



theRPgroup

Research • Planning • Professional Development  
for California Community Colleges

# Allan Hancock College

## Guided Pathways Focus Groups

### Recommendations

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## Pillar 1 Recommendations: Clarifying the Path

**Recommendation 1: Increase the physical presence of Allan Hancock counselors and staff and the quality of outreach services to all local high schools in AHC's service area.**

High school students in a number of focus groups noted that the presence of AHC's counselors on local high school campuses, and usefulness of the outreach sessions and services was uneven. Students from certain high schools mentioned receiving in-depth and helpful information about AHC, while others commented that the information they received came from their high school counselors and teachers, and not necessarily from an AHC representative. Given that these outreach efforts are meant to inform students about the variety of programs and services available at AHC and then facilitate entry into the college, it is important that the college offer high quality and equitable outreach services to students from all local high schools.

**Recommendation 2: Explore ways to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio in education planning workshops to ensure all participants are able to identify an educational goal around which to develop their student education plan.**

Both recent and not-so-recent high school graduates shared that while the education planning workshops offered at the high schools and at the college provided useful information, they can also be overwhelming and chaotic and not meet their intended goal of helping participants with their student education plans. Participants described the high ratio of students to counselors in these workshops as the main contributor to this sense of chaos and counselors' inability to effectively help all students with SEPs.

While the RP Group researcher could not identify whether the students who found the education planning workshops chaotic and overwhelming were first-generation college goers, it is important to note that these workshops might be their first experience with higher education and the complex systems that they need to learn to navigate. Therefore, this early momentum point can either set students on the right path for success or potentially have the opposite effect.

## Pillar 2 Recommendations: Helping Students Enter a Path at AHC

**Recommendation 3: Increase the capacity of the Counseling Center to provide sufficient appointments for students early on in their first semester and at key times during subsequent semesters.**

Feedback from AHC students, supported by a substantial body of research, makes clear that most students need counselors to successfully get on an educational path and stay on that path. However, many students cited not being able to access counseling services at critical junctures in their educational journeys. Students who were not able to connect with a counselor in their first semester at AHC often wasted significant time and

resources in classes that did not get them any closer to their long-term goals. Moreover, students who may be on-track can potentially get derailed by not having access to counselors who can provide important information and guidance when students need to make critical decisions about their academic goals.

**Recommendation 4: Explore changes to policies and practices in general counseling that would enhance student/counselor relationships and increase the delivery of accurate information and helpful services.**

Allan Hancock College students had mixed feelings about the college's general counseling services, particularly the drop-in appointments. Students who found themselves in a counselor's office without a predetermined educational/career goal were particularly vocal about not getting effective help from counselors. Students spoke about a continuum of effective counseling—from counselors who took the time to learn deeply about the student and provide meaningful support to those who left students discouraged after a counseling session. The unevenness in counseling also emerged when students discussed going through several counselors until they found the "right one" who provided the guidance and accurate information they needed.

While it is clear that budgetary concerns and a potentially unwieldy counselor-to-student ratio must be taken into account with respect to general counseling policies and practices, numerous options are still available to Allan Hancock that would enhance students' counseling experiences. For example, AHC could explore providing general counselors with additional professional development focused on keeping them up-to-date with the large amount of often-shifting information they must be able to accurately share with students.

Additionally, a system that enabled students to consistently work with a dedicated counselor would facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and counselors, and in doing so, increase counselors' capacity to understand students' goals, help them overcome obstacles to these goals, and ultimately, pave the path to success. It is also worth noting that a number of students lauded the work of the counselors in the Transfer Center in particular; as such, it would be worthwhile to further investigate what is working well among this group of counselors and seeking opportunities to expand their effectiveness to other types of counselors.

**Recommendation 5: Equip and encourage counselors to take the "whole student" into account when helping students develop educational plans and make decisions about their academic path.**

Community college students often lead complicated and difficult lives. Financial pressure is a serious issue for a great many students, and a large percentage struggle to balance the responsibilities of work and family with their desire to earn postsecondary credentials. It is thus particularly important for community college counselors to listen to students' voices when helping them identify their goals and

then map out a path to achieving those goals. Students whose educational plans are developed in the context of their finances, employment needs, family responsibilities, health issues, and other critical factors are likely to have a greater chance at successfully following and completing those plans.

Allan Hancock College can facilitate this “whole student” approach by letting counselors know that understanding the specific context in which each individual student operates is an essential component of doing their jobs effectively. In addition, the college could provide training and resources that equip counselors to understand as much as possible about each student’s situation and how to customize education planning to the unique needs of that student.

**Recommendation 6: Empower everyone who works at the college to be a source of student support.**

Students across the nine focus groups shared mixed feelings about the relationships they had with faculty and staff at the college. Allan Hancock College is not only an organizational entity; it is also a network of complex human interactions. For students to feel supported both academically and socially, the college must promote a culture in which all faculty, staff, and administrators feel a responsibility for student success and understand their particular roles in promoting that success.

Instructors and counselors may see their roles at the college as already inherently about support. In contrast, other personnel may not see how what they do directly supports students, such as individuals working behind the scenes in payroll, maintenance, or administration. However, everyone who works at the college can potentially play a valuable role supporting students regardless of role or position.

In order to empower every person working at AHC to provide appropriate student support, the college must do more than simply tell staff to “be more supportive” of students and then leave it to them to figure out on their own how to put that directive into action. Personnel across the college must have the opportunity to discover exactly how they can, both in their specific job and as a member of the college community, directly contribute to student success. The college needs to provide professional development and support to help personnel develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support students, and continually practice these new skills with the full cultural and logistical backing of the college.

## **Pillar 3 Recommendations: Helping Students Stay on the Path**

**Recommendation 7: Leverage student voices to close the communication gap between students and the college’s faculty, staff, and administrators. Moreover, the college should devise creative and effective strategies for clearly and broadly conveying what resources are available at AHC and how to access them.**

During the focus groups, students frequently started sentences with, “I didn’t know about...,” “If I had known...” or, “It wasn’t until I heard from a friend that... .” Statements like these clearly speak to a communication disconnect between Allan Hancock College and its students. Simply announcing the availability of a certain service or program is not sufficient. Instead, students suggested a creative, multi-pronged, and recurrent communication strategy that reaches students at all levels, whether first-time, continuing, or returning, and informs them about the programs, services, and activities that are available to them.

Focus group participants provided an important insight: that an effective communication strategy cannot be one-size-fits-all, but rather must use a variety of modes in order to reach a substantial portion of AHC students. In fact, students themselves are perhaps best-positioned to inform the college about how to effectively reach their peers and should be deeply engaged in the design, development, and testing of communication processes to help AHC develop a strategy with the greatest chance of efficacy. By developing a multi-faceted communications strategy that is deeply informed by student perspectives, AHC will be able to better ensure that students are making the most of all the college has to offer when it comes to helping them understand their options (Pillar 1), identify their goals (Pillar 2), effectively and efficiently pursue those goals (Pillar 3), and learn as much as possible in the process (Pillar 4).

**Recommendation 8: Expand student supports and services for evening students.**

Focus group participants who primarily take courses in the evening shared that the college is lifeless at that time of day, with most administrative offices closing at 5:00 pm. Given that the majority of evening students work full-time, these students specifically asked for the college to expand counseling services and extend the cafeteria hours to accommodate students who are rushing from work to class and have not had time get food or eat before class.

**Recommendation 9: Re-examine course availability and scheduling options, especially with respect to key courses required for transfer, and make adjustments to better balance the supply of courses with student demand.<sup>10</sup>**

Focus group participants spoke about course availability and cancelled courses as factors impacting their educational experience, lengthening time to degree completion, and increasing the cost of attendance. According to the students in the focus groups, there appears to be a mismatch between the courses students need to take and when these courses are offered. Moreover, the cancellation of courses can jeopardize students’ access to financial aid and veterans benefits, as well as the ability to play their sport for student athletes, all of which require students to be enrolled in at least 12 units. As AHC

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<sup>10</sup> The Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (IEPI) Strategic Enrollment Management Applied Solution Kit (ASK), may offer support (<https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ctl/ArticleView/mid/1686/articleId/178/IEPI-Applied-Solution-Kit--Strategic-Enrollment-Management>)

moves forward with the adoption of Guided Pathways, the college might consider leveraging enrollment data and pathway projections to forecast the appropriate courses and number of sections to meet student demand.<sup>11</sup>

The limited availability of courses required for students' programs of study presents a major obstacle for students seeking to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year university in a timely and cost-effective manner. Focus group participants described the ways in which the lack of course availability posed a serious threat to the achievement of their educational goals; if even one course in a sequence is unavailable for a semester or a year, a student's entire educational path may be derailed. As such, it is critical that AHC examine its enrollment management efforts, perhaps using students' educational plans to predict which courses need to be offered when, and ensure that students have as many options as possible to enroll in the courses they need to complete their programs of study.

**Recommendation 10: Expand activities and events that promote student life at the Lompoc Valley Center.**

Students enrolled in courses or programs at the Lompoc Valley Center are in particular need of activities and events that promote student life and foster a sense of community. AHC is an institution that is geographically isolated, and students at the smaller Lompoc Valley Center perhaps sense this isolation most acutely. By investing additional resources into clubs and/or social activities that draw Lompoc Valley Center students together, the college will help ensure that all its students reap the maximum benefit from the support of their peers and develop a sense of ongoing connection to the institution that together facilitate persistence and enhances learning.

**Recommendation 11: Increase student and academic supports at Lompoc Valley Center.**

Students at the Lompoc Center shared that increased services such as counseling for both ESL and non-ESL students, expanded library hours on weekdays and weekends, health services, and other supports would bolster their educational success. Students also expressed a desire for the Lompoc Valley Center to have a number of academic supports currently only offered at AHC's main campus in Santa Maria, such as the Writing Center and the calculator rental program.

**Recommendation 12: Explore communication strategies that enable Lompoc Valley Center students to understand why certain degree-applicable courses are being cancelled or not offered every semester and proactively assist them to identify acceptable alternative courses.**

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<sup>11</sup> Turn pathways maps into data-driven course schedules, EAB, December 2017. (<https://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/community-college-executive-forum/expert-insights/2017/build-schedules-that-fulfill-student-demand-and-maintain-enrollment>)

Students at the Lompoc Valley Center appear to perceive a lack of degree-applicable course offerings at the Lompoc Valley Center. Unfortunately, their perceptions are based on their student experience and not their understanding of the complex process colleges must go through every semester to forecast what classes will be needed and to how many sections of each course should be offered. If this is the case, the college needs to communicate to students the reasons why a class or section may not be offered and assist students to find acceptable alternative courses.

## Pillar 4 Recommendations: Ensuring That Students Are Learning

### **Recommendation 13: Provide training to general student tutors and develop criteria to assess their knowledge of the subject matter they are expected to tutor.**

Students had many positive stories to share about the academic help they received from the Math and Writing Centers. However, they painted a different picture when it came to the assistance they received from the general tutoring center. Participants attributed the difference in tutoring quality to the preparation expected of math and writing center tutors as compared to general tutors.

### **Recommendation 14: Ensure ESL courses are sufficiently customized and/or differentiated to meet students' broad range of needs.**

ESL students both at the Lompoc Valley Center and the Santa Maria campus voiced that the current configuration of ESL courses is not serving their language needs, which are very broad. Based on student comments, it appears that ESL levels were combined into fewer courses. The RP Group researcher does not know whether the shortened ESL sequence was as a direct result of AB 705; however, if this is the case, the college needs to communicate this change to students and identify ways in which the college can better serve ESL students meet their educational goals.

### **Recommendation 15: Ensure CTE programs have the most up-to-date equipment and that faculty are teaching the most current skills/practices so that students are competitive in the job market upon completion of their certificate or degree.**

Students in several CTE programs mentioned that what was being taught in the classroom was not keeping pace with the needs of evolving and growing industries. The college might consider doing an audit of each program to determine where it may be falling short in terms of preparing students for their careers and subsequently develop strategies to ensure programs have the monetary support and knowledge base to stay competitive and current.

## Recommendations for Continuous Improvement of Guided Pathways

**Recommendation 16: Create ongoing opportunities to gather feedback from students about their experiences at AHC and reflect on that feedback to inform the college’s Guided Pathways design and implementation efforts.**

The incorporation of student voices in an in-depth manner and ongoing basis will be critical to the success of Guided Pathways at AHC. The focus groups discussed in this report represent a strong starting point for gathering direct student feedback on what is and is not working for them across all aspects of their educational experience. Additionally, focus groups create opportunities for students to meet one another, share information, and support each other. Continuing to conduct focus groups or creating other similar opportunities for students to reflect on the positives and negatives of life at Allan Hancock College will not only provide the college with critical information that can be used to guide decision-making, but it will also send a strong message to the college community that student voices are valued by the institution and its leaders.

## Conclusion

This report summarizes key findings from nine focus groups comprising a diverse group of AHC students. These focus groups mark an important beginning for making student perspectives more visible at Allan Hancock College. Looking at the college through the lens of student experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—can dramatically change one’s understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. To this end, the college has an opportunity to build upon this first step of eliciting student views by developing a systematic process for regularly engaging students in the planning, design, assessment, and refinement of college practices. The inquiry and design work faculty, staff, and administrators are undertaking for AHC’s Roadmaps to Success initiative offers an immediate structure for this student engagement. If done meaningfully, AHC can not only continue leveraging student perspectives to make the case for Guided Pathways reform at the college, but also offer students a place of power and influence at the planning and implementation table as the college determines how to restructure the student experience such that it both aligns with the Guided Pathways framework and promotes equitable success for all students.