

Connection by Design

Students' Perceptions of Their
Community College Experiences



**COMPLETION
BY DESIGN**

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The design concept for this report is an abstract, yet highly focused, graphical representation of student voices. Each color signifies the involved states; all together, the colors represent the states working in concert to paint a larger picture that resembles a sound wave (graphic equalizer). The sound wave represents all of the voices and discussions heard during the student focus groups.



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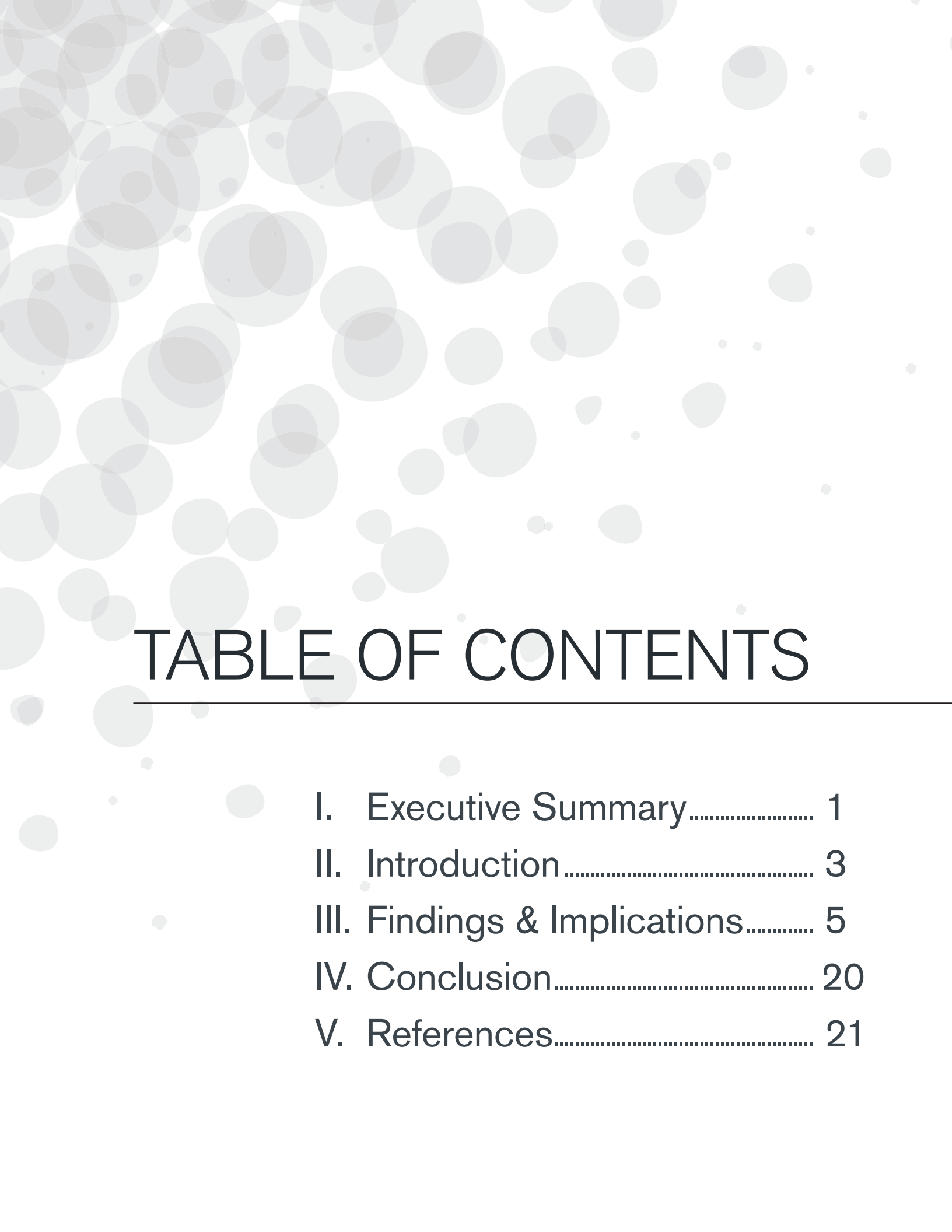


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across focus groups consisting of current and former community college students in four states (Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas), a consistent message resounded: Students want to be more connected to their colleges, from the moment they enter until the day they complete their studies. They want to feel more connected to faculty, staff, and peers. They want to be more engaged by their classes and to feel more supported by services they receive. And they want to see colleges be more deliberate in ensuring those connections.

Connection by Design is the second of two reports based on student focus group discussions conducted in spring 2012 by staff from WestEd and Public Agenda. It supports the findings from the first report, *Student Voices on the Higher Education Pathway* (Public Agenda & WestEd, 2012), about college students' desire to receive transparent, accessible, accurate, and timely information leading up to and during their college experiences. In addition, it analyzes students' ideas about their community college experiences as they related to several strategies for increasing college completion rates. The focus groups discussed information delivery methods and student supports, including orientation, student success courses, advising, and alert systems; instructional services, including developmental education and entry into a program of study; and career preparation and exploration.

The study sample was too small to offer definitive findings across all student populations, but the following key issues arose during the discussions:

- ◇ In making college-related decisions, students often do not know which questions to ask until it is too late. They want colleges to anticipate their questions and provide them with information more quickly and consistently.
- ◇ Given their busy schedules, many students are concerned about more services becoming mandatory, including orientation and student success courses. If a service is mandatory, they want it to be of high quality, engaging, and clearly connected to their plans and goals.
- ◇ Students understand that they cannot always receive individualized, in-person attention. In fact, they want colleges to do a better job in determining which services and information are best provided one on one and which could be provided effectively through group and online experiences.
- ◇ Many students would welcome receiving individualized information by email or text message. Many of those at risk of not completing college want colleges to be more proactive in reaching out to them with additional supports.
- ◇ Many former students who have dropped out want colleges to be more proactive in inviting them to return and letting them know *how* to return.
- ◇ Many students are dissatisfied with college websites; they want sites to be more interactive, with online information that is dynamic, accurate, and timely.
- ◇ Students understand why most support services are provided when students enter college, but they want to be able to access supports throughout their college experiences.
- ◇ Few focus group participants had participated in accelerated developmental education offerings, but many think they would be good options to replace a traditional developmental education sequence.
- ◇ Overall, students understand the pros and cons of choosing educational goals and entering into a program of study soon after starting college versus exploring a variety of options for one or more years. Most wish that their college had provided them with more structured opportunities to explore their options.

INTRODUCTION

Long known for their success in expanding access to college, community colleges in the United States are also striving to increase college *completion*. As they deal with ever-tightening budgets, many community colleges are considering how to redesign programs and services to be both more effective and more efficient in helping substantially larger numbers of students to earn certificates or degrees. As colleges engage in these efforts, many educators are seeking to learn more about students' perceptions of the programs and services they receive. Students may not always understand precisely which processes or policies would most help them succeed in their higher education, but their insights can be useful in informing college redesign. This report is intended to assist administrators, faculty, and other college staff by providing information about students' perspectives of their college experiences, from their first connections with college to their completion of a credential.

An overarching theme that emerged from focus group discussions conducted for this project is that students want to feel connected and engaged with their college — with instructors, staff members, and

peers and with the information and other services available to them. Moreover, they are looking for their college to play a more purposeful role in making them feel connected — hence, *Connection by Design*.

Many researchers have already sought to examine specific areas of community college experiences through students' eyes (see, for example, Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2009, 2012; Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006; and Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). This report adds to that growing body of student-voice literature, drawing from focus group discussions with current and former community college students about factors that may have helped or hindered their progress in college. *Connection by Design* is the second report based on the focus groups, which were conducted for Completion by Design (<http://completionbydesign.org/>) in March 2012 by staff from Public Agenda and WestEd. The first report, *Student Voices on the Higher Education Pathway* (Public Agenda & WestEd, 2012) (http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/student_voices.pdf), identified some general themes from the discussions (see "Students Speak," below). This second report delves into the

STUDENTS SPEAK

Student Voices on the Higher Education Pathway, authored by Public Agenda with support from WestEd, identified five overall themes that emerged from discussions with and among current and former community college students:

- Students reported wanting more exposure to career possibilities so that they could make better-informed decisions about the goals they set out to achieve and the steps necessary for success.
- While former and current community college students consistently reported that they had not been ready for college, most believed that the student success and developmental education courses intended to bring them up to speed were not offered in a way that helped them succeed.
- Participants believed that having clear goals, and being in programs with well-defined pathways, gave them a greater chance of persisting, completing, or transferring.
- Students reported that advisors, counselors, and faculty members who offer support and guidance that is accurate, accessible, and tailored to students' education and career goals are in high demand and can be hard to come by.
- Students are aware that colleges offer a wide range of services, but they reported that finding the specific information or services they need often requires going on a "wild goose chase" and navigating silos.

student discussions using a different lens. Specifically, it maps what students had to say about their community college experiences in relation to several major strategies for increasing college completion rates. When possible, the report offers suggested next steps extrapolated from the findings.

The focus groups were conducted by WestEd and Public Agenda in four states (Florida, North Carolina, Ohio,

and Texas), and each group was composed of one of three types of community college students:

1. current students,
2. completers — that is, those who had successfully completed community college, earning either a degree or a certificate and/or transferring to a four-year college, and

RESEARCH SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The data that informed this report was drawn from 15 two-hour focus groups conducted in March 2012 with 161 individuals from Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. The individuals in the focus groups represented three types of relationship to community college: those currently enrolled (“current students”), those who had completed a degree or certificate (“completers”), and those who had dropped out (“non-completers”). Current students ranged in age from 18 to 27 years old, while completers and non-completers ranged in age from 24 and 29 years old. The greatest number of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, followed by African American and Hispanic. Employed participants held jobs ranging from administrative to management roles in various industries, with health care and technology the most common. The main areas of focus group inquiry included:

- Attitudes toward higher education attainment
- Factors influencing decisions to go to college
- College readiness
- Early experiences in college, especially with developmental education, orientation, and student success courses
- Beliefs about and experience of determining a program of study
- Institutional supports for, or barriers to, completion
- Use of technology as it related to their community college experiences (current students)
- Recommended changes that might have helped them to persist and complete college degrees or certificates

This report is the second of two reports by Public Agenda and WestEd that analyze this focus group research. The first report provided information based on preliminary analyses of the transcripts; this report provides additional analyses in relation to five major reform areas in which the community colleges are working to improve completion rates for large numbers of students.

For this report, a team of four researchers read and coded the 15 focus group transcripts. First, they identified key themes and issues that arose from the discussions across the topics covered in focus group protocols. Next, they created a coding system to categorize findings across central themes and subthemes and engaged in a calibration process to ensure consistency in coding across team members. Once the codes were established, the individual researchers coded the transcripts — first across all student group types within one state and then across all states for each student group type. After every round of coding, researchers discussed key findings, documented evidence related to the findings, and identified relevant quotes. The focus group toolkit, from which the interview questions used for the focus groups were developed, can be accessed at <http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/resource/424>.

Qualitative research can be used to explore issues and generate a deep understanding of problems. However, the conclusions drawn from small-scale research of this kind should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive.

3. non-completers — that is, those who had left college without earning a degree or certificate and who did not transfer.¹

The purpose of having separate focus groups for each type of student was to learn what, if any, common experiences or differences might exist between them (particularly between completers and non-completers) that could be useful for colleges to know about and act upon. What we learned is that, while life challenges varied between individual students, the differences in college experiences across the three student types were relatively minor and similar life challenges were common. We did not find a common college service, support, relationship, or circumstance that helped those in the “completer” group to finish or, conversely, that prompted those in the “non-completer” group to leave without finishing.

In fact, we found the three types of students to be less distinct from one another than expected. For example, many in the “completer” group had struggled

as students, with some having dropped out and re-enrolled. The same was true for current students. Meanwhile, many non-completers were considering returning to college and six months hence might be considered “current students.” One clear message from non-completers as a whole was that they would welcome outreach efforts to encourage them to re-enroll.

The study sample was too small to offer conclusive findings, but one implication is that community colleges appear to be on the right track in their efforts to improve completion rates by focusing across the full continuum of students’ college experiences, from the first connection students have with college to the final class they take and services they receive. Moreover, the fact that students in the different focus groups were more similar than different in how they experienced college may add credence to their shared perceptions of what did and did not work for them in their own community college.

¹ For the methodology underlying this report, see page 3.



FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

During the focus group discussions, the theme of connecting “by design” resonated in important ways with both current and former students. Participants spoke of wanting to feel tightly connected to their college: In addition to interacting with their peers, they want to feel connected with faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about their field, informed about the college, and supportive of the students’ needs. They want support services to be connected to their coursework and their majors and tailored to their needs and goals. And they want college faculty and other staff to help them understand the connections between their coursework and their career prospects. The participants’ emphasis on the importance of connections across the campus reflects Completion by Design’s focus on breaking down silos and linking departments and services. The concept of connection is not one that focus group leaders introduced or queried students about; rather, it was introduced by the participants themselves in the course of discussion.

In unpacking the overall theme of connection, this report maps students’ perspectives onto several major reform areas that are of interest to colleges participating in Completion by Design. Specifically, the findings are presented as follows:

1. Connecting to information and supports
 - » Orientation sessions
 - » Student success courses
 - » Advisement and early alert systems
2. Connecting to instructional services
 - » Developmental education
 - » Programs of study
3. Connecting to careers and/or career exploration

In each of these areas, we provide information about: services that appear to be working well from students’ perspectives; key challenges that participants

described; and students’ ideas about improvements colleges could make.

1. Connecting to Information and Supports

Across the discussions, focus group participants reported a need for transparent, accessible, accurate, and timely information. In describing how they received information that was useful to them, many participants were quick to mention counselors or instructors who had shown an interest in them, providing them with a connection to the college and what it had to offer:

“I felt like my advisor was extremely helpful [in making] sure my classes transferred correctly for me. He knew that my goal was to transfer [and that] I needed to ensure that everything would transfer correctly.” (Completer)

“My advisor was specifically in [my major] so she knew what I needed to take. She mapped it out for me the first time I met her. She had this form. We sat down and filled it out together, and that’s what we followed all the way through.” (Completer)

“I feel like my teachers know me. They recognize me in the hallway, even if I had them last semester ... I can go to them.” (Current student)

However, many participants also reported having had substantial problems in figuring out where to go to get accurate information or to access needed support. As noted in *Student Voices*, students generally were “aware that colleges offer a wide range of services, but they report that finding the specific information or services they need often requires going on a ‘wild goose chase’ and navigating silos” (p. 4).

When asked to characterize their need for information, participants described a range of issues. On one end of the spectrum is information that students

consider to be routine or generic. For example, they might know they need to sign up for a course, pay an invoice, get approval for a course load, or access a tutoring service, but they do not know how or where to do these things.

At the other end of the spectrum are more complex needs for information, including information that is personalized. For example, many participants reported knowing that they should choose a major as soon as possible but said they did not know how to find information about the different program options or about how different options related to their specific career interests. Similarly, some spoke about having known that they wanted to transfer to a four-year college, but not having been aware that certain courses would not transfer.

Most troubling, participants reported, is not knowing *what* information they need or what questions they *should* be asking. Sometimes, they said, they simply are not aware that they need information until it is too late. For example, some students reported that they had enrolled in a course only to find out later that it did not count toward their major, or they found out too late that financial aid has credit limits. One current student summed up this common experience:

"If you ask the right questions, if you know which questions to ask, you can get a lot of information back. I don't know what questions to ask ... [But college staff] kind of sit back and wait for you to come and ask them."

All of these challenges are difficult for colleges to mitigate, but the most difficult to address may be the last: Anticipating what students might need at each stage of their college experience and providing that information even when students are not asking for it.

In general, students expressed concerns about not having timely information available and tailored to their specific needs, and they expressed frustration about the amount of time they have to spend

simply tracking down information. In particular, they reported the following frustrations:

The information they needed was difficult to access. Even if the students knew where to get the information, they often had to wait in a line or make an appointment to access it. Sometimes they waited in line only to find out that the person they were waiting to see did not have the information they needed. It was particularly frustrating for students to wait in line or make an appointment to obtain general information that, in their opinion, should have been available on a website.

"You go wait an hour in line in admissions. [Then people tell you,] 'No, no, no. You need to go to counseling. You need to go to financial aid.' You can spend like six hours there and not get anything done." (Current student)

"It would have been better for me to have somebody who knew what the right paths were and give me guidance to say, 'If this is your goal, you should be taking this.'" (Completer)

Sometimes, the information they received was unclear or was inconsistent with what they had already been told. Participants reported variation in the quality of information obtained from websites, in-person meetings, orientation sessions, and advisors. Some participants said they received inaccurate information. Many said that, because they worried about inaccuracy, they often tried to check information across multiple sources and used their peers as resources.

"I've been to multiple counselors. They've all said near completely opposite things." (Current student)

"I would just ask the same question to them three times and see if they gave me the same answer [each time]." (Completer)

There was usually no easy way to follow up with further questions to either clarify or get additional information. Participants reported having to meet

with different counselors or instructors each time they needed follow-up information.

*"You get the runaround trying to find things out yourself. It was a big old game of tag."
(Non-completer)*

A key challenge for colleges is to determine which information can reasonably be provided to students in generic ways (such as through brochures, static websites, or frequently asked questions) and which information should be tailored for students based on their specific needs at each phase of the college experience from entry to completion. Tailored information can be delivered, for example, through interactive online surveys, timely emails, information sessions geared to particular groups of students, mandatory student success courses, and intrusive counseling. Another way that colleges are thinking of information delivery is in terms of "high-touch" versus "low-touch" contacts with students, with "high-touch" options providing a higher level of interaction and "low-touch" options providing more generic information.

Some participants expressed the need for colleges to develop websites that are easier to navigate and that offer interactive, online resources. One completer put it this way:

"I think what would be helpful — since it seems like we all were trying to either figure [things] out on our own or from other peers — is to have really accessible, easy-to-use online resources ... I just want to look online and find it myself, because it seems like it's going to be such an ordeal to go to a person who probably won't even know [the answer] anyway."

However, because not all students feel comfortable accessing information online, colleges may need to provide the same information in multiple ways. Focus group participants spoke of the importance of colleges making resources transparent, so

students readily know how to access various kinds of resources and the purpose of each resource. One current student who had dropped out at an earlier point and then returned explained that access to information also involves connecting to the right person or people:

"If the information were easier to get to and I knew sooner who to talk to, I may not have had to drop out and I might have been further along at this point. It would have been nice to know the go-to [person]: it took me getting near failing for them to say, 'Come talk to somebody.' Then, people were extremely helpful and very supportive."

An important next step for some colleges might be to reconsider the mix of generic and personalized information that they provide to students about college programs and services. Current and former students understood the importance of having easy access to generic information about the college and its programs, and they wanted to access that information easily through online or other formats 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They felt that too often they had to wait in line and meet one on one with an advisor to get this information. They also wanted to receive more thorough information, early in their college experiences, about the relationships between programs of study and various career opportunities. Moreover, they wanted to be able to connect this information to their own needs and goals — and this is where they wanted more personalized connections with advisors and instructors. With that said, they were also very open to receiving personalized information, including alerts about services they needed, through interactive online formats, email, and text messages.

In terms of improving online resources, colleges might consider conducting focus groups with students about the usability of websites and experiment with having students involved in redesigning the sites. It

might be useful for colleges to post videos created by students — for example, about questions they wished they had asked to help them succeed, and how they might find answers to those questions.

Finally, it was clear that participants would welcome new methods for colleges to reach out to students at risk of dropping out and to stay connected with those who do drop out. Focus group participants wanted to know that they, individually, matter to the college. Several students (both non-completers and students who had dropped out and then returned to college) said that they wished their college had reached out to them when they left college, encouraged them to return, and sent them information about events and classes. Students also wanted colleges to proactively provide them with information and supports during the semester, particularly when there might be warning signs that students are struggling or at risk of not completing courses or not making adequate progress.

Orientation sessions

Community colleges typically offer orientation sessions for new or returning students to help these students understand and be prepared to adapt to the expectations of college. While such sessions can vary widely in their offerings, they typically provide, at a minimum, generic information about the college, its instructional programs, and its student support services (Brock et al., 2007; Moore & Shulock, 2009). Almost all focus group participants wanted access to generic information about the college, its programs, and its services. At a minimum, participants expected orientation to provide an introduction to the college, guidance about where to go for different information and services, and a better sense of some of the questions they may need to ask or issues they may need to learn about. Those students who found orientation sessions to be helpful said that it was valuable to learn where people, programs, and services were located and from whom they should seek various kinds of

information. However, some students thought orientation would be more helpful if it were more targeted to specific programs of study and provided more than just basic information about matriculation-related issues and services.

Most people in the focus groups were disappointed by the limited kinds of information they had received in orientation and wanted access to more and better information at their point of entry into college. This was particularly true for participants who talked about juggling many different responsibilities in their lives, leading them to think of their time as a particularly limited resource. These participants said they wanted to receive information at the outset that might help them to be more efficient in how they spent their time on campus.

Many participants, both current and former students, said the orientation sessions were too focused on routine or generic information. The following comments, both from current students, are typical of this criticism:

"Orientation programs at [my college] always teach to the lowest common denominator."

"I was told to go online [for orientation] and it wasn't very helpful. It introduced me to the college, yeah, but that was about it."

Because orientation is one of the first points of contact for many students, it has the potential to help students begin to develop the connections to college that they desire. But orientation sessions also have the potential to frustrate students if they perceive the sessions to provide information that they already know or feel they should be able to access easily elsewhere, such as online. These comments and criticisms from students about what they want to see in an orientation are particularly important for those colleges that are considering making orientation mandatory. Participants who had been *required* to attend orientation were often critical of its quality.

Student success courses

Colleges typically offer student success courses to help students develop study habits, time-management skills, and other skills and non-academic knowledge needed for college success. As a growing body of research suggests that these courses can facilitate the transition into college for first-time and returning students (Brock et al., 2007; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Jenkins, 2011b), an increasing number of colleges are considering making these offerings mandatory for some student populations. For most focus group participants, discussions of “college readiness” focused less on academic preparedness and more on adjusting to the culture shock of college — both inside and outside the classroom:

*“In high school, you have the eagle eye on you. In college, you’re on your own.”
(Non-completer)*

“I felt like I was physically prepared, but mentally, no. My study habits — I would get to class on time and be in there and not learning. It wasn’t like high school. In high school, I can go to class and learn it, go to basketball practices, not worry about the homework. In college, I tried that and no way.” (Current student)

In the focus group discussions, participants were mostly critical of their experiences with student success courses, but some did point to benefits of these courses. Students who described them as valuable generally found them to be relevant to their needs in offering strategies for success in college (such as time management, test taking, and studying) and in providing them with information about themselves and how they learn (such as critical thinking and self-inquiry):

“I took a success class, which I think helped me a lot because the first quarter, I was like, ‘Oh, this is easy.’ Then, I was like, ‘Oh, not so easy.’

Then, I was like, ‘Maybe I should take a course that would help me learn how to study.’ I did better.” (Completer)

“I think it’s a good course to take ... the time management and test study prep and things like that ... I worked almost full-time every quarter I went there, so proper time management was key.” (Completer)

“The topics covered were time management, memory, effective note taking, effective test taking, reading. Now we’re getting into less of the mechanics and more of the critical thinking, communication, diversity — all that stuff. It’s been good so far.” (Current student)

*“It helped me learn a lot about myself. I’m learning how to learn. It taught me more about myself, [such as that] I’m more of a visual learner and hands-on than auditory.”
(Current student)*

As these comments suggest, not all students who had taken a student success course saw value in it; many other students had never taken one and, in some instances, were unaware of them. The criticisms about these courses ranged from students not being clear about what they had learned in them to students viewing what they learned as nothing more than “common sense” and, thus, not very useful. In addition, some focus group participants described the course as a hurdle they had to get over, that is, they had to pay to enroll in the course but did not earn college credit from it. A current student summed up this sentiment by stating simply, “It was kind of a waste of time.” In general, focus group participants seemed particularly attuned to anything they perceived as wasting their time, given the other demands on their time and their concerns about college costs.

Those students who were critical of student success courses were wary of having them mandated for

students, and several returning students perceived the mandating of such courses as punitive. As one current student said,

"At other colleges, they are optional. It doesn't make any sense to make someone take those courses and spend all that money. If [students] need that support, [they should] be referred to those centers and it's up to them how they're going to spend their time, because in the end, it's your money and it's your time. It is your waste of time or your investment in time."

This student response underscores the importance for colleges — especially those considering mandatory student success courses — to rethink their curricula to ensure that these courses are based on recent research on student engagement/success and are relevant to students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Colleges might consider different curricula for student success courses to make them more relevant based on, for example, students' fields or programs of study; whether students are first-time college-goers versus returning or transferring from another college; and/or whether students are working in addition to attending college or are full-time students who are not working.

Some students suggested that the kinds of skills taught in these courses would be best learned either in the second semester (once students have had a chance to "get their feet wet" and recognize where and how they are struggling) or within the context of their academic courses. One completer proposed that the classes should be offered in the second semester because:

"... the first semester I was like, 'I didn't even use any of the stuff.' Then the next semester, that's when the real stuff started kicking in and I'm like, 'I don't know how to study. I don't know how to do this.' [I don't know] if I was paying attention in that class, but I didn't think I really needed it. So maybe if I would have

stepped out and seen that I needed it when I actually took it, I would have been more able to focus."

There is not a one-size-fits-all model for this type of course; students have different needs and enter college at different points along the education trajectory. In addition to considering different content and timing options for the courses, colleges might consider providing the courses in a variety of delivery modes so students can select the one that best fits their schedule — for example, an online version, a night class, and/or different modules from which students could select based on a self-assessment of their needs.

In general, focus group participants identified several areas in which they want assistance, all of which could be addressed in a student success course:

- ◇ an introduction to the college's programs of study;
- ◇ information about the college's tools for helping students stay on track, complete a degree audit, and learn about transfer requirements for four-year colleges;
- ◇ information about how to prepare before meeting with an advisor; and
- ◇ facilitated face-to-face time with peers and advisors/instructors, to begin to build trust and dispel myths.

For next steps, colleges should consider a thorough review of the content of any offerings that they are making mandatory. Given students' responsibilities outside of college and their financial challenges, participants emphasized that any mandatory offerings, such as orientation sessions and student success courses, must be engaging, high quality, and relevant to students' intended coursework and career plans.

Advisement and early alert systems

Focus group participants reported a wide range of experiences with advisement and, collectively, expressed a strong desire to:

- ◇ connect with a single trusted source of personalized information and guidance at key junctures;
- ◇ receive timely alerts and other information (via email and text message) based on their individual needs and progress without having to ask – including welcome or welcome-back messages, useful information, and check-ins from instructional departments, support services, and the college at large; and
- ◇ find accurate information online in interactive and easy-to-use formats.

Whereas orientation sessions and student success courses were seen by participants as short-term experiences, advisement and access to related support services were perceived as crucial throughout the college experience. In fact, they were seen as so important that they were sometimes identified as contributing factors in helping students stay connected, on track, and *in* college – or, conversely, as contributing to students' feeling disconnected, being off track, and possibly dropping out.

Participants' experiences with advisors seemed to directly affect their perceptions, not just about the effectiveness of advising services but also about the quality of their college in general. In discussing their positive experiences with advisors, participants referenced the ease with which they had been able to access information, the accuracy of this information, and their own growing awareness of what they knew and needed to learn.

In addition to the quality and relevance of the information they received, participants pointed to the quality of the delivery as being important in itself. They spoke of being very aware of whether or not

they felt welcomed and whether or not those with whom they talked knew their histories and goals. The following two quotes represent sharply different perceptions of a student's relationship to college. The first participant, a current student, found a consistent way to receive information and guidance.

"The learning centers are such a good thing. ... They have set days. There are walk-ins those days. You can come and talk to counselors. On certain days you can sign up to see the counselors. It's just a quick, easy process. Because not many people go to the learning centers, you have as much time as you need to talk to the counselors, and then [you can] still leave and come back later on that day and talk [again]. They already have your work pulled up, and they just – it's easy to access the counselors there."

The second participant, a non-completer, had not found a consistent and easily accessible source of information and support, but recognized the need for it.

"As somebody going into college for your first time, you have to go off of word of mouth, what your friends say, what people who are going to school with you say. If you aren't getting proper guidance from an advisor or somebody that's really there or knows what's going on, I can't see how you would know. Actual guidance, I would say, would be a great tool or a great resource... There's no way we could be expected to know just offhand what we [need] to do or how to do it."

Focus group participants were more likely to be positive about their experience with advisors if their advisor was linked with a specific area or focus. Advisors that were dedicated to a particular program of study or a specific student population, for example, were perceived as providing more

accurate, consistent, and personalized information. Two completers spoke about the value of having received this kind of tailored support in their specific programs of study:

"I know in my case, my [program of study] was fire science, and all the advisors and all the professors were retired fire, retired construction. They all shared information that pertained to what's going on in the field."

"My advisor was specifically for visual communications, so she never met with any other student unless she had to: she was just strictly for my degree. She knew what I needed to take. She mapped it out for me the first time I met her. She had this form. We sat down and filled it out together. Then, that's what we followed all the way through. Three years later, as I'm finishing up my degree, she pulls out that sheet that she wrote out the first day I met her."

But in general, as other reports have documented, participants had negative perceptions about the availability and accuracy of advising at their college. The most substantial criticisms were related to the long wait times to meet with advisors; the lack of accurate information provided (for example, about courses that might transfer to four-year institutions); inconsistency in the knowledge and helpfulness of advisors; lack of clarity as to where to go for different kinds of information; and the lack of feedback and guidance over time (Public Agenda & WestEd, 2012; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Like many participants, one current student spoke strongly about the need to connect with a single counselor and about the costs of not having had that connection:

"My thing is having the same counselor. For some reason, every time I talk to a counselor, it's always somebody different. I think if [you] had one specific person, [that person] could cater to your needs. One counselor [that I had] put me in some classes, and now, looking back,

I didn't even need [those classes]. It was just a waste of time. They don't transfer or anything."

As this student did, many focus group participants felt that they had to fend for themselves or negotiate among competing suggestions from people — including peers, parents, instructors, and multiple advisors — who may or may not have understood their educational history and goals. Many described their inefficient, frustrating, and sometimes stressful experiences of having had to "chase down" the correct person or resource only to find out they still needed additional information.

"My problem with advisement is sometimes they're in a rush and sometimes they just really give me incorrect answers. I get their answers and then I'll go home and look it up with my friends, and that helps me out, actually. Sometimes it's missing something or it's just totally off." (Current student)

In addition, some focus group participants were critical of the fact that some counselors do not adapt their advice to students' own history, interests, and level of commitment. They did not see these counselors as their advocates. For example, one completer did not return to a counselor after this experience:

"The last time I went to go speak to my advisor, I wanted to sign up for five classes to complete my AA in two years. She said, 'Do you work full-time?' I said, 'No,' but at the time I had two jobs. She's like, 'Technically, you're working full-time, [so] I won't sign you up for more than four classes.' I said, 'Okay, thank you,' took my information, went online, and applied for my own classes ... I personally knew that I could handle it. I wanted to get it done and over with, so I was going to make the time and effort to do it."

Such cases are difficult for advisors, given the need to match course-taking patterns with real chances for

success. But what participants seemed to be saying is that they want accurate and complete information about their options and chances for success, along with advocacy based on their own stated needs and level of commitment.

In addition to wanting advisors who will serve as their advocates, participants said they want access to other resources and tools to help them succeed. For example, they thought that advisement services were not proactive enough, in terms of sending students welcoming messages or alerts based on their individual needs. Some focus group participants had taken part in creating and maintaining a personalized education “map” of their progress during college, and they said they found this process to be very helpful. Most participants, however, had not participated in any kind of progress mapping.

Related to this, most participants also thought that advisement systems have not been effective in determining which information to provide to students in different formats: online vs. in-person and static vs. interactive. For example, many participants said they sometimes found that the static information provided on a college website (for example, about programs and services) was out of date and not easily searchable. In addition, many said that the college website they had used did not provide any information in an interactive format, such as an opportunity to develop or track education plans, create portfolios, or have pertinent resources emailed to them at key points along their education pathway (such as the FAFSA applications prior to the start of a new school year or term). The following comment, from a completer, is representative of participants’ thoughts about the need for colleges to have more useful websites:

“I feel like I just want to pull them into the 21st century. [Waiting for a counselor] really does feel like a waiting room in a hospital. I feel like they need to update their website and

put all these resources they have — advising, career things — put it all into a great website.”

Similarly, one current student suggested that colleges could do a better job providing access to routine information through “crowdsourcing” to capture and share student knowledge (crowdsourcing — a process of soliciting information, usually online, from a distributed group of people — is a common practice in social networking but not at community colleges):

For me ... a forum or an online Q&A [would be useful]. I guarantee the same question will be asked by 10 students in one year. If there’s a way to keep track of that and someone can type in and say, “What about parking near ...,” then, people who have found tricks about it can [give advice] there, like a field-of-knowledge database.

These reflections and suggestions point to a strong desire to be able to access — and receive — accurate information and guidance easily and when needed, even if students do not always *know* what they need. This is a challenging task for colleges, particularly for those with limited budget resources, since it involves assessing and, perhaps, reconfiguring how they currently deliver information and guidance, through both in-person and online formats.

In general, focus group participants seemed to want in-person advising and support when making major decisions, such as selecting a program of study, developing an education plan, transferring to a four-year institution, fulfilling degree requirements, and seeking financial assistance.

Just as importantly, participants said they want to be contacted with personalized information when they need to act or when they need to know something — for example, if they have signed up for a course that does not count toward their major, if they are having trouble in a course, or if a financial aid deadline is

approaching. Students understand that high levels of interaction and assistance do not always have to be in-person, but they do want services that are customized and synced with their specific goals and needs — for example, through email alerts, text messages, or progress-mapping processes tailored to them. For more generic kinds of information (for example, program descriptions and comparisons, frequently asked questions), participants said they prefer that the information be available online.

2. Connecting to Instructional Services

In their efforts to raise student completion rates, community colleges are working not only to improve student supports and information delivery, but also to improve their instructional programs and curricula. Many focus group participants indicated that they chose to attend community college partly because of the convenience and flexibility they thought these colleges offered and partly because they expected to receive more individual attention from community college faculty than from faculty at a four-year institution. Feeling connected to faculty was important to them. One current student summed it up by saying, “You get a little more one-on-one and you’re a little more personal with your instructor.”

As well as wanting to feel close connections with faculty, focus group participants also expressed a need to feel a tighter connection between the subjects they were studying in college and their options after college, including transfer and career opportunities. Whether they were starting out with developmental education or moving right in to a Career Technical Education or transfer-level curriculum, participants wanted to feel that they were making progress and not wasting their time.

Developmental education

Many of the focus group participants had been or were enrolled in at least one developmental

education course, and many acknowledged their need to catch up academically. Among the participants who spoke positively about their developmental education experience, most referred to instructors who had made a difference for them and noted the benefits of having a professor focused on their particular needs. One completer remembered being “disappointed” when first learning that some developmental courses would be required, but then finding the courses helpful, largely because the professors explained everything and were “very thorough,” making sure that “everybody [understood] the concept and that they passed. If you needed extra help they had the lab where you could go upstairs and they would assist you with any questions.”

However, developmental education courses were criticized by the majority of focus group participants, whose general opinion seemed to be, as reported in *Student Voices*, that the courses “were not offered in a way that helped them succeed” in college (p. 4). Most focus group discussion about students’ struggles and disappointments with remedial classes focused on mathematics classes rather than English.

As other reports have documented, many participants did not know that they would be required to take assessments to determine the level of courses in which they would be placed (for example, Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Some said they had not understood what the placement tests were for, or that they would not get transfer-level credit for taking developmental courses. Some also said that, with hindsight, they wished they had studied for those assessments. However, several acknowledged that the college had offered them opportunities to study for the placement tests and they had chosen not to take advantage of the opportunities.

Some participants were critical of how developmental education courses, both mathematics and English, were taught. As when talking about other aspects of the college experience, many students spoke of

a lack of connection or engagement — in this case, with instructors — as central to their criticism. These focus group participants talked about instructors who either did not seem to care about their interactions with students or seemed to lack awareness of different ways to reach students who are struggling with material that they find difficult. Many participants expressed frustration about the extent to which they felt they were expected to “figure it out” themselves, rather than having the instructor adapt his or her teaching methods to be successful with all students. One participant, who eventually completed community college, recalled having had to take one developmental mathematics class four times before eventually passing:

“I took two years off because I was so pissed off that I couldn’t pass it. I finally just passed it this past year, but [the experience] was not very good, to say the least.”

Continuing to work toward college completion despite the kind of experience described by this participant requires a level of resilience and commitment that not all students have. In general, participants emphasized the extent to which negative experiences in developmental education courses can undermine student confidence and lead to a downward spiral in their quality of work and academic commitment. One non-completer described the experience this way:

“I felt I was wasting my three hours of three days out of the week to go and sit in a course where it wasn’t even relevant to anything that I was doing, and I had already done it in high school. I’m just like, ‘Okay, I’m repeating behavior here. It’s not going towards anything that I’m interested in,’ so that can just really damage your entire mentality. Especially when you know you’re paying for it, and it’s a zero course. You’re like, ‘Okay, I’m not even getting credit here,’ so that just really bothered me.”

Even some who went on to complete community college remembered feeling frustrated by developmental education courses. One said,

“Sometimes you just feel run down [in developmental education]. It’s just like over and over, and then you feel like you don’t see any progress. You don’t see anything that is coming forth from all this hard work that you’re doing, and so you just like, ‘I’m just going.’”

Many community colleges are considering ways to improve their efforts to help underprepared students catch up academically, including by revisiting course placement processes and providing students with opportunities to accelerate through or around developmental education (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Jenkins, 2011a). Few focus group participants had enrolled in an accelerated course, but those who had were positive about the experience. As one current student emphasized, feeling a connection to the instructor made a substantial difference:

“I know a lot of my friends were still on the same things [like they were still in high school], but I was doing some of the fast-track courses, [which] actually helped with the pace. The professor makes all the difference in the world.”

Among those students who had *not* participated in accelerated developmental education, many thought it would be a better option for students compared with a traditional developmental education sequence.

As part of their efforts to accelerate student progress through or around developmental education, colleges are also considering the importance of having a developmental math curriculum that is more relevant to students and that builds on the mathematical concepts that will be most useful for their education and career plans (Cullinane & Treisman, 2010; Edgecombe, 2011). Based on their own experiences, several participants

questioned the relevance of college mathematics to their careers. One completer said,

"I took remedial mathematics and I got a bachelor's degree. I'm really disappointed with my college mathematics. The only class that I consistently use is statistics. I mean for what we're doing today in life, for the degree plan that I had set forth, it would be sure nice to know a lot more about finance and statistics, stuff that I actually use."

In short, many focus group participants recognized that when they got to college they had needed to catch up academically, but they were critical of the developmental education courses they had received, particularly in mathematics. Across the board, people appeared eager to try new formats, including accelerated options, that might help to enroll sooner in credit-bearing coursework.

Programs of study

Given Completion by Design's emphasis on encouraging students to enter a general field of study or a specific program of study as quickly as possible after starting college, we were interested in people's experiences establishing their education goals, exploring various fields, and selecting a program of study or major.² Participants were split in their perspectives about the tension between exploring options and having more structure. In general, participants acknowledged the value of establishing education goals and enrolling in a program of study early on. Many participants said that, with hindsight, they wished they had entered college with more-focused education goals so that they could have progressed more rapidly through college. However, many others said that it is also important for students to be able to explore different education and career areas in college and to take time to figure out what they most want to study.

² For further information related to the Completion by Design approach, see Jenkins, 2011a.

Across the three types of students in the focus groups (current students, completers, and non-completers), most participants had enrolled in college without having established clear education or career goals. Many expressed the belief that it is common for students to shift their goals and interests during college, and they did not necessarily want to give up the opportunity to explore intellectual or career options. Some mentioned the importance of community college as a place to find and develop a passion, noting that the ability to explore different subject areas can assist with that process. Many participants reported that they had switched majors at least once and many felt that this was a natural part of the process of coming to understand what they wanted to do.

However, this exploration process felt like a double-edged sword for many participants. As reflected in the following quote, from a completer, people with that perspective said they had felt frustrated when realizing they had spent time and money taking classes that would not count toward their new goal(s):

"I switched majors a bunch. It must've been about three times. When you start off college you just take classes you need, and then you slowly figure out what you want to do. You always end up switching. For most people I've talked to, it's kind of what everyone else is doing. Do psychiatry or psychology or whatever and then you switch from that to criminal justice ... It was frustrating because you took classes that you didn't need. Some classes went with the other degree that you were taking, some classes didn't. You just have to kind of adapt."

A smaller proportion of focus group participants said they entered a program of study early in their college experience, having come to college with a relatively clear idea of what they wanted to do, whether it was to fulfill requirements for a specific

field or to get their general education requirements out of the way as quickly as possible and then transfer. These participants felt that their early focus helped them be more efficient in taking classes that counted toward their major. As one current student summed it up, “I think it is [important to focus early] so you don’t waste your time.”

Among focus group participants who had come to college with more extensive work experience, some, but not all, felt that their work experience had helped them start college with greater focus than they might otherwise have had. But many in this subgroup said they had not known, or did not yet know, what education pathway to take to reach their career or employment goals. Those who had been successful in determining their education goal (such as having identified a university to which they wanted to transfer or having identified a specific master’s program in which they wanted to enroll) appeared to be more focused in choosing courses and to be more successful in following an appropriate sequence of courses required to enter and move through a program of study. This suggests the need for education and career planning, even for students who appear to be more focused, such as this current student:

“If you know the roads that you need to take to get where you need to go, it’s so much easier than thinking, ‘Here’s the general area where I’m going [but I] have no idea how to get there’ ... I think people just assume, ‘Okay, you’re going to college now, you know what you’re doing.’ That’s not the case.”

Students’ education or career plans notwithstanding, circumstances at college that are beyond students’ control can delay or derail student progress. For example, many participants said that the inability to enroll in overbooked courses had delayed their progress and had caused them to complete units that did not count toward their requirements. In some cases, participants said they took courses they did not need

because they could not get what they *did* need, but had to stay enrolled in order to sustain their financial aid. Some spoke of facing long waiting lists — up to a year or two — before they could get into the sequence of courses they needed. Because of wait lists, said one non-completer, “I just signed up for another class that had nothing to do with what I wanted to do. It’s like you just have to find anything random to fit in [to your schedule].”

Some participants said they had not had time to gather all the information they needed in order to make informed course-taking choices and, as a result, had taken courses they did not need or that did not count for transfer.

Based on these kinds of experiences, some focus group participants suggested that college is more effective — or at least more efficient — for those students who come to college “ready” to make decisions about their future. Said one current student,

“Do not go to college until you’re ready ... because if your head is not right and you go into the game not ready to play the game, then you’re not going to be doing the right thing when it comes to studying. You have to have a goal. And then, when you have a goal and you have a reason to get to that goal, then you have your eyes set on that goal ... Make sure you’ve got a plan.”

Across the board, feedback from the focus groups seems to suggest that a key function of college is to help students to explore while also supporting them in selecting and making progress toward their education and career goals — providing structured exploration. In light of the authors’ overall findings concerning participants’ desire for connectedness, it is not surprising that students want support services, such as education planning, to be coordinated with instruction. That is, they want information about the various programs and transfer requirements to

be easily accessible so they can use this information to inform their course selection. They also want access to career planning to support and encourage their course choices — for example, they like the idea of mapping out their degree pathway. This current student said that colleges could do a better job of encouraging students to select a program of study:

"Sometimes you have to choose [an education path] because a lot of us don't have time to waste. [People have] kids at home or are trying to make a better life for themselves or just trying to pay for it. We don't want to be stuck treading water."

The following quote, from a completer, accurately captures the difficulty that colleges face as they seek to balance the need for early program entry (in order to improve completion rates) with the need to allow students to explore education and career options:

"[Getting people to focus is] always ideal, but then there are always going to be people like me who have no idea what they want to do. I wouldn't say you need to pressure someone, but there needs to be more urgency."

One practice that resonated with participants was to encourage greater use of concurrent enrollment courses in high school. Participants believed this was a promising way to enable younger students to explore various classes early on and, thus, gain a better sense of college while still in high school — so that, once fully enrolled as a college student, they are better able to focus. Likewise, some internships and other connections to careers, discussed in the following section, might assist students in career exploration and decision-making. Overall, participants expressed a desire to be supported and directed in exploring education and career options while also being encouraged to get into and through their main coursework efficiently, with supports and workforce connections provided along the way.

3. Connecting to Careers and/or Career Exploration

Given that the goal of postsecondary education is to enhance students' knowledge and skills and, therefore, to improve their work opportunities, it is not surprising that many colleges are considering efforts to strengthen the connection between college and careers. This includes providing career exploration, service learning opportunities, and direct connections to local businesses in the college's community (Perin, 2011).

In general, focus group participants were uncertain — and in some cases, pessimistic — about any causal relationship between completing a degree and building a career. Several expressed the belief that an increasing number of jobs require a bachelor's degree and that, without a degree, they were not likely to advance very far in any career. However, they also emphasized that even receiving a bachelor's degree does not guarantee being able to secure a good first job or to advance in a career.

Across the board, focus group participants said that they need more information about the relationships between their studies and possible careers. In particular, students said they wanted more information about:

- ◇ the types of degrees available in a given field and the jobs associated with each type of degree;
- ◇ the skills needed and tasks involved for specific jobs; and
- ◇ job openings and opportunities in their respective fields in their own community.

Participants said that having had this type of information would have helped them make more-informed decisions about their education and career goals. Some suggested that their perceptions of job

opportunities and job security were key factors in their decisions about what to study, yet many said they did not feel confident about the accuracy of the information on which they had based their decisions.

In addition to wanting more information about the connections between education programs and careers, participants wanted more opportunities for internships and service learning. They saw hands-on or real-life experiences as valuable in helping students better understand career options. Those who had already participated in internships said the experiences were invaluable, both in terms of networking and in understanding the job world. The following quotes from current students reflect participants' general attitudes about these kinds of work experiences:

"Right now, if you have an internship it's going to help you a lot no matter what, especially if you have an internship with the company you want to work with. You've got connections."

"You're almost in the field, and you see it every day and you know how it works. You see what it entitles and entails. You know what you're prepared for."

Other participants commented positively on the value of having adjunct faculty who are in the workforce teach courses, since these instructors often bring real-life examples and experiences to class.

Finally, focus group participants expressed their desire for more assistance from colleges in job placement and career advancement. Some students described the need for career fairs and other events that would connect them with employers. They acknowledged that their college may already hold such events, but said that, if so, they did not know about them. Beyond job fairs, some participants, including the current student quoted below, wanted colleges to be much more active in making connections between students and prospective employers.

"It would help a lot more if [the college] had something set up so if there were job openings in the area, the college could collaborate with a lot of the businesses and know which students are about to finish and are interested in working there."

Students also suggested that colleges can do substantially more to provide useful and timely information to students about employment opportunities related to each program and about the skills and tasks involved with various jobs.

CONCLUSION



This report focuses on students' experiences in college in relation to several major strategies being employed by Completion by Design colleges — and other colleges across the country — to increase college completion. Across the board, students voiced a strong desire to have better and more purposeful connections with their college. They described these connections in specific ways, and they articulated specific ideas about how colleges could be more deliberate in ensuring those connections. It is clear that students care about the education opportunities available to them and understand some of the constraints colleges are under in this fiscal climate. It is the authors' hope that these voices help colleges' efforts to innovate and find new ways to support student learning and success.



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