At many elite universities, transfer students are an exotic group, comprising a tiny subset of the undergraduate population. Stanford and Yale enrolled 29 new transfers apiece in 2014, Harvard 12. Princeton has not enrolled any transfers since 1990.

Would-be transfer students typically seek to land at public universities, where they find open doors, low in-state tuition and large numbers of classmates who share their life experiences. But some prominent private schools also have established major pipelines for these students. One of the biggest is at the University of Southern California, ranked 23rd on the U.S. News & World Report list of national universities.

USC enrolled 1,435 new transfers in 2014, nearly half the size of its freshman class that fall. A huge share of those transfers came from community colleges.

At USC’s 133rd commencement on Friday in Los Angeles, it will award 5,662 bachelor’s degrees. Fifteen percent, or 831, of those diplomas will go to students who started their higher education journey at a community college.

One of them is Nicole Daviau.

“It’s so awesome,” Daviau, 27, said this week as she prepared to don a cap and gown to accept her degree in business administration. “It doesn’t feel real. It’s definitely been a long climb. It wasn’t like I was told from birth that I was going to go to college, and that I was going to USC.”

Daughter of a waitress and a musician — neither of whom has a college degree — Daviau said she dropped out of high school in ninth grade and went through “a teenage angsty phase.” She floated for a few years, working as a babysitter and getting jobs in a sandwich shop and elsewhere until she managed to earn her GED high school equivalency certificate in 2008.

Then she enrolled in a public two-year school called Los Angeles Harbor College. She ended up spending nearly six years there, taking music classes and working part time. Lengthy, winding academic pathways are common at community colleges.

Eventually a professor spotted her potential and challenged her to apply to USC. Daviau had applied to various California State University campuses and was almost certain that she would go to one in Dominguez Hills. But she applied to USC and was surprised to get in with a substantial financial aid package to offset much of the hefty sticker price. Tuition and fees at USC are about $52,000 a year, not including food, housing and other expenses. Daviau said she will graduate with about $26,000 in student loan debt. “It’s definitely manageable,” she said.

It was not easy after she got in, Daviau said. She was a commuter student, riding the bus or driving from her apartment in Harbor City to the campus 22 miles away. She was struck by the wealth of USC and many of its students. “It was a culture shock,” she said. “The amount of money thrown around at the school is amazing.”

But she packed a lot of learning into two years. She traveled to the United Arab Emirates with classmates, got to know the faculty of the Marshall School of Business, became active in USC’s transfer student community and lined up a job with Aramark...
Corp. after graduation. For kicks, she also took a surfing class with USC at the beach in Santa Monica. “They give you the board and the wet suit and everything,” she said.

When she thinks back on her childhood, Daviau said she is amazed at the prospect of being a graduate of any college, let alone USC. “I can count on one hand the number of people who went to school with me who actually pushed through higher education,” she said.

USC President C. L. Max Nikias said the university views finding and educating students like Daviau as core to its mission. “We feel very strongly that this is one of the things we ought to be doing, providing access to people to get a USC degree,” he said. “You give opportunity to kids from all walks of life.”

Nikias cited filmmaker George Lucas as one of many examples of notable USC grads who transferred from a community college. Transfer students are just as successful as those who start as freshmen, he said.

“They come to us well-prepared,” he said. “We cherry-pick the very best graduates from the community colleges. We want to make sure when they come here they succeed.”

Starting in community college also helps students save money. “You can get a USC degree with less cost and the same value,” Nikias said.

Transferring also is part of the educational culture of the nation’s most populous state. California’s famous “Master Plan for Higher Education” in 1960 envisioned community colleges, the Cal State system and the UC system working in sync to propel students through college. Many thousands transfer every year into the public Cal State and UC schools. Although private, USC benefits from, and takes advantage of, this strong tradition of student mobility in the Golden State.

Harold O. Levy, executive director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which promotes college access for disadvantaged students, said top private schools should provide more opportunities to transfer students, especially those from community colleges. These schools, with millions of students, represent a huge and diverse pool of talent. “Many colleges don’t appreciate the strength of these students,” he said. “It’s been a revelation to some of them that the caliber and quality of these students can be exceptional.”

Levy cited USC, Vassar College and Cornell University as examples of schools that are serious about recruiting transfers. “These are colleges that recognize that where you started college may be no indication of your capacity of mind,” Levy said.

Princeton announced in February that it will soon reinstate “a small transfer admissions program as a way to attract students with diverse backgrounds and experiences.” The Ivy League university in New Jersey said its effort will target, among others, military veterans and students from low-income backgrounds, including some who began at community colleges. But Princeton said the program will not be in place until 2018 at the earliest.

Following are the total number of new transfer students who enrolled at selected prominent universities in fall 2014. They are listed in descending order. The source of the data is school responses to the Common Data Set questionnaire.

- University of California at Los Angeles: 3,167
- University of California at Berkeley: 2,187
- University of Southern California (USC): 1,435
- University of Michigan: 1,041
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: 886
- New York University: 854
- University of Virginia: 665
- Cornell: 554
- Vanderbilt: 207
- University of Pennsylvania: 150
- Georgetown: 148
- University of Notre Dame: 118
- Washington University in St. Louis: 110
- Northwestern: 55
- Brown: 51
- Johns Hopkins: 40
- Rice: 31
- Wake Forest: 30
- Stanford: 29
- Yale: 29
- Carnegie Mellon: 20
- MIT: 16
- Dartmouth: 14
- Duke: 13
- Harvard: 12
- Caltech: 3
- Princeton: 0