

**Investigating the CUNY Transfer Pipeline
from Community College to 4-year College
for Students of Color**

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Abstract:

The City University of New York (CUNY) has long been hailed as the largest urban public university system in the country, currently serving over 243,000 students, primarily New York State and New York City residents.¹ The CUNY system comprises four-year schools as well as two-year schools, or community colleges. Students of color are most represented at CUNY's community colleges, and studies have shown that most enter college with the intent to transfer to a 4-year college to attain their baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, K., Lahr, H., & Morest, V. (2017); Logue, A. W., Oka, Y., Wutchiett, D., Gentsch, K., & Abbeyquaye, S. (2022)). However, community college transfer students of color face unique challenges in transitioning to four-year institutions due to credit loss, transfer shock, and lack of communication about articulation agreements between community colleges and 4-year colleges. As a result, there is a notable drop-off in the population of students of color at CUNY community colleges as opposed to CUNY 4-year colleges. This study investigates the factors that most impact the transfer pipeline from CUNY community college to CUNY 4-year college. The aim of this research is to identify the key barriers and supports that impact the academic success of community college transfer students throughout the history of CUNY. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving surveys and semi-structured interviews with six students from various CUNY community colleges and 4-year colleges, as well as semi-structured interviews with four CUNY administrators and professors. The paper provides a contextual roadmap of CUNY's inception, as well as an analysis of policies instituted across the university system throughout history.

¹ *CUNY Welcomes Students to New Academic Year – CUNY Newswire.* (2023). CUNY Newswire. <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2023/08/25/cuny-welcomes-students-to-new-academic-year/#:~:text=Founded%20in%201847%20as%20the>

I. Introduction

- A.** The City University of New York (CUNY) has long been hailed as the largest urban public university system in the country, currently serving over 243,000 students, primarily New York State and New York City residents.² The CUNY system comprises four-year schools as well as two-year schools, or community colleges. Students of color are most represented at CUNY's community colleges, and studies have shown that most enter college with the intent to transfer to a 4-year college to attain their baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, K., Lahr, H., & Morest, V. (2017); Logue, A. W., Oka, Y., Wutchiett, D., Gentsch, K., & Abbeyquaye, S. (2022)). However, community college transfer students of color face unique challenges in transitioning to four-year institutions due to credit loss, transfer shock, and lack of communication about articulation agreements between community colleges and 4-year colleges. As a result, there is an overwhelming disparity in the population of students of color at CUNY community colleges as opposed to CUNY 4-year colleges.
- B.** The significance of this study lies in examining how the CUNY system, and other public urban university systems, can design a transfer pipeline that enhances postsecondary access for their diverse surrounding communities.

Research Questions:

- a. What are the specific barriers faced in transferring within the CUNY system, and how do these barriers especially affect students of color in baccalaureate attainment?
 - b. What efforts have most improved the CUNY transfer pipeline from community to 4-year colleges, and what gaps remain?
- C. Overview of Methodology:** A mixed-methods approach was used, involving surveys and semi-structured interviews with six students from various CUNY community colleges and 4-year colleges, as well as semi-structured interviews with four CUNY faculty

² *CUNY Welcomes Students to New Academic Year – CUNY Newswire.* (2023). CUNY Newswire. <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2023/08/25/cuny-welcomes-students-to-new-academic-year/#:~:text=Founded%20in%201847%20as%20the>

members. The paper provides a contextual roadmap of CUNY's inception, as well as an analysis of policies instituted across the university system throughout history.

- D.** This first section of this paper will provide a historical background of the development of junior colleges/community colleges, the creation of the CUNY system, and the impact of city governance on perpetuating the racial divide between CUNY's community colleges and 4-year colleges. The second section will provide a look into the present-day CUNY system, how it continues to disproportionately serve students of color, and the malleable factors that create possible "leaks" in the transfer pipeline for students of color. The third section will analyze present-day policies that have either improved or weakened the transfer pipeline for students of color. The fourth section will explain the methodology, ethical considerations, and selection process for the student interviews, and the fifth section will analyze the stories of six students of color at CUNY— both current CUNY community college students and 4-year college students who transferred in from a CUNY community college. The sixth and final section will be the conclusion

II. Historical Background

A. Introduction to Junior Colleges

The development of the public higher education system in the United States can be traced back to before the Civil War— notably with the Morrill Land Grant of 1862. This act allocated federal land and funds to states for the creation and expansion of public colleges. It also established a separate land grant for the development of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), with the stipulation that Black students were restricted to studying mechanics, agriculture, and industrial fields. Many of the states that received these funds excluded students of color from their colleges. During Reconstruction, Congress passed the Freedmen's Bureau Act to increase higher education for formerly enslaved people by funding the creation of more HBCUs, still limited to teaching vocational education.³

The Freedmen's Bureau Act further supported higher education for formerly enslaved people by funding more HBCUs, still remaining focused on vocational education. Henry P.

³ *Contextualizing the History of Structural Racism in Community Colleges* | Urban Institute. (n.d.). [www.urban.org](https://www.urban.org/projects/structural-racism-explainer-collection/contextualizing-history-structural-racism-community).
<https://www.urban.org/projects/structural-racism-explainer-collection/contextualizing-history-structural-racism-community>

Tappan, president of the University of Michigan, established the first “junior college” in the mid-19th century as an isolated two-year study for students not prepared for “senior colleges”, now known today as 4-year colleges. These colleges, often located inside of high schools or senior colleges, initially emphasized vocational education, while senior colleges were focused on the advancement of the sciences and research. Between 1910 and 1930, their numbers grew, and the Truman Commission on Higher Education in 1947 transformed junior colleges into community colleges, designed to meet local educational needs and eventually became independent institutions.

B. New York City’s Community Colleges and Creation of CUNY

The Post-WWII period saw a surging interest in expanding community colleges nationwide particularly due to the G.I. Bill, which ultimately doubled the number of college-degree holders in America.⁴ However, New York City lagged behind, focusing more on how to manage the operating costs of their four tuition-free senior colleges. Staten Island’s first municipal community college opened in 1955, followed by two more in the Bronx and Manhattan, all charging tuition.⁵

Due to low enrollment between NYC’s community colleges and 4-year colleges, state and city legislatures officially consolidated the schools into one system, City University of New York (CUNY), and allocated more funds to the colleges in 1961. The Board of Higher Education (BHE) used the funds to add three more community colleges, and by 1964, CUNY eliminated tuition costs for students at all of their community colleges.⁶ However, CUNY struggled to secure the funds needed to accept the city’s influx of high school graduates. As a result, the

⁴ Brahm, N. (2024, July 2). *How the GI Bill Has Evolved and Enabled Access to Higher Education*. Insight into Diversity. <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/how-the-gi-bill-has-evolved-and-enabled-access-to-higher-education/#:~:text=Within%20the%20first%20several%20years>

⁵ *1946-1960 Municipal College Expansion · CUNY Digital History Archive*. (n.d.). Cdha.cuny.edu. <https://cdha.cuny.edu/coverage/coverage/show/id/13>

⁶ *1961-1969 The Creation of CUNY - Open Admissions Struggle. CUNY Digital History Archive*. (n.d.). <https://cdha.cuny.edu/coverage/coverage/show/id/23>

senior colleges and community colleges were forced to tighten their admissions standards, which led to a predominantly White, middle-class student body.²

C. The Push for Diversity within the CUNY System

In response to the racial disparities within CUNY's senior and community colleges, Chancellor Bowker pressured the BHE to adopt an Open Admissions Policy, which would guarantee a seat somewhere in CUNY for every NYC high school graduate. In 1964, he launched College Discovery and SEEK programs, which aimed at supporting students of color entering CUNY from the city's underfunded public high schools through remedial coursework. The BHE also added three more community colleges and three more senior colleges. In addition, in 1966, they agreed to an Open Admissions Policy— but to have it put into effect by 1975. This triggered the battle for Open Admissions in 1969.

The spring of 1969 was marked by the activist movements from Black and Puerto Rican CUNY students in the SEEK program. Their protests, which included building occupations and police confrontations, culminated over several months and successfully pressured city officials to accelerate the timeline to implement Open Admissions in the fall of 1970, five years earlier than anticipated. Open Admissions led to a significant increase in total student enrollment across the 4-year colleges and community colleges alike, with students of color making up 70% of the entering class by fall 1975. While this shift effectively diversified CUNY's student body, it also sparked backlash from conservative politicians concerned about CUNY's perceived decline in academic standards.

D. City Governance Impacting Racial Disparities within CUNY

In the 1970s, the city government began CUNY senior colleges and imposed a first-time tuition on their students, leading to an extreme plummet in student enrollment at the senior colleges, a loss of roughly 62,000 students, as they were all moving into the community colleges. By 1980, CUNY's entering class suffered a 50% decrease in Black and Latino students as compared to the class of 1977.⁷ Governor Cuomo's and Governor Pataki's policies in the late 1980s and 1990s further strained CUNY, resulting in tuition hikes, budget cuts, mass faculty layoffs and a reduction in course offerings. This sparked major protests, most notably a City Hall rally attended by roughly 25,000 students of color that was met with police violence. Mayor Giuliani

⁷ 1978-1992 Retrenchment - Austerity - Tuition. *CUNY Digital History Archive*. (n.d.). <https://cdha.cuny.edu/coverage/coverage/show/id/43>

ended remedial instruction at senior colleges, despite suggestions to pour more money towards adding more developmental education courses within the remedial program, for smaller class sizes and more student-centered support. As a result, community colleges solely taught remedial courses, which led to an unequal enrollment of students of color. While CUNY saw increased faculty hires and enrollment growth in the early 2000s through private fundraising efforts, the racial divide persists, with community colleges serving more students of color and senior colleges remaining predominantly White and Asian.

III. Investigating CUNY's Vertical Transfer Pipeline

A. The Racial Gap in Community College to 4-year College Transfers at CUNY

Studies have shown that on a national level, 80% of students who attend community college ultimately hope to transfer out in hopes of attaining their bachelor's degree. In actuality, 26% of community college students transfer into a 4-year college within 5 years, and only 17% of vertical transfer students (students who transfer from community college to 4-year college) earn their bachelor's degree in that span of time⁸. At CUNY, approximately 50% of graduates at their 4-year colleges are vertical transfer students from their community colleges. However, the number of vertical transfer students coming into CUNY's 4-year colleges does not bridge the racial gap between their student populations and that of the community colleges. CUNY admissions data as recent as Fall 2019 shows that the percentages of Black and Hispanic students combined make up 67.3% of the total enrollment at their community colleges, but 49.3% of the total enrollment at their 4-year colleges. In comparison, White students make up 15.3% of students at community colleges and are more represented at the 4-year colleges, making up 27.1% of the total student enrollment.⁹ It is also important to note that Black men are the student demographic least likely to make the transfer from community college to 4-year college. In fall

⁸ *What We Know About Transfer What the Research Tells Us At What Rate Do Students Transfer and Graduate?* (n.d.). Retrieved August 4, 2024, from <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/what-we-know-about-transfer>

⁹ *Total Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and College: Percentages Fall 2019*. (2020). CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/oira/institutional/data/current-student-data-by-race-ethnicity/>

2022, CUNY admissions data demonstrates that only 939 (8.3%) of CUNY's 11,130 vertical transfer students were Black men¹⁰.

B. Key Barriers in the Vertical Transfer Pipeline

There are many contributory factors that can lead to “leaks” in the transfer pipeline from community college to 4-year college. Variations in financial constraints, academic preparation, and home/family environment can indicate the likelihood of a student leaking out of the transfer pipeline. A large portion of vertical transfer students are tasked with several at-home, time-consuming responsibilities that could affect their persistence through the transfer process. In a 2022 study that surveyed students throughout the CUNY system, a reported 31% of vertical transfer students stated that they spend at least 10 hours per week as a caregiver to a loved one. In addition, about 62% of vertical transfer students reported that they work a part-time or full-time job during their school year, compared to 53% of surveyed community college students and native (non-transfer) students at 4-year college.¹¹ Between all three student groups surveyed (vertical transfer students, native students at 4-year college, and community college students), vertical transfer students reportedly faced the highest level of food insecurity.

While these statistics represent the different malleable factors that could affect student persistence through the transfer process, there are other issues on a policy and systematic level that might cause possible leaks in the transfer pipeline. One prominent issue is the gaps in funding between community colleges and 4-year colleges that exist not just within CUNY, but on a national level. The average expenditure on instruction for a student at a public 4-year college is \$10,153, roughly twice the amount (\$5,097) at community colleges. As a result, community colleges often lack the resources needed to hire enough full-time counselors to provide adequate support and transfer advising services for students¹².

¹⁰ Rayo, R. (2023, June 8). *Racial Opportunity Costs*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/beyond-transfer/2023/06/08/why-black-men-arent-transferring>

¹¹ Logue, A. W., Oka, Y., Wutchiett, D., Gentsch, K., & Abbeyquaye, S. (2022). Possible Causes of Leaks in the Transfer Pipeline: Student Views at the 19 Colleges of The City University of New York. *Journal of College Student Retention Research Theory & Practice*.

¹² Dougherty, K., Lahr, H., & Morest, V. (2017). *Reforming the American Community College: Promising Changes and Their Challenges*. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/reforming-american-community-college-promising-changes-challenges.pdf>

Credit loss poses another major threat to students not proceeding with the vertical transfer process. Credit transfer from community college to 4-year college can result in one of three scenarios. The first scenario, which is the most ideal, is that a major-related credit taken at one's community college counts as a major-related credit at the student's 4-year college they are transferring to. The second scenario is that a major credit taken at one's community college counts as an elective credit at the 4-year college, which requires the student to repeat the original course to fulfill their major requirements. While the elective credit still counts towards the total number of credits needed to graduate, it might delay a student's expected graduation date if they have to keep repeating courses at their 4-year college for their major. The third scenario, which is the worst case, is that a credit that counts towards a student's major at their community college does not amount to anything at their 4-year college, meaning it cannot be put towards their major or the total amount of credits needed to graduate. In a 2022 Research Brief published by CUNY, "47% of transfer students at CUNY lose an estimated average of 10.9 credits when they transfer from community college to a bachelor's program, almost equivalent to one semester of full-time college work."¹³

III. An Analysis of the Efforts taken by CUNY to Improve Transfer Today

A. The Shift from Remedial Courses to Co-Requisite Courses

Throughout most of CUNY's history, incoming community college freshmen had to take skills tests in math, reading, and writing—and if they were below a passing score, they would have to take non-credit bearing remedial courses, which they had to pay for before even beginning their degree-related coursework. A 2015 CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education report revealed that 70.1% of Black and Hispanic community college freshmen were assigned to the remedial program, compared to 36.4% of Asian and White students. That same

¹³ CUNY (2022). *Credit Loss and Transfer Shock: Longitudinal Analysis of Students who Transfer from Associate to Bachelor's Programs*.
<https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/oira/policy/research-briefs/TOP-Brief-2-Credit-Loss-and-Transfer-Shock.pdf>

report also showed that students in remedial math were half as likely to graduate on time compared to their non-remedial peers .¹⁴

In fall 2022, CUNY reformed its remediation program, introducing credit-bearing developmental education coursework through a co-requisite model. A co-requisite course is a type of college course where students who may not have the necessary skills to succeed in a certain subject can still enroll. In this model, students take a regular, credit-bearing course alongside an additional support course or workshop that focuses on the skills needed for success in the main course, which is why they are taken simultaneously.

Dr. Christopher Shults, who currently serves as the Vice President of Institutional Advancement, spoke of his experience as an administrator at BMCC in 2017, when their math department first developed their own co-requisite courses for students, and the results it yielded before the model was spread system-wide.

You would see 60, 65, 68% pass rates in those co-requisites. And those developmental courses were in the 40s. So students are passing at higher rates with college credit. And studies at BMCC, and nationally, show that students of color, and especially men of color, passing that credit-bearing math course in their first year is one of the most significant predictors of retention and graduation on time.

By aligning developmental education with credit-bearing coursework, CUNY's co-requisite model not only improved pass rates but also enhanced students' retention rates in community college. This shift is seen as a crucial step in addressing the equity gap in graduation and transfer outcomes for students of color.

B. Articulation Agreements and the Struggle for Partnership between the Community Colleges and 4-year Colleges

Historically, articulation agreements help community colleges and 4-year colleges address credit transfer issues by outlining how major-related courses at one community college will be counted towards a student's degree at each of the 4-year colleges. Articulation agreements can guide community colleges in selecting where to transfer, since they are meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the varying intercollege relationships between their community colleges and CUNY's 4-year colleges. Without these articulation agreements,

¹⁴ *Report of the CUNY Task Force On Developmental Education*. (2016). https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/undergraduate-studies/developmental-education/Proposed-Recommendations-of-RTF-06.17.16.final_.pdf

students are left unaware of how their courses will be counted upon transferring to a 4-year college, which could directly lead to significant credit loss and delays in their graduation time.

In 2021, CUNY created a website that co-located these articulation agreements for students' accessibility. However, articulation agreements are tedious and hard to maintain, which can make it difficult for 4-year colleges to remain accountable to the transfer policies they agreed upon. To put it into perspective, CUNY Academic Works reported that "if each of the seven community colleges have 20 majors, and each of those majors needs to be articulated with a comparable major at each of the 13 comprehensive and senior colleges, then 1,820 articulation agreements need to be constructed and maintained."¹⁵

To avoid the complexities of building an articulation agreement, BMCC and John Jay College worked collaboratively to create a model dual admissions program, known as the Criminal Justice Academy (CJA). Dr. Shults explains how CJA ensures that BMCC students who pursue a major within the program can transfer to John Jay after graduating, without filling out a CUNY transfer application.¹⁶

If a student gets a Criminal Justice associates degree at BMCC, and then comes to John Jay, they don't lose a single credit, and no credits go to free electives. They go to program based electives, and they go into the program. That way, students are able to preserve some of those credits and their financial aid. So that happens, because there has been a tight partnership between the faculty, and between the Academic Affairs staff at those two colleges, where that is not as tight.

The need to form salient, program-based articulation agreements, and to create a stronger line of communication between faculty and academic affairs to make them work, has grown with the 2023-2024 CUNY Transfer Initiative. The goal of the initiative is for community colleges and 4-year colleges to work together "to create a uniform system of transfer where competencies are used to evaluate transfer."¹⁷ In other words, community college and 4-year college professors from their respective departments must collaborate to ensure that the community college courses

¹⁵ Logue, A. W., Jordan, C., Townsell, M., Bellettiere, N., & Torres, R. (2023). *Transfer Information Online: Websites and Articulation Agreements at The City University of New York*. CUNY Academic Works. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/905/

¹⁶ *CUNY Justice Academy – BMCC*. (2024). Cuny.edu. <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/advisement/cuny-justice-academy/>

¹⁷ *Transfer Initiative – The City University of New York*. (2023). The City University of New York. <https://www.cuny.edu/academics/current-initiatives/transfer-initiative/#goals>

match the rigor needed for them to count as major-related credits at the 4-year college. The ultimate goal of the 1 to 1 matching of courses on a departmental level is for community college students to achieve “junior status” when transferring to the 4-year college, meaning they are considered academically on pace with their native 4-year college peers.

Dr. Sharon Persinger, a professor in the department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Bronx Community College, shed insight on the difficulties she has faced in finding compromise with the 4-year colleges when building articulation agreements, in terms of how to define the “competencies” and metrics used to evaluate a potential transfer student’s viability to achieve “junior status.”

The senior colleges have quite a lot of influence over this. I told the committee at the beginning. ‘Since you're the receiving colleges, and you have the expectations, I'm sure that you will expect to have a great deal of influence over what these competencies are.’ And that was true. The reason our competencies, I think, are so high is that we based them on the documents that are required for accreditation of computer science bachelor's degrees, because there were two of the 4-year programs that are accredited. They see their particular curriculum to be rather inflexible. They have to be sure that they're doing these things in order to keep their accreditation. But the other thing that the receiving colleges have control over is who they admit. So they could just increase their admission standards for students from all of the 2-year colleges if they're required to give them junior status.

This dynamic highlights the power imbalance in the negotiation process, where community colleges may feel pressure to align with the more rigid standards of the 4-year colleges. As a result, there is a risk that articulation agreements might inadvertently raise more barriers for community college students seeking to transfer, rather than facilitating a smooth transition.

C. Looking Ahead: Further Steps Towards Improving Vertical Transfer

In 2020, CUNY launched a Transfer Explorer tool, a website where students can input a credit taken at their community college to see how exactly it would transfer at the major departments of the 4-year colleges. The tool is meant to help students manage course planning and discover which classes they must take at their community college to have a more seamless

transfer to their 4-year college. The online system updates daily to ensure that the curriculum requirements of each major department are aligned with current articulation agreements.¹⁸

Dr. Alexandra Logue, a current research professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, talked more about ways in which CUNY has expanded their Transfer Explorer tool in order to more efficiently connect community college students with transfer advising services. Students can upload their transcripts and answer a brief survey about their transfer goals, which will be integrated into advising software. “Advisors both at the community college and the senior college they're interested in can go in and see these students, they can then give them specific advice about what to take in order to have a transfer and being that major at the senior college,” Dr. Logue explained.

IV. Student Interviews: The Methodology

A. Purpose and Significance of the Interviews

I have taken the interview responses of six students of color at CUNY. Four of the interviewees are vertical transfer students and the two interviewees are community college students with a demonstrated intent to transfer. These interview responses are not meant for making generalizable conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the transfer pipeline, but rather to capture the diversity of students' experiences and perspectives surrounding the process.

B. Design and Rationale

I mainly employed qualitative methods for my research. I sent surveys to community college transfer students at 4-year colleges in CUNY that sought information about the services available on their campuses to support the transfer process, such as college advising centers, recruitment fairs hosted by 4-year universities, scholarship application assistance, and equitable transfer credit policies. For the community college students, I asked about the intentions to transfer within the CUNY system, to list the services they have utilized in learning more about transfer. Both student groups were asked demographic-based questions and asked of their responsibilities outside of being a student.

¹⁸ *Home - Transfer Explorer*. (2024). Cuny.edu. <https://explorer.cuny.edu/>

C. Selection of Participants

I selected interviewees to represent the diversity in backgrounds, majors, and experiences within the CUNY system. I included the voices of student parents immigrant students, students who work part-time or full-time jobs, and students who have graduated from the CUNY system, to see if policies for them differed from how they are present-day.

D. Interview Process:

Based on survey responses, I reached out to those who met the criteria for the student. I conducted 45 minute interviews through Zoom and used transcription software for quoting purposes. The interviews were semi-structured and tailored to match the student's survey responses. Students were compensated for their participation in their interviews with a (describe how payment was delivered and in what form). I conducted compensated, semi-structured interviews over the summer and tailored the interview questions to each student's survey responses.

E. Ethical Considerations:

Interviewees gave me informed consent about the use of their responses for this paper and I am using aliases to protect the students' identities.

V. Student Interviews: Embedded Analysis and Narratives

Stephanie, age 25, is a current Early Childhood Education (ECE) major, with a particular focus in teaching art, at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), and expected to graduate December 2024. When asked about her journey into community college, she said that, originally, she did not have much of an interest in attending.

I think my mom kind of instilled in me that college is what I need to do to be successful, luckily. When I attended BMCC, the first year was rough. But as I went along, I realized that maybe college is the right path for me. And I found a love for education. And because I have a love for creativity, I kind of combined the two.

Stephanie plans to transfer to a 4-year college within the CUNY system. However, Stephanie said she has not received specific guidance on the transfer process due to BMCC not assigning students to a major-based academic advisor. Instead, students must email college

counseling services to connect with an advisor available at the time, rather than someone who knows a particular department or student's history.

Due to not having a major advisor, Stephanie only recently learned of the additional application materials needed to transfer for her specific major, which might delay the time of her transfer after graduation.

I had to do my own research and I found out that I needed a cover letter, I needed three Professor recommendations, I needed a portfolio. These are things that [academic advising] didn't cover, which made it a little challenging for me, because I'm in my last semester, and I don't have any professors to, you know, ask now, really. So I don't really know what I'm gonna do about that either. Despite the obstacles that come with the process, Stephanie is still determined to make the transfer to 4-year college to increase representation among early childhood art educators.

I've never really seen a woman of color as an art teacher, like on social media or anything like that [...] But it didn't really stop me because I just thought 'Maybe, you know, we're not posting about it.' But I kind of got over it. I was like, 'You know, this is what I want to do, so I'm gonna just do it.' At the end of our interview, Stephanie shared that despite her concerns about credit transfer and submitting the application materials needed to transfer as her major, she feels assured in knowing she has enough credits to graduate on time and feels prepared to move on to a 4-year college within CUNY.

Audrey, age 30, is a Nursing student at Hostos Community College, expected to graduate May 2026. Despite already holding a bachelor's degree, Audrey explained her motivations for later pursuing an associate's degree at Hostos. "I am a parent, and I know it was more likely for me to be in a classroom where there were other parents at the community college," said Audrey.

Audrey shared that she wanted to attend a more diverse environment than that of the NYC private liberal arts college she attended prior. Additionally, Audrey shared how being an immigrant who arrived in the U.S. a few years before college, along with her racial identity, shaped her college experience.

My parents saw that as the American dream— having their kids going to private schools— and I just didn't have a great experience. It was not the demographic that I was comfortable in. As a black woman, being the absolute, absolute minority, just didn't feel comfortable. The college definitely was set up for more of a middle class, White American from the Midwest in just education, style, and expectation [...] So it was not easy. It took a long time

for me to adjust, and by the time I adjusted, it was time to graduate.

Audrey chose to enroll at Hostos Community College mainly for its close commute to her home, which was essential as a mother to an infant at the time, and for its tight-knit community. “There's a culture here of, like, everyone in the administration having to be on campus and having to be in the office at least once, if not twice a week,” said Audrey. “And all the offices, every Wednesday, have to have walk-in appointments. And that was not anywhere else.”

When asked about having any potential concerns in transferring to a CUNY 4-year college, Audrey explained that as a student in the nursing program, similar to CJA, her credits fortunately qualify her as a “junior status” student.

We might have one or two extra classes that we need to take [at Hunter College] to graduate. I know, for example, with Hunter College, you really don't have to take any other general studies courses. It's like the same courses that we took here. Just transfer there, and you just have to kind of pile on your nursing courses to get you the 120 credits needed to get a bachelor's.

After graduating from Hostos, Audrey plans to transfer to a 4-year college within the CUNY system to pursue nursing. When choosing where to apply, her main consideration will be the opportunities to expand her skills, particularly through the hospital affiliations of the nursing program, rather than the broader college environment.

Nikita, age 32, is a Public Health student who transferred from Hostos Community College to Hunter College, expected to graduate May 2025. She explained that the timing of her enrolling in community college coincided with when she left her part-time job as a medical assistant to care for her grandmother as she recovered from open heart surgery.

It's crazy how things line up. But that was it for me. That was the best time to go, because for so many years the excuse was while I worked a 9 to 5. I can't go to school, you know. I'm raising my daughter. I can't go to school. There were so many things in the middle that it took for her to get sick and actually me finally having the free time to finally say, ‘Okay, now I'm going to school.’

While her reasons for attending Hostos, as opposed to the other CUNY community colleges, was for its shorter commute from home, Nikita's choice to transfer to a 4-year college within the CUNY system was for its affordability after accumulating debt from her 18-month long program to become certified as a medical assistant.

Although Nikita's choice to attend a CUNY 4-year college was the most affordable and convenient for her, she still has faced complications during her transfer.

When I was at Hostos, I took more credits than I needed, and I took quite a few electives just to kind of get ahead of the curve. But I wasn't sure about how the credits would translate. But I did lose most of my major credits, maybe like 12. I lost my language credit, so now I have to redo language all over again, and a credit in nutrition, which just adds more coursework, and I already did this. It's the same work that I already completed.

Despite her setbacks, Nikita is still set on obtaining her bachelor's degree in public health—a field of study she felt inspired to pursue as a medical assistant for a private OB/GYN on the Upper East Side. “It was just the contrast between the care I was getting and the care I was giving,” said Nikita. “That's what sent me back into public health because my original wheelhouse was maternal and fetal health disparities, especially with black women and black mothers.”

Nikita noted that many students enter community college without clear plans of transferring and expressed the need for more academic advising for those students if they change their minds. “The process can be difficult if you don't know what you're looking for, or if you don't know the question to ask,” said Nikita. “And I feel like just setting people up to know what questions to ask would be extremely helpful moving forward.”

Kyra, age 29, is a Political Science graduate of Hunter College who transferred from LaGuardia Community College. She also earned her masters at the CUNY Graduate Center and is a current student at St. John's Law School. Prior to LaGuardia Community College, she had attended a CUNY 4-year college but had to leave due to a family emergency. When able to return to college, Kyra decided it would be easier to switch over to a community college and then transfer to earn her bachelor's degree.

With the community colleges and how they structured their semesters, I was able to get an Associate's in about a year. So it's something that I wouldn't have been able to do, had I gone anywhere else. And also, since I took some time out to take care of my sister who's autistic due to a family emergency, time was really of the essence to me. So community college really helped me finish a lot of credits in a short amount of time.

Kyra said that most of the work involving her transfer application process was done away from academic advising. Similar to Stephanie, Kyra said that the advisors assigned to her were based on availability, not major, which she said contrasted greatly

from Hunter College. There, she was given a major-specific advisor, and the head of the pre-law department still stays in contact with her today.

To improve the transfer pipeline, Kyra was torn between increasing funding for transfer support at 4-year colleges to enhance their outreach efforts or directing it towards the community colleges. However, she advised aspiring transfers to use the help of their professors.

When I was in [LaGuardia], I actually had a professor who, like, pulled me to the side, and we had a talk, and she said that she would really like to see me, you know, complete a graduate degree. She really encouraged me, actually [...] Academic counselors, and I think students really miss out by not talking to their professors, because they actually give really good educational and professional advice.

Silvia, age 34, is a recent Health Education and Promotion graduate of Lehman College, who transferred into the school from Hostos Community College. She reflected on her journey into community college as a newly arrived immigrant.

By the time I started college, my English was very limited, or almost none. So I had to start with ESL classes. I had to take the GED in English in order to qualify for TAP, because if not, I was not going to be able to pay for college. I also was a single mom when I started college. And my family was back home. [...] But I was like, ‘In order for me to raise my kid and have a better future in New York City, I had to go to school.’

Silvia enrolled in Hostos Community College for its easy commute from home. She added that their diverse faculty helped her navigate language barriers on campus, since many of the academic advisors spoke Spanish.

After graduating from Hostos Community College, Silvia first transferred into Hunter College for their Social Work department— her intended major at the time. However, she left Hunter College almost immediately after enrolling. “We have a lot of people from different backgrounds at Hostos, but over [at Hunter College], I just didn't feel like I belonged,” said Silvia.

Like Audrey, who was drawn to Hostos Community College for its walk-in advising services, Silvia felt that Hunter College lacked a similar culture, as they shifted much of their advising to online services.

I'm a person that likes to speak in person instead of just emailing. Sometimes people are not answering emails or not answering

phone calls. So as a student, I want to be able to know ‘Alright, I went to this building, in this office, and I spoke to this person and [they] told me that’ but sometimes when you do the research [online], you don't find that basic information.

Fortunately, Silvia said that she has found a supportive community at Lehman College. It does not have “hand-holding” at Hostos, Silvia explained, but still provided that same level of in-person, academic support. To improve the transfer pipeline, Silvia believes CUNY’s websites should include where to go in-person for the “basic ABC steps” to complete their transfer.

Alexander, age 23, is a current Economics student who transferred from BMCC to City College of New York (CCNY), expected to graduate December 2024. Alexander shared what led him to start his journey through CUNY at BMCC.

[Community college] wasn't my plan at all. I was formally attending Pennsylvania State University [PSU], out of state. However, because of Covid, and subsequently entering lockdown, I found myself back home with a lot of unnecessary debt, and I realized that the trajectory that I was going, and that I was probably not going to finish my degree. And so, after taking a couple of years outside of school, I opted to go back into community college because it was a lot more affordable option.

Alexander entered PSU as an undecided major but leaned towards pursuing a degree in Psychology. However, when he entered BMCC, he wanted to explore something more STEM-related, and ultimately earned an associates in Computer Science. Now, at CCNY, he pivoted to finance for his bachelor’s degree.

When asked why he transferred within the CUNY system to a 4-year college, Alexander shared that despite switching majors, he did not face credit transfer issues.

When you transfer to a senior college or a 4 year institution, they will take your associates from whatever community college or 2-year institution, and they will see that and deem that as you having fulfilled the liberal arts requirement. So, for instance, when transferring to CCNY, because I had my associates in computer science, I no longer had to take any electives outside of my new major. So that's the benefit.

Alexander also ranked the usefulness of the different campus-based services he used when transferring. Like the other interviewees, Alexander ranked in-person advising as the most useful resource, followed by college workshops as second, and college websites as third.

As Alexander approaches his final semester at CCNY, he shared that one of the first steps towards improving the transfer pipeline is for administrators to have more understanding and compassion.

During my application process in both BMCC and my transfer process at CCNY, there were times throughout where advising services, maybe the bursar, or what other administrative department just seem to be quite standoffish or tired [...] Maybe they're speaking to someone who's not being kind, and they're like projecting that onto their next conversation, or whatever the case may be, but feel like a little bit of understanding goes a long way.

VI. Final Thoughts

Commitment to Equity

This paper is meant to reiterate the need for a commitment to equity and inclusivity within the CUNY system, ensuring that all students, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic background, have the opportunity to succeed in higher education. CUNY, as the largest public urban university system, has the unique power to create an accessible pathway into higher education for New York City's diverse population. From speaking with administrators and students, there is a shared sentiment that progress starts with encouraging more dialogue between their community colleges and 4-year colleges. By increasing the population of vertical transfer students from, the CUNY system would be taking an effective step towards bridging the racial gap between their respective student populations.

Call to Action

In this call to action, I must also recognize the need for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to work together in addressing the systemic barriers that hinder the academic success of students of color in NYC. The city government must work with CUNY to prioritize funding the CUNY system, their academic services, and increase the average expenditure for students at the community college level.