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The Unseen Struggle: Transfer Students Navigating Purpose and Pressure at the Top UCs
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Transferring from community college to UC Berkeley or UCLA isn't just about changing campuses, but also an immense leap into a hyper-competitive academic culture where many transfer students quietly battle imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and the pressure to "catch up", all while trying to define their own sense of purpose.

The University of California system admits thousands of transfers each year, with many coming from California community colleges. As of 2024, 25.4% of transfer applicants had been accepted to UC Berkeley, while 26% of transfer applicants had been accepted to UCLA. Most transfers cite two reasons for their path: lower tuition and the chance to attend a top-tier university after not gaining admission out of high school.

"My grades weren't so good in high school, so for me doing community college offered me another chance to get to my dream university," said Aiden Do, a current UCLA economics undergraduate. "My experience as a community college student is something I will never take for granted." While gaining admission to world-renowned universities like UCLA and UC Berkeley is a feat in itself, it's only the beginning.

The leap from community college to a research university can be jarring. While community colleges tend to offer often smaller class sizes, more accessible professors, and a less pressurized environment, campuses like UC Berkeley and UCLA demand students to keep up with fast-paced academics and intense competition. While traditional students typically have four years to settle into university life, most transfer students must make the most of just two years. According to University of California statistics, the average time-to-degree for transfer students in the UC system is just 2.32 years, compared to 4.03 years for freshmen. The data reports that only 65% of transfer students graduate within that two-year time window, trailing behind the 73% four-year graduation rate for students who entered as freshmen. The compressed timeline for transfers not only creates more academic and career pressure but also leaves less time to build a sense of purpose and community.

"In my first semester, I struggled ... everyone just seemed like they knew what they were doing and I felt like an imposter," said Dave Da Na, a current UC Berkeley Electrical Engineering and Computer Science undergraduate. This experience is not unique to the UC System. Nationally,

transfer students often report similar challenges. Studies show that the early stages of transition, adapting to rigorous coursework and unfamiliar expectations, can cause waves of self-doubt and imposter syndrome for students trying to find their initial footing.

For many transfer students, the adjustment period goes beyond academics, but finding community and purpose as well. Entering a new school where many peers already have established friend groups, successful internships, highly competitive club positions, and familiarity with campus resources can make any newcomer feel left behind. Dave and Aidan are far from alone in these experiences. Many transfer students report an early sense of isolation and confusion, wondering whether they truly belong at their new campus. In such a compressed timeline, building meaningful relationships and making peace with one's progress becomes a quiet but critical goal.

Fortunately, efforts to create transfer-friendly environments are growing. "I lived in Holly dorm, a place that hosted only transfers," said Ronald Lee, a recent UCLA graduate and former director of non-traditional students for UCLA's Undergraduate Students Association Council. "It was living there that I met people who related to me and where I felt like I truly belonged." Ronald compared his time at UCLA to an "amusement park," emphasizing the importance of embracing the broader experience beyond academics. Similarly, UC Berkeley has recently opened the Helen Diller Anchor House, a new residence hall tailored to transfer students. These spaces, while limited in availability, offer glimpses of what a more inclusive transition could look like.

At a recent pop-up event, Jay Shetty, podcaster, author, and life coach, shared wisdom that resonates with transfer students. "I'd say to young people that it's not their fault that there's so much pressure to live up to some other person's version of success," he said. Shetty emphasized the value of finding community among those who prioritize authenticity and personal growth over comparison, and reminded students that their path is no less, just different. "You can't do it on your own. You go to seek people like that out", Shetty added.

The transfer experience is often marked by quiet, invisible struggles. While academic milestones are easy to measure and compare, what truly defines a student's journey often lies beyond transcripts and GPAs. It's found in those small, pivotal moments such as sitting alone in a crowded library, meeting someone who truly understands, or finally believing their story is worth telling. These internal reckonings shape a deeper kind of growth. For many transfers, the challenge is not catching up academically, but learning to stay grounded in their purpose. And often, it's only when they stop comparing themselves to others that they realize they were never truly behind.

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