longest road to BSN completion compared to those who earned an associate degree in another discipline and those
who transferred without; they are likely to earn more community college units pre-transfer and take eight or more years to reach a BSN (potentially a result of pursuing employment between completing an ADN and entering a baccalaureate program)

The RP Group designed this document for those closely engaged in building the nurse workforce in California, including educators, employers and policy advocates. We intend for this document to:

- Share information discovered about transfer in nursing through this study
- Promote a dialog about what the findings mean and how they can be used to improve transfer in this discipline

In turn, this brief starts with a short overview of the RP Group’s research on transfer in nursing. We then provide a summary of findings on how community college transfer students work toward a bachelor’s degree in nursing as well as the factors that impact their journey. We conclude with a series of discussion questions to stimulate reflection on and dialog about how nurse educators, employers and policy advocates might respond to the research.

**How did we conduct this research?**

The RP Group studied students post-transfer, including those currently enrolled in nursing programs and those who successfully achieved a BSN. Six primary research questions drove this portion of our study:

Question 1: Who are the transfer students?

Question 2: How do students get on the nursing transfer path?

Question 3: How do they use the community college system to prepare for transfer?

Question 4: What challenges them along the way?

Question 5: What supports them toward transfer and degree?

Question 6: What happens to students post-transfer?

We explored these questions through the research activities described below.
Backward mapping the journey of baccalaureate achievers (quantitative data analysis). The RP Group collaborated with the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS) to analyze student records and identify the educational paths taken by 2,820 transfers who ultimately achieved a BSN between fall 1996 and spring 2009. Twelve universities were part of this analysis including undergraduate programs at 11 California State Universities (CSUs) and one private university. Readers should be advised that this analysis was limited to those institutions participating in Cal-PASS.¹

Our sample targeted students who completed at least 12 transferable units at a California community college and who had at least two years of university course data available prior to degree completion. The cohort does not include students who already completed a baccalaureate and returned to use the community college system to work toward transfer and completion of a nursing baccalaureate. We performed analyses of completers’ demographics, time and units to transfer and degree, pre-transfer coursework including their first English and math class, number of community colleges attended, use of support services like financial aid and the impact of these and other factors on time to transfer and degree.

Documenting the experience of students post-transfer (student surveys and focus groups). To expand on and complement these quantitative findings, the RP Group gathered the perspectives of recent transfer students now pursuing their baccalaureate degree in nursing at one CSU, one private non-profit and one private, for-profit university. These universities were selected because they were among the largest recipients of nursing transfer students found in the Cal-PASS database in 2006. Just over 170 students completed surveys and 20 participated in focus groups. These activities centered on factors that impacted their transfer experience and advice they would offer their peers, community colleges and four-year institutions about how to strengthen the preparation and transition of future nursing transfer students.

The qualitative findings should not be used on their own to draw conclusions or make generalizations about nursing transfer paths beyond the students interviewed. Rather, the perspectives harvested through these activities highlight themes, illustrate complex experiences and augment the quantitative evidence.

What are the key findings?

The following section presents key findings related to the six research questions (see p. 2) explored through the RP Group’s examination of the nursing transfer pathway. Where possible, we supply results from all three of the study’s primary research activities (quantitative data analysis, student surveys and student focus groups) to answer these questions. At the same time, some questions are solely informed by findings from one or two research activities.

The RP Group STP3 study includes:
- Analysis of the transfer path taken by over 2,800 students who ultimately completed a BSN
- Surveys and focus groups with almost 200 transfer students currently enrolled in BSN programs
Question 1:
Who are the transfer students?

Quantitative analysis of students’ educational paths to transfer and degree and survey responses provided a range of insights into the composition of students who transfer and complete a degree in this discipline. The quantitative analysis showed that a large majority of BSN completers were female (86%). It also found that the largest percent of students were white (45%) followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (16%), Filipino (15%) and Latino (13%).

Similarly, survey responses revealed that transfer students currently enrolled in the three university-level programs involved in this portion of STP3 tended to be female (81% across participating universities). While survey responses generally aligned with the quantitative analysis findings on transfer students’ ethnicity, there were some differences between institutions. Accordingly, survey participants attending the two private universities were more likely to be African-American (13%) compared to those enrolled at the participating CSU (0%).

In terms of age, CSU survey participants were younger on average than those attending the private, for-profit university. Approximately 67% of CSU participants reported being 20 to 29 years of age versus students from the two private universities who were distributed more evenly across several age categories. For example, 24% of survey participants attending the private, for-profit university were 24-29 years of age, 17% were 30 to 34, 19% 35 to 39 and 17% 40 to 49. Regardless of their university affiliation, a significant percent of transfer students indicated they were first-generation college goers. Over half (56%) of survey respondents across the three participating universities reported being first in their immediate families to go to college.

Question 2:
How do students get on the road to transfer in nursing?

Study participants indicated they used the community college system with intention; over half of survey respondents reported knowing they would pursue a major in nursing from the time they entered a community college and nearly all reached this conclusion after one year. Students rated “personal educational goal” and “job/career advancement” as top motivators for pursuing transfer. Focus group participants illuminated further, saying they understood that employers increasingly prefer to hire BSN-prepared nurses and that this degree facilitates greater employment opportunities. A few students noted they found it easier to access university-level BSN programs than community college ADN programs and that they could complete a BSN in roughly the same amount of time needed to achieve an ADN.

I had an ADN and was working as a nurse. I saw that most of my colleagues were pursuing BSNs. I decided to go back [for a bachelor’s degree] and eventually it became a requirement for my job. You definitely need a BSN to advance in this field.

– Private University Transfer Student
Question 3: How do students use community colleges to prepare for transfer to a BSN program?

Analysis of the educational paths taken by transfer students who ultimately completed a BSN revealed that these learners largely used the community college system to complete General Education (GE) and foundational science courses. Accordingly, GE classes comprised about two thirds of the total community college units completed by transfer students, followed by science courses like biology or chemistry (28% of transferable community college units achieved). Similarly, survey and focus group participants reported using the community college system to fulfill GE and core science requirements for transfer to a BSN program including anatomy, physiology, microbiology and chemistry.

Interestingly, while a majority of students began their journey prepared for college-level English, many placed into math courses below transfer level. Just over a quarter (28%) started in below transfer-level English yet more than half (53%) took below transfer-level math while attending a community college. Quantitative analysis showed that the vast majority of nursing students ultimately completed statistics/finite math as their highest math course pre-transfer.

Additionally, backward mapping also showed that nursing students were most likely to “swirl” or attend multiple community colleges when compared to other disciplines (accounting and engineering), with 63% attending at least two colleges and 27% enrolling in three or more. Focus group participants indicated they swirled to go where they could access required coursework and get classes at convenient times.

The analysis of students’ associate’s degree achievement pre-transfer proved particularly intriguing. While 55% (1,564/2,820) of the BSN completers we studied earned an associate’s degree prior to transfer, only 31% of these (482/1,564) were ADNs.Overall, among all the BSN completers in the study, just 17% (482/2,820) achieved an ADN pre-transfer. Approximately 38% received an associate’s degree in another discipline while 46% transferred without completing this credential. The RP Group believes these findings raise interesting questions about the different paths students travel through community colleges in their pursuit of a BSN, including how to efficiently offer prerequisite coursework to transfer students who forego achieving an ADN in their pursuit of a BSN.

Ultimately, just over 40% of BSN completers took between two and four years to transfer while roughly the same percent took four or more. Those who earned an ADN pre-transfer generally took longer to transfer; 80% of these students took more than four years compared to approximately 40% who earned an associate’s degree in another discipline and 30% who did not earn any degree pre-transfer. About a third of these learners earned more than 70 units prior to transferring. Unlike other disciplines
(engineering and accounting), the majority of nursing students took more than two years to transfer regardless of the number of community college units taken.

**Question 4: What challenges do students encounter along the way?**

When asked about the factors challenging their transfer experience, survey respondents identified the “cost of attending a four-year institution” and “need to work to support self and/or family” as top challenges. Surveys and focus groups also revealed several other issues encountered by students pre-transfer. Some participants discussed problems accessing required coursework at their home community college due to limited offerings or impacted courses. Some students also reported difficulty receiving correct and appropriate advising, including which courses to take and when. Among those who transferred to private universities, some participants indicated that community college counselors offered limited information on non-public transfer options.

Students in this study also reported difficulty understanding and managing changing transfer requirements on the part of receiving institutions, both at public and private universities. Participants who had to wait for some period of time before entering a BSN program after completing their transfer requirements found this to be a particular challenge, at times having to repeat or take additional coursework once enrolled at the university.

Several participants reported difficulty transferring all of their community college credits once accepted into their BSN program. This challenge varied depending on the type of institution. Some students attending one private university said they had difficulty getting previous math and/or English coursework counted and indicated they had to take additional classes. Students attending the CSU reported they had difficulty transferring units which they had completed in the spring or summer prior to university enrollment. Very few survey respondents indicated that they used a transfer agreement to seamlessly move credits between their community college and university programs—arrangements that might reduce problems with course transferability.

Finally, participants reported complications with determining expectations for program participation after they transferred. Again, this issue surfaced for students attending both public and private universities but differed by institution. In the case of one private university, some students felt that they did not receive clear information at the time of enrollment about all required coursework or about how the university would assess their progress and achievement.
Students attending the CSU discussed issues related to BSN program requirements differing from and conflicting with the university’s general expectations for degree completion.

**Question 5:**
What supports nursing students toward transfer and a degree?

Survey and focus group results suggest that a detailed and focused education plan leading to transfer in nursing can mitigate the guidance and credit transferability challenges encountered by many students. Most BSN candidates indicated in their survey responses that they had some sort of plan mapping their journey to transfer. The large majority of survey respondents indicated they had “very detailed” or “somewhat detailed” educational plans outlining the courses required for transfer. Many (ranging from 40% to 70% depending on the institution) developed their own plan while a counselor helped others. Those who report having a detailed plan were also more likely to rate it as useful, were less likely to take lower-division major preparation courses after transfer and were more likely to highly rate their preparation for upper-division work.

On a related point, transfer students indicated that counselors with focused knowledge of nursing programs can provide critical advisement not necessarily available through the general guidance function of their colleges. Some of these students referenced meeting with community college counselors assigned specifically to their nursing department who provided explicit information on transferring to a BSN program.

Focus group participants also noted that in some cases, community colleges effectively used contextualization to drive home content learned in courses required for BSN programs. These students discussed taking prerequisites such as biology, physiology and anatomy which were taught in the context of nursing. Students stated that this approach enabled them to grasp the relevance of the coursework and helped them recall concepts post-transfer.

Moreover, students attending focus groups generally applauded the rigor and quality of the instruction they received at their community college.

I was running a daycare and needed to fulfill educational units in order to qualify for an annual stipend… but I also wanted to get working on my nursing degree. I went to a counselor who mapped out how to take child development classes and address my nursing prerequisites at the same time. She was awesome… she helped me develop a plan for every semester for three years. She said ‘Here are the classes you need, here’s the progression you need to follow and if you have any extra time, here is the list of courses you should pull from.’ She laid everything out for me.

— CSU Transfer Student

I found that a lot of my community college science courses were contextualized to nursing. I think that community colleges have realized that lots of nursing students are taking science pre-reqs there. [Colleges] seem to have stepped up their writing requirements and geared biology and physiology lessons toward the field. I felt really prepared when I transferred.

— CSU Transfer Student
colleges and these students expressed overall appreciation for their pre-transfer preparation. Transfer students largely indicated in surveys that they felt as prepared—if not more prepared—for university-level work when compared to their peers who started their postsecondary education at that four-year institution. That said, focus group respondents suggested that community colleges could improve transfer students’ preparation for BSN programs by (1) contextualizing more prerequisite courses in math and science, (2) developing students’ test preparation and test taking skills, (3) improving learners’ critical thinking skills and (4) enhancing students’ study and research skills.

**Question 6:**

**What happens to nursing students between transfer and degree?**

Data analysis reveals that the road to degree is long for many students. Approximately, 30% took six to eight years to complete their degree from their first community college enrollment, while another 30% took eight or more years.

The road is longest for those who completed an ADN pre-transfer; 58% took eight or more years to complete a BSN compared to 29% who completed an associate’s degree in another discipline and 19% who did not complete any degree pre-transfer. These numbers may be explained by these students working for some time between completing an ADN and pursuing a BSN.

The largest portion of transfers who completed a degree spent between two and three years at the university, regardless of how many units they had earned previously at a community college. For example, 45% of students who transferred with 30 to 55 transferable community college units and 44% of students who made this transition with 86 or more obtained their BSN within two to three years of their first university term.
How can we make this research work for you and for students?

The RP Group is eager for these findings on the nursing pathway to support the work of educators, employers and policy advocates interested in increasing students’ transfer access and success. To this end, the following section offers two sets of discussion questions to promote dialog among nurse education stakeholders. One set focuses on how the research reflects your own experience and the other explores how these findings can be used for action, including helping students achieve a baccalaureate and informing efforts to ensure the supply of individuals prepared to work in nursing aligns with labor market demand across the state.

How does this research reflect your own experience?

The following questions are designed to help nurse educators facilitate discussions on your campuses and across institutions and segments about your own experience promoting transfer.

**Discussion Questions:**

- How do these findings align with your experience supporting students in their effort to transfer and complete a BSN?
- What findings are particularly useful? How might you use them?
- What issues seem unresolved? What additional research would be of value to your work?

How can we use this research to improve the nursing pathway?

This research suggests several possible opportunities for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the nursing transfer pathway, many of them coming from the “experts”—successful transfer students. Community college and university educators, inter-segmental groups, employers and policy advocates might consider ways to work both independently and collaboratively to explore these points for improvement.

**Discussion Questions:**

*Pre-transfer readiness and pathway efficiency*

- Given that many degree completers in this cohort actually started in basic skills math, what can educators do to streamline related coursework, accelerate students’ math mastery and direct BSN transfer candidates toward the type of math required for this degree (e.g., statistics versus calculus)?
• How can community colleges efficiently package prerequisite science coursework including anatomy, physiology, microbiology and chemistry classes for those students who tap this system on their way to BSN completion (but do not pursue an ADN)?

• How can community colleges contextualize these prerequisite science courses to nursing in an effort to help transfer students prepare for upper-division work and retain necessary content for future use?

• What (if any) courses presently contained in ADN programs and thus not accessible to non-ADN students could be offered to those pursuing transfer to BSN programs without completing an associate’s degree along the way?

• How can efforts like AB1295 and the collaborative model for nurse education be institutionalized and scaled to increase the number of ADN completers who continue on to BSN completion?

Post-transfer systems and supports

• How can universities work with feeder institutions to ensure transfer students’ community college credits and related work experience count toward efficient BSN completion?

• How can universities and their nursing departments provide clear direction on the requirements for degree completion immediately upon transfer?

For more information...

For more information on the Student Transfer in Professional Pathways Project, visit http://www.rpgroup.org/stp3.html or contact Eva Schiorring, Project Director, eschioring@rpgroup.org.

Notes

i Cal-PASS is a voluntary statewide data sharing system to track students transitioning among institutions and segments such as high school to college and community college to university.

ii This number also includes licensed vocational nursing (LVN) degrees, although these degrees represent only a small fraction of the percentage presented.