

**How Studying Community Colleges Impacts Learners: Reducing Community College
Stigma and Improving Community College Advocacy**

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Author Note

Regarding conflicts of interest, I was the founder and director of the Community College to PhD Scholars Program, which hosted the community college studies presentation series.

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Abstract

Objective: I implemented and evaluated a speaker series of community college studies presentations. The seven monthly presentations were led by professors and an institutional researcher who conduct research on community colleges. Example presentation topics included the history of community colleges, policy reforms in community college developmental education, and transfer receptive culture. The presentations' primary audience was community college students. **Methods:** I interviewed 12 community college student attendees. I analyzed interview transcripts using structural coding and thematic analysis. **Results:** I identified two themes. The first theme was that the presentations improved most students' perceptions of community colleges. To elaborate, the presentations destigmatized community colleges and dismantled a deficit thinking paradigm. The second theme was that the presentations improved most students' interest and ability in community college advocacy. For example, several attendees informally shared the knowledge they gained from the presentations to empower their community college peers. Furthermore, several attendees became more effective advocates within formal institutional positions such as student advisory group member, office assistant, or peer advisor. **Conclusions:** My findings align with past research that suggests that community college studies can improve learners' perceptions and advocacy around community colleges.

Keywords: community college studies, community college student identity, community college stigma, community college pride, community college advocacy

How Studying Community Colleges Impacts Learners: Reducing Community College Stigma and Improving Community College Advocacy

Negative perceptions of community colleges are well documented in the research literature; researchers often name these negative perceptions as *community college stigma* or *transfer stigma* (Alexander et al., 2009; Bowker, 2021; Gauthier, 2020; Hawk & Hill, 2016; Holland, 2015; Hyatt & Smith, 2020; Jain et al., 2017; Laanan et al., 2010; Levin et al., 2017; Reyes, 2011; Robinson, 2022; Shaw et al., 2019; White, 2022).

Bias against community colleges is an important equity issue as it can impact community college students' higher education trajectory. Bias hinders community college students' transfer preparation: some university professors push back against the development and standardization of community college course articulation agreements (Bowker, 2021; Kisker et al., 2010; Schudde et al., 2021) and advocate for stringent transfer admissions requirements in order to weed out transfer students from their department majors (Castellino, 2013). Furthermore, bias hinders transfer students' experience at the university: transfer students are perceived to be more difficult to teach and some university professors are less willing and frustrated with teaching transfer students (Castellino, 2013; Hyatt & Smith, 2020).

Community college stigma can have an impact on students' self-perception of their community college student identity or transfer student identity (Hartman & Mayo, 2022; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016; Zuckerman & Lo, 2021). For example, studies suggest that community college students (and transfer students) will often hide that they attend(ed) a community college because they are ashamed or to avoid anti-community-college bias (Alexander et al., 2009; Jain et al., 2017). As another example, Hartman and Mayo's (2022) study suggests that transfer students either (a) perceived transfer as a positive identity because of

their university's transfer receptive culture and transfer-affirming experiences with people, (b) perceived transfer as a negative identity because of inequitable transfer policies and non-transfer-affirming experiencing with people, or (c) felt that "transfer was not a part of who they were or how they saw themselves" (p. 482).

Hartman and Mayo's (2022) study suggests there may be benefits and consequences to these self-perceptions. For example, some transfer students recognized the unique strengths they have as a transfer student compared to non-transfer students. Whereas other transfer students who had "negative association with transfer resulted in [them] not wanting to seek information about social activities and events on campus over time" and consequently struggled to make friends (p. 486).

For this paper, I implemented and evaluated a monthly speaker series of community college studies presentations. The presentation audience was primarily community college students. To my knowledge, this is the first paper to examine the impact of community college studies curriculum on community college students. Whereas other work has focused on the impact of community college studies on graduate students, professors, or higher education professionals (Rex, 2017; Romano et al., 2009; Royer et al., 2016). The evaluation questions guiding this study are:

1. Did the community college studies presentations improve students' perceptions of community college?
2. Did the community college studies presentations improve students' interest and ability in community college advocacy?

Brief Overview of Related Literature

Availability of Community College Studies Courses

“The field of community college studies” (Jain et al., 2016, p. 1015) focuses on “research pertaining to community colleges” (Floyd & Antczak, 2009, p. 2). Considering that community colleges serve a large percentage of undergraduate students, Cohen et al. (2013, Chapter 13) argue that community college studies is an understudied but growing field of study. Doran and Lucht (2021) go even further and argue that community college studies is marginalized and less respected within the broader field of higher education research. In fact, studies suggest that community college research is underrepresented within (a) top-tier education journals and (b) education journals more broadly (Crisp et al., 2016; Townsend et al., 2005).¹

There have been several research studies on community college studies curriculum, most of which is focused on graduate-level practice-focused degree programs for community college administrators and student affairs personnel (Forthun & Freeman, 2017; Friedel, 2010; Gamez Vargas, 2013; Hammons & Miller, 2006; Romano et al., 2009; Royer et al., 2016, 2021). However, community college studies courses may be rare. Royer et al.’s (2021) curriculum audit found that only 36% of higher education programs and 21% of student affairs programs offered at least one graduate-level course focused on community colleges. Even more concerning is that only 8% of higher education programs and 5% of student affairs programs mandated a community college studies course in order to graduate. This suggests that few higher education professionals have taken a community college studies course.

Impact of Community College Studies on Community College Perceptions and Advocacy

Beyond increasing students’ *knowledge* of community colleges (Romano et al., 2009), community college studies courses can change students’ *perceptions* of community colleges. For

example, Romano et al. (2009) surveyed graduate students enrolled in community-college-focused doctoral programs to examine if the doctoral programs influenced students' level of agreement with 11 Likert item statements. Among other statistically significant Likert item statements, the doctoral programs increased the degree to which students (a) *agree* to "I believe in the open admissions philosophy" and "I believe that CCs have a special responsibility for educating underrepresented and disadvantaged students" and (b) *disagree* to "I believe that CCs should favor vocational education and workforce training as opposed to transfer preparation" (p. 316).

Furthermore, Royer et al. (2016) interviewed student affairs practitioners who took a graduate-level community college studies course. Prior to the course, the practitioners were "lacking understanding about these [community college] institutions" (p. 240) and initially had a neutral or negative view of community colleges. The interviewees reported that the course changed their perceptions of community colleges and increased their desire to work at the community college.

Outside of graduate programs and courses that require long commitments, community college studies can also be presented through short events. For example, Appalachian State University hosted a one day Transfer Symposium, which introduced community college studies to over 200 of their university faculty and staff who attended the event (Appalachian State University, n.d.; Rex, 2017). Among other things, the Transfer Symposium featured institutional research about the transfer student population at Appalachian State University (e.g., transfer students demographics, academic performance, institutional barriers). While there was not a formal evaluation, Rex (2017) anecdotally stated that before the Transfer Symposium faculty and staff believed in negative stereotypes about transfer students. The Transfer Symposium

anecdotally increased faculty and staff's (a) knowledge of transfer students, (b) support and buy-in for allocating additional resources for transfer student initiatives, and (c) engagement in transfer student advocacy.

Other Ways to Improve Community College Perceptions

Beyond community college studies curriculum, there are other interventions to improve perceptions of community colleges. (It *seems* like community college studies curriculum was not a component to any of the following interventions, at least from what is available in their respective publications.)

First, Miles (2010) interviewed student presidents of community college student government associations. These student presidents had pride in their community college and “wanted [other] students to feel proud to be part of the [community college] institution.” (p. 81). To build this pride, student leaders had community college t-shirts made and organized activities for students. However, Miles’ study did not examine if these student-leader-initiated programming had an impact on other students’ community college pride.

Second, Robinson (2022) implemented a social media campaign and podcast in order to reduce community college stigma. The social media component consisted of Twitter tweets that included a link to a positive news article or blog post about community colleges, an interesting quote from the source, and the hashtag #EndCCStigma (p. 141). Robinson also developed the *End Community College Stigma Podcast* where he interviewed students, faculty, and administrators to discuss the positive aspects of community college and dispel negative stereotypes. However, Robinson did not evaluate the social media campaign or podcast.

Third, Jain et al. (2017) implemented and evaluated a university-sponsored summer outreach program where community college students enrolled in summer university courses and

attended supplemental workshops and activities hosted by the outreach program. To reiterate, the outreach participants are “currently attending a community college” (p. 175). However, their “positive transfer identity ... was developed *after* [emphasis added] they transferred” to a university (p. 182). While their article discusses students’ development of transfer pride, it is unclear how the outreach program specifically contributed to their transfer pride.

Fourth, while not an evaluation, Adam’s (2021) practice-based paper outlined initiatives at the institutional level and student level to cultivate transfer pride at the University of California, Los Angeles. Adams states

At the institutional level, it has meant a commitment to transfer-specific resources [such as the UCLA Transfer Student Center and transfer student housing], inclusion and celebration of transfer identity [such as Transfer Pride Week and transfer awareness training], and consistent advocacy that includes the transfer student voice. At the individual level, it has meant ensuring that transfer students have opportunities for engagement, leadership, and connection [such as transfer student clubs, transfer peer mentors, social media for transfer students]. (p. 44)

Study Context

The Community College to PhD (CC2PhD) Scholars Program at the University of California, Los Angeles hosted seven monthly community college studies presentations throughout the 2017 – 2018 academic year.² For context, CC2PhD was an undergraduate research and PhD preparation program for community college students interested in pursuing a social science PhD (Nguyen, Epstein, et al., 2023; Nguyen, Gaddis, et al., 2023; Nguyen, Rios-Aguilar, et al., 2023).

The community college studies presentations were free and open to the public. However, the primary audience were community college students in the CC2PhD program.

I provided the following information to presenters, which influenced how they framed their presentations. First, the presentation should be one hour long with 10-15 minutes set aside at the end for audience questions. Second, the presentation should be lecture-style and incorporate PowerPoint slides. Third, the presentation should be non-technical and easy to understand for the community college student audience (e.g., do not spend too much time discussing your methodology and theoretical framework). Fourth, I told presenters that the goal of the community college studies presentation series was to “advance understanding of community college equity issues and dispel community college myths.” Fifth, I provided presenters with a list of the other presenters and their corresponding presentation topics, which helped decrease the presentation of redundant information.

The presenters included six university professors from nearby public and private universities and one institutional researcher from a nearby community college. Broadly speaking, presenters discussed their research on these community college topics: the history and mission of community colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1991), developmental math (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Ngo & Melguizo, 2016), the unstructured nature of community college (Baker, 2016), community college students’ community cultural wealth (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021), transfer receptive culture (Jain et al., 2016), inequitable access to community college baccalaureate programs (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021), and the community college to PhD pipeline (Rivas, 2012).

Method

For this evaluation, I interviewed attendees to understand the impact of community college studies presentations on their perceptions and advocacy around community colleges.

Participants

Study participants were community college students in the 2017-2018 cohort of the CC2PhD Scholars Program. In order to participate in CC2PhD, students agreed to participate in program evaluation activities.

Throughout the paper, I refer to study participants as P1 – P12. The following is a breakdown of the 12 study participants' demographics. Gender was 67% female and 33% male. Race and ethnicity was 8% American Indian or Alaska Native, 42% Asian, 8% Black or African American, and 50% Hispanic or Latina/o. Age was 42% 18-20 years old, 50% 21-22 years old, and 8% 25 years or older. College generation was 75% first-generation college student.

After completing the CC2PhD program, interviews were then conducted during summer 2018. By that time, 83% of students graduated from community college and were incoming transfer students for fall 2018. Whereas the other 17% were continuing with community college.

Positionality

I was the founder and director of the CC2PhD Scholars Program, which hosted the community college studies presentation series. I told the study participants that they should feel free to be honest. Even so, the study participants – who were in the CC2PhD Scholars Program – may not have felt comfortable speaking candidly because I was the CC2PhD program director.

Further reflecting on my positionality (Holmes, 2020), there are several life experiences that influenced the implementation and evaluation of this presentation series. By happenstance, I discovered community college studies when I was a community college student. As a student who had negative perceptions of community colleges, the experience of reading research articles focused on community colleges was empowering. It sparked my desire to conduct research on and advocate for community colleges. Furthermore, I was heavily influenced by attending Rex's

(2017) presentation where she discussed the positive impact that Appalachian State University's Transfer Symposium had on professors and staffs' perceptions of and advocacy for transfer students. Finally, as I continued my higher education, I enrolled in a graduate-level community college studies course.

Procedure

Interviews took place in a private videoconference room during summer 2018, which was a few months after they completed the CC2PhD Scholars Program. At the start of the interview, I explained that the focus of the interview would be the community college studies presentation (and not the overall CC2PhD Scholars Program). To refresh their memory, I then briefly walked them through a document that listed the community college studies presentation titles and presenters. Afterwards, I asked interview questions based on the semi-structured interview guide. The main discussion topics in the interview guide include engagement in the presentation, knowledge of community college studies, if they used what they learned from the presentations in a real-world setting, self-perception of their community college student status, perceptions of other community college students, and community college advocacy.

Analysis

I used Otter.ai, an automated transcription service, to transcribe the interviews. I then manually reviewed relevant portions of the transcript to fix the automated transcription mistakes. I engaged in *denaturalized* transcription when fixing the automated transcription mistakes (Oliver et al., 2005). In other words, I removed false starts, repeated words or phrases, and filler words in order to improve clarity without changing the speaker's original meaning. A few study participants spoke English as a second language. So, in keeping with a denaturalized approach, I corrected their grammar and standardized their English when necessary for clarity.

I used ATLAS.ti software for the qualitative data analysis. I employed *structural coding* to code the transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). Structural codes are phrases that summarize an interview passage as it relates to the study's research questions. After the first round of coding, I reviewed the codes and their corresponding transcript text. I then merged, split, deleted, and added codes. I then employed *thematic analysis* to identify themes based on the codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82).

Results

I identified two themes from the interviews: improved perceptions of community colleges and improved community college advocacy.

Improved Perceptions of Community Colleges

A minority of students said that the presentations did not change their perception of community colleges. P8 explained that the presentations lacked an emphasis on the positive academic traits of community college students:

If [the presentations] said something like, "She [was] a transfer student. And now she has a PhD degree. She's [very successful]." [Then] I will be proud as a community college student. But [the presentations are] just talking about the issues in community college.

In contrast, a majority of students said the presentations improved their perceptions of community colleges.

Many students were already aware that they stigmatized community college. However, for others, the presentations helped uncover their implicit bias. Even *before* the presentations P5 "thought [he] was proud" of his community college student status but he later realized "I do kind of stigmatize myself." P1 said "[The presentations were] a wakeup call for me because a lot of

those [community college] stereotypes [discussed in the presentations] were the stigmas that I also had towards others, unknowingly.”

While non-exhaustive, there are several possible reasons why community college studies may improve participants’ perceptions of community colleges. First, the presentations dispelled negative community college stereotypes: “[I] have the evidence [from the presentations] to know why those [community college] stereotypes are not in fact true” (P2). Second, students may find comfort in realizing that their struggles in community college are not unique but are actually quite common: “[It was] not just something that I personally experienced. So, I got to understand it as something that the majority of community college students experience ... [and is] more of a [system-wide] issue” (P1). Third, the presentations helped students shift away from a deficit thinking paradigm.³ The presentations help “you see how it's not all about individual choice [of a student]. In almost all cases, it's about different [institutional] barriers that are preventing students from really succeeding” (P3).

When asked, interviewees stated that their perception of community colleges is important as it can impact their student success. P2 said that having a positive perception “would be exhibited not only within their academic achievement levels, but their self-efficacy as well.” For example, P9 said “[Initially in community college] I wasn't trying as hard as I definitely could have been” because she initially believed that “[community college accomplishments] doesn't add up to as much. ... [You could be a] straight A student but you're [just] a straight A student in community college.”

P2 posits that community college students with negative perceptions “might not be as quick to interact with other community college students.” This was true in P12’s experience:

My first year of community college, I was the most uninvolved student. ... I didn't talk to anyone. ... because I didn't want some type of [community college] stain that would rub like a residue on me. ... [After changing my perspective in] the second year ... I finally like started becoming involved on campus. ... I became a student leader. I became proud of leading the students that I [initially] so heavily tried to disassociate myself from.

Likewise, P1 said “having the pride is important, especially once I transferred to a four-year institution, because that will help me connect with students who are also transfer students.” On the other hand, transfer students who are ashamed may avoid events and programs geared towards transfer students.

This theme is split into two subthemes: (a) improved self-perceptions and (b) improved perceptions of other community college students.

Improved Self-Perception of Their Community College Student Status

The majority of students stated that the presentations “helped [them] destigmatize community college” (P12) and “changed [their self-perception] for the positive” (P2). For example, P6 describes her shift from shame to pride: “[Before] I was feeling a bit ashamed of being a community college student. I didn't really want to share that with anyone. And now ... I would be proud to say where I came from.” However, to be clear, the presentations might not completely eliminate students' self-stigmatization: “As proud as I am now, I still struggle with [self-stigmatization] ... So, it's not so much that the stigmas [disappeared] ... [but] they got quieter” (P9).

The presentations' discussion of institutional barriers allowed community college students to be less self-critical and ashamed of their imperfect academic performance. This is because “a lot of students go through community college without realizing the [institutional]

barriers that are against them” (P12). P11 said the presentations “gave me a lot of grace to not be so hard on myself. ... This [academic misstep] isn't just all my fault.” P10 elaborates

I remember [a presenter] said the average amount of time that people spend at community college was eight years [or some number like that]. And I was like, “woah, I'm not even close to eight years.” Because for me staying [a third] year was almost close to the worst thing in the world. ... But [the presentation] was very comforting to see like, “Okay, so I guess I'm not the only one.”

Likewise, P6 felt “empowered” by learning about the institutional barriers that contributed to her “struggle getting” through her long sequence of developmental math courses. After the presentations, P6 realized “it was not really in my control ... [and] that it was just how the [developmental math] system was made.”

Improved Perception of Other Community College Students

Initially, many interviewees had negative views of other community college students.⁴

For example, P11 said:

I thought community college students were stupid. ... I saw other community college students showing up to class hungover or uninterested. ... I also thought that [they] were only there because they were forced to be there because of their parents.

The presentations helped interviewees become more empathetic towards other community college students who were struggling academically. After the presentations, P1 said “I got to be more careful with my words and ... check what I'm thinking, ‘Is it a fact? ... Or stereotypes?’” Furthermore, P12 said

[The presentations] really made me less of an asshole. ... If a student got an F on a test – instead of rolling my eyes and being like “yeah, you should have studied” like I used to –

I [now] thought of other [barriers] that might have prevented them from doing well on the test.

Instead of focusing on weaknesses, the presentations helped participants' identify the strengths that other community college students have. For example, P3 said:

I know someone who's been [at community college] for 10 years. And I think when I started [community college] I would have ... [thought] "What's wrong with you?" But I look at them now and I'm just crazy amazed by their persistence ... And they still have really strong goals for themselves. And that's something I don't see in many four-year [non-transfer] students.

Likewise, P6 said the presentations made her realize the "cultural wealth [the community college student] has to offer. ... They're very resilient. ... They bring skill sets. ... Especially after they transfer ... how they are actually ... better than" or perform similarly to non-transfer students.

Improved Community College Advocacy

A minority of students said that the presentations did not improve their community college advocacy. For example, P5 explained that "I don't think I actually do have an actual interest to help [community college] students."

Whereas for the majority of students, the presentations increased their interest and ability in community college advocacy. For example, P6 initially had no interest in community college advocacy: "But definitely, after [the presentations] I ... just have such a desire to help [community college students]." Other students already had a preexisting desire to engage in community college advocacy, but the presentations further strengthened their interest and ability in advocating for community colleges. For example, P1 said:

So even before [the presentations] I wanted to be involved in the Transfer [Student] Center at [the university] ... But now that I have gone through [the presentations] ... I think I would be able to help [transfer students] from a [more] solid ground ... [with research-based information] that extends [beyond] just my personal experience.

Students provided a few rationales to explain their increased interest in community college advocacy. P11 said the presentations “gave me like a [sense of] responsibility ... [to] give back.” P2 said “the applicability [or relevance] of much of this research ... is what motivated many of us ... to go back and help [community college students].” Similarly, P9 said “activism is kind of deeply entrenched with your identity and [part of] my identity ... [was] being a community college student.”

Students engaged in community college advocacy outside and/or inside institutional positions. *Outside of an institutional position* refers to informal advocacy. Whereas *inside of an institutional position* refers to advocating under a formal capacity as a hired or elected position in the community college or university.

Community College Advocacy Outside of an Institutional Position

A common form of advocacy is educating others by sharing knowledge that they learned from the community college studies presentations. This is surprising as the presenters and I did not ask attendees to share this knowledge (i.e., attendees voluntarily shared this knowledge). For example, P6 said she shared the community college research with “my neighbors or my family.” Furthermore, P6 shared it in a seminar course during the summer bridge program for incoming transfer students: “We're talking about transfer rates and education. And I was able to bring that up ... [that California community colleges] are going to [offer] B.A.s. ... They were really impressed [that I knew that].”

Similarly, P4 shared community college research to encourage his friend to persist in community college. Even though P4's friend is "very smart," his friend "placed very low" on the developmental math "assessment" test: "My friend wanted to give up on community college. ... I actually shared [with] him that presentation [on developmental math] ... He was really happy knowing that he wasn't the only student [struggling due to developmental math placement policies]."

Another person that P4 influenced was his family member who had negative views of community colleges: "[she] used to believe that community colleges were for losers ... that couldn't do good in high school." Before the presentations, P4 made prior attempts to change her mind, which were unsuccessful because he did not have research to back up his claims:

When I didn't have like the facts to prove to her ... she would just be like, "Oh, your BS-ing me." ... But [after the presentations] I was able to provide her the facts and the information and the statistics. ... And now she's very supportive of community college students.

Aside from busting stereotypes about the intelligence of community college students (e.g., there are a subset of community college students who excelled in high school), P4 also made an equity-focused appeal for community college students who did struggle in high school: "I also told her, '[community college is] a second opportunity for them to improve and get to the university they want to go. ... And [they] deserve a second chance.'"

A few students used the knowledge from the presentations to engage in self-advocacy. For example, P3 advocated for her own needs as a transfer student:

After [the presentations], I was really aware of that idea of a transfer receptive culture when I was visiting universities. ... And that actually played a pretty big role in the [university] that I ended up choosing [to enroll in].

To elaborate, P3's community college provided transportation to an admissions event at a University of California campus. However, she noticed that "a majority of the students there were high school students. ... And that [the event] wasn't specific to transfers." Even so, P3 still took the initiative to ask questions focused on her transfer-specific needs but received unsatisfactory answers: "[The presentations were] heavily focused on like your SATs scores [which is irrelevant for transfer applicants] and that whole [freshmen admissions] timeline. ... The presenters didn't know how to answer a lot of my [transfer-specific] questions."

Another self-advocacy example is P12 who stood up for herself when her friends implied that community colleges were not real colleges:

[My friend said] like "Oh, I'm so excited for you to finally [transfer and] go to college with the rest of them." And ... I was like "I need you to realize that I have been in college for the past two years. Like the [community college] education that I've been receiving is valid."

P12 explains "Because of the [presentations], I was able to be like 'I am in college' which was a thing that I never would have said before."

Community College Advocacy Within Institutional Positions

Several students engaged in community college advocacy within community college institutional positions. First, P11 was the president of his psychology community college club: "When I would have a psych club meeting, ... [I would present] like a five-minute" summary of "what I learned" from the community college studies presentations. Second, P1 was invited by a

counselor to be “part of the student advisory group” to provide input on her community college’s “development of the new program called meta majors.” During the student advisory group meetings, she “actually brought up quite a few of the [community college] research.” P1 stated that the presentations were “actually was one of the motivating factors in me [accepting the invitation to] that advisory group” and without the presentations “I don’t think I would have been as knowledgeable and as informative as I could have been in that [student advisory] group.”

Lastly, there were two community college students who worked in office assistant roles at their community college. P2 was already working at the “counseling office at my community college” before the presentations started. However, P2 stated that the presentations encouraged him to take a more proactive role in helping students he once perceived to be “at risk” but now sees as “at promise”. He said

[I] went [from] having a [negative] mentality [of the at-risk students] to taking proactive measures to actually help them out. ... For instance, I provide them my email. And let them know "If you need any help with anything let me know."

Similarly, P5 worked “as an office assistant at the Black Latino [Student] Center.” P5 would share community college research with other students at the center: “I knew that [the community college research] would help [others]. ... When they would be talking about how they’re struggling in the class, [I would say] ‘Hey. Look here’s the numbers. You’re not alone.’” However, he acknowledges that while this knowledge can be “empowering” and “help” others, the community college research can also be “really depressing to hear” and engender “roll your eyes” response from students he told.

At the time of the evaluation (i.e., summer before junior year), several students stated that they *planned* on engaging in community college advocacy at their forthcoming university.

Examples include helping prospective transfer applicants through the “application process” (P9), volunteering for the “Transfer Weekend” outreach event for admitted transfer applicants (P9), getting “involved in the Transfer [Student] Center” (P1), and “writ[ing] for the Daily Cal [student newspaper] ... [about] transfer” (P12). To elaborate on one example, P6 applied to be a peer advisor at her forthcoming university’s community college outreach program. At the time of this evaluation, she made it past the first stage of the application process and was preparing for the job interview: “[If hired, I can] use some of that [community college research] to empower or enlighten ... my mentees.”

The presentations also influenced attendees’ future educational and career goals. However, readers should take the students’ following responses with a grain of salt because they are so young (academically speaking). Their interests and goals are likely to continue to change as they progress through higher education.

The presentations strengthened P9’s preexisting interest to “become a [community college] faculty member.” She said, “I want to ... give students the opportunities that I got [as a student] ... and see if there's anything that I can do as a potential faculty member to kind of address those [community college] issues” described in the presentations. Moreover, P3 was *considering* pursuing a professional career in community college counseling: “I’m still pretty uncertain ... But I know that I want to work with community college students in some capacity. ... I might be considering becoming a counselor.”

Regarding research interests, a few students were *considering* focusing on community college studies as one of their areas of research. P11 said “[the presentations] changed my [research] career actually. I think before this ... I wasn't interested in education. And after ... [community college students are] like [one of] my population[s] I’m interested in.” Furthermore,

P2 said “Most of my past research has focused on Latinx [freshmen-admit university] students. ... [But the presentations] encourages me to focus in and perhaps do some [research] work at the community college as well.”

Discussion

I identified two themes based on the interview data. The first theme was that the presentations improved most attendees’ perceptions of community colleges. It specifically improved most attendees’ perceptions of their own community college student identity and perceptions of other community college students. Among other things, these improved perceptions possibly stemmed from the presentations dispelling negative stereotypes and dismantling a deficit thinking paradigm. In general, attendees felt empowered and recognized the strengths of community college students.

The second theme was that the presentations improved most students’ interest and ability in community college advocacy. Many students engaged in various forms of advocacy outside and/or inside institutional roles. A common form of advocacy was sharing the knowledge they gained from the presentations to (a) empower and motivate peers who were struggling in community college or (b) combat other people’s community college stigma. The presentations also encouraged some attendees to take on institutional roles where they can formally advocate for community college students. Lastly, the presentations also influenced some attendees’ future educational and career goals (i.e., pursuing careers in community colleges or conducting research on community colleges).

My findings align with past work on the impact of community college studies curriculum on community college perceptions and advocacy (Rex, 2017; Romano et al., 2009; Royer et al., 2016). Furthermore, my findings align with curricular research in other fields of study. For

example, research suggests that ethnic studies (Halagao, 2010; Marrun, 2018; Sleeter, 2011) and gender studies (Kirkup et al., 2015; Stake, 2006; Stake & Rose, 1994) curriculum improves perceptions and activism around race/ethnicity and gender, respectively.

Limitations

First, the study participants – who were in the CC2PhD Scholars Program – may not have felt comfortable speaking candidly because I was the CC2PhD program director. Second, CC2PhD participants were only required to attend half of all CC2PhD events.⁵ As such, most students only attended a subset of the seven community college studies presentations. Third, many participants would describe multiple factors that contributed to their changed community college perceptions and advocacy: the community college studies presentations, CC2PhD's research and PhD preparation program, their experiences at their community college campus, or other university-sponsored outreach programs for community college students. Even so, many participants said that the presentations were an important contributor, albeit not the sole contributor, to changes observed in this study.

This study also has generalizability limitations. Community college students who were admitted to and completed CC2PhD's 7-month research and PhD preparation program are not representative of the typical community college student. For example, CC2PhD required a lengthy application process and applicants self-certified that they were interested in pursuing a social science PhD. Furthermore, the monthly community college studies presentation series may not be generalizable to other formats such as a semester-long course (Royer et al., 2016) or a one-day symposium (Appalachian State University, n.d.; Rex, 2017).

Implications for Practice and Research

Future researchers and practitioners can fill in methodological and implementation gaps from this study. Examples include evaluating a stand-alone community college studies curriculum without any other associated programming that may confound the results, recruiting representative community college students, minimizing researcher-participant power imbalances, and using an experimental study design to determine causal relationships.

There are also gaps to be addressed in the wider research literature. Researchers should survey students, particularly community college students and transfer students, to examine if they would be interested in enrolling in a community college studies course. If there is interest in such a course, instructors should investigate the efficacy of incorporating research projects or service learning to increase engagement in the community college studies course.

Building on Royer et al.'s (2021) curricular audit of community college studies courses at the graduate level, researchers should investigate the extent to which community college studies courses are available at the undergraduate level. Researchers can also survey the chairs of education departments to investigate the reasons why a community college studies course (at the undergraduate or graduate level) is not offered. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2013) state that there are relatively few professors who conduct research on community colleges. So, would education professors – who specialize in other research topics – be interested or willing to teach a community college studies course?

Researchers and practitioners should also explore effective ways of incorporating community college studies in a compact one-time manner. For example, during orientation for incoming students or diversity training for professors and staff.

As mentioned before, there are other ways to improve perceptions of community colleges beyond community college studies curriculum (Adams, 2021; Jain et al., 2017; Miles, 2010; Robinson, 2022). Future research should compare the efficacy of interventions that incorporate community college studies compared to interventions that do not.

Shifting away from community college studies curriculum, I will now focus on recommendations related to this study's outcomes of interest: community college perceptions and advocacy. Building off past work, future research should quantitatively study the impact of self-perception of community college student (or transfer student) identity on academic outcomes (Hartman & Mayo, 2022; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016; Zuckerman & Lo, 2021). Furthermore, there have been a couple studies on community college advocacy from community college professionals (Baime, 2022; Mayfield et al., 2022; White, 2022) and community college student leaders (Miles, 2010; Miles et al., 2011). However, future research is needed to study transfer students' engagement in community college advocacy. This is a ripe area for study as some universities have transfer student specific clubs and elected student government positions specifically designated to represent the transfer student constituency (Adams, 2021).

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Notes

¹ Refer to the following parenthetical citation for analysis of research trends within community college studies (Coulson-Johnston et al., 2022; Crisp et al., 2016; Eddy & Khwaja, 2019; Floyd et al., 2016; Skidmore et al., 2014).

² CC2PhD hosted the community college studies presentation series as a one-time series (i.e., this presentation series was not implemented the following year). While somewhat related, this presentation series was not the focus of the CC2PhD Scholars Program. Instead, the mission of CC2PhD was to help diversify academia by providing community college students with training in undergraduate research and PhD preparation.

³ According to Valencia (1997), deficit thinking “posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) ... [Whereas] systemic factors (for example, school segregation; inequalities in school financing; curriculum differentiation) are held blameless” (p. xi).

⁴ One interesting implication from my findings is that community college students are capable of stigmatizing other community college students and transfer students. In other words, being a community college alumni may not necessarily make you immune to bias against community colleges.

⁵ CC2PhD participants were only required to attend half of CC2PhD’s 27 events, which included seven community college studies presentations, nine research methods presentations, and 11 PhD preparation presentations. As an incentive, CC2PhD participants received additional funding for each additional presentation they attended that was beyond the half threshold.