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Building Equity by Supporting the Whole Student: Findings from Case Studies of Two Colleges in the Working Students Success Network

Now more than ever, philanthropy seeks to use its grant making and voice to build and support equity for historically marginalized communities. Toward that end, postsecondary education is an important area of investment because it is a critical pathway to economic mobility and stability. At the same time, colleges are serving a growing number of students from historically underserved groups—including students experiencing poverty and students of color. The Working Students Success Network (WSSN) originates from the efforts of several national foundations to work collaboratively with community colleges to promote an equity agenda by offering holistic student supports and transforming their institutional culture. In this brief, we present findings from follow-up case studies of two of the original WSSN colleges (see Box 1 for details).

We organize the findings from the case studies in line with WSSN's strategic themes of equity and holistic student supports. We conclude with a discussion of implications for colleges, funders, and other stakeholders interested in equitable postsecondary outcomes.

The Working Students Success Network (WSSN) is an innovative, comprehensive strategy for supporting working students from groups traditionally underserved in American higher education, especially students of color and those experiencing poverty. Starting in 2014, with financial support from six private foundations and technical assistance from Achieving the Dream (ATD), the original WSSN included 19 community colleges in four states. Since then, the effort has merged with several other ATD initiatives and has expanded its reach to include other states, institutions, and partners. Broadly speaking, WSSN strategy emphasizes *institutional culture change* centered on equity for historically underserved populations, including students of color and students experiencing poverty and *integrated and holistic services and supports* across three pillars: (1) employment and career advancement, (2) income and work supports, and (3) financial services and asset building.

Building on a comprehensive evaluation of the original WSSN effort,[1] Mathematica and Insight Center for Community Economic Development conducted case studies of two colleges in Washington State, both notable for relatively mature implementation of a holistic service approach for underserved students:

- **College 1:** Located in a small suburban city in the greater Seattle metropolitan area. The college's fall enrollment totals about 6,500 students, about a quarter of whom receive Pell grants. The student population is diverse, with about 35 percent of students identifying as Black, 15 percent as Latinx, and 20 percent as Asian. The college also enrolls a large immigrant population, including many East Africans.
- **College 2:** Located in a small city in rural Washington. Although the area is largely agricultural, it is also home to a large manufacturing plant. The colleges' fall enrollment totals about 2,100 students, with about 45 percent receiving Pell grants. Although a majority of the college's students are White, about 35 percent of students are Latinx.

Research questions for the case studies focused on equity and inclusion and institutional culture change. Data collection included two site visits to each of the colleges, conducted in fall 2018 and spring 2019, as well as telephone interviews with state and college administrators during the same period. In total, the research team spoke to 83 individuals, including 58 students and 25 administrators, faculty, and staff members. ◢

Understanding equity

The basic premise of the WSSN strategy is that a holistic approach "levels the playing field for under-served student populations and produces equitable results for all students."[2] However, when community college leaders do not have a clear definition of equity—or when key personnel and partners do not have a common understanding of equity—this may impede the college's progress toward achieving it.

> **"[Our college] is diverse, but that doesn't mean we are always equitable."**
> *– College administrator*

Rather than providing all students with equal resources, equity means ensuring that all students have the support they need to be successful. For example, some students experiencing poverty may need more or different types of support to achieve the same outcomes as those with more economic resources. A strong and explicit equity framework—with a clear vision of equitable outcomes and an understanding of support strategies for different groups—is essential for driving student success. The case studies show how initiatives such as WSSN, and the colleges that participate in them, may risk falling short of their own or their funders' goals if they lack a clear, shared understanding of equity and what is required to achieve it.

The importance of a strong equity framework

The case study colleges serve large numbers of students of color and students experiencing poverty and they chose to participate in WSSN, in part, because they recognized the need to better support such students. However, college leaders and staff did not appear to have worked intentionally to adopt or build a clear, overarching equity framework. Instead, they tended to focus their framing and programmatic efforts on meeting students' basic needs.[3]

A pragmatic focus on students' needs makes sense in the face of the potentially immense task of shifting college culture, especially around historically and politically sensitive issues related to race and ethnicity. But without a unifying equity framework, the colleges' efforts were not necessarily responsive to students' different identities and circumstances, which may have limited their success.

There was evidence that individuals cared about and were grappling with the concept of equity and that some were trying to shift campus culture in that direction, but they struggled without a common language or model. Staff members in different divisions at one college tended to define equity differently, and some stakeholders appeared to confuse equity with equality or representation. For example, when asked how services address the needs of students of color, responses at one college tended toward something to this effect: Because our population is largely students of color, we are addressing equity. This line of thinking emphasizes numerical representation and assumes equal access, but it sidesteps the fact that different groups of students have very different needs. Expressing a less common understanding, another respondent at the same college noted, "[Our college] is diverse, but that doesn't mean we are always equitable … We need to provide a space for people to be successful." Further, this college leader recognized the need to make intentional investments, saying, "Equity and capital go hand in hand."

Equity necessarily entails an understanding of how systemic racism and exclusionary policies affect services and programming. It also requires a willingness to talk about race.[4] Many staff members at the case study colleges seemed to struggle with such issues, which could also impede the development of clear equity goals and strategies. For example, one college leader recounted how staff had been asked to read the book *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People* as part of their professional development, and one person confided that it was so uncomfortable, he or she could not finish the book. Indeed, respondents on that campus tended to consider equity in terms of social class, rather than race or ethnicity.

Interestingly, students offered some of the most detailed and direct definitions or understandings of equity across the campuses, which underscores the importance of considering student voice when developing a framework and corresponding strategies to achieve equity. We elaborate on this below in our discussion of student voice and experience.

> **"People understand equality, but the campus does not believe in equity. They are more about equality."**
> *– Student organization leader*

The need to shift away from one-size-fits-all approaches

One-size-fits-all approaches for improving post-secondary outcomes are unlikely to improve equity because the root causes of students' academic difficulties vary widely. For example, the supports most needed by first-generation students may differ greatly from those needed by English-language learners or students with disabilities. Moreover, many students have intersecting qualities—for example, a first-generation student who is also an English-language learner—that may call for further differentiation in support services. Therefore, community colleges must seek to address the needs of specific student groups via targeted supports. Without targeted supports, students can fall through the cracks. For instance, when one student sought academic help from disabilities services, staff members told her that her classes were already "self-accommodating." They provided the student with transcripts of class videos and lecture notes, but she said she was "still not sure how to help [her]self."

Leaders at case study colleges emphasized efforts to serve all students, rather than focusing on students who needed services the most. This focus on equality and, importantly, on scale—that is, feeling pressure to serve all students—may explain why the colleges failed to maximize the potential of some promising but small-scale or "boutique" approaches that were already present on their campuses, as described below in our discussion of culturally responsive programming.

The role of student voice and experience

A strong equity framework and targeted approaches to meet different students' needs must take student perspectives into account. It is important to recognize, however, that simply seeking input from students is not enough. The student experience must be at the center of any postsecondary equity agenda, which stresses the importance of recognizing not only structural barriers but also cultural assets and strengths. The colleges appeared to take an ad hoc approach to seeking students' input and understanding their needs. Such uncoordinated approaches reflect the absence of an overarching equity framework, are less likely to yield strong results, and may leave students feeling left out of important processes.

A majority of people interviewed in both colleges noted they knew little about the collection of systematic data to assess student needs. Staff who work most directly with students—particularly those who provide support services—did provide some examples of student needs assessment, but those data were not widely shared across the colleges. Similarly, it was not always clear whether or how the information gathered should be used to connect students to relevant supports that were already available, or to develop new supports as appropriate. Stakeholders struggled to make good use of assessments, as they were not grounded in a collective purpose. For example, even in cases where student input informed decision-making, there was little evidence that students had had a role in defining questions, interpreting data, or being involved in crafting the college's ultimate approach.

"The college does use student surveys on campus, [but] nothing is done with the data."

– Student

Indeed, students felt as if their voices were not considered. As one student asserted, although "the college does use student surveys on campus, nothing is done with the data." Many students described feeling as though the onus was on them to understand their own needs and how to meet them. One focus group participant noted that some students—especially first-generation college attendees—might not know what they need and, therefore, might not seek the appropriate supports.

Supporting the whole student

Whole-learner approaches address root causes that may impede students' academic achievement, such as unmet basic needs or feelings of not belonging on campus. Despite some of the challenges that the colleges faced in developing a common, informed understanding of equity, the case studies revealed several important considerations for colleges, funders, and other stakeholders interested in using holistic supports to promote equity in postsecondary education.

The centrality of attention to and support for students' basic needs

Colleges cannot support the whole student, nor achieve equity, without addressing the root causes of challenges facing students who experience poverty and discrimination. Students may struggle academically not because they lack ability, but because they lack access to adequate financial aid, housing, food, technology, or personal safety. Both colleges appeared to have experienced some success in changing college staff members' mindsets about students struggling with poverty and related challenges, as well as attitudes toward the colleges' role in addressing these issues.[5] However, there is some room for improvement and needs may increase, especially in the wake of the economic downturn expected from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students shared complementary and contrasting experiences related to several areas of basic needs:

Financial barriers: Students experiencing poverty often depend on financial aid to complete their college education. In the case study colleges, a strong majority of students expressed frustration with the financial aid process and staff. One student described the lengthy approval process as "grueling." Several students had been dropped from classes and were unable to re-enroll because of delays in their aid. Although the amount or even the timing of aid is not entirely within the colleges' control, students pointed to several problems that the colleges could address, including heavy staff caseloads, complex paperwork, inconvenient processes, and staff knowledge and behaviors, especially the failure to communicate clearly, consistently, and in a timely way about aid requirements. Students also noted that academic costs outside of normal tuition and fees can pose a barrier to academic success—for example, when faculty require websites with paywalls to access class materials, or require special equipment (such as graphic calculators or technical tools) that is not available through the library or other campus sources.

"The financial aid process can be improved. The people that work the front desk don't have the best attitude. There should be some instructions on 'first you do this' and 'then when there is a curve ball that comes up, you need to have your parents do this...' That needs to be said ahead of time."

– Student

Housing: Like many community colleges, these institutions do not have easily accessible housing on or near campus, which creates immense barriers for students experiencing poverty. The case study colleges have used some creative strategies to address this. In addition to one college's arrangement (described in Box 2) allowing students to live in a nursing home, the other college is considering designating some dorm rooms for transitional housing for homeless students. The college already provides access to showers in the gym, long-term lockers, and free laundry to these students. Although these creative approaches are commendable, the scale of the problem seems to demand a more systemic institutional response.

"Housing is really expensive here on campus. Seems like the on-campus housing was made for students that can pay more."

– Student

Food security: In line with recent research estimating that up to almost half of college students are food insecure, many students at these colleges struggle to access healthy, affordable food on or near campus.[6] Although both colleges have food pantries, their limited hours and offerings pose problems for students. Similarly, the cafeteria at one college is open for limited hours, the food is not particularly affordable, and it is difficult to find inexpensive, healthy food near campus. Because many students cannot easily access transportation, traveling off campus to purchase food during the day is not possible. Some students reported going hungry while at school. A few students suggested that the colleges offer bus passes to students as part of their tuition to alleviate this problem.

"The food bank is way too far away, and you have to either make an appointment or go [there during] their hours. There are times where maybe they are open for [only] an hour."

– Student

Safety: The ways in which students' identities and backgrounds interact with college administrators' decisions affect how safe students feel on campus. At one of the case study colleges, undocumented students reported avoiding campus on at least one occasion when Immigration and Customs Enforcement came for a job fair.

Black students discussed feeling unfairly targeted by security officers. Students also noted lack of lighting in parking lots and failure by the college to notify them of violent or unsafe incidents that had occurred nearby. When colleges do acknowledge students' identities and backgrounds, it can help students to feel accepted and connected. For example, a Somali student shared: "As a woman with a hijab, I feel safer on campus than outside in the community ... Campus sent out an email communicating [the fact that it was Ramadan] to the student body. It's like, wow, they are acknowledging me."

Data collection for the case studies concluded about a year before the 2020 pandemic. Even then, some students had noted challenges in accessing broadband and technology for remote learning. Looking ahead, as colleges react to the evolving public health crisis, it will be even more important to ensure that all students can access appropriate technology, tools, and other supports for remote learning.

The critical but tenuous role of caring individuals

Although holistic approaches are central to the WSSN model, on the case study campuses, such services were largely provided by a few highly motivated, resourceful, and passionate staff members who often went above and beyond their job descriptions (see Box 2). These exceptional staff members were often critical for maintaining communication channels with external partners to provide students with services the colleges cannot offer. Most interviewees—including students and college staff members—pointed to such caring individuals and applauded the work they do to serve students, but they could not provide details on the work that the college or its organizational units were doing as a whole. Without more focused institutional attention, the provision of holistic services—and the partnerships required to maintain them—could be affected if key staff were to leave the college or change roles, especially because they often work in areas without dedicated funding. Institutionalizing such efforts is important, but it requires colleges both to embrace their responsibility for supporting the whole student (a potential adaptive challenge) and to develop processes and skills to carry out the work (a potential technical challenge).

Box 2. Caring individuals go above and beyond their job descriptions

A workforce program assistant at one of the colleges provides an example of someone leveraging community partners well to meet student needs. Her experience as someone who was formerly incarcerated and as a woman of color informed her creative approaches to connect homeless students with housing resources and reentry students with supportive student organizations. This person used a bartering system to create partnerships with community agencies to find internships and housing for students. For example, she arranged for students to live in a community retirement home in exchange for volunteering their time there. ◢

Faculty also play an important role in supporting the whole student, but they are often not as involved as they would like to be or feel they should be. Although they have the most contact with students, faculty interviewed for the case studies were not typically involved in communication or planning of student services. They described meaningful personal interactions with students where they were able to connect them to appropriate services. Yet they also noted that it would help if they were better educated about the various services and resources available, which would also enhance their understanding of their own role in supporting students. One faculty member connected this situation directly back to the equity agenda, stating, "Equity is also making sure that faculty know what the services are [to support students]."

Students echoed others' recognition of and appreciation for the attentiveness of individual faculty and staff. According to students in the focus groups, personal connections with faculty, staff, and peers are extremely important, both to help students feel a sense of belonging at the college and to inform them about resources, services, and events, as most students gather such information through word of mouth. In particular, students noted that they value faculty who go beyond just teaching and reach out when a student seems to be struggling, which makes them feel understood and supported.

The underappreciated potential of culturally responsive programming

Culturally responsive programs meet students' distinct needs and aspirations and reflect students' lived experiences. These are often small programs within the larger college, and they explicitly serve students of color, immigrant students, first-generation college students, and students experiencing poverty. Examples of such programs at the case study colleges include PUENTE (a national college-success program serving Latinx and other students), Umoja (a community and curricular model centered on the Black and African-diaspora experience), MESA (an initiative focused on under-represented students in STEM programs), and TRIO (a group of federally funded programs that serve students from low-income households, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities). The need for culturally informed, student-centered approaches is becoming more urgent as colleges seek to support the diverse array of "non-traditional" students who come from groups that postsecondary education has not served well in the past.

Students credited culturally responsive programs with nurturing their sense of belonging on campus, which is an important condition for success.[7] They reported feeling a sense of community within these programs, noting that program spaces allowed them to be themselves and connect with others from similar backgrounds.

"Before the Puente program, it was like 'come to class and leave.' I didn't feel part of campus. I felt like I was coming to a desk taking notes and that was my day on campus. After I joined Puente, I started finding out about the resources. I get a lot of emails now—and I don't know if it is because I am part of Puente–[but] now I enjoy coming to campus as being a part of school."

– Student

Students attested that culturally responsive programs were especially valuable in helping them feel accepted at the college. One student noted that it was only when she joined MESA that she finally felt part of a community, which positively affected how she felt about attending college. Interestingly, some Latinx students reported that they had learned about these culturally responsive programs through kin networks, rather than through official college channels.

Students and staff also reported that culturally responsive programs play an important role in addressing academic and non-academic needs. They described instances where students had received guidance on transferring to a four-year college, which classes to select, and forming study groups, as well as financial aid, housing and food, and access to computers and books. According to students, these culturally responsive communities and personal connections to their organizational leaders make it easier for them to succeed in college. Students also shared that these groups are valuable because their leaders are more culturally aware of students' needs: They are often people of color with similar lived experiences who can relate to students' academic and personal challenges. As one student attested, "If it wasn't for my family or Umoja, school would be extra, extra hard."

"When discussing space for learning communities, we get asked why we would need our own space. It is a space where students could close the door and just be themselves. Trying to get white male administrators to understand that is a challenge."

– Umoja member

Moving toward equity in postsecondary education: Reflections on the WSSN case studies

Although these case studies involved just two community colleges in one state, a few key themes emerged that can guide postsecondary stakeholders—including colleges, funders, and other partners—as they work together and in their separate spheres to develop and implement strategies and programs to achieve equitable student outcomes (Exhibit 1).

First, to forward an equity agenda, postsecondary stakeholders must take stock of their own definitions and assumptions related to equity, and must work to ensure that they understand one another as they approach their shared work. By definition, equity requires colleges to abandon a one-size-fits-all approach. It is imperative that stakeholders understand that different student populations need different supports to achieve the same level of success. Actively seeking and listening to the student voice is critical to developing such understanding.

Realizing a postsecondary equity agenda also requires supporting the whole learner. In particular, stakeholders should work within their relevant contexts to address root causes of the barriers and challenges students face; at the same time, they must recognize and leverage the assets that students bring to campus. Students—especially those from historically underserved groups—need supports not only for their academic success but also for their material and emotional well-being. At the same time, they bring a wealth of personal relationships and resources that can support their success if appropriately integrated with the college experience.

The case study colleges illustrate the importance of caring individuals and culturally responsive programs in achieving these goals, but there is tension around the sustainability and scalability of such supports. Specifically, the work of caring individuals must be intentionally integrated into institutional practice to be scaled and sustained.

Exhibit 1. Considerations for colleges, funders, and other stakeholders supporting equitable postsecondary outcomes
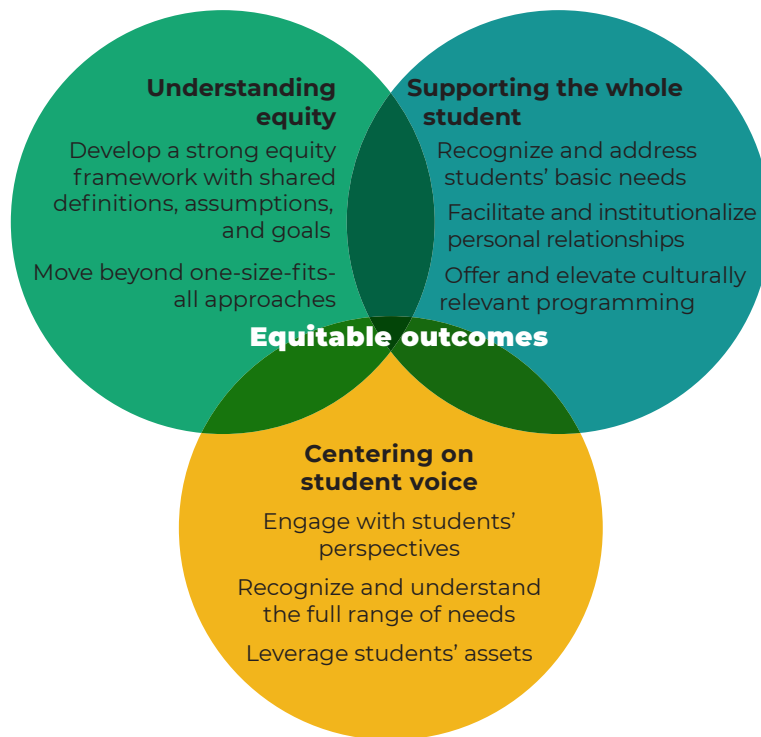
Similarly, colleges appear to underutilize culturally responsive programs because they are viewed as "boutique" services and not typically considered scalable. However, if equity demands different supports for underserved students to help them achieve the same level of success as their more privileged peers, then it is worth rethinking our assumptions about what it means to "scale" a program. If equitable outcomes require targeted supports, perhaps scale can only be achieved through a combination of varied supports focusing on different students' needs.

The postsecondary landscape is, indeed, becoming more diverse, but diversity alone is not enough. Uplifting, integrating, and directly addressing diverse perspectives and needs is necessary for universal student success.

Endnotes

[1] Sullivan, Margaret, Derek V. Price, Lindsay Fox, and Ann Person. "How Community Colleges Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability of Low-Income Students to Boost College Completion: Lessons from the Working Students Success Network." Oakland, CA: Mathematica Policy Research, April 30, 2018. Available at https://www.mathe-matica.org/download-media?MediaItemId={39019019-C6F 7-4A47-B6D5-17F7F2EADB85}

[2] Achieving the Dream. *Integrated Student Support Services in Action: A Guide to Implementing the Working Students Success Network Approach.* January 2018, p. 6. Available at https://www.achievingthedream.org/system/files_force/ resources/atd-guidebook-digital-scroll.pdf

[3] Derek V. Price, Roberts, B., Kraemer, S., & Chaplot, P. "Community college approaches to address basic needs and improve financial stability for low-income students: Lessons from the working students' success network implemen-tation evaluation." Indianapolis, IN: DVP Praxis, January 2018. Available at https://www.dvp-praxis.org/wp-content/ uploads/2018/02/WSSN-FInal-Report-2018.pdf

[4] See, for example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Embracing Equity" guide for a discussion of the relation-ships between equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion. Available at https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF_ EmbracingEquity7Steps-2014.pdf

[5] See Price et al. 2018.

[6] For example, see: Freudenberg, Nicholas, Sara Goldrick-Rab, and Janet Poppendieck. 2019. " College students and SNAP: The new face of food insecurity in the United States." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 12, pp. 1652-1658.

[7] Although more research is needed to understand program efficacy, extant research suggests that cul-turally-responsive programs can improve not only students' sense of belonging, but also key college out-comes, such as retention and completion. See for exam-ple The RP Group's study of Umoja programs available at: https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/ Umoja_Evaluation/Resources/umojaBrief_digital_final. pdf?ver=2020-03-08-132907-650