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Identifying Needs of Potential Transfer Students of Color to Enhance Equity and Inclusion in the College of Health Professions

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IDENTIFYING NEEDS OF POTENTIAL TRANSFER STUDENTS OF COLOR TO ENHANCE EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN THE COLLEGE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS

TEAM MEMBERS

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Project Sponsor: Seth Sykes, Associate Vice Provost for transfer initiatives and programs, Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success Transfer Center

PROJECT ABSTRACT

State Council of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV)¹ data indicate disparities in recruitment and retention outcomes for transfer students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity compared to non-Hispanic White peers. With the goal of enhancing equity and inclusion while diversifying the health professions, this project characterizes the needs of this population to inform the development of a new bachelor's program within the College of Health Professions. The project provides recommendations based on data collected from both prospective and current VCU transfer students.

RACIAL EQUITY

The desired result of this project is to improve outcomes for transfer students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity at VCU, specifically within the health professions. The needs assessment survey sought to identify potential barriers for transfer student success and included questions to better understand students' experiences related to systemic racism, particularly as it pertains to academic success and the transfer process. The results of the survey will be used to inform the structure of the new Bachelors of Health Services program within the College of Health Professions at VCU.

QUEST 2025

In the Quest 2025 strategic plan, Theme I is identified as Student Success. A specific priority within this theme is to "enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates." Data show that underrepresented student populations, particularly students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity, who have transferred into the university, have lower degree completion outcomes when compared with completion data from non-Hispanic White counterparts. The goal of this project is to recommend strategies to improve graduation and retention rates for transfer students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity who are entering the health professions workforce.

¹ State Council of Higher Education of Virginia. <https://research.schev.edu>

PROJECT GOALS

Goal 1 - survey current and prospective transfer students to gain understanding of issues related to transfer, with particular focus on students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity.

Goal 2 - assess the survey data to identify perceived barriers and opportunities as they relate to students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity

Goal 3 - develop data-driven recommendations for strategic design of the bachelor's program. The resulting recommendations will assist the College of Health Professions in designing the Bachelors of Health Services program in ways that may effectively reduce or eliminate systemic barriers for transfer students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

Our group first reviewed data related to retention and completion outcomes for transfer students of color in Virginia. Next, we identified relevant stakeholders in a continuation of the exploratory phase to gain additional information related to transfer students of color. This included contacts at the community college level and stakeholders within the university. Through this process, the group narrowed our focus to health professions as data suggest large disparities among persons of color compared to white professionals in the workforce². For example, while underrepresented minorities make up 30% of the general US population, they only make up between 9 and 11% of health professionals such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and dentistry. As such, we connected with leaders of VCU's College of Health Professions (CHP) and elected to pursue a needs assessment to ascertain barriers to academic success for transfer students of color. After creating the needs assessment survey, we worked with Reynolds Community College and VCU to disseminate this survey to both current and prospective transfer students to VCU. Reynolds Community College was chosen due to a high rate of transfers to VCU. The survey was sent to all current students at Reynolds Community College, and all currently enrolled transfer students at VCU, regardless of race/ethnicity. Data were analyzed with a specific focus on respondents of color, to highlight perspectives and needs voiced by respondents in this group. Our team defined persons of color as any individual who self-identifies as Black, Asian, American-Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other race not listed. People who identified as having Hispanic ethnicity were included in this report. From these results, recommendations are being made to inform the design/structure of the new Bachelor of Health Services program within the College of Health Professions at VCU.

ACTION STEPS

These data provide valuable information regarding pre-transfer barriers to academic success and can inform future recruitment and retention strategies developed between institutions at both the community college and four-year institution level. Data collection could be continued on an annual basis to elicit ongoing student responses and perspectives.

OUTCOMES

Current VCU Transfer Student Data

We received survey responses from a total of 540 enrolled VCU transfer students. 275 or 50.9% self-identified as a person of color or as having Hispanic ethnicity. The majority (73%) attended a 2-year institution prior to enrolling at VCU. See the figure below outlining the self-reported race/ethnicity of respondents of color and of Hispanic ethnicity.

² Valenting, P., Wynn, J., & MClean, D. (2016). Improving Diversity in the Health Professions. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 77(2), 137-140; <https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.77.2.137>

Figure 1. Self-reported race/ethnicity of respondents

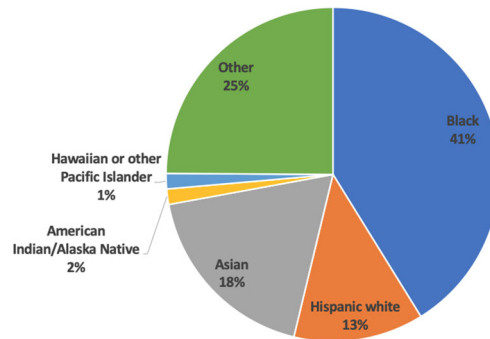
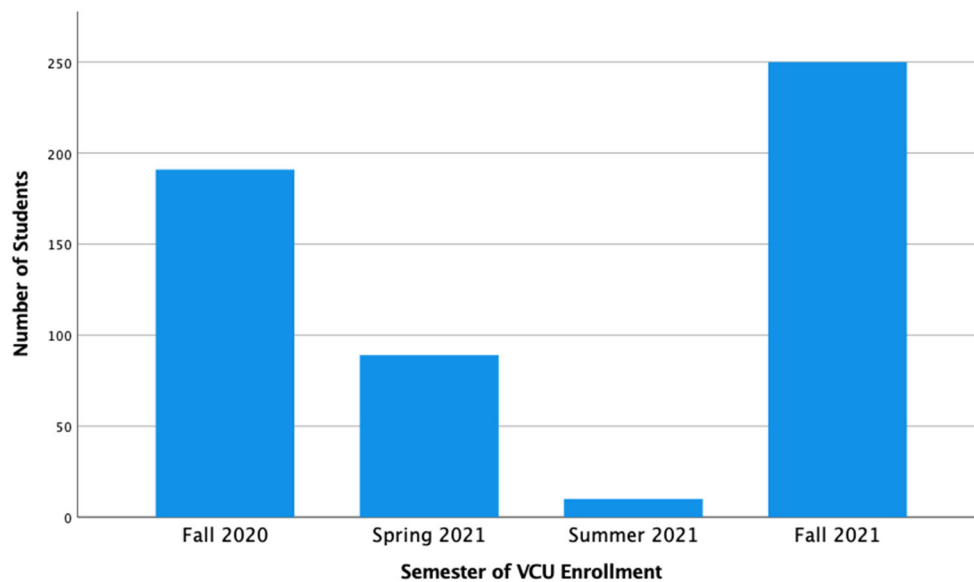


Table 1. Age/gender breakdown of survey respondents

	All students (n=540)	Students of color + Hispanic (n=240)
<21	38.3%	45.4%
21-25	42.0%	37.5%
26-30	8.9%	5.8%
>30	10.7%	11.3%
Female	70.4%	74.6%
Male	25.9%	23.3%

Table 2. Semester of VCU enrollment:



Students were asked to rate the importance of several factors in relation to their decision to transfer to VCU. Top six factors identified as “important or very important” by students of color & those with Hispanic ethnicity included:

- 1) diverse faculty, staff, and student body (89.1%)
- 2) improvement in financial situation (88.8%)
- 3) social opportunities associated with VCU’s location in Richmond (78.2%);
- 4) advisor recommendation (71.3%);
- 5) proximity to family (69.1%); and
- 6) urban campus setting (66.9%).

There was a notable difference in the rated importance of advisor recommendation prior to enrollment for students of color compared to white, non-Hispanic students. 71.3% rated advisor recommendation as “important or very important” in their transfer decision compared with 53.9% of white, non-Hispanic students.

Students were asked to identify barriers to achieving their educational goals now that they were enrolled in VCU. Top answers for transfer students of color included:

- 1) needing to work a job and make money (65.8%);
- 2) not enough financial aid (60.4%);
- 3) classes not offered at ideal times (37.1%);
- 4) parking issues (29.8%).

Students were asked to identify additional, non-listed barriers to success as a free response question. Twenty-four students from all of the respondents mentioned themes of mental health, sexism/racism/transphobia, and lack of online courses as barriers to completing their educational goals.

Narrative Response Section

Respondents identified helpful aspects of their transfer experience. Responses for transfer students of color & of Hispanic ethnicity included:

- Counselors at community colleges
- Helpful transfer advisors at VCU (and in particular, early contact with these advisors)
- Ability to submit materials online rather than by mail
- Current friends at VCU
- Flexible professors
- Knowing other transfer students in the same boat
- Strong connection between community colleges and VCU
- “Unofficial credit evaluation”
- Transfer checklist or email reminders
- Online resources
- Pathways program
- Live chats with financial aid

Respondents identified unhelpful aspects or experiences that made their transfer more difficult. Responses for transfer students of color & of Hispanic ethnicity included:

- Financial aid issues/confusion
- Not knowing anyone
- On campus housing is not available for all students
- Communication barriers with some VCU student-facing offices such as student housing, transfer advisors, financial aid, other staff
- Outdated forms on websites/long time to process paperwork
- Limited night/weekend course offerings
- Some of the processes are repetitive, too many emails
- Inconsistent information or guidance/suggestion from advisors
- Expensive parking and tuition
- Unfamiliar with resources the school offers
- Orientation not geared toward transfer students
- Difficulty getting into major-specific classes because of transfer status
- Accepted too late to apply for scholarships

Respondents identified **resources** they wish had been available during their transfer. Responses for transfer students of color & of Hispanic ethnicity included:

- In-person counseling with a transfer advisor
- Having a single point person
- A campus tour
- Scholarships just for transfer students
- More explicit instruction on financial aid and scholarship opportunities
- Calendar to know deadlines for things like housing, financial aid, etc.
- Connecting with other transfer students, or students who have recently transferred
- Easy way to engage in campus extracurriculars
- Adult classes online or at night

We received survey responses from a total of 149 prospective VCU transfer students (i.e. current community college students from Reynolds Community College). Fifty-five percent (82) self-identified as a person of color or of Hispanic ethnicity.

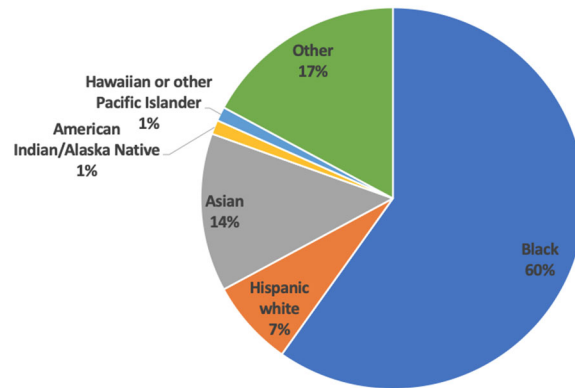
Table 3. Prospective Transfer Student Data

	All students (n=149)	Students of color +Hispanic (n=82)
<1 year	41.6% (62)	43.9% (36)
1-2 years	36.9% (55)	36.6% (30)
2-3 years	15.4% (23)	15.9% (13)
4 or more years	6.0% (9)	3.7% (3)

Table 4. Age/gender breakdown of survey respondents:

	All students (n=149)	Students of color +Hispanic (n=82)
<21	42.3% (63)	50.0% (41)
21-25	21% (14.1)	14.6% (12)
26-30	21% (14.1)	9.8% (8)
>30	29.5% (44)	25.6% (21)
Male	24.2% (36)	20.7% (17)
Female	73.8% (110)	78.0% (64)
Other	1.3% (2)	1.2% (1)
Prefer not to answer	0.7% (1)	0

Figure 2. Breakdown of self-identified race/ethnicity for survey respondents of color & of Hispanic ethnicity



Students were asked to identify past, current, and future barriers to achieving their educational goals.

Table 5. Barriers to Education Goals

Students of color+Hispanic (n=82)	Past	Current	Future
Not enough financial aid	30.5%	32.9%	36.6%
Needing to work a job & make money	24.4%	58.5%	40.2%
Caring for children/family/elders	17.1%	22.0%	20.7%
Transportation difficulties	22.0%	20.7%	8.5%
Parking issues	15.9%	12.2%	11.0%
Classes not offered at ideal times	24.4%	19.5%	18.3%
Advising	20.7%	20.7%	11.0%
Lack of access to needed technology	17.1%	12.2%	3.7%
Transfer issues	17.1%	14.6%	20.7%
Problems related to systemic racism	11.0%	13.4%	9.8%
Other	3.7%	6.1%	3.7%

Knowing that this may be a barrier for many students, respondents were asked to identify their preferred course format (see table below). Respondents were permitted to select more than one option. It is notable that in both the entire sample and the student of color sample, an entirely in-person format was preferred by less than 50% of students.

Table 6. Preferred Course Format

	All students (n=149)	Students of color+Hispanic (n=82)
Online	47% (70)	47.6% (39)
In person	48.3% (72)	48.8% (40)
Hybrid	55.7% (83)	59.8% (49)

Students were asked to identify what items were important to them as they consider academic transfer. The starred* items were endorsed several percentage points more often for transfer students of color compared to their white peers. Other barriers students entered via free-text responses included chronic disabilities/medical issues, and out of state tuition prices.

Table 7. Considerations for Academic Transfer

Students of color+ Hispanic (n=82)	Important	Extremely important	Important OR extremely important
Academic quality	30.5%	58.5%	89.0%
Availability of specific academic programs (majors)	40.2%	47.6%	87.8%
Availability of financial aid/scholarships	19.5%	70.7%*	90.2%*
Graduates get good jobs	25.0%	61.0%	86.0%
Affordability	23.2%	64.6%	87.8%
Flexibility of course offerings and formats	32.1%	48.1%	80.2%
Opportunity for a VCU degree	26.8%	50.0%	76.8%
Career, job, and internship available in Richmond WHILE attending school	24.4%	51.2%	75.6%
Diverse faculty, staff, student body	35.4%	31.7%	67.1%
Focus on hands-on experiential learning (internships, service learning, research)	35.4%	40.2%	75.6%*
Sense of community within your chosen program	37.0%	39.0%	76.0%*

Narrative Response Section

Students were asked to identify what aspects would make them choose the VCU College of Health Professions. Responses included:

- The popularity and percentage of those who graduate entering their career field.
- Word of mouth accolades and reputation
- Job offers
- Connection with hospital
- The length of the program and acceptance of credit hours already taken.
- Availability of some specific job/career pathways
- Online coursework and other flexibility
- Internship opportunities, community engaged work, hands on learning
- Work study program

SUSTAINABILITY

The Office of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success could consider repeating a similar survey periodically (i.e., annually or biennially) to assess ongoing barriers for students of color. Transfer student academic outcomes should be periodically reviewed to monitor disparities between student populations. Programs could also consider individual interviews or focus groups with transfer students of color and of Hispanic ethnicity to provide a narrative perspective on the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations being made as a result of this needs assessment will inform the design/structure of the new Bachelor of Health Services program within the College of Health Professions at VCU, specifically to promote academic success among transfer students of color and those of Hispanic ethnicity. These data may also benefit other departments as they seek to decrease systemic barriers for these students. Recommendations include:

- Increase /support around the financial aid process
- Enhance availability of transfer advisors at VCU
- Increase peer mentoring opportunities - specifically mentoring where a prior transfer student is paired with an incoming transfer student
- Add or more clearly identify specific scholarships for transfer students - also specific to transfer students of color/Hispanic ethnicity (deadlines for other scholarships don't necessarily correspond with a transfer student timeline)
- Increase flexibility in course offering time and modalities
- Increased transparency around financial opportunities and paperwork/processes for applications
- Continue dialogue and identification of action items around systemic racism issues that are present - awareness of past racial trauma or racist experiences at prior institutions or other systems is important. This allows administration to be cognizant of increased potential for increased cognitive load burdening students of color & those of Hispanic ethnicity
 - One example could be providing faculty, staff, and students with education on racial trauma as it relates to higher education
- Increase diversity and representation of faculty/staff/students
- Continued training, dialogue, and identification of action items related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for faculty and staff
- Data suggest that advisor suggestion carries weight for transfer student decision-making important for consideration when Community College advisors are helping students make decisions

FINAL PITCH

Transfer students face a number of challenges with regard to retention at four-year institutions including barriers to accessing financial aid and confusion surrounding transfer of credits. These challenges become increasingly complex for students of color and of Hispanic ethnicity who are also navigating systemic barriers as well as ongoing bias and microaggressions in academic institutions. Promoting a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce of health professionals is a critical function of higher education and is critical to promoting the health and wellness of the Commonwealth. The College of Health Professions at VCU has a unique opportunity to design the new Bachelor of Health Services program to be equitable for all persons. The suggestions put forth in this report are based upon student perspectives that may help guide decision making in the design of the bachelor's program.

Diversify the Health Professions

Identifying Needs of Transfer Students of Color and Hispanic Ethnicity to Enhance Equity and Inclusion in the College of Health Professions



- **Hem Bhardwaj**, Associate Professor of Cardiology/Internal Medicine, Pauley Heart Center, Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, Vice Chair of Operations and Quality for the Division of Cardiology
- **Ashley Brewer**, Assistant Professor, Web and User Experience Librarian, Digital Engagement Department, VCU Libraries
- **Christopher Garland**, Senior IT Engineer, Dean's Office, School of Pharmacy
- **Rebecca L Heise**, Associate Professor and Undergraduate Program Director, Department of Biomedical Engineering, College of Engineering
- **Courtney Holmes**, Associate Professor, Department of Rehabilitation Counseling, College of Health Professions
- **Hillary O'Boyle**, Fellow Physician, Department of Pediatrics, Division of Pediatric Hospital Medicine, Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU
- **Seth Sykes**, Associate vice provost for transfer initiatives and programs, [Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success Transfer Center](#)

Our Team



A college degree...



Has been linked to:

- positive health outcomes
- lower rates of crime and incarceration
- critical thinking skills and making informed choices
- authoritarianism (or support for democracy)
- pluralistic orientation (or social tolerance and racial egalitarian attitudes)
- increased civic engagement
- personal agency and empowerment
- overall happiness



(Georgetown Education, 2021)



Matriculants to US Medical Schools

	2019-2020	2020-2021
Immigrant or non-permanent resident	272	276
American Indian or Alaskan Native	44	36
Black or African American	1,626	1,767
Asian	4,687	4,793
White	10,181	9,923
Multi-Race	1,411	1,487
Hispanic/latinx	1,412	1,524



SCHEV Four-Year Retention Rates of Community College Students Transferring to VCU

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Men, Students of color	58%	58%	65%
Men, white students	68%	68%	65%
Women, students of color	67%	70%	65%
Women, white students	74%	75%	80%



Degrees Awarded by Virginia's Community Colleges

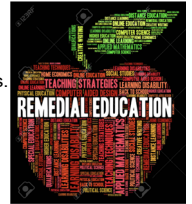
	2018-2019	2019-2020
Total	17,706	17,453
Immigrant or non-permanent resident	434	501
American Indian or Alaskan Native	70	49
Black or African American	2,800	2,691
Asian	1,360	1,328
White	10,225	9,892
Multi-Race	706	742
Hispanic/Latinx	1,922	2,041



Remediation Courses

Designed to catch students up before beginning college courses - *however they cost the same as college classes but don't count toward a degree*

- 68% of Black students who attend community college and 40% of Black students at universities are assigned to remediation (Center for American Progress)
- Less than 25% of community college students who take remedial courses go on to complete college-level courses.
- At 4-year colleges, just over 33% of students assigned to remediation continue to take college level courses



What?

Transfer students of color and Hispanic identifying students have inequitable access to higher education

Access into the health professions skews heavily white and people of color and hispanic people are not equally represented in the workforce

So What?

How can we support transfer students of color and those with hispanic identities in both recruitment and retention outcomes within the context of the training of health professionals in higher education?

Now What

1. Connect with university goals and objectives (Quest 2025)
2. Identify opportunities to strengthen VCU's initiatives related to the university's core mission to support student success



Quest 2025

Theme I: Student Success

Create a university culture that transforms the lives of our distinctive and diverse student population; one that supports students through inquiry, discovery, innovation and creative expression.

- Improve retention and graduation rates
- Increase in-state enrollment
- Empower student voices to be engaged learners and to contribute to curriculum design



Addressing Racial Equity

Overall Objectives

- Improve outcomes for transfer students of color and hispanic students, specifically within the health professions.
- Understand students' experiences related to systemic racism, particularly as it pertains to academic success and the transfer process (including potential barriers to success)
- Inform the structure of the new Bachelor of Health Services program within the College of Health Professions at VCU



Project Goals

Goal 1 - survey current and prospective transfer students to gain understanding of issues related to transfer, with particular focus on students of color

Goal 2 - assess the survey data to identify perceived barriers and opportunities as they relate to students of color

Goal 3 - develop data-driven recommendations for strategic design of bachelor's program.

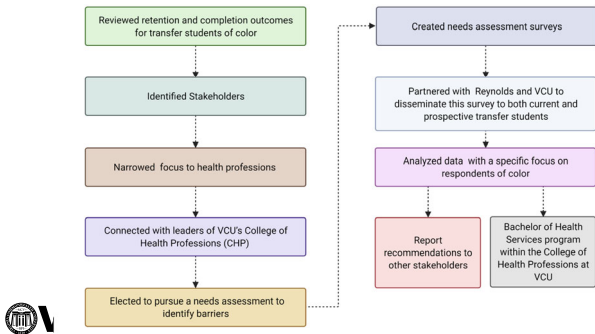
Stakeholders



Current and Prospective Transfer Students



Project Strategies



What do you think?

www.slido.com

#220377



Two Surveys

Currently Enrolled VCU Transfer Students

Survey of Prospective VCU Transfer Students (current Reynolds CC students)

- offer perspectives on their experience with completed transfer

- offer perspectives on future transfer and needs for program fit



in both surveys, we allowed for the entry of email addresses as 1) a recruitment tool for CHP; and 2) collect names for a raffle drawing for swag

VCU Transfer Students

- Survey sent to 3,427, completed by 540 currently enrolled transfer students
 - 50.9% (275) self-identified as Hispanic and/or persons of color

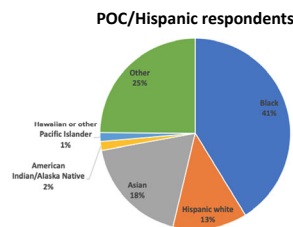


Prospective Transfer Students-Reynolds Community College

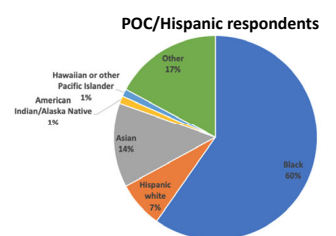
- Survey sent to 7,421 students, completed by 149 current Reynolds students
 - 55% (82) self-identified as Hispanic and/or persons of color



VCU Transfer Students

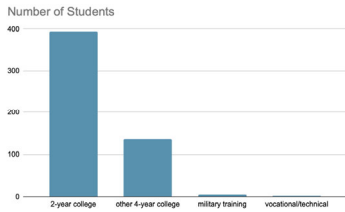


Community College Students

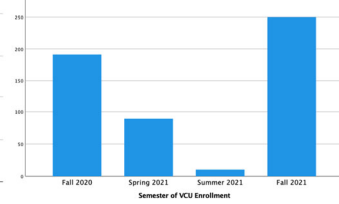


Current Transfer Student Demographics

Prior Institutions

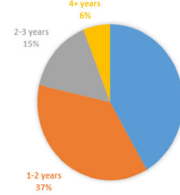


Initial Semester of Enrollment at VCU



Community College Student Demographics

LENGTH OF TIME ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE



	All students (n=149)	Students of Color + Hispanic (n=82)
Full time student	63.1% (94)	65.9% (54)
Part-time student	35.6% (53)	34.1% (28)
Working full time	32.9% (49)	28.0% (23)
Working part time	22.1% (33)	19.5% (16)
Not working	11.4% (17)	13.4% (11)



Age and Gender

Current Transfer Students

	All (n=540)	Students of Color + Hispanic (240)
<21	38.3%	45.4%
21-25	42%	37.5%
26-30	8.9%	5.8%
>30	10.7%	11.3%
Female	70.4%	74.6%
Male	25.9%	23.3%

Community College Students

	All (n=149)	Students of Color + Hispanic (82)
<21	42.3%	50%
21-25	21%	14.6%
26-30	21%	9.8%
>30	29.5%	25.6%
Female	73.8%	78%
Male	24.2%	20.7%

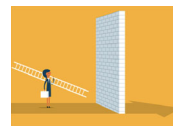


Results: Currently Enrolled VCU Transfer Students of Color and Hispanic Students



Top 6 Important Factors

1. Diverse faculty, staff, and student body (89.1%)
2. Improvement in financial situation (88.8%)
3. Social opportunities due to location (78.2%)
4. Advisor Recommendations (71.3%)*
5. Proximity to family (69.1%)
6. Urban campus setting (66.9%)



Reported Barriers

1. Needing to work a job and make money (65.8%)
2. Not enough financial aid (60.4%)
3. Classes not offered at ideal times (37.1%)
4. Parking issues (29.8%)

* Mental health issues, sexism/racism/transphobia, and needing online classes mentioned in other category for all respondents



Helpful Aspects of Transfer Process

- VCU transfer advisors
- Counselors at community colleges
- Knowing other transfer students in same situation
- Transfer checklists/email reminders



What made transfer more difficult?

- Financial aid issues/confusion
- On campus housing not available
- Communication barriers with some VCU student-facing offices
- Not knowing anyone



Transfer Student Wish List

- In person counseling
- Having a single point person
- Scholarships just for transfers/scholarship advising
- Better financial aid instruction
- Connection with other students



Results: Prospective VCU Transfer Students of Color + Hispanic Students



Barriers to Academic Success

Students of color+Hispanic (n=82)	Past	Current	Future
Not enough financial aid	30.5%	32.9%	36.6%
Needing to work a job & make money	24.4%	58.5%	40.2%
Caring for children/family/elders	17.1%	22.0%	20.7%
Transportation difficulties	22.0%	20.7%	8.5%
Problems related to systemic racism	11.0%	13.4%	9.8%
Other	3.7%	6.1%	3.7%

- Other barriers:
- chronic disabilities & medical issues
 - OOS tuition prices



Preferred course format

	All students (n=149)	Students of color + Hispanic (n=82)
Online	47% (70)	47.6% (39)
In person	48.3% (72)	48.8% (40)
Hybrid	55.7% (83)	59.8% (49)



What is **important or very important** in considering a potential institution for transfer?

- Availability of financial aid/scholarships (90.2%)
 - 73% for white, non-Hispanic students
- Academic quality (89.0%)
- Availability of specific majors (87.8%)
- Affordability (87.8%)
- Graduates get good jobs (86.0%)
- Flexibility of course offerings and formats (80.2%)



RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendations

- Enhance availability of transfer advisors on VCU side
- Increase availability of specific scholarships for transfer students
 - With specific to transfer students of color
- Increase transparency around financial opportunities and paperwork/processes for applications
- Continue dialogue around systemic racism issues that are present
 - awareness of past racial trauma or racist experiences at prior institutions and increased cognitive load of students of color
- Increase diversity and representation of faculty/staff/students



Recommendations, continued

- Increase/enhance peer mentoring opportunities
 - specifically matching transfer student status and student identities
- Enhance flexibility in course offering time and modalities
 - awareness of external responsibilities of transfer students of color and Hispanic students
- Training of DEI for faculty and staff within CHP



Specific Recommendations for Community Colleges

- Optimize advising
 - Advisor suggestion carries weight for transfer student decision
 - especially in transfer students of color

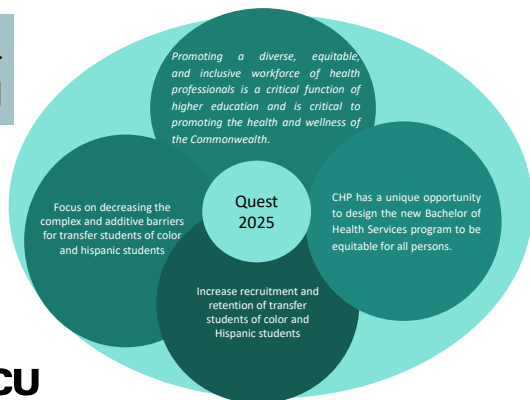


Sustainability

- Ongoing assessment would be useful
 - Office of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success
 - Community Colleges
 - Quantitative and Qualitative Data
- Results can be used to
 - enhance collaboration between VCU and community colleges
 - support creativity and innovation with regard to recruitment and retention of diverse student body



FINAL PITCH



Team Process Observations



- Institutional barriers exist to disseminate surveys to students
 - Concern for survey overload
 - We achieved an adequate response rate with two emails sent out to current VCU students and to prospective students
- High importance of ensuring stakeholders have adequate understanding of the purpose and benefits of the project



Teamwork makes the Dreamwork

- Disseminating tasks among group members to ensure equitable participation
- Have a set weekly meeting time, then be able to decide when to cancel if it is not needed



Acknowledgements

Seth and his team
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Resources

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