

REPORT

Amplifying Student Voices

The Community College Libraries and Academic Support for Student Success Project

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Executive summary of findings

The Community College Libraries & Academic Support for Student Success (CCLASSS) project examines student goals, challenges, and needs from the student perspective. Through this project, we aim to provide community colleges and their libraries with strategic intelligence on how to adapt their services to most effectively meet student needs.

In spring 2018, we conducted semi-structured interviews with students at seven partner community colleges on student objectives and goals, definitions of success, challenges faced, and coursework practices.

Key findings

Across institutions, we found that students:

- View community college as an accessible option – in terms of location, transportation options, and cost – that fits their complex lives and needs.
- Have complex definitions of success that focus on both their career and educational achievement as well as their personal development.
- Face significant challenges related to balancing work and school, finances, childcare arrangements, language barriers, transportation to and from the college, and navigating resources and services at their college.
- Complete their coursework in a variety of places depending on their individual needs and resources available, but generally want to avoid distractions and noise while working.
- Do not find it difficult to locate the information they need for their coursework and have a particular affinity for using Google when doing so. They tend to rely heavily on their professors for providing guidance on resources to use when completing assignments.

Introduction

The CCLASSS project

Community colleges are vital engines of our higher education system, enrolling approximately 39 percent of all undergraduate students with special emphasis on serving underrepresented minorities, low-income students, first-generation college students, new Americans, and other diverse populations.¹ Community college libraries are partners and leaders in ensuring success at their institutions by providing a variety of important spaces, resources, and services for their students.

The vast majority of research to date on how to adapt library services to support institutional priorities has been conducted at four year colleges and universities, and the definitions of student success used in these projects have often derived from higher education institutions, state boards of education, and the federal government, thus omitting the perspective of the student in what defines success. To continue evolving in support of their students, community colleges and their libraries need strategic intelligence about how to adapt their services.

Ithaka S+R and Northern Virginia Community College, along with six other community college partners and with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) [RE-96-17-0113-17], are taking an important step to strengthen the position of the community college library through the Community College Libraries & Academic Support for Student Success (CCLASSS) project.

The CCLASSS project is focused on understanding (1) how “student success” can be defined so that it is inclusive both of students’ own needs as well as important policy priorities, and (2) what services colleges and their academic libraries can offer to most effectively support students in their attainment of success.

This project is focused on answering these questions through three phases:

1. A *qualitative discovery phase*, in which we learn about the practices, preferences, and needs of community college students and their relationship to success by means of on-campus, in-depth, in-person qualitative interviews;
2. A *service concept development phase*, in which we develop a series of concepts for services that community colleges and their libraries might seek to offer based on the discovery phase; and

¹ Enrollment figure provided by CCRC FAQs: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html>.

3. An *assessment phase*, in which we will evaluate the service concepts with community college students by means of a survey to evaluate their potential value.

This report covers findings from the first of these three phases, which has focused on understanding the practices, preferences, and needs of community college students from the student perspective.

Following this first phase, we will develop new service concepts to meet these student-identified needs and will assess these concepts via survey at each of the partner community colleges later this year. We will publish a separate report of findings from the aggregate results from these surveys in 2019. We will also publish a toolkit that can be further adopted by both community colleges and community college systems to test these service concepts themselves or develop and assess additional service concepts specifically relevant to their populations.

We look forward to continuing to engage with the higher education community as our work on this project proceeds.

Methodology

Northern Virginia Community College and Ithaka S+R have partnered with the following institutions which serve as research sites for this project. Partnership members include four members of a single university system and three additional institutions. These institutions are located in urban and non-urban settings, and each serves highly diverse student populations.

The population for this study is currently-enrolled students across the seven colleges, including credit and workforce students, non-credit, degree, credential, and continuing education students, and online students. Students under the age of 18 were excluded from this study.

Approximately 500 students from each college were randomly selected to be invited via email to participate in the study. For institutions with multiple campuses, this sample of students remained proportional to the enrollment on each campus.

	Location(s)	2015-16 Student Headcount²	Carnegie Classification: Size and Setting³	Carnegie Classification: Basic⁴
Northern Virginia Community College	Alexandria, VA Annandale, VA Loudoun, VA Manassas, VA Woodbridge, VA	75,858	Two-year, very large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional
Borough of Manhattan Community College	New York, NY	35,506	Two-year, very large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional
Queensborough Community College	Bayside, NY	21,271	Two-year, very large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional
Bronx Community College	Bronx, NY	15,494	Two-year, very large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional
LaGuardia Community College	Long Island City, NY	26,103	Two-year, large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional
Monroe Community College	Rochester, NY	27,586	Two-year, very large	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Nontraditional
Pierce College	Lakewood, WA Puyallup, WA	16,769	Two-year, medium	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Nontraditional (Ft. Steilacoom) / Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional (Puyallup)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 students across the seven participating colleges. These interviews were primarily conducted in person, though some were conducted via phone to accommodate a variety of student schedules. As an

² Retrieved from IPEDS: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>. Includes students enrolled for credit during the 12-month reporting period.

³ Retrieved from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>.

⁴ Retrieved from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>.

incentive, students who participated in this study were provided with a \$50 Amazon.com gift card.

Interviews covered topics including student objectives and goals, definitions of success, challenges faced, and coursework practices.⁵ Anonymized interviews were transcribed and coded through NVivo using a grounded approach.

Our aim in this first phase of the CCLASS project is to understand the experiences, preferences, and needs of community college students in their roles as students. While our objective in the project overall is to design and test new library services, in this phase it was important to take an extremely open-ended approach to understanding this audience as students rather than as library users (or potential users). With this in mind, when possible, the email invitation for this study was sent under the signatory of the college provost, vice president of academic affairs, or equivalent. Most interviews were held outside of the library in an office, classroom, or other academic room elsewhere on campus. Perhaps most importantly, our interview script did not mention the library or any other specific academic support services.

Acknowledgments

Each of the colleges involved in this project is represented by a project lead who serves as a point person for their local institution, helping to ensure that decisions taken in this project will prove strategically valuable to community colleges and their students. This team will play a vital role in developing the library service concepts that will be tested via survey later this year. The project leads for each college are as follows:

- Jean Amaral, Assistant Professor and Outreach Director, Borough of Manhattan Community College
- Braddlee, Dean of Learning & Technology Resources, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus
- Christie Flynn, Dean of Library and Learning Resources, Pierce College District
- Jeanne Galvin, Professor and Chief Librarian, Queensborough Community College
- Katie Ghidui, Instructor and Interim Director of Libraries, Monroe Community College
- Michael Miller, Professor and Chief Librarian, Bronx Community College
- Steven Ovadia, Professor and Deputy Chief Librarian, LaGuardia Community College

⁵ Please see appendix for the interview script used for this project.

In addition to the project leads, we have convened an external advisory panel to provide guidance at critical points in the project. The members of the external advisory panel are as follows:

- Bryan Alexander, President, Bryan Alexander Consulting
- Deborah Gilchrist, Vice-President for Learning and Student Success for Pierce College District
- Megan Oakleaf, Associate Professor, Syracuse University School of Library and Information

We thank the project leads and external advisory panel members for their tremendous contributions towards this project, as well as the Institute of Museum and Library Services for providing support to make this project possible [RE-96-17-0113-17].⁶

We are grateful to our colleagues who contributed to our work on this project in a variety of ways, including Danielle Cooper, Martin Kurzweil, Kimberly Lutz, and Roger Schonfeld.

⁶ Please see log number RE-96-17-0113-17 for more information on this project:
<https://www.ims.gov/grants/awarded/re-96-17-0113-17>.

Choosing college

Community college students have an array of personal needs that impact the choices they make in their academic lives. Students in this study often view community college as an accessible option in terms of location, transportation options, and cost. And, while students report seeking options that fit their lives and needs for affordability and convenience, the quality of education received and availability of programs that support their goals are also viewed as important in driving their choices.

Students expressed the importance of the location of a college in two main ways. First, students reported choosing their specific college because it was near home, was easy to commute to via car or public transportation, and/or was generally in a convenient location. Additionally, a few students reported that they were a resident of a pre-defined geographic area (e.g. a borough in New York City) and decided to go to their college because it was also within this area – not necessarily because it was the closest, but because of the community with which they identify. One interviewee explained, “I’ve lived here in the Bronx for, like, seven years. And I like this college because I find that [there is a] Hispanic community here... so I feel more comfortable.” Conversely, one student mentioned that they specifically sought out their college because the student population differed from that within their community, and they believed that this would help them improve their proficiency in English.

Having a pathway from community college to a four-year institution was often an important factor in students’ decision-making.

Cost was another major factor that students reported in their decision-making processes. Some students who aim to complete their education with their associate’s degree highlighted that the colleges they chose were more affordable than other two- and four-year institutions. Students who are interested in transferring to a four-year institution often mentioned that credits obtained from their community college would be less expensive than those that they would obtain at the four-year institution, and that by transferring these “cheap credits,” they would lower the overall cost burden for their bachelor’s degree. For these students, having a pathway from community college to a four-year institution was often an important factor in their decision-making.

When deciding to enroll in a specific community college, students are highly influenced by their family and friends. As one student explained, “There was just never any question that I wouldn't go to college. My mom is a teacher and she used to be a college career counselor... It's always been pre-determined that I would go to college, and there was never the thought that [I] wouldn't.” Another student noted, “Not a lot of people from my family had finished college. I was set on the task to be the first one to do so... I was highly encouraged by my parents.” Many interviewees chose to go to the same college family members or friends had attended because of the experiences of these individuals.

Students are also influenced by the general reputation and, less frequently, the specific academic programs or offerings of a college. They often reported hearing that the college they chose was seen “as a good college” and that this was an important factor in their decision-making process. As one student explained, “To my knowledge and [based] on everything I've been told, it's one of the best community colleges around so it would [have been] foolish not to check it out.” Another student explained, “I've heard nothing but good reviews... everybody that seems to go just had a positive outlook on it.” A recent study of full-time students at four-year colleges and universities also indicated the great importance of the reputation of an academic institution; this factor was rated most highly by respondents in their decision-making process, with approximately two-thirds indicating that it was very important. Respondents also indicated the cost of attendance as highly important, though the proximity to home and input from family were not considered to be relatively as important, diverging from our findings on community college students.⁷

Lastly, a number of students reported starting their coursework at a particular college and then returning to that same college to complete their coursework. Roughly half of the students interviewed either started their coursework at the college in which they are currently enrolled or another college, often with gaps in their time enrolled. The challenges that often account for this non-continuous enrollment are explored later in this report.

⁷ Kevin Eagan, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Hilary B. Zimmerman, Melissa C. Aragon, Hannah Whang Sayson, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2017), <https://www.heru.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2016.pdf>.

Defining success

A major aim of this project is to understand students' own definitions of success. While in this report, these goals were captured at one point in time, they often change over time as a student evolves in their personal and academic lives. Students generally do not have just one goal within each of these categories below but are complex individuals with multiple goals within and across these categories.

Extrinsic goals

Students often defined success around *extrinsic goals* that primarily focused on career and/or educational achievement. These externally-focused, outcome-oriented goals included obtaining a certificate or associate's degree, getting good grades, career advancement and financial security, and building a pathway towards additional education. Student persistence, achievement, and attainment, including rates of transfer, enrollment in postsecondary education, retention, time to graduation, and graduation are often used to measure student success in relation to this set of goals from an institutional perspective.

The vast majority of interviewees viewed obtaining their associate's degree or a certificate as a baseline measure of success. While many students viewed this as a step towards additional education, many also did not express an intention to continue their education beyond the college at which they are currently enrolled. A number of students also viewed passing a specific class (often a math class) in order to obtain their degree or certificate as an indicator of success. As one student explained, "The math class I need for my major is Stats 160, [which] I had to retake a lot. Then the math I need is 165. So if I can get through that 165 course, I'll call that a win."

"I turned 40 years old last June and got sick and tired of asking people, 'Home fries or hash browns?' I've been a waitress for 20 years, so in order to fulfill my longing to have a college education, I decided it was time to go back."

Interviewees frequently reported goals related to career advancement, and these goals were often tied to respondents wanting to increase their earning potential. These goals are often focused on advancing within a field in which they are currently working (for

those students who are working while enrolled), or starting out in or transitioning into a new field. A number of students reported working in jobs where they don't make enough money and/or don't have opportunities to advance without additional credentialing or an associate's degree. As one interviewee explained, "I turned 40 years old last June and got sick and tired of asking people, 'Home fries or hash browns?' I've been a waitress for 20 years, so in order to fulfill my longing to have a college education, I decided it was time to go back." Students often see their college experience as a general requirement for career advancement and financial success. As one student explained, "Well I think especially today it's increasingly difficult to get any sort of career or move up in the world without higher education... without a post-secondary degree."

"Especially today it's increasingly difficult to get any sort of career or move up in the world without higher education... without a post-secondary degree."

A number of students specifically reported being interested in mastering skills that could be applied to advance their career within a specific field. As one student who aimed to become a registered nurse explained, "[It's important] not just for me to pass, but for me to understand the material I'm getting so I can use it when I get my job... I really want to learn so I can apply what I've learned here."

For those students who do intend to pursue additional education, building a pathway to a four-year institution or another program within the community college is a critically important component of their success. Some students are unsure about their trajectory but may be considering transferring to a four-year institution. As one student explained, "I don't know if I have [the] capacity to go back to school to obtain my bachelor's degree. So this is a way for me to kind of be in between my associates and potentially going back to school to get my bachelor's degree." Others have a very well defined pathway and specifically named the institution to which they plan on transferring. Having good grades or a specific GPA is often seen as a key requirement of being able to transfer credits to a four-year institution. As one student explained, "I'll really get my success if I'm able to attain all the GPA required in my various prerequisites... [and] if I'm able to join the nursing program. That's what I consider to be a successful time [here]."

Intrinsic goals

While the aforementioned extrinsic goals are highly important to students, there are other *intrinsic goals* – that is, those focused on advancing personal development – that are often just as, if not more, important. These more internally-focused, process-oriented indicators of success include gaining knowledge, feeling a sense of accomplishment, and developing social skills and a sense of community, and are often related to the aforementioned extrinsic goals. These goals generally have not been a key component for measuring institutional outcomes and academic library contributions to these outcomes.

“It’s not just that you get the degree because anybody can get a degree and anybody can get a grade, but just the knowledge... each class helps me to stretch my mind and to think differently and that helps me at the workplace. It helps me learn to think differently.”

Students reported highly prioritizing the attainment of knowledge, both generally and within specific fields, when speaking about their goals and definitions of success. A number of students specifically reported being interested in gaining knowledge broadly. As one student explained, “...just knowing that I’ve learned something, that I’ve gotten something out of it. It doesn’t even necessarily have to be super related to the course material or my forte or my area of interest.” Many students emphasized the importance of being able to apply the knowledge they gain to the “real world.” As a number of students explained, “I [want to graduate] in the time period I want to with the grades I want... not just the grades but to really get what I came here for... to learn and to understand and be able to use it,” “I mean, yeah, the degree is cool, but I’m more about the knowledge... at this point, it’s more about the knowledge than the degree itself,” and “It’s not just that you get the degree because anybody can get a degree and anybody can get a grade, but just the knowledge... each class helps me to stretch my mind and to think differently and that helps me at the workplace. It helps me learn to think differently.”

Many students are also focused on developing a sense of community as a part of their college experience. Forming personal and professional connections, with both peers and faculty, is a key component of success for many of these students. A number of students, especially those who are new to the United States, emphasized the importance of developing a sense of community. As one student explained, “[I need to] improve my

social directions since I'm in your country... I need to relate with people in order to be of value to this community that I'm new to." Another mentioned, "For me, [success] means gathering more experience and more knowledge... I always want to be aware of everything that's going on, and that's me doing a civic duty not just for myself, but to society at large, because the more that we are educated, the more that we can implement change."

"You learn how to work with certain types of people... you just learn how to be a person in society... I feel like that's a really important area of growth that I look for in all of my classes."

Some students mentioned the importance of developing social skills and learning to work with others. As one interviewee explained, "You learn how to work with certain types of people... you just learn how to be a person in society... I feel like that's a really important area of growth that I look for in all of my classes." A number of students view involvement in extracurricular activities as one way to achieve this goal. As one student explained "...because I'm so involved on campus, I hope that I would leave a legacy here for future generations to come that will be able to carry on the torch and keep pushing forward in student life."

Lastly, students highly value feeling a sense of accomplishment, bettering themselves, and being happy, and see these achievements as important indicators of success. For one student who recently came to the United States, these goals were centered around advocating for themselves. They explained, "[I want to] be able to think or talk or write [in an] educated, intelligent [way]... to be able to argue [and] advocate for myself because this is a different country. Sometimes I'm not familiar with the rules and I cannot advocate for myself here." For another student who recently became disabled, the focus was on showing others that they could achieve the same sense of accomplishment as others could. They explained, "I have a mission, and my mission is to learn as much as I can so I can prove that there are many options for people who have serious health problems." Another student expressed that an important goal for them was to gain confidence. They explained, "[Success is] having the confidence to move on to a university, knowing you have those skills and not being intimidated by it, because I'm also a first-generation college student... It's one thing to be like, 'I'm getting a degree,' but it's [another] to be able to move on from it and have confidence in what I've learned

here.” Other students expressed this set of goals as developing themselves, feeling better about themselves, becoming more well-rounded, bettering their life, and being happy.

“[Success is] having the confidence to move on to a university, knowing you have those skills and not being intimidated by it, because I’m also a first-generation college student”

Facing challenges

The challenges that community college students face are very much at the intersection of their complex academic and personal lives. While some students reported struggling with their coursework, their most significant problems often related to balancing work and school, finances, childcare arrangements, adjusting to a new language, transportation to and from the college, and navigating resources and services at the college. These challenges, which were mentioned by nearly all of the students in this study, have limited, and may continue to limit, students' ability to achieve the aforementioned goals they have set out for themselves.

First, students struggle with their coursework in a variety of ways. As previously described, math courses can prove especially difficult for many students. A number of students mentioned having to retake math courses multiple times, and one student reported that a number of their classmates had to leave the college because they couldn't pass one of the remedial math classes. Students enrolled in these remedial courses, which have been designed to develop the skills of students who are deemed underprepared for college, are generally less likely to accomplish extrinsic goals such as completing a program and earning a degree or credential.⁸

Students also listed a number of other courses that they have struggled with and/or have had to retake, including accounting, chemistry, computer science, and economics. Many of these students have gone to their professor and/or pursued tutoring for additional help, but the results from these efforts seem mixed, as many students continue to struggle even after connecting with these resources.

While students generally view community college as a financially accessible option for themselves, they still often struggle with the cost of their education. Many students reported difficulties with making ends meet to pay for housing, food, and their tuition and other college costs, and many struggle with navigating financial aid resources. One student shared that they were not sure that they would be able to continue at the college because of their financial challenges. Recent studies from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab have highlighted the prevalence of food and housing insecurity issues at both community and

⁸ For example, see Elizabeth Ganga, Amy Mazzariello, and Nikki Edgecombe, *Developmental Education: An Introduction for Policymakers* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, February, 2018), <https://www.ecs.org/developmental-education-an-introduction-for-policymakers/>, and Alexandra W. Logue, "The Extensive Evidence of Co-Requisite Remediation's Effectiveness," *Inside Higher Education*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/07/17/data-already-tell-us-how-effective-co-requisite-education-opinion>.

four-year institutions; a 2017 survey of more than 33,000 students indicated that roughly half of community college students are housing insecure and two in three students food insecure.⁹

Time management is the biggest challenge that I'm facing as a student, because, like right now [while I'm talking to you] I'm on my lunch break, so I have to find every little bit of time that I can, whether it's 30 minutes or an hour in between things in order to study or finish an assignment and get everything done."

Many students struggle with time management and balancing all of their roles outside of the classroom. A number of students reported working numerous jobs in addition to being enrolled and struggling to keep up with all of their responsibilities. As one student explained, "Time management is the biggest challenge that I'm facing as a student, because, like right now [while I'm talking to you] I'm on my lunch break, so I have to find every little bit of time that I can, whether it's 30 minutes or an hour in between things in order to study or finish an assignment and get everything done." Another interviewee explained that they didn't expect to struggle so much with time management when they started at the college, "The time commitment was also another big [challenge]... [my classes took up] eight hours a week in addition to my full time work schedule and all of my other obligations... I didn't quite anticipate how large the impact was going to be. It was like those nights I was essentially lost. I can't cook dinner or prepare my lunch for the next day." Students reported encountering difficulties with scheduling appointments with advisors, testing centers, and other offices on campus due to the complexity of their schedules and the hours of these offices. A number of them explained that there just aren't enough hours in the day for them to keep up with their studies and other responsibilities outside of college.

Some students, especially those who are taking care of children or grandparents, struggle with balancing responsibilities at home and at school. As one student explained, "I have

⁹ Sara Goldrick-Rab, Katharine M. Broton, and Daphne C. Hernandez, *Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education: An Introduction to Three Evaluations of Supports for Food and Housing at Community Colleges* (Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 2017), <http://wihopelab.com/publications/Addressing-Basic-Needs-Security-in-Higher-Education.pdf>.

a six-year-old, so it's basically dropping him off to school and [trying to get] to my classes on time... And the classes are basically right around that chunk of time where I have to pick him up and he's not in daycare... so that's my biggest issue right now.” A number of students who are parents mentioned struggling with arranging for childcare while taking classes. One student explained, “My wife also works full-time and takes classes during the evenings, so we have to ask her family or my family [or] get a babysitter, which is not cheap, to watch the kids while we’re both in school... it would be nice if we could drop them off at a childcare center and go to class for an hour, versus having a babysitter for three hours because we have to factor in the commute.”

“It would be nice if we could drop [our kids] off at a childcare center and go to class for an hour, versus having a babysitter for three hours because we have to factor in the commute.”

A handful of students who are new to the United States reported challenges with adapting to reading, writing, and/or speaking English. As one student explained, “American English is different from Jamaican English because we use British English... so I’m always writing British English instead of American English.”

A number of students reported having a variety of disabilities which presented challenges for them in getting their work done. These challenges often prevented students from being continuously enrolled in courses and therefore lengthened, sometimes by years, their time to completing a degree or credential.

Many students reported challenges related to transportation to the college. These challenges were generally related to the time it takes to get to campus (both via car or public transportation), associated costs, and reliability. As one student explained, “I’m not that familiar with [public transportation], so sometimes I’ll take Uber or my sister will drive me.” Another interviewee explained, “I think transportation is a huge [challenge]. I have to take the bus to school and it’s really, really unreliable in when it comes. So I find I am getting to classes very late and that definitely is a challenge for me because no matter what time I leave I find that the bus is not there.”

Perhaps most significantly, students reported having a tremendously difficult time navigating all of the resources, services, departments, and programs at their college. While these challenges sometimes focused on one or two specific areas (for example,

advising and/or financial aid), these challenges largely centered around navigating college life broadly. For some students, knowing what resources are available and for which they are eligible is a major source of frustration. One student reported finding out in their final semester that there was a program at their college that could have covered a significant portion of tuition costs, and they expressed regret that they were not able to participate earlier. They only happened to find out about the program because they were studying in the room where there was a program meeting and ended up staying because they offered free lunch. Other students also reported not being able to take advantage of services because they found out about them too late.

“If you don’t ask the right person or you don’t know that you have to do your own research and you just rely on [the college], you’re going to get lost.”

A number of students reported having difficulty coordinating across different service areas at the college. As one student explained, “For me the college is just so big. Sometimes you get bounced back and forth from departments to departments... you get lost in bureaucracy... one person at a desk will say one thing [and] the next day you go back, they will say another thing... sometimes you don’t even know how to navigate the whole system.” Another student articulated, “If you don’t ask the right person or you don’t know that you have to do your own research and you just rely on [the college], you’re going to get lost.” Students described a number of situations where they received conflicting information across and within service areas, and these situations often had serious financial implications for the students.

Many students reported relying on their advisors and professors for providing information on the various services available at the college. Beyond these individuals, some students also noted the importance of the information they were provided when they first enrolled at the college and/or during a college success course that provided overview information on a number of important college resources.

Completing coursework

Community college students are assigned a variety of different types of work in their courses, including in-class work, group projects, participation in discussion forums, written reactions to readings and/or videos, and research papers. To complete these assignments, students use and seek a variety of different spaces, tools, and resources.

Finding space

Most community college students complete their coursework at home and on campus. Across these different locations, students prioritize space that is quiet and free of distractions. No students in this study reported any challenges associated with finding space to work on collaborative projects with their classmates.

Students who expressed preference for doing their school work at home do so because they see it as a comfortable place for doing work in their own environment. Some students described having a dedicated space specifically set up for completing school work (e.g. desk area with a computer/laptop, printer, etc.). Others shared that they do their work at home in spaces intended for other purposes, such as on their beds or in shared spaces (e.g. living room, kitchen).

“Working at home is a double-edged sword because you're comfortable, but it also can be a problem if you're too comfortable.”

However, many students also view their homes as less than ideal places for doing work due to insufficient space, distractions, and other responsibilities at home. As one student explained, “Working at home is a double-edged sword because you're comfortable, but it also can be a problem if you're too comfortable.” A number of students expressed being distracted by house chores (e.g. laundry, dishes, etc.), family responsibilities (e.g. taking care of children or grandparents, distracting siblings, different schedules for family members), or a lack of dedicated space. One student described their challenges with a lack of space for schoolwork, stating, “...I live with my brother, but we only have a one-bedroom apartment. So whenever I want to study, I do it [in] my bedroom [and] sometimes he brings his girlfriends and ...I cannot concentrate.”

Students also shared that they use a variety of spaces on campus to complete their work, especially between classes while already on campus, including the library, computer lab, tutoring center, or writing center. Many choose to work in the library because it's quiet and they are less prone to being distracted compared to time spent at home or in other spaces. Some students specifically enjoy working in the library because their peers are also focused on working. One student explained, "Usually it's like no one's talking. Everyone's just focused," and another detailed, "I'm a procrastinator so I need to be in a public space where there are many people doing work as well. It really helps me focus in on what I have to do and it feels like that's the rhythm that everyone already is in in this space and so it's easier for me to concentrate in those spaces."

However, interviewees shared how having peers present in the library while trying to work is only helpful up to a certain point, recognizing the trade-off of an overcrowded library leading to noise and other distractions. As one student explained, "For the most part it's nice and quiet. Sometimes people are rude. They get on the phone and have conversations and sometimes they talk to each other. But for the most part I like coming to the library. I actually leave my house to come here to study because I get more motivation when I'm here." A few students reported coping with the noise by listening to music on their headphones to tune it out.

"For the most part I like coming to the library. I actually leave my house to come here to study because I get more motivation when I'm here."

For some, these distractions and lack of space at the library caused them to find other places to do their work. At one college in particular, students especially experienced difficulty with getting work done in the library due to overcrowding and noise. Students from this college explained, "One day I came to the library and I went upstairs it was just, I think I tried it twice and it was just too noisy. And it's like I cannot concentrate so I had to go home," and "Here it gets crowded... in the winter you'll see people in the library floors [in whatever] nook and cranny they can find because nobody wants to be in the cold... you have a combination of students who are really working on their school assignments and those that are just getting shelter from the cold... they're just hanging out because they have a hole in their schedule or something." A 2015 study on coursework and library spaces at CUNY highlighted similar frustrations when the

academic library become too noisy.¹⁰ When these libraries are used for purposes beyond their remit, community colleges are at risk of not meeting student needs by failing to provide the quiet, distraction-free space that is so critical to students being able to complete their work.

Students also occasionally reported completing their coursework elsewhere off campus and outside of the home – for example, in a public library, at a friend’s house, in a café, and on campus in a computer lab, tutoring center, or writing center. A few students within the CUNY system aim to make the most of their time by working while in transit – for example, reading on the subway.

Using information

In contrast with the difficulties that students encounter with navigating information on college services, students generally believe that finding information needed to complete their coursework is an easy task as long as they have sufficient internet access, an appropriate device for accessing the internet, and clear instructions from their professors. As one student explained, “It’s easy because I have a phone, a computer, a laptop. I can just look it up.” Students may encounter difficulties if they have limited or unreliable access to the internet or lack a certain device on which to complete their work. As one student described, “...right now I only have my phone, which is a little bit uncomfortable because, you know, it affects [my] vision... reading on the phone, it’s hard. So that’s one of the things affecting some assignments because I don’t have a computer.”

“Right now I only have my phone, which is a little bit uncomfortable because, you know, it affects [my] vision... reading on the phone, it’s hard. So that’s one of the things affecting some assignments because I don’t have a computer.”

¹⁰ Regalado, Mariana, & Maura A. Smale. ““I Am More Productive in the Library Because It’s Quiet”: Commuter Students in the College Library.” *College & Research Libraries* [Online], 76.7 (2015): 899-913. Web. 15 Jun. 2018

Students frequently reported that they turn to Google for finding information, especially blogs and articles, for their coursework. They use a variety of Google products, including Search and Translate, for getting more in-depth information on a topic discussed in class, coming up with ideas and topics for new assignments, and translating text from one language to another. Students indicate a particular affinity for Google, employing descriptors such as “everything,” “my second professor,” “a very big basic platform,” and “my best friend” for using the search engine to find information. No other general purpose search engines were mentioned in the interviews conducted.

Some students also utilize scholarly resources found through Google Scholar, databases, and/or the library website/catalog. When using these resources, students often seek peer-reviewed sources that they need for a specific assignment (e.g. a secondary source on a specific topic) that has been defined in a certain way by their professor. They occasionally struggle with the siloed nature of these resources, as one student explained, “We had our last paper that I needed to find a secondary source for. I just kept coming up with nothing in one of the databases. After a few hours at different times here and there combined, I just switched and looked through a different database and found what I was looking for.”

Students have a variety of rules they employ for evaluating the credibility of specific resources. Many check with their professors to ensure that the sources they have picked are “valid,” “truthful,” “reputable” and/or “acceptable.” They seek resources that are “free of bias” and that are “fact-based, often relying on websites that end in .edu, .gov, or .org to guide them and avoiding websites like Wikipedia or BuzzFeed News which they believe to be problematic. When using internet search engines, students intentionally select from the top items in the list of results because they believe that these are the most frequently used by others and/or the most trustworthy.

Seeking help

Students report relying heavily on their professors for providing detailed requirements for and/or screening the resources they can use for their assignments. They shared that their professors generally post criteria for resources to be used for an assignment in a course management system, and that they frequently refer back to this information throughout the semester. Professors often provide lists of acceptable or preferred databases to use for research assignments and students will frequently check in with their professors while gathering resources to make sure that the resources they have selected adhere to the criteria outlined by the professor. As one student explained, “I guess I would ask my professor, like, ‘Hey, is this resource fine?’ We’ll go over it. And then, they’ll go, ‘Okay. Yeah, you can use that,’ and if you can’t, like, ‘No, I think it’s off-topic.’... [I just want] to make sure that I’m abiding by the criteria.”

Students not only described their professors as their primary resource for finding content relevant to their course assignments but also for navigating campus resources more widely. Professors will often include information on other college services that students can use for additional support in their syllabi, including tutoring and writing centers, and will also connect particular students who are struggling with coursework with these services. Students typically will see tutors for a specific subject, while writing centers provide more general guidance in developing ideas for and proofreading written assignments.

Students not only described their professors as their primary resource for finding content relevant to their course assignments but also for navigating campus resources more widely.

Many students also described relying on their wider social network for support, including family, friends, and classmates. These individuals typically help students with tasks like proofreading, providing feedback, double checking answers, and providing general support and guidance. Students seemed very comfortable with seeking help from these groups of individuals and expressed confidence in the usefulness of their input. As one student explained, “My mother helps me edit almost every single assignment that I have. I don’t live with her but I always way share the documents while I’m working on them and she helps edit them... It really helps sometimes when I can’t see those myself because it’s my own work.” Another student explained, “my sister's gone through school and usually, if it comes down to it, I'll ask somebody that has more knowledge than me just in general, that is older than me and has had more life experiences, whether it's at school or not.”

The interviews revealed that students only very infrequently seek out the assistance of librarians at their college. Only a few students reported doing so, and these students were nearly all from one college that has what appears to be an especially effective “college success” course where students learn how to navigate the college system. One of the outcomes for these courses is that students will be able to identify and use college resources and services in order to aid in personal and academic success, which includes a visit to the library to understand the services and resources available. However, one student at this college who was able to waive the course did not gain this information,

and reported that they did not know what assistance that the library could provide in helping them look for sources to support an assignment.

Conclusion

Community colleges are a critical component of the American higher education landscape, chartered to provide educational opportunity and to advance economic mobility for a large and diverse population of students who vary significantly in academic preparation, social and cultural background, and goals for pursuing post-secondary education. Two-year colleges shoulder the challenge of providing open enrollment while at the same time facing the difficult reality of being the most resource-constrained sector of public higher education.¹¹

The community college students interviewed in this project perceive their institutions not merely as proximate and affordable, but un-cynically as engines of learning opportunity that are delivering value in supporting both their extrinsic and intrinsic educational goals.

Despite these institutional challenges, the community college students interviewed in this project perceive their institutions not merely as proximate and affordable, but un-cynically as engines of learning opportunity that are delivering value in supporting both their extrinsic and intrinsic educational goals. We see these goals as personal, multifactorial, and extending well beyond the accumulation of credits, credentials, and preparation for the workforce. These goals include seeking knowledge and mastery as their own rewards. And, students believe their education will help fulfill their needs for belonging, achievement, and contributing to their family and the larger society.

For community college libraries, in their drive to serve the mission of their institutions and their students, the question of how best to align resources and services in the cause of supporting the success of these students is a high-stakes proposition. Staffing and budgets are frequently limited to the extent that implementing any new project or service

¹¹ For more information on community college student needs and spend per pupil compared to four-year institutions see The Century Foundation Taskforce on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal, *Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2013), https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/20130523-Bridging_the_Higher_Education_Divide-REPORT-ONLY.pdf.

means discontinuing an existing service. While there are significant internal and external motivations to innovate, the costs of missteps are daunting.

We see the necessity and opportunity for libraries to engage in reinvention beyond traditional roles in helping students reach their goals, and to leverage the resources that students most often associate – for example, the library as the most significant academic physical space on the campus outside the classroom – as a platform and stepping off point for adopting, adapting, or building new services that will be attractive and relevant to the students crossing their physical and virtual thresholds.

Every student who enters the library or makes use of library resources constitutes an opportunity to connect with information or services that will support students in achieving their goals. In particular, we see that economically challenged, first-generation, and new American students, who are often unfamiliar with the structures, opportunities, and obstacles presented by our institutions, are in need of access to information to facilitate their academic journeys. Librarians are well positioned, both by training and positioning, to make information relevant to the success of students available at the time and point of need. In synergy with, and complementary to, other parts of the organization, in particular classroom faculty, academic departments, student service professionals, librarians can serve in a facilitation and advocacy role.

Furthermore, it remains important to address how librarians, in their role as the institutional subject matter experts on the organization, evaluation, and use of information can better reach both our successful and struggling students on the importance of information literacy, the library, and the resources and expertise available to them through this part of the institution. We see in these interviews there is much work still to be accomplished in this area, and while students see their classroom faculty as experts in their disciplines and as the evaluators of their academic progress, the value available to them through the library remains opaque.

In the next phase of this project, we are bringing together library leadership from each of the partner colleges along with our expert advisors to brainstorm, develop, and interrogate possible services aligned with the community college mission and population, informed by this research. Based on these discussions, we will then refine and test the perceived relevance and value of our ideas via a large scale student survey.

Appendix

Interview script

Educational goals and expectations

1. Can you tell me about what you were doing when you decided to apply to this college?
 - Can you tell me what your life was like around the time when you applied?
 - What did you spend your time doing? Were you working? Were you in school?
2. What were your reasons for choosing this college?
 - Did you consider and/or apply to other colleges?
3. What were your reasons for choosing to go to college in general?
4. What do you hope to achieve by attending this college?
 - What is really important for you to achieve as a result of your experience at this college?
 - *Some students talk to us about completing a two year degree, transferring to a four year college/university, obtaining certification, preparing for the workforce or a career change, etc.*

Coursework & academics

5. What kind of work are you assigned in your classes?
 - *Some students talk to us about tests, quizzes, papers, etc.*
6. Where do you complete your work?
 - Do you face any challenges in finding space that allows you to work effectively?
7. How do you come up with new ideas to incorporate into your projects?
 - What kind of information or resources do you consult to complete your work?
 - Who do you turn to for support or assistance with completing your work?
8. How easy is it for you to access resources or information that you need to complete your work?
 - What difficulties do you face?

Defining challenges and success

9. What does success at this college look like for you?

- What would you need to accomplish during your time here or after you complete your coursework to think “My experience at this college was a success”?
- How might your life be different as a result of being a student here?
 - *Some students talk to us about what they are planning as their next steps immediately finishing coursework and some talk to us about five years out afterwards*
- How confident are you that you will achieve this success?

10. What did you think would be the biggest challenge you would face with being here?

11. And now that you’re here, what are the biggest challenges you face?

- *Some students talk to us about challenges related to finances, their families, lack of preparation, etc.*

12. What do you need in order to make you more successful in the ways you were speaking about before [referring back to the way that the respondent defined success previously]?