

Cultivating Success: 25 Years of Empowering Black Student Retention Through the Transitions Program

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author delves into the transformative impact of the Transitions Program on student success, illuminating its effectiveness in cultivating strong cultural foundations and fostering a steadfast commitment to retaining Black first-year students. Through the efforts and resources provided through the African American Cultural & Resource Center (AACRC) at the University of Cincinnati (UC), the Transitions Program emerges as a crucial pillar in equipping Black students for not only a successful collegiate journey but also for thriving in their post-college lives and careers.

Keywords: Transitions, Black, first-year

AIN'T NO STOPPING US NOW

On November 13, 1999, a new initiative was born at the University of Cincinnati's African American Cultural & Research Center, promising to benefit historically under-represented first-year students navigating the often-challenging waters of higher education. Spearheaded by the visionary Drs. Stacy L. Downing and P. Eric Abercrombie, the initiative resonated with the spirit of its theme song, "Ain't No Stopping Us Now." In its inaugural year, Transitions, which was and has been intended for first-year Black students to assist with their transition from high school to college during their first year of college, proudly graduated nine tenacious students, a testament to the students' resilience and determination.

The pioneering program introduced a Rites of Passage curriculum that would assist the university in achieving higher retention and graduation rates for Black students. Today, Transitions not only facilitates students' adjustment to college life through peer mentoring, workshops, and study resources, but also fosters vital connections with staff, faculty, administrators, and upper-classmen students, creating a safe and supportive community within the University of Cincinnati.

Three fundamental principles are now the backbone of the program's mission:

- Connecting cultural consciousness
- Emerging creative minds
- Affirming positive attitudes

By the 2001-2002 academic school year, the program wove traditions into its fabric, such as the opening dance that symbolizes unity, the passing of the light ceremony, and the acceptance of the charge at the AACRC's annual leadership formal ball. These rituals not only celebrate students' intellect, talent, and individuality but also instill a resounding affirmation: "Ain't No Stopping Us Now!"

rites of passage

A rite of passage can be defined as a ritual, event, or experience that marks or constitutes a major milestone or change in a person's life, for example transitioning from high school to college (Lebese et al., 2022). Since its inception, Transitions has embraced this model to encourage participating students that they are future leaders of the University of Cincinnati and a broader tomorrow who are capable of effecting change in their communities and beyond.

This is evident in the impressive achievements of alumni, many of whom have become prominent figures on campus, actively engaging in student government and leading various organizations—in fraternities and sororities and in roles as Resident Assistants (RAs), Student Orientation Leaders (SOLs), United Black Student Association (UBSA), and many more. Nearly 70% of students who have completed the program have also volunteered their time and talents back into the program by acting as mentors for incoming students, all while exemplifying a standard of excellence both in and outside the classroom.

One poignant example highlights a student who used the numerous skills and resources from the program and emerged as a future leader who advocated for change within the Black community at UC during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. This individual used her experience to fuel her activism, demonstrating how the program's curriculum extends beyond the classroom with lasting impacts on social justice initiatives in the greater Cincinnati community and beyond.

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

On August 24, 2015, a coalition of passionate Black leaders convened to address the University's response—or alarming lack thereof—to the tragic shooting of Samuel DuBose, an event that shook the Black campus community to its core. DuBose was fatally shot by a UC police officer, Ray Tensing, during an off-campus traffic stop on July 19, 2015 (Graves, 2015). The discussion quickly evolved into a critical examination of systematic issues facing Black students and the surrounding community. Thus was born the Irate 8, a group of students dedicated to amplifying the voices of Black students at UC while linking their struggles to the national Black Lives Matter movement. Their mission was clear: reform the institutionalized policies that contributed to an unsafe experience for many (Graves, 2015).

The name "Irate8" reflected the percentage of Black students enrolled at UC during the 2014-15 academic year, highlighting the urgent need for change. The group was co-founded by Ashley Nkadi and Brittany Bibb, a participant in the Transitions Program. This coalition garnered significant attention from social media and the sitting UC President at the time. Nkadi and Bibb's advocacy, along with their coalition of 30 to 40 students, aimed to ensure their beloved campus was a safe and inclusive place for minority students, a characteristic that would later contribute to this population's recruitment and retention (Graves, 2015).

In their pursuit of a secure and equitable campus climate, the Irate 8 presented ten compelling demands to university administration, addressing critical issues ranging from enhanced racial awareness training to the urgent need for increased Black faculty and student representation. Their determined stance not only sparked discussions on campus but also broader movements for change within academic institutions. A few of the ten demands that reflected the adjustments they felt should have been made to the University's policies, budget, procedures, and curriculum include:

II. We demand that the University of Cincinnati enforces a fully funded comprehensive racial awareness curriculum that is mandatory for all students, faculty, staff, and police structured by a caucus comprised of students, community members, and administrators of diverse backgrounds to be put in place by the start of the 2017–2018 academic year.

VII. We demand the University of Cincinnati doubles the number of Black students on main campus over the next 3 years, starting today, October 14, 2015.

VIII. We demand that the University of Cincinnati builds a stand-alone AACRC or renovates for all of 60 W. Charlton to belong to the AACRC by August 1, 2018 (Brennan & Eaton, 2015).

A NEW TRANSITIONS

After graduating from UC, Bibb continued her impactful leadership, steering the Transitions Program into new territories. In 2018, she established the Early Arrival Program (EAP), designed to prepare incoming Black students for college and beyond, connect them with resources, and build community on campus. This three-day program offers students early move-in and a chance to learn about university expectations for student learning and behavior. During the program, students develop a sense of belonging by cultivating meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and learn about campus resources such as Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS), the Center for Community Engagement (CCE), the Student Wellness Center, Enrollment Services, and the Learning Commons. Ninety-four students participated in a survey immediately after the Early Arrival Program. The results support the program's success:

- **Over 90%** of participants felt the program set a positive tone for their first year, providing a strong foundation for their academic journey.
- **Over 90%** agreed that they found a sense of belonging through the program, highlighting its role in community building.
- **Over 90%** of participants felt that the program helped them get acclimated to campus prior to classes, educating students on the resources provided to them.
- **Over 90%** indicated that the EAP sessions were both helpful and informative, equipping students with essential skills for success.

In the fall of 2019, the Abercrombie Living Learning Community (ALLC) was launched in collaboration with Ethnic Programs & Services (EPS) and Residential Education & Development (RED). The community is dedicated to Dr. P. Eric Abercrombie, the former director of the AACRC who served as UC’s Executive Director for Special Initiatives and Community Relations during his almost 50-year legacy of working at UC. The ALLC is a residence-based learning community in Turner Hall for students accepted into the Darwin T. Turner Scholars Program (a program dedicated to enriching the educational environment for undergraduate students by supporting the recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups with high potential for academic success at UC) and/or the Transitions Program. Participants live in an environment that fosters personal and social identity development, leadership engagement, and academic success. Students participate in a variety of service-learning projects and meet monthly (ALLC, 2019). Members of this community engage in dialogue and reflection that facilitate a sense of pride in one’s racial and ethnic identity and their other intersecting identities. The ALLC has positively affected students’ academic success, has positively impacted their personal, academic, and professional strengths, and has helped students interact and connect with their peers (ALLC, 2019).

RESHAPING TRANSITIONS

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought uncertainty and change to higher education, Transitions has continued to thrive, adapting its approach to provide support and resources to students in innovative ways. Moreover, in the fall of 2024 Jacquelyn Taylor, who is the Assistant Director of Leadership and Engagement, created and introduced a required Transitions First-Year Experience course that focuses on creating a foundation for

academic and personal success. This class aims to further bolster the retention of Black students who are in the Transitions Program. The curriculum is focused on retaining these students not only from first year to second year but on highlighting retention practices from first to second semester.

The program’s outcomes are impressive, with a clear upward trend of retention for Black students compared to the general population, emphasizing the effectiveness of the program:

FIGURE 1.

Number of first time degree seeking Black students

COHORT YEAR	UC PERCENTAGE	TRANSITIONS PERCENTAGE
2017	85.9% (82.5% Black)	95%
2018	88.2% (85.2% Black)	98%
2019	88.2% (86.8% Black)	83%
2020	86.5% (84.1% Black)	95%
2021	86.2% (78.2% Black)	97%
2022	85.7% (75.9% Black)	97%
2023	85.3% (77.1% Black)	95%

Note: Percentages based on an estimated 800 Black first-year students

The Transitions First-Year Experience course, which emulates the framework from the early days of the Transitions Program, continues to assist students in cultivating a sense of belonging at the University of Cincinnati. Through the curriculum, students establish support networks within the university and the broader Cincinnati community and develop skills to support overall success during their first year of college (academic, leadership, personal, professional, and social).

Through weekly classes, students develop an affinity for the AACRC and UC, nurture and develop cultural foundations, participate in AACRC signature events, and engage in community service opportunities to empower them to be change agents in their local and greater communities.

As a result of actively engaging in this course, students will be able to (Taylor, 2024):

1. Identify strategies and resources that will enhance their academic, personal, social, and leadership development.
2. Expand their success network of faculty, staff, and peers that can support their campus engagement and belonging.
3. Examine how their background and experiences shape their value, wellness, and social change to utilize campus resources as a student of color.
4. Describe how they plan to engage and contribute to the community and culture of the University of Cincinnati and the AACRC.
5. Define the importance of diversity and inclusion policies and practices in work environments in the U.S. and globally.

The course emphasizes the following UC baccalaureate competencies:

- Effective Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Knowledge Integration
- Social Responsibility

During class, students engage in large and small-group discussions and hands-on activities facilitated by peer leaders to meet course outcomes that build a sense of belonging and culture of community. Students' participation and engagement play a vital role in their learning. They are expected to openly share their ideas and express their opinions in class, respect the opinions, values, and identities of their classmates, instructors, and guests, and honor the open environment of the class by respecting confidentiality when appropriate. In addition, students will engage in community service opportunities at their own pace, completing a total of ten community service hours by the end of the school year. Students are also required to complete weekly one- to two-hour sign-ins in the AACRC, complete three academic coaching appointments through UC's Learning Commons during their first semester, and participate in AACRC signature events.

TRANSITIONS IN ACTION

This course helps students develop effective communication, critical thinking skills, knowledge integration, and social responsibility through in-class activities and out-of-class reflection pieces. Throughout the semester, students engage in opportunities and receive regular feedback which

challenges them to improve in these areas and think more broadly about their impact, using these skills as tools. At the end of the semester, these competencies are assessed through the completion of a survey to determine which skills they have advanced or improved from the start to the end of their first semester (Taylor, 2024).

Experiential Learning Examples

1. One specific AACRC signature event that students are required to participate in is Kuamka which means "in the beginning" in Swahili. Kuamka is a co-ed leadership pageant and celebrates a week of exciting events highlighting Black excellence (Kuamka, 2012). Ending the week with a Red, Black, Green, and Gold Ball, which symbolizes Pan-Africanism, Transitions students are recognized during the Ball as the next campus leaders, and they participate in a traditional cohort dance performed in front of guests at the Ball. This cohort dance is one that builds camaraderie and sense of community and focuses on nurturing and developing cultural foundations.
2. To give students insight into being a part of an effective leadership team, students were required to create a program for a registered student organization. Through this assignment, students were placed in groups and submit a program proposal that outlines in full detail what the program entails (description, target audience, purpose, materials needed, budget, etc.). This assignment gave students the opportunity to engage in and develop leadership skills that are important in the professional world.
3. Community service is a core value at the University of Cincinnati and enhances students' personal development. As students are required to complete at least ten hours of community service while in the program, our students are dedicated to being involved in the greater-Cincinnati community through service. Our students can often be found involved with Bearcat Buddies. Bearcat Buddies is a tutoring program offered through the Center for Community Engagement (CCE). Students who are interested in serving as volunteers, tutoring and helping Cincinnati Public Schools' students achieve academic success (Bearcat Buddies, 2010).

These examples highlight just a few of the experiential components of the program that enhance students' knowledge, help them gain a broader view of the world, and integrate learning beyond the classroom environment.

25 YEARS AND BEYOND: RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

The year 2024 marks the 25th anniversary of the Transitions program. The Transitions Program has consistently demonstrated its ability to improve student retention and graduation rates, fostering an environment where students not only survive but thrive.

Participants of the program echo this sentiment, saying:

“The program has helped me successfully transition from high school to college by surrounding me with people of similar backgrounds who uplift my endeavors. The AACRC staff has been incredibly supportive, providing resources that foster my growth and cultural understanding. I’m grateful to find community as a Black woman in a predominantly white institution.”

Transitions 2021 participant

“I can’t pinpoint a specific moment, but the first three months of Transitions really was imperative for me. Without it, I don’t know what my college life would look like. In those three months, I met my best friends, gained mentors that I know I can go to for further support, and being in this program provided me with a sense of community.”

Transitions 2023 participant

Coupled with six-year graduation data of Black students from the University of Cincinnati (see Figure 2 below), student participant testimony provides additional proof of the program’s efficacy and necessity.

With close to 1,000 students who have participated in the program since 1999, the program has been guided by dedicated leaders who have helped Transitions evolve into its current form.

However, financial limitations have forced the Transitions Program to turn away over 100 potential participants this year alone, significantly impacting the vital skill development of this community. With over 53,000 students enrolled at the University of Cincinnati (Ricks, 2024), of which 9.3% are Black, the demand for support within this demographic has never been greater. As the university continues to grow and evolve, it is imperative that the needs of the Transitions Program are met with urgency and commitment. The success of the Transitions Program is not merely a statistic; it is reflected in the transformed lives of students who go on to pursue fulfilling careers and contribute positively to their communities.

FIGURE 2.

Number of first time degree seeking Black students

COHORT YEAR	UC PERCENTAGE	TRANSITIONS PERCENTAGE
2012	68% (59.8% Black)	58%
2013	71.3% (62.9% Black)	79%
2014	72.8% (67.5% Black)	58%
2015	73% (63.7% Black)	70%
2016	72% (63.5% Black)	68%
2017	71.5% (55.4% Black)	72%
2018	TBD	73%

Note: Data includes first-time, full-time Bachelor’s degree seeking undergraduates at the UC Clifton campus.

As we look ahead to the next 25 years, we aspire to deepen our impact and broaden our reach. We hope that we can fulfill our promise to create a nurturing environment that champions academic excellence, personal growth, and community engagement. In addition, we want to foster a new generation of leaders who are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world. The program has aspirations of adding a scholarship fund to the program, cultivating a culture of philanthropy that empowers our students to live, learn, give, and earn in ways that enrich not just their lives, but the lives of those around them. Lastly, support will allow us to expand our outreach and serve a greater number of students who are eager to engage in a transformative educational journey.

CONCLUSION

The Transitions Program at the University of Cincinnati stands as a powerful testament to the importance of intentional support for Black students navigating the complexities of higher education. Since its inception in 1999, this transformative initiative has not only fostered a sense of community but has also significantly impacted retention and graduation rates among Black students at the University of Cincinnati. Through its comprehensive approach, which includes mentorship, cultural consciousness, and leadership development, the program equips students with the tools necessary for academic success and personal growth.

Key highlights from the article underscore the program’s foundational principles—connecting cultural consciousness, nurturing emerging creative minds, and affirming positive attitudes—each contributing to an environment where students feel valued and empowered. The introduction of innovative initiatives like the Early Arrival Program and the Abercrombie Living Learning Community further enhance the support network available to students, ensuring they are well-prepared for the challenges of college life.

The success stories of Transitions alumni exemplify the program’s profound impact, as many graduates have gone on to become leaders within the university and their communities, advocating for change and equity. The formation of groups like the Irate8 illustrates the program’s role in fostering civic engagement and social justice among students, showcasing how academic experiences can intersect with broader societal movements.

As the Transitions Program celebrates its 25th anniversary, the commitment to nurturing future leaders remains steadfast. Looking ahead, the aspiration to expand outreach and deepen impact reflects a dedication to creating a thriving, inclusive academic environment. With the potential addition of scholarship funds, the program aims to cultivate a culture of philanthropy that not only enriches the lives of individual students but also enhances the collective experi-

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ence of the entire UC community.

In conclusion, the Transitions Program is more than just a support initiative; it is a lifeline for Black students, a catalyst for change, and a beacon of hope for a more equitable future in higher education. As it moves forward, the program will undoubtedly continue to inspire and empower generations of students, proving that indeed, “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now!”

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