

Democracy's College

Working Together to Create a Transfer-Receptive Culture

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at ocrl.illinois.edu.

José Viramontes:



My name is José Del Real Viramontes. I am a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Education Policy and Organizational Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and part of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership staff. Today I'm joined by three very special people. Alfred Herrera, assistant vice provost and director for the Center for Community College Partnerships at the University of California, Los Angeles. And Santiago Bernal, assistant director for the Center for Community College Partnerships at

the University of California Los Angeles. And Dr. Dimpal Jain, associate professor of education at California State University, Northridge.

Today, we will be having a conversation about how community colleges and four-year colleges, universities, can work together towards developing or enhancing a transfer-receptive culture. Welcome. Alfred, would you like to say a few words?

Alfred Herrera:



Hello, everybody. Happy Indigenous People's Day. It's important to acknowledge the land that the original inhabitants were on, that we are on. I'm really happy to be here. As Jose mentioned, I'm at UCLA and I've been there for about 40 years now, and all of those 40 years have been focused on working with transfer students. So the work that we do in the Center for Community College Partnerships is really about motivating and empowering community college students who

come from first-gen, underrepresented communities to take ownership of their education and really show them how to move forward in preparing to transfer to a four-year university.

Santiago Bernal:



Hi, everyone. My name is Santiago Bernal. I'm the assistant director for the Center for Community College Partnerships at UCLA, and I've been working with transfer students since I participated as a peer counselor in the longest-running transfer-receptive cultural program at UCLA, I would say, which is through the Academic Advancement Program, which is an equity program. It was through a transfer summer program that was a bridge between community college students and UCLA to introduce them to the rigorousness of a research institution. And I've been working with transfer students ever since then, actually with Alfred beginning in 1994, and love doing what I'm doing now.

Dimpal Jain:

I'm Dr. Dimpal Jain, faculty at Cal State, Northridge, and I have been working as a practitioner, or a faculty member in higher ed, for almost the past 20 years now. Held a few different positions, but my work has always centered around community college students' transfer and looking at the intersection between race and racism.



José Viramontes:

Nice, thank you. Dimpal, would you like to give us a brief description, definition of what a transfer-receptive culture is?

Dimpal Jain:

Sure, thank you, Jose. Today in our conversation we're going to be talking a lot about a transfer-receptive culture. You may have heard the term before or it may be brand new to you, so we wanted to make sure that we're all working off the same definition. So we're just going to provide a really quick explanation, both of critical race theory and how it informs our definition of transfer-receptive culture.

A lot of our work is informed by theory. We really believe in the power of theory and its explanatory role in terms of assessing and forming new frameworks. Our definition of a transfer-receptive culture is absolutely first and foremost defined by critical race theory. And critical race theory asserts that white supremacy plays a role in shaping American institutions. In particular, it also really helps us understand one type of American institution, which is the education system or educational institutions, in this case higher ed. So CRT in education helps us challenge the dominant discourse, really common beliefs that have been entrenched for a long time, and helps us challenge and reconceptualize notions around race and racism and how it applies to not just only theory but also policy and practice. And that's where we really see TRC (transfer-receptive culture) is at the intersection of those three things: of theory, policy and practice.

The quick definition of TRC; there's five elements, and they're somewhat on a spectrum. We have come to kind of reconceptualize the elements most recently, and we have seen how the elements can transverse through time and space in a way. Our first element is an institutional priority, and that means that the university sets transfer as a priority. But we see that happening in both pre-transfer and post-transfer efforts. The second pre-transfer element is outreach and resources, so the university has specifically transfer-designed outreaching resources.

The next two elements we can see as post-transfer, and these are different support systems that the university provides, including unique financial and academic support. And also recognizing the role of community and family in transfer students of color lives. And then lastly this idea of research and assessment and how that should be continuous also across pre-transfer and post-transfer efforts, where we continuously assess what transfer means, how transfer looks different for BIPOC students, and try to improve upon transfer at the university.

José Viramontes:

Thank you, Dimpal. I want to get started with you, Dimpal, following up your definition of a transfer-receptive culture. Can you tell us more about your book and share how universities can utilize it to develop or enhance their transfer policies, programming, and practices?

Dimpal Jain:

Sure. We all wrote a book together, Santi, Alfred and I. We have been publishing about a transfer-receptive culture for quite some years now, almost the past 10 years, I would say. And this year our book just came out and we really wanted to write a book-length treatment on this topic. We really thought it would be useful for not just scholars but also practitioners and students and community members that were interested in the idea of transfer. And again, its intersection with race and racism. So we co-wrote this over many, many years and many, many meetings and different spaces across LA. And we're really happy that it's here.

The way that we find it can really help universities and community colleges both is the way that we designed the book. So, we have key terms at the end of each chapter as well as discussion questions to continuously have those who are reading it in conversation with the text—also that there's clear takeaways from each chapter. And then in the last chapter that we titled “Lessons Learned from the Transfer-receptive Culture,” we tried to give really concrete strategies that the reader could walk away from. And that includes the idea of transfer agents and transfer champions, what those can do kind of in a localized part of their own transfer-receptive culture on campus. We gave a set of inquiry questions to kind of help as conversation starters. We also included TRC geographies, what we're calling it, kind of how to map your campus and look to see where transfer is a hotspot, where transfer is a friendly area, and where transfer should be more strong. And that means transfer conversations, transfer resources, transfer services.

And then, lastly, we provided some data tables that we found really helpful in our own work from the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, or NISTS, that gives you really clear variables to choose from when you are going to institutional research, and also delineates how those variables are different for transfer students. With all of that said, we also made sure in the book, and then what we also want to get across in terms of why we wrote this and how we wrote this, is that we're really centering BIPOC students in all of this. So Black, Indigenous, and people of color transfer students is what's at the heart of the text itself.

José Viramontes:

Thank you, Dimpal. Santi, I wanted to ask you, based on your current position, how do you believe the current health and racial pandemics has affected transfer?

Santiago Bernal:

I'm in a very blessed position, I would say, because I get to work at UCLA full time, and I get to work once a week at Pasadena City College in their cancer center. So I'm privy to both of the conversations that are taking place at the community college and at a university. And the way you're asking this question is actually perfect to talk about the health and racial pandemics. I would want to say, though, that the racial pandemic is not just current—it's been going on for centuries in this country, right? So I think in terms of how this is impacting the way that transfer-receptive culture is playing out at the university, and by extension the work that we do at the community colleges, really challenges the priorities that institutions have, right? It's really pushing to see what resources are going to be allocated to transfer students.

So the university has to make decisions about how do we do that, and by extension, also, what is going to be happening at the community colleges as we do outreach, as we do the work that we need to do at the community colleges. And of course, this is going to vary from institution to institution. Some institutions have decreased the work that is being done to recruit community college students. The funding has been going towards of course the needs of the students during this pandemic. And we do know from data, through in-house data, that the students that have been most impacted are community college students, particularly community college students of color, particularly Black and Brown students. Those are the students who have been, at this point, the most affected by the pandemic.

And of course, for some of us, that's not necessarily news because we know that when it comes to these communities, the infrastructure has not been there to begin with. And what we're trying to do with our transfer-receptive culture is to ensure that infrastructure exists. That it's not something that will be affected as much by crises like the pandemic. So we're hoping that universities, as they are moving forward, they need to continue to put that emphasis on transfer students, and particularly transfer students of color. So, to that end, I think in the work that we have been doing at UCLA, we have really tried to focus, how

do we do this under the new condition? The new normal? Which is doing remote work to see how accessible our work is.

And so, one of the things that we did this year was to move away from our cohort programs that were more selective, and to open the access to any student who was interested in our programs. We reduce, of course, the amount of time that we spent and we zero in on what we thought was most important. And what we thought was most important was working with specific communities at the community college. To address the concerns that those communities have. And this is very direct to the element to the specific tailoring of outreach for community college students. And element three, which is showing what's available at the university for the students. So we have worked to do webinars that will focus specifically in Native American/Pacific Islander students, African American/Black students, on Chicanx/Latinx students. And also we have focused, for example, on men of color, formerly incarcerated, system impacted, foster youth, so a variety of communities that often, again, are going to be the most impacted. And trying to show that we can build community, even through this crisis, right, through this pandemic.

One of the things that we know about our communities is that we're resilient. That we have within our communities what we need. And we just need to bring forth those assets, those navigational skills, all of those things that are part of the community cultural wealth that can assist us in ensuring that our students will be successful. And we continue to do that through this work. We can't not do it; that's just not an option for us. So that's where we are, and I think we're going to continue to push forward, regardless of the systemic ways in which we're attacked. We have the defenses and we are going to continue to thrive.

José Viramontes:

Thank you, Santi. Alfred, can you elaborate a little bit more on how critical partnerships between community colleges and universities support transfer?

Alfred Herrera:

Happy to talk about that because the question has been going round and round about whose responsibility transfer is. And universities often say that it's the responsibility of the community college to prepare students, and community colleges often say it's the responsibility of the university to make sure the students have the information, et cetera. So it goes round and round, and the reality is it's both. It is a shared responsibility. In fact, I'll take it a step further, it's three ways: It's high school, it's community college, and it's four-year universities. High school because we need to prepare the counselors and others to ensure that they understand that community college is college; that it is important to prepare students for entering community college, just like they prepare students for a university.

It's important because community colleges need to understand that they need to work with high schools as well as universities to engage in collaborative programming that allows more benefits for the students. And then universities to make sure that they're participating actively in the work that is being done.

So it is a three-pronged effort of responsibility that we always need to make sure that we talk about. And the reason they're important is because they afford an opportunity to increase goals. So every one of us wants to increase the numbers of students who transfer. We want to make sure that the students get the most information in the best way possible. So looking at collaborative efforts by all the partners allows for discussions between the entities, not only between systems, but also within campuses to ensure that programs that are providing support to students are not operating in a silo, but are participants across the campus to ensure that they're all working towards the same goal.

Effective partnerships require some degree of flexibility, so it's important to be flexible and to know that everything you want to do is not necessarily what's going to end up happening. Strong partnerships entail a perceived benefit for each of the partners. Community colleges want students to transfer, universities want those students. And of course successful partnerships have support of the president and faculty and administrators. So some of the things that are critical in terms of elements, what I call five Cs of effective partnerships.

Commitment—there has to be a commitment from both sides to ensure that the work is getting done. Coordination has to be done on both sides. It can't be one or the other; it needs to be both coordinating the efforts. There has to be strong collaboration on meetings, programs, and anything related to this partnership. There has to be cooperation from across the campuses to ensure that all entities are buying in. And probably the strongest is communication. It's really critical to make sure that the communication is open and goes both ways.

Let me share just a little bit about one of the partnerships that we have. We have some comprehensive partnerships with four community colleges in the Los Angeles area. And the partnerships are really comprehensive in that they provide an opportunity for us to engage deeply in the work that's being done. So, the example is that we have a full-time staff person who is assigned to work at that community college and spends three days a week there. We have more than five or 10 students who are peer mentors who work at that community college, and many of them have transferred from that college. So imagine five or 10 students going back to that campus, getting into places and connecting with people that none of us have the ability to do, but because of their experiences they've been able to do that. The students and the coordinator work with faculty, work with administrators, do presentations to classes, to clubs. They do fairs, they do tabling, they do a variety of different workshops. We host summer programs specifically for those students at those campuses. We do Saturday academies where we bring students back to the university three times a year. And it's really to engage the students, to motivate them, to empower them, to help them understand, number one, why they need to be at a university; number two, how they can get there; and three, to successfully show them the way. And it's really important because it opens the door for students to really see themselves at the university, to know that it is a place that is attainable, and it's not as bad as they thought it was and so far away and beyond the realm of their responsibility.

So it's been a great opportunity for us to really showcase our campus, but also higher education because the work that we do is not getting students to UCLA—it's getting students to transfer. We want them to understand what they need to do to go wherever they want to go. We want to be a part of that and we want to make sure that whatever goal they set, we help them get there. That's the work that we do; that's what transfer receptive culture is, is helping students understand what they need to do. And more importantly, helping universities understand what they need to do to change, to embrace the students that are coming in.

One of the things that I think is really beautiful about the work that we do is the opportunity to see it in action. And one of the things that I want to mention is for those of you who don't know, José was a student in one of our programs just a couple of years ago. And he had the opportunity to participate in our Site Plus, or what was then called STEP program, and the program basically is an opportunity for community college students to come to UCLA in a non-residential program and take an upper-division summer-session course.

And the program is built around support of those students in that class, so about 20 students come to UCLA and take a class twice a week, and then we have a supplemental instruction and workshops designed to prepare students to transfer. And it's a six-week program. And José started in that program and participated, ultimately transferred to the university, UCLA, and was engaged in a number of different efforts. And then come full circle, last summer he was one of the instructors in one of the classes that we offered students to participate in. So the beauty and the impact that that has, not only on José but on all of our students, to see someone who went through the program and is now teaching them at a university level is profound. And it's the perfect example of how our programs impact students' lives and the universities' lives. So, I want to turn it back over to you, José, and ask for you to say a few things about that experience.

José Viramontes:

Thank you, Alfred. Just thinking back on it, I think it was really special. For me, it took me about eight years, on and off, to transfer to UCLA, so the program has had an immense impact in my life, in both my personal and academic. I mean, Dimpal was my graduate mentor back when I did the program. So, I think what the program did for me, and I think what it does for a lot of us who come through community colleges, is, one, I think it validates our experiences. And aside from that, it also allows us to see ourselves somewhere like at UCLA, right? And then even further than that, because I remember part of the program, like you said, workshops and peer mentors and speakers that share their experiences, and the other part is the academic. So, I think those are two areas where a lot of us need the support or the motivation.

But one of the things that I also appreciate about the program is that you all expose us to graduate school. So once you start applying to transfer, and you eventually do, and then you get to your prospective university, then the next

step, you know it's graduate school, or law school or professional school, right? So, I think that that's one of the things that I remember the most, right, having an impact on validating my experience as a first-gen Mexican immigrant, giving me the confidence to make sure that I did well at a place like UCLA. It connected me to great people, to the resources, but also exposing me to what's next. And as a result, I was able to be part of McNair at UCLA. I did my thesis. From there, I went onto the University of Texas to do my master's and Ph.D. And now, as a result of that, I'm a visiting assistant professor at Illinois. And what's been beautiful about the experience is not only coming full circle, but having you all be part of it, right, at each stage of my development. In particular, Dimpal. Dimpal, she's been a really great support, you know, she was part of my dissertation committee when I did my dissertation. And every time I have questions about anything related to academia, she's always been there for me. So it's been a really great experience, so thank you.

I want to end by giving you all an opportunity to say some last parting words of advice.

Dimpal Jain:

I can say something really quick. I think one of the great things about theorizing something like a transfer-receptive culture is seeing it in action. And I think, José, you're, like, a direct manifestation of that. Not only was I able to be in a teaching relationship with you, but now I'm also in a learning relationship with you. And so to be able to bounce ideas back and forth and to serve on your committee and we just coauthored a book chapter where Jose is lead author. It's just amazing to see the promise of community college students from CC (community college) to the Ph.D. And I think it's more formalized spaces within the university where we can actually see and track that trajectory. And I think that's what's great about a transfer-receptive culture.

Santiago Bernal:

I want to echo what José said about Dimpal and the impact that she has had on so many of our students. If we could count the number of transfer students that have gone on to graduate school because of her influence, or because she made them do it, is countless at this point. But beyond that, she also has guided us, guided me, personally, into writing, which, I was an English major. Most people think, "Oh yeah, I love writing." I actually hate writing. It's a *hard* effort to write. So for anyone out there who's struggling with writing, I definitely—it's hard. But it's also rewarding at the same time. And I think part of what, for me, was to ensure that we were providing students with something that is usually not provided to transfer students of color, that's not affordable to transfer students of color, which most other students who are affluent, who are from backgrounds that are allowed to kind of find themselves, right, and they use the universities to explore that. And oftentimes that is not afforded to us. We're oftentimes talked about, you know, you need to find an occupation, you need to find a job, you need to find something that will make money for whatever reasons and for many reasons, right?

But it is more than that. Education is more than that and I think that's kind of the message that we try to share with our students, and I think you exemplify that. It wasn't just about employment: It was about a preoccupation that you have now about education being equitable and education being a way to ensure that equity was going to be part of your life. That's the beauty of what the program does is it allows students to really find what they're passionate about. And I think beyond anything else that we may have done, to be able to be afforded that type of space where you can find yourself and find what you love to do is beautiful to see you doing what you're doing.

José Viramontes:

Thank you, Santi. Alfred?

Alfred Herrera:

Yeah. I mean, they've said a lot about what I was thinking, as well. You know, I mean, the bottom line is the reward is to see people like you achieve their goals and to be able to do that. And to have been in this environment to be able to create programs that allow this to happen is the beauty of it all. Having worked at UCLA for as long as I have worked and the thousands and thousands of students who have been part of programs that we have put on has been beautiful. It is important to acknowledge the work that has been done, and we're not anywhere near done. Unfortunately, programs like ours need to continue because of the realities of what we face today and the pandemic, in the Black Lives Matter issues and all of those things that come with it. It's unfortunate that we have to do it, but we will do it until we don't. And I think it's really important to acknowledge this and celebrate the opportunities that we see, and the rewards.

A couple of points for people out there who are really interested in creating partnerships or helping change the realities of what it's like to be an institution that's focused on transfer. A couple of key things: Find your allies. You need to find people who are there to help you. There are so many people that are interested in doing the same kinds of things that you're interested in, and you need to find them and work together. You also need to find those who are going to challenge you, because it's important to make sure that you understand what those challenges are so that you can work around them and through them, and to make sure that you do that.

The other part of it is to remember why you're doing it. You're doing it for the students, first and foremost. The reality is that's who needs to be involved in this. So you need to engage them, as well. But you're also doing it for the future and for the community. To remember every one of those lives that you impact not only impacts the student, but it impacts their family and their community and our institution. So, you're not just making a change in a student, you're making tremendous ripple effects on our country. And that's really important. You need to hold the university accountable. You need to make sure that if transfer is on the radar, it *is* on the radar. It is not something that's pushed aside, but it has to be, first and foremost, embedded in the fabric of the institution.

And the work that you do is important because it creates that opportunity. And last I'll say be *resilient*. Today is a perfect example for us to be doing this because it is Indigenous People's Day, and you talk about resiliency. The opportunities that have been taken from Indigenous people. We need to make sure that we acknowledge them. We need to make sure that we understand the struggle and that we provide opportunities. So be resilient in that you continue to do the work because what you do is most important and it will change the lives. Thank you.

José Viramontes: Thank you all. I appreciate it.

Announcer Sal Nudo: Tune in next month for Democracy's College podcast, when Nathaniel Stewart talks with Mauriell Amechi, Regina Gavin Williams, and Blayne Stone Jr. The group will discuss how the transitions and pathways to postsecondary education are similar and different for Black former foster care students. Additionally, they'll discuss key elements to successfully connecting foster care youth to educational resources that help advance their postsecondary education opportunities.

Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.