

UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT

The Road Less Traveled:  
Factors Affecting Community College Transfer Admission to a Flagship University

Presented to

The Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice

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February 2, 2009

The author wishes to thank the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice at the University of Southern California, the National Institute for the Study for Transfer Students at the University of North Texas, the Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education, and the ASHE/Lumina Foundation Fellows Program for their financial and collegial support in the development and ultimate publication of this study. All research results, opinions, and errors are my own.

## Introduction

*The aims and values of an educational institution are often revealed most vividly by the choices it makes in selecting its students.*

William G. Bowen & Derek Bok, 1998, p. 15

In the past, many students have found access to a selective four-year institution is most practical if they begin at a local community college (Hilmer, 1997). Open-enrollment policies at two-year public colleges have historically afforded access to economically disadvantaged, first-generation, place-bound, and lesser-prepared students aspiring to obtain a baccalaureate degree (Hilmer, 1997). For these students, community college acts as a conduit to a university education that, at first, may have seemed out of reach.

Nationally, over 42% of students in public two-year institutions take this path to earn a four-year degree (Peter & Cataldi, 2005; Cheslock, 2005)., Roughly 75% of freshmen and sophomore students, in Texas, enroll at public two-year colleges (Texas Association for Community Colleges, 2006). Moreover, the state's community colleges educate 78% of all minority students classified as freshmen (Texas Association of Community Colleges, 2006).

In terms of growth, community colleges accounted for 80% of the postsecondary enrollment growth from fall 2005 to fall 2006 (Texas Association of Community Colleges, 2006). However, statewide data reveal community college transfer rates are extremely low. Among the 17,784 students awarded an academic associate degree in 2005, a mere one-fourth applied to a public four-year public institution.<sup>1</sup> Among 491,439 two-year students earning 30 plus semester credit hours, but not receiving a two-year degree, only 4% or 20,031 students applied to a public university (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006, pp. 12-13). This low rate has remained unchanged since 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> The quarter of students who earned an academic associate degree and applied to a four-year university was the equivalent to 4,651 students, see Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006).

## Literature Review

Many scholars have examined the individual characteristics common among transfer students who enroll and persist at senior-level institutions (Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, et al., 2006), while others have examined minority dependence upon the transfer pipeline (Eaton, 1988) and the decline of community college transfer rates (Brint & Karabel, 1989, Grubb, 1991). Still other scholars have studied college choice among transfer students (Somers, et al., 2003; Hilmer, 1997). In spite of this vast array of research on student transfer issues, little research has been conducted on a four-year institution's transfer admission process (Saupe & Long, 1997) and, specifically, the factors affecting community college access to a four-year institution (Cheslock, 2005; Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008).

As Cheslock (2005) explains, we know little about the determinants of an institution's transfer enrollment rates. In addition, the limited scholarly research that does exist rarely delves into trends associated with transfer admission. This study takes a unique look at community college transfer access in the presence of a controversial admission policy popularly known as the Top Ten Percent (TTP) law in Texas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it examines the applicant, admission, and enrollment trends of a conditional transfer program developed to accommodate admissible non-TTP students displaced by top decile students guaranteed admission to an unnamed selective state university. Specifically, the study investigates changes in the proportion of two major transfer student populations at a state flagship institution: two-year transfer and four-year transfer students using descriptive trend data from 1997-2007. With the exception of 1997, the academic years studied represent 10 years of the TTP law being in place.

Under our traditional higher education structure, Bourdieu (1977) theorizes elite social classes gain access to high quality academic preparation and advantageous extracurricular opportunities and, in turn, are rewarded with admission to the most selective colleges and universities. Selective university admission, it is argued, occurs under the guise of a fair and competitive admission process (Bourdieu, 1977). If Bourdieu's theory is correct, does having more four-year than two-year transfer students admitted to a state flagship institution provide evidence of a reduction in educational mobility for community college students? As this study

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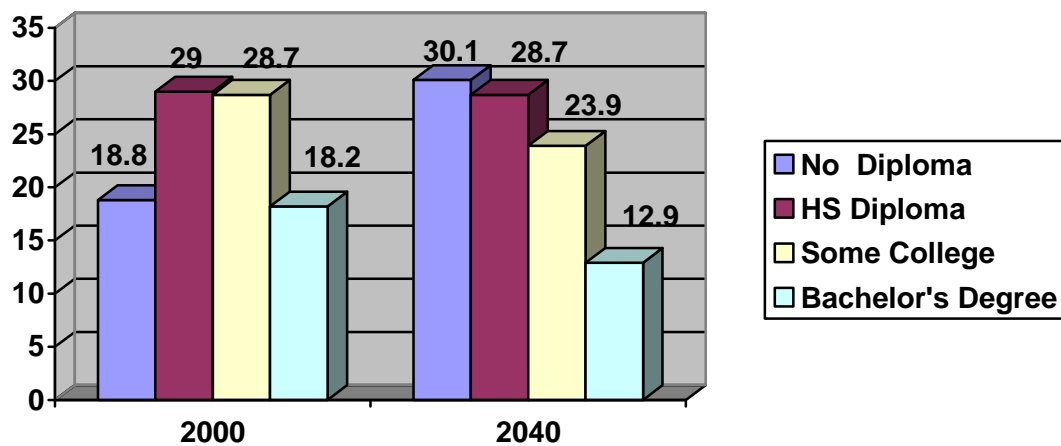
<sup>2</sup> The Top Ten Percent law (HB 588) was passed by the 75<sup>th</sup> State Legislature in 1997. Texas residents graduating in the top ten percent of an accredited public or private high school in the state or from a high school operated by the United States Department of Defense qualify for automatic admission to the public postsecondary institution of their choice. To qualify for admission, the student must submit an application by the institution's stated deadline.

will reveal, changes in transfer admission to an elite flagship university have changed over time lessening the life chances for individuals to move into more selective “academic hierarchies” and, thus, impeding their movement into a higher social class (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 153).

### Purpose and Focus of Study

Some might say, “As goes Texas, goes the nation.” U.S. Census data shows, in Texas, the number of 15 to 19 year old Hispanics increased from 33 percent of the overall population in 1990 to 40 percent in 2000. Since 2003, community colleges have grown by more than 114,500 students with Hispanics accounting for 38 percent of this growth (TACC, 2003). In spite of growing rates of college participation by ethnic minority groups, the proportion of people with an academic degree is forecasted to decline in Texas.

Figure 1: A Comparison of Educational Attainment between 2000 and 2040



According to the state’s demographer, projections for the future in terms of postsecondary participation and degree attainment look bleak (Figure 1). It is projected that between 2000 and 2040, the labor force with no diploma will grow by 11.3%, the population with a high school degree will decrease slightly from 29 to 28.7 percent, the group with some college will see their percentages slip by 4.8%, and for the population earning a bachelor’s degree, the result will be a loss of 5.3% (Murdock, 2005). These projections provide a disturbing forecast of a less educated state workforce equating to billions of dollars in lost revenue.

## **Data and Methods**

This study employs descriptive statistics, an archival document review and structured interviews. Data obtained for this study come from three major sources: the Office of Admissions, Office of Information Management and Analysis, and publicly available print resources.<sup>3</sup> The general period of study is 1997–2007 although data prior to and after these dates are included if available. To give context and meaning to the findings, an admission policy matrix was constructed to provide a side-by-side comparison of freshman and transfer policies, programs, and relevant judicial rulings. Graphs and charts are used to convey trends of transfer students by institutional feeder pattern while information garnered from structured interviews with admission staff serve to strengthen the interpretation of the trend data. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, triangulation of data from different sources (e.g., documents and reports, interviews of admission office staff) and methods (e.g., inferential and descriptive statistics) provide a richer and more holistic view and analysis.

Descriptive statistics used for this preliminary study cannot prove a casual relationship between demand for automatic admission and changes in the feeder patterns of transfer students, but will show trends and highlight differences in the data since the enactment of the Top Ten Percent (TTP) law. These findings based on the transfer admission trends for 1997-2007 provide some evidence of whether the transfer route from community colleges to a state flagship university is well traversed or a road less traveled. Moreover, this study sets the stage for mixed methods research that includes large pooled samples of student level data acquired by the author to identify the determinants of transfer admission for this flagship institution in the era of the TTP law and its offspring, the Conditional Transfer Program (CTP).<sup>4</sup>

## **Research Questions and Findings**

Although interest in transfer student issues has grown in recent years, the investigation of trends between transfer admission and automatic admission laws in California, Florida and Texas

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2006-2007, the Office of Information Management and Analysis operated as the Office of Institutional Research.

<sup>4</sup> The Conditional Transfer Program is a fictional name for the true name of the program so as to protect the identity of the institution in this research paper. Approval to name the institution in the body of the author's dissertation study has been approved by her dissertation committee.

are lacking. This study adds to the literature on student transfer access by addressing the following questions as it pertains to a Texas flagship university.

1. How did transfer admission criteria change from 1997 through 2007?
2. What specific factors affected public two-year transfer student admission to a public flagship university?
3. What policies and practices are recommended to protect and improve transfer access for public two-year college students at research institutions?

### Changes in Freshman and Transfer Admission Criterion: 1990s-2007

Over time, the University’s admissions processes have grown increasingly complex and competitive in nature. The comparison matrix (Table 1) details significant changes in freshman and transfer admission requirements, policies, and programs. In general, the catalysts for these additions, modifications or omissions were institutional action or policy, a legislative mandate or judicial ruling.

Table 1: Significant Events in Freshman and Transfer Admission

Year	Freshman Admission	Transfer Admission
Prior years	Scaled Admission Model using Affirmative Action	Rolling Admission for Transfer Students/Statement of Purpose (optional)
1996	<i>Hopwood v. Texas</i> ruling (March 1996) Holistic Review initiated w/out racial consideration	
1997	Top Ten Percent Law enacted / Holistic Admission w /3 essays required for non TTP applicants / \$200 enrollment deposit required	
2000	Provisional Admission Program ends (est.1962) & is replaced by CTP Moratorium for Spring Freshman Admission	Moratorium for Spring Transfer Admission
2001	TX resident applicant offers extend to Fall & Summer admission	Conditional Transfer Program (CTP) begins
2002	Campus enrollment exceeds 52,000	First cohort of CTP Transfer Enrollees arrive (N=182)
2003	<i>Grutter v. Bollinger</i> decision allows narrowly tailoring a race conscious admission policy	6,000 CTP Offers
2004	University delays using race as a factor	CTP requirements strengthened for Fall 2005-06 cohort
2005	Holistic Review begins for freshman admission w/racial consideration	Rolling Admission end in Spring Batch Holistic Reviews begin Essay & Statement of Purpose Required
2006 to Present		Policy to review CTP if it exceeds 60% of total transfer admission

Prior to 1996, the Office of Admission considered test scores, rigor of coursework, class rank, and special accomplishments in their selection of a freshman class. It was termed a classic admission model that heavily weighted academic merit. This model delineated its admission requirements using a graduated scale whereby students ranked in the top 15% of their class were required to have a minimum test score for entrance while the bottom half underwent a review by an admission officer (Garza, 2009).

This classic admission model used race as a factor for admission until the *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996) ruling by the U.S Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. The Circuit Court's ruling ended race-based affirmative action in admission at all public state colleges and universities in Texas. The state's response to the *Hopwood* ruling was the passage of H.B.588 by the 75<sup>th</sup> State Legislature. The Top Ten Percent (TTP) Law" was a rank-based admission policy that served as the sole determinant for automatic admission. Texas high school students ranked in the top ten percent of their graduating class were guaranteed admission to their choice of the state's public undergraduate institutions including the two flagship universities: Texas A&M University and The University of Texas at Austin.

After 1997, an individual holistic review for all non-TTP applicants was initiated by the University. Individual holistic review is based on the premise that no one factor alone will assure admission. It takes into consideration who "might contribute to, benefit from, the rich, diverse, and challenging educational environment of the University" (Proposal to Consider..., 2004, p. 23). It includes the calculation of an academic index (AI) and a personal achievement index (PAI). The PAI includes consideration of an applicant's socioeconomic status, parent education level and work experience among other factors.

Beyond the holistic review, the University also initiated an application requirement of three essays so that admission officers could glean more information on the applicant's background. To better predict the size of the freshman class, a \$200 enrollment deposit was also instituted. The deposit was required in the summer prior to a student's fall enrollment. As one admission director stated, the loss of race-based admission, the new implementation of the TTP law and the initiation of three required essays and a \$200 enrollment deposit provided a "perfect storm" which resulted in a drop in freshman application and enrollment rates for fall 1997 (Garza, 2009).

Over time, the transparency and guarantee of the TTP law drew a record number of freshman enrollees to the University (Record enrollment..., 2002). Campus enrollment grew to



49,902 in the fall of 1999. By 2000, the tremendous growth and popularity of the University led to unprecedented actions to better manage enrollment. "We're losing control..." a University administrator confessed (Mayer, 2001).

The Provisional Admission Program, as one example, extended 4,000 student offers in its last year of operation (Office of Admissions, 2009). The 905 students who successfully completed the summer provisional program were offered fall admission in 2001. As a result of the unprecedented growth, the Executive Vice President and Provost proposed "redefining the Provisional Admission Program" to expand access to minimally eligible freshman students. Programmatic changes were proposed for mainly two purposes: 1) to seek relief from a growing freshman demand and 2) change the focus of the summer program to handle admissible freshman applicants not qualified for automatic admission (Ekland-Olson, 2000, p. 793). The proposal for a Conditional Transfer Program (CTP) was approved by the Board of Regents and the 47 year old provisional program was eliminated.

With enrollment pressure still high, the University made a rare decision to enact a moratorium on spring undergraduate admission in 2001 while simultaneously extending over 2,000 conditional transfer contracts to non-TTP freshman applicants. Upon successfully fulfilling the CTP contract requirements, guaranteed transfer admission was extended to these students for fall 2002.

By 2002, the University became the largest in the nation with enrollment peaking at 52,273 students (Hale, 2002). Changes in admission policy were put in place to address increasing numbers of qualified freshman applicants not in the top ten percent, but admissible to the University. In 2003, the summer semester became a second freshman enrollment pathway to be filled after the slots for fall freshman admission were exhausted. The number of CTP offers grew quickly with each passing year as well as the number of the students fulfilling the contracts. To better manage the number of CTP transfer enrollment, contract requirements were strengthened for the fall 2005-2006 cohort (Office of Admissions, 2008).

On June 23, 2003, the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>5</sup> The Court upheld the use of race in a narrowly tailored fashion to "further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body." The University cautiously waited one year to implement a race-sensitive holistic review process for non-TTP undergraduate applications (Garza, 2009).

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<sup>5</sup> *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 123 S.Ct. 2325 (2003).

Transfer admission experienced little change in its policies and procedures prior to 2000. Students were admitted based on their academic background (GPA, academic rigor) and special accomplishments. The personal statement was an optional exercise and, according to Admission staff, meeting the minimum admissible GPA was essentially the greatest predictor for admission (Washington, 2008). A minimum number of transfer credits was not necessary and each application was evaluated individually, characteristic of a rolling admission process. In 2001-2002, transfer applicants were mandated to complete at least 24 semester hours (SCH) of transferable credit to gain admission.

By 2005, students applying for transfer admission had several new requirements: an essay, a statement of purpose, and the completion of 30 SCH of transferable credit. Most significantly, the fall transfer admission cycle was now a more competitive review where applicants were ranked against each other and not evaluated individually.

As demand for freshman admission slots grew, it displaced non-Top Ten Percent applicants. After 2000, these high-achieving students were offered either admitted to the summer semester or offered participation in the Conditional Transfer Program (CTP). With large numbers of non-TTP applicants being given the option of participating in the CTP, regular transfer admission now had a smaller number of transfer admission slots available. Recent measures to control CTP growth included a formal reexamination of the program if CTP admission guarantees exceeded 60% of the total transfer admission target (General Information 2006).

After an extensive document review of freshman and transfer admission policy, the CTP has been the most intriguing and bold experiment in attempting to control enrollment and simultaneously protect access to the flagship institution for diverse student populations. Increased demand for freshman admission has created a ripple effect into transfer admission pools. Although I cannot establish a casual relationship with this qualitative analysis, the trends seem to show an increased demand for CTP slots is mirrored by stricter requirements for regular transfer admission.

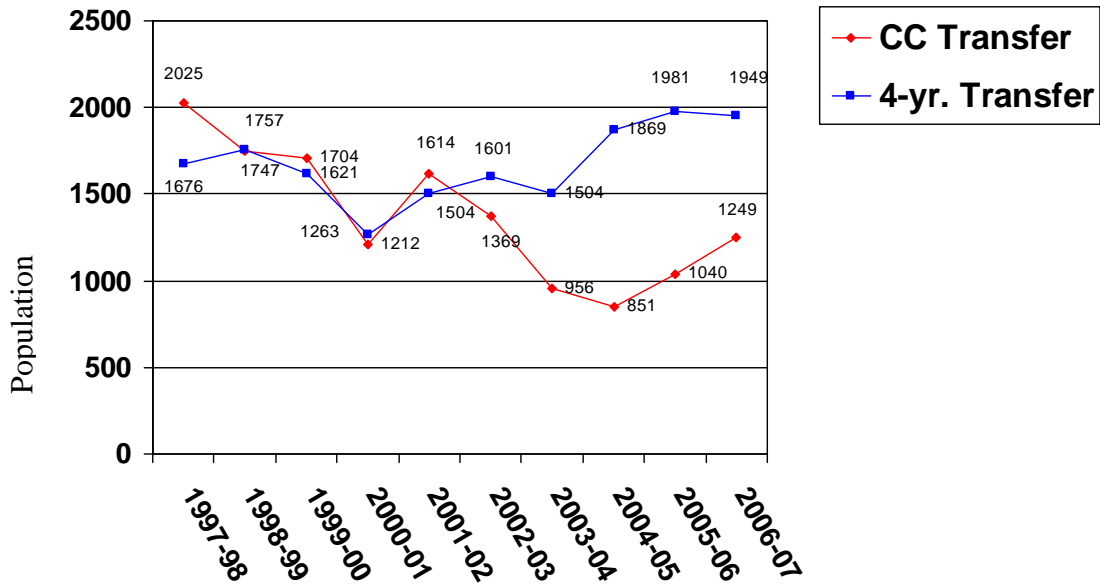
In summary, the metaphor of two pathways leading to one destination seems simplistic yet, appropriate for what represents the state of admission at the University. As admission leaders stress, the law does not allow the university to limit the number of students admitted (Garza, 2009). By law, the university must find a place for every student in the top ten percent that completes an application by the deadline. It is evident that the University is using every

resource and available pathway to accommodate the maximum amount of students possible, but it begs the question which groups are taking the road less traveled and will that pathway remain open.

### Trends for Two-Year and Four-Year Transfer Students

Figure 1 identifies trends in two-year and four-year admission rates to UT Austin for combined fall, spring and summer enrollment by year. In 1997, community college transfer enrollees totaled 2,025, the largest total for the ten-year span documented. Coincidentally, this was also the first year the TTP Law was implemented. From 1997-2000, community college and four-year transfer student experienced a downward trend in enrollment. The lowest enrollment point in this series of years was 2000, the year the University peaked in enrollment with over 50,000 students, and a spring moratorium on fall and spring admission was enacted.

Figure 1: Trend Lines of Community College and Four-Year University Transfer Enrollees: 1997-2006 (Complete data not yet available for 2007)

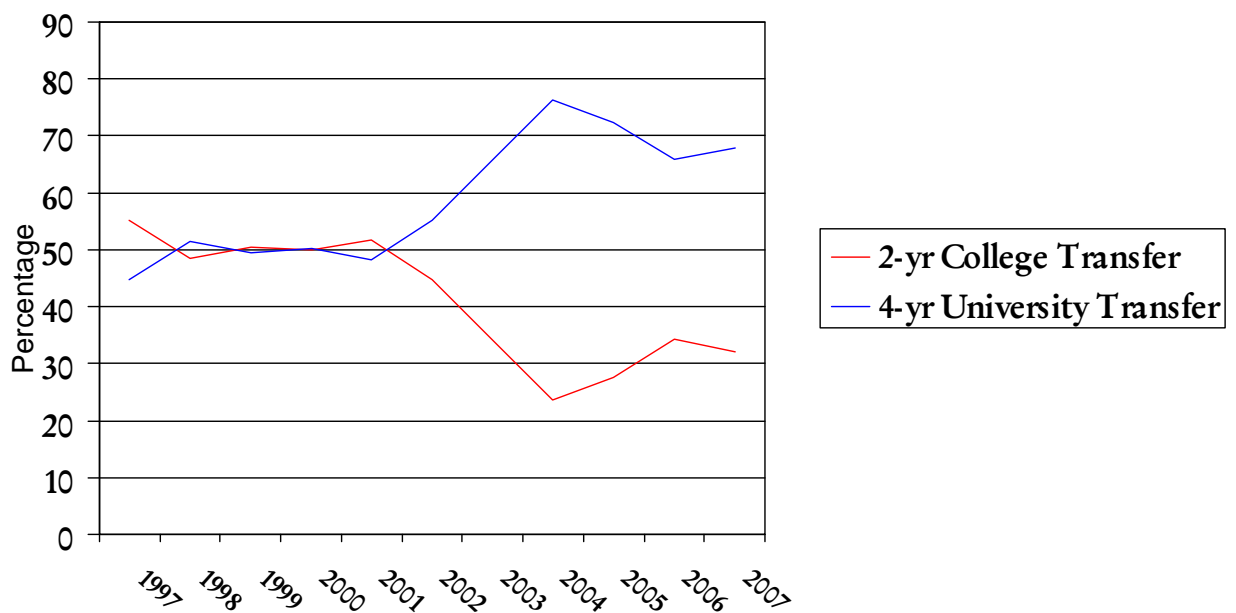


Source: Institutional Research Statistical Handbooks 1995-2006  
Fall, Spring & Summer Transfer Enrollees Combined

In 2000, when the flagship university experienced one of its highest points in student population, the overall transfer enrollment sank to its lowest point. With the commencement of the Conditional Transfer Program (CTP), two-year student transfer rates began to decline quite drastically. In 2002, the first CTP transfer cohort entered the University. Before the CTP, the

number of transfer students was lowest in 2000, the year of the spring admission moratorium. After CTP was established, the two-year transfer rate dropped below the moratorium rate of 1,212 for two consecutive years with enrollment falling to 956 students in 2003 and 851 students in 2004. In 2005, CTP transfer requirements were made more stringent to better control for growth. After this change, the growth trajectory among four-year transfer students became less pronounced while two-year transfer enrollment recorded gains of 209 students in 2004 and 189 students in 2005. Although this data analysis does not offer a correlation between numbers of CTP students and traditional two-year transfer students, it does seem to indicate a sudden drop followed by a general downward trend in two-year transfer enrollment of after the implementation of the CTP.

Figure 2: Percentage of Transfer Students from 2-Year Colleges and 4-Year Universities; 1997-2007



Sources: Office of Institutional Research. 2002-03 Statistical Handbook. Table S19.  
Office of Information Management and Analysis. 2007-08 Statistical Handbook. Table S19.  
Note: Fall semester percentages only.

In Figure 2, two trend lines depict the percentage of transfer enrollment from two-year and four-year institutions of higher education. In the late nineties, community college students comprised roughly half of the University’s transfer population. As an example, in 1997, two-year transfer students comprised 55% of the transfer cohort while four-year transfer students represented slightly over 44% of the transfer population. Parity between two-year and four-year

enrollees occurred from 1998 to 2000. From fall 2001 to 2002, the implementation of the Conditional Transfer Program (CTP) occurred as well as a 7% decrease in the proportion of community college students during this same time period. Beyond 2001, the proportion of two-year transfer students to four-year transfer students widened. By 2004, community college transfer students comprised just 24% of the entire fall transfer cohort. In comparison, four-year transfer enrollment recorded tremendous growth with over 76% of the fall 2004 transfer class coming from senior-level institutions. As stated earlier, the University enacted stricter CTP contract requirements resulting in a decrease of 210 students or a 10 % reduction from the previous year. Although a causal relationship cannot be established, it is important to note CTP requirements were changed in 2005 in an effort to control for CTP growth. Trend lines appear to indicate an inverse relationship between the percentage growth of four-year transfer enrollment and the percentage drop in two-year transfer enrollment.

Figure 3: Conditional Transfer Program (CTP) Offers, Enrollees, and Transfer Students 2001-2008

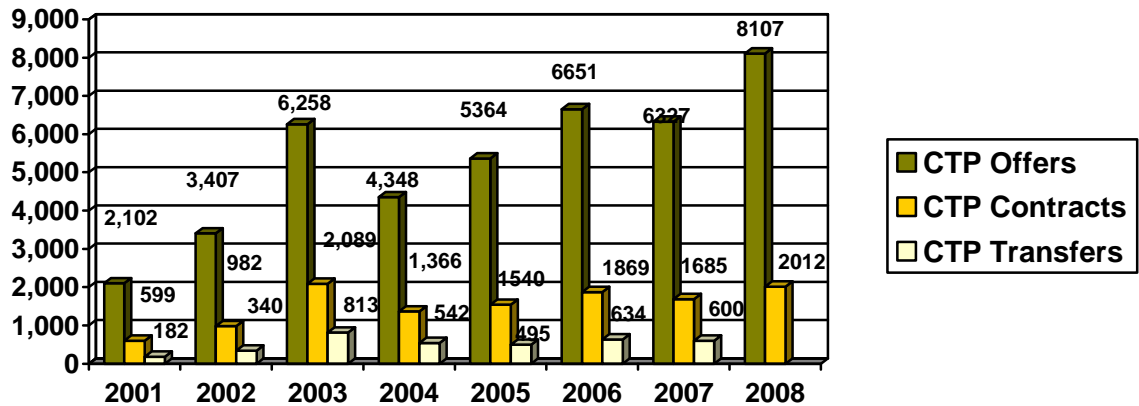


Figure 3 shows the remarkable growth in the Conditional Transfer Program (CTP) participation from 2001 to 2008. The CTP is the third route to admission to the flagship university after fall and summer admission offers are extended. A CTP offer provided to non-TTP freshman applicants who are Texas residents. If they wish to participate, they sign a CTP contract and chose a sister institution to attend. Students who complete and return the CTP contract agree to complete 30 semester credit hours of prescribed coursework with a minimum grade point average of 3.0 (Office of Admissions, 2009). Students submitting a contract attend a

component institution of the flagship to fulfill the terms of the contract. The students defined as CTP transfer has successfully fulfilled the terms of the contract and enrolled at the University. Since its creation, CTP offers have rose grown form 182 to 11 times that amount in 2008. In seven years, CTP contracts grew from 340 in 2002 to 2012 in 2008. Contract offers peaked in 2003 and comprised 49% of the transfer fall cohort. In spite of attempts to manage the number of CTP students transferring to the University by strengthening the GPA and course requirements (e.g. GPA raised from a 3.0 to 3.2) for the 2004 fall class, the program continues to exhibit unbridled growth.

### **Conclusions & Implications**

In its 12<sup>th</sup> year of existence, the Top Ten Percent Law (TTP) has achieved arguable success in diversifying the state's flagship institutions (Saenz, 2007; Niu, Teinda, and Cortes, 2006). TTP status has become somewhat of a golden ticket for students of every race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status wanting a guarantee of admission to the state's flagship universities. However, this study provides evidence of a disturbing trend in community college student access to a flagship university. Trend data reveal as non-TTP student enrollment in CTP has increased in percentage, there has been a simultaneous percentage decrease in two-year transfer enrollment. While well intentioned, students qualifying for automatic admission are indirectly crowding out community college students at a highly ranked flagship university in a state where too few top ranked institutions exist.

Texas has and 50 community college districts and 74 community college campuses. Yet, community college students averaged 30.3% or 626 students of the fall transfer cohort from 2004-2008. If left unchanged, the transfer program may be overrun with CTP students, who are wholly comprised of non-top ten percent freshman applicants. If so, it begs the question of whether the flagship university can recruit a diverse pool of transfer students or if CTP serves as a subliminal form of cascading of selective freshman applicants.

A robust transfer program is essential to maintain access among low-income students and other traditionally underrepresented students to nationally ranked academic programs and public universities, particularly since Texas has not made sufficient progress in meeting its goal to increase the number of nationally ranked academic programs and research institutions (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008). The significance of the transfer pipeline is its ability to improve opportunities for social, cultural, and economic mobility (Bourdieu, 1977).

The state benefits by the reduced cost of educating students at a community college for that portion of their undergraduate experience. A policy agenda that leverages the benefits of the TTP law while valuing and protecting community college student access seems prudent given the high demand by many postsecondary students to attend the highest quality institution that will accept them.

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